

What You Lose When You Gain a Spouse

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In America today, it's easy to believe that marriage is a social good—that our lives and our communities are better when more people get and stay married. There have, of course, been massive changes to the institution over the past few generations, leading the occasional cultural critic to ask: Is marriage becoming obsolete? But few of these people seem genuinely interested in the answer.

More often the question functions as a kind of rhetorical sleight of hand, a way of stirring up moral panic about changing family values or speculating about whether society has become too cynical for love. In popular culture, the sentiment still prevails that marriage makes us happy and divorce leaves us lonely, and that never getting married at all is a fundamental failure of belonging.

But speculation about whether or not marriage is obsolete overlooks a more important question: What is lost by making marriage the most central relationship in a culture?

For me, this is a personal question as much as it is a social and political one. When my partner, Mark, and I talk about whether or not we want to get married, friends tend to assume that we are trying to decide whether or not we are “serious” about our relationship. But I'm not expressing doubts about my relationship; I'm doubting the institution itself.

While marriage is often seen as an essential step in a successful life, the Pew Research Center reports that only about half of Americans over age 18 are married. This is down from 72 percent in 1960. One obvious reason for this shift is that, on average, people are getting married much later in

life than they were just a few decades earlier. In the United States, the median age for first marriage rose to an all-time high in 2018: 30 for men and 28 for women. While a majority of Americans expect to marry eventually, 14 percent of never-married adults say they don't plan to marry at all, and another 27 percent aren't sure whether marriage is for them. When people bemoan the demise of marriage, these are the kinds of data they often cite. It's true that marriage is not as popular as it was a few generations ago, but Americans still marry more than people in the vast majority of other Western countries, and divorce more than any other country.

There is good reason to believe the institution isn't going anywhere. As the sociologist Andrew Cherlin points out, just two years after the Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage in 2015, a full 61 percent of cohabiting same-sex couples were married. This is an extraordinarily high rate of participation. Cherlin believes that while some of these couples may have married to take advantage of the legal rights and benefits newly available to them, most see marriage as “a public marker of their successful union.” As Cherlin puts it, in America today, getting married is still “the most prestigious way to live your life.”

Andrew Cherlin: Marriage has become a trophy

This prestige can make it particularly difficult to think critically about the institution—especially when coupled with the idea that vows might save you from the existential loneliness of being human. When my friends cite the benefits of marriage, they often point to an intangible sense of belonging and security: Being married just “feels different.”

In his majority opinion in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote, “Marriage responds to the universal fear that a lonely person might call out only to find no one there. It offers the hope of companionship and understanding and assurance that while both still live there will be someone to care for the other.” This notion—that marriage is the best answer to the deep human desire for connection and belonging—is incredibly seductive. When I think about getting married, I can feel its undertow. But research suggests that, whatever its benefits, marriage also comes with a cost.

As Chekhov put it, “If you're afraid of loneliness, don't marry.” He might have been on to something. In a review of two national surveys, the sociologists Natalia Sarkisian of Boston College and Naomi Gerstel of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst found that marriage actually weakens other social ties. Compared with those who stay single, married folks are less likely to visit or call parents and siblings—and less inclined to offer them emotional support or pragmatic help with things such as chores and transportation. They are also less likely to hang out with friends and neighbors.

Single people, by contrast, are far more connected to the social world around them. On average, they provide more care for their siblings and aging parents. They have more friends. They are more likely to offer help to neighbors and ask for it in return. This is especially true for those who have always been single, shattering the myth of the spinster cat lady entirely. Single women in particular are more politically engaged—attending rallies and fundraising for causes that are important to them—than married women. (These trends persist, but are weaker, for single people who were previously married. Cohabiting couples were underrepresented in the data and excluded from the study.)

Sarkisian and Gerstel wondered whether some of these effects could be explained by the demands of caring for small children. Maybe married parents just don't have any extra time or energy to offer neighbors and friends. But once they examined the data further, they found that those who were married without children were the most isolated. The researchers suggest that one potential explanation for this is that these couples tend to have more time and money—and thus need less help from family and friends, and are then less likely to offer it in return. The autonomy of successful married life can leave spouses cut off from their communities. Having children may slightly soften the isolating effects of marriage, because parents often turn to others for help.

The sociologists found that, for the most part, these trends couldn't be explained away by structural differences in the lives of married versus unmarried people. They hold true across racial groups and even when researchers control for age and socioeconomic status. So it isn't the circumstances of married life that isolate—it's marriage itself.

When I came across Sarkisian and Gerstel's research, I wasn't surprised by the data—but I was surprised that no one seemed to be talking about the isolation of modern romantic commitment. Many couples who live together but aren't married are likely to experience at least some of the costs and benefits associated with marriage. The expectations that come with living with a serious partner, married or not, can enforce the norms that create social isolation. In the months after Mark moved into my apartment, I enjoyed the coziness of our shared domestic life. I liked having another person to help walk the dog and shop for groceries. I loved getting into bed with him every night.

But when I looked at my life, I was surprised by how it seemed to have contracted. I didn't go out as much. I got fewer invitations for after-work beers. Even my own parents seemed to call less often. When invitations did arrive, they were addressed to us both. We hadn't even discussed marriage yet, but already it seemed everyone had tacitly agreed that our step toward each other necessitated a step away from friendship and community. I was happy in our home, but that happiness was twinned with a sense of loneliness I hadn't expected.

When I thought about getting married, I imagined it would only isolate us further. Marriage has social and institutional power that cohabitation does not; it confers more prestige, and it prescribes more powerful norms.

Social alienation is so fully integrated into the American ideology of marriage that it's easy to overlook. Sarkisian and Gerstel point out that modern marriage comes with a cultural presumption of self-sufficiency. This is reflected in how young adults in the U.S. tend to postpone marriage until they can afford to live alone—rather than with family or roommates—and in the assumption that a married life should be one of total financial independence.

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This idea of self-sufficiency is also reflected in weddings themselves, which tend to emphasize the individuals getting married rather than the larger community they belong to. On the website TheKnot.com, whose tagline is "Welcome to your day, your way," you can take a quiz to help define "your wedding style." There are pages and pages of "wedding inspo" so that every detail can be perfectly refined for a wedding that's "totally you." Admittedly, there is something appealing about the idea that a wedding might perfectly express the identities of the individuals involved but this is a

In his book *The All-or-Nothing Marriage*, the psychologist Eli Finkel examines how, over the past 200 years, American expectations of marriage have slowly climbed Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Just a few generations ago, the ideal marriage was defined by love, cooperation, and a sense of belonging to a family and community. Today's newlyweds, Finkel argues, want all that *and* prestige, autonomy, personal growth, and self-expression. A marriage is supposed to help the individuals within it become the best versions of themselves. This means that more and more, Americans turn to their spouses for needs they once expected an entire community to fulfill.

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One way to think outside the monolith of the American marriage is to imagine a world without it. Implicit in the self-sufficiency of the American ideology of marriage is the assumption that care—everything from health care to financial support to self-development and career coaching—falls primarily to one person. Your spouse should make you soup when you're sick and cover the rent when you go back to school to study for your dream job.

In his book *The Marriage-Go-Round*, Andrew Cherlin describes the marriage-based family as equivalent to a tall tree: Care and support pass up and down between generations, but more rarely do people branch out to give help or get it from their siblings, aunts and uncles, or cousins. And in different-sex relationships, especially once children are involved, the work of this care falls disproportionately to women. Without marriage, this care and support could be redistributed across networks of extended family, neighbors, and friends.

Regardless of this pruning of the tree of care, one of the main arguments in favor of marriage is that it's still the best environment for raising children. But as Cherlin argues in *The Marriage-Go-Round*, what matters for children is “not simply the kind of family they live in but how stable that family is.” That stability may take the form of a two-parent family, or, as Cherlin points out, it might be the extended-family structures that are common in African American communities, for example. Given the frequency of divorce and remarriage or cohabitation, marriage provides only temporary stability for many families. If stability is what matters for kids, then stability, not marriage, should be the primary goal.

