Transactional marriages were once as common as marriage based on love

August 23 2017

Credit: Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

That love and marriage "go together like a horse and carriage" is very much a modern notion. In the past, most marriages were based on material interests, and couples had to make the best of them, says LMU ethnologist Dr. Annegret Braun.

In context of recent history, the linkage between love, romance and marriage reached its peak in the 1980s. Since then, the marriage rate has steadily fallen, while the proportion of long-term partnerships (both hetero- and homosexual) and the incidence of patchwork families have both risen. However, according to the pairfam study, a longitudinal and multidisciplinary study that began in 2008, one of the major reasons for the decision to start a family has not changed since time immemorial.

Love is not the only conceivable basis for marriage. In the 1980s, a popular farming magazine published the following advertisement in its Personal columns: "Farmer (23) seeks woman with combine harvester (minimal header width: 250 cm) as potential marriage partner. Please include a photo of the combine with your response. The business-like tone of this ad may sound disconcerting to us, but it would not have raised eyebrows anywhere in Europe 150 years ago. In those days, the financial situation of the potential partners – together with their membership of the same social class – was the crucial factor in determining a couple's eligibility for marriage. At that time, "most marriages were still arranged by the parents of the bride and groom," as Dr. Annegret Braun of the Institute of European Ethnology at LMU points out. The well-off bourgeoisie took care that romantic novels did not find their way into the hands of their nubile daughters – in order to avoid giving the latter any misleading ideas as to the place of emotions in the choice of a marriage partner! In fact, only the poor could 'afford' to marry for love, and women were then rather more likely to think of love in terms of affection. The most important qualities of a husband were the ability to provide for his wife and family, a good character and a gentle disposition, "and many wives were forced to give their future husbands the benefit of the doubt," says Braun.

In rural areas, sexual relationships were recognized as legitimate only if the couple involved were already betrothed, i.e. engaged. But, of course, then – as ever – young people did not always follow the rules, and couples would often steal off into the fields after the dances at the crossroads. "But if an unmarried woman became pregnant, she had to be able to prove that she had indeed received a pledge of marriage – by producing an engagement ring in court, for instance." In Bavaria, the rate of illegitimacy was particularly high in mountainous areas. "The high Alpine meadows were regarded as dens of iniquity, because social controls in such relatively inaccessible areas were less effective," Braun (herself a native of Swabia) explains. In fact, in many Alpine regions,

dairy farmers were not allowed to employ milkmaids in the summer pastures. In bourgeois households, on the other hand, it was not uncommon for brides to have little idea of what marriage entailed. "Many of them fled in terror on their first encounter with their husbands in the marriage bed."

In the vast majority of marriages, the partners were in one respect very unevenly matched. "Wives were expected to be subordinate to their husbands," says Braun, and her examination of 19th-century diaries confirms that they generally conformed to this expectation – though there were, of course, exceptions to this rule. But even a good working relationship between husband and successful division of labor in the daily chores involved in running a farm did not imply that the partners' emotional lives were necessarily satisfying. Moreover, children were not usually regarded as the cherished fruits of a loving relationship. In well-to-do families, children were often treated as decorative distractions from their parents' social duties, and in the countryside they were indispensable sources of labor and guarantees of support in their parents' old age. The birth of the first son was a signal event, "but affection for children seldom played a large role in family life, in part because parents knew that children were quite likely to die young." In the Danube region of Central Bavaria, the rate of infant mortality was 35%. According to Braun, not only was life expectancy much lower in the 19th century, the expectations that people had of life were also much more modest, and their capacity for coping with loss was correspondingly greater. Misfortunes were sent by God, and had to be patiently borne. The reward for suffering would come in the next world.