Of course, some would argue that, regardless of divorce statistics, marriage is a stabilizing force for relationships, that the commitment itself helps couples stay together when they otherwise might not. It's true that marriages are less likely to end in breakup than are cohabiting relationships, but that might simply be because married people are a self-selected group whose relationships were already more committed. Many people anecdotally report that getting married deepens their sense of commitment, even when they didn't expect it to.

But other studies have shown that it's the level of commitment that matters to relationship satisfaction or the age at which the commitment is made—not a couple's marital status. A further problem is that social norms surrounding marriage, divorce, and cohabitation have changed rapidly in the past few decades, so getting a reliable longitudinal data set is hard. And though divorce is certainly difficult, it's not as though cohabiting unmarried couples can just walk away: Mark and I own property together and may someday have kids; beyond our own sense of commitment we have a lot of incentives to

The psychologist Bella DePaulo, who has spent her career studying single people, says she believes there are serious repercussions of putting marriage at the center of one's life. "When the prevailing unquestioned narrative maintains that there is only one way to live a good and happy life, too many people end up miserable," she says. The stigma attached to divorce or single life can make it difficult to end an unhealthy marriage or choose not to marry at all. DePaulo thinks people are hungry for a different story. She argues that an emphasis on marriage means people often overlook other meaningful relationships: deep friendships, roommates, chosen families, and wider networks of kin. These relationships are often important sources of intimacy and support.

In her 1991 book *Families We Choose*, the anthropologist Kath Weston wrote about the prominence of these sorts of chosen families in queer communities. These relationships, which were not shaped by legal or biological definitions of kinship, played a central role in queer lives, especially during the AIDS crisis. Importantly, the people Weston interviewed turned to alternative forms of family-making not simply because they were denied access to legal marriage, but also because many had been rejected by their families of origin. Still, the LGBTQ+ community continues to provide a model for intimacy and care beyond the bounds of the institution of marriage.

It is too early to tell how the legalization of same-sex marriage will affect queer communities in the generations to come. Abigail Ocobock, a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame, believes queer couples might be more resistant to the isolating effects of marriage, thanks to a long history of community reliance. But as Michael Yarbrough, the lead editor of the scholarly anthology *Queer Families and Relationships: After Marriage Equality*, said in an interview, though marriage has helped "both married and unmarried queer people feel more included," some evidence suggests that "it also seems to be reducing people's participation in LGBTQ community life." Angela Jones, Yarbrough's co-editor, believes marriage fails to support the most marginalized queer and trans people. In an email interview, she wrote, "It is queer liberation, not homonormative marriage that will cause radical changes to how we form, live, and find joy in our families and communities."

Love is the marrow of life, and yet, so often people attempt to funnel it into the narrow channels prescribed by marriage and the nuclear family. And though this setup is seen as a cultural norm, it is not, in reality, the way most Americans are living their lives. The two-parents-plus-kids family represents only 20 percent of households in the U.S.; couples (both married and unmarried without children) are another 25 percent. But millions of Americans are living alone, with other unmarried adults, or as single parents with children. It's worth considering what would happen if they lived in a culture that supported all intimate relationships with the same energy currently devoted to celebrating and supporting marriage.

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Governments, hospitals, insurance companies, and schools assume that marriage (and subsequently the nuclear family) is the primary unit of care. But of course love—and the care it necessitates—is much more far-reaching and unwieldy than that. What if you could share health-care benefits with your sister and her son? Or take paid leave to be with a close friend who had an operation? In a country with epidemic rates of loneliness, expanding our sense of what counts as meaningful love—and acknowledging and supporting relationships in all their forms—could have enormous benefits.

When Mark and I talk about whether or not we want to get married, what we're really asking is how we want to define our sense of family and community. What is the role of care in our lives? Whom are we offering it to, and where are we finding it? I don't think choosing not to get married will save us from loneliness, but I think expanding our sense of what love looks like might. We've decided not to get married, for now, at least. I hope that might be a reminder to turn toward the people around us as often as we turn toward each other.

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