Twentieth-century transformations

With the advent of the 20th century, the incidence of arranged marriages began to decline. The bourgeosie was no longer as economically secure and male dominance faced its first challenge. More and more women

found work outside the home, taking up the office jobs made possible by technical progress and earning their own keep. "In the interwar period, social status remained the paramount factor in the choice of a mate, but affective affinity between the partners began to play a significant role," says Braun. In the aftermath of the Second World War, marriage was often viewed in the same light as comradeship between wartime buddies. With the aim of analyzing the changing notions of marriage in the postwar years, Braun has combed through reams of advertisements in the Personal columns of the newspapers. "Only in the 1950s and 1960s does the word 'love' make its appearances in these adverts." But by the 1980s love had become the principal avowed motive for marriage, although few aspired to finding their own Mr. Right or Ms. Perfect. Marriage proposals tended to take on a provisional form: 'What do you think? Shall we give it a try?' Interestingly, the partners' political orientation takes on a new relevance in this context at this point. In an advert placed in the Personal columns of a Munich newspaper, one lonely heart felt compelled to state that he was 'neither a royalist nor an aficionado of Franz-Josef Strauß.' The Nineties then saw romance in the ascendancy, and elaborately celebrated romantic weddings have become the ideal since the turn of the century, says Braun.

Young people still aspire to finding a partner for life. "The notion of partnership has become ever more important as the marriage rate itself continues to decrease," says Dr. Carolin Thönnissen of the Institute of Education at LMU, who is investigating the changes in pair relationships and family structures in Germany in the context of the pairfam project mentioned above. Most early relationships are still formed between members of the same circle of acquaintances. But, even though their social situation has undergone little change, in their middle 30s people begin to make use of online dating services. – According to the pairfam study, around 15% of singles now use the internet in their search for the perfect partner, and this number continues to rise. "However, when it comes to marriage, expectations are dominated by the romantic ideal of

equal partnership," says Thönnissen. This can be understood as an expression of the yearning for stability in a world that is changing at an ever increasing pace. Moreover, because people now marry later than they used to, couples have more money at their disposal, and can afford to spend more on the wedding itself. Women also devote much more time and thought to the planning of the Big Day. In the US, women who show an obsessive concern for the detailed organization of their own weddings are now known as 'bridezillas.'

Sex and satisfaction

Of course, by no means all couples are destined to live happily ever after: One-third of marriages end in divorce. For Thönnissen, however, this development itself has a positive side: Among other things, it reflects the fact that women are better educated than they were in the past, and that economic factors are no longer the deciding factor in determining the duration of a marriage. "In addition, there are now more alternatives available," she says – with an eye to the fact that unmarried and same-sex couples, patchwork families and homosexual partners with children are now widely accepted forms of living together. Furthermore, the incidence of two-timing has fallen: Based on pairfam's data, some 7% of 20-year-olds admit to having been unfaithful to their partners, but that figure drops to between 2 and 3% among older age groups. "There is a strong positive correlation between the frequency of sexual intercourse and the state of a couple's relationship," says Thönnissen. However, surveys show that, for most couples, the importance of sex declines at a steady rate. "Sex is a significant, but nevertheless a relatively minor element of a satisfying and fulfilling relationship," says Thönnissen.

A century and a half ago, affectionate relationships with children may have been comparatively rare, but the notion of a close emotional bond between parents and children is now the major motivation for having children at all. "Children are now seen as conferring a sense of meaning

and purpose on the partners' relationship," says Thönnissen. Two children are the current ideal. However, the second reason for having children nowadays would be very familiar to our forebears: Children are still expected to provide support for their aging parents, if and when the need arises. In this respect, nothing has changed. "The desire to have children is reinforced by social pressures, and declines as the financial burden associated with raising them increases," Thönissen adds. Highly educated women experience the conflict between having a family and pursuing a career in a particularly acute form. The pairfam study has revealed that, as men get older, their careers become more important to them than their partners. Women's interests follow the opposite trajectory. "This means that women who wish to have children are faced with the task of convincing their partners to start a family as soon as possible," says Thönnissen – and laughs.

Provided by Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich