

The All-or-Nothing Marriage

By ELI J. FINKEL FEB. 14, 2014

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ARE marriages today better or worse than they used to be?

This vexing question is usually answered in one of two ways. According to the marital decline camp, marriage has weakened: Higher divorce rates reflect a lack of commitment and a decline of moral character that have harmed adults, children and society in general. But according to the marital resilience camp, though marriage has experienced disruptive changes like higher divorce rates, such developments are a sign that the institution has evolved to better respect individual autonomy, particularly for women. The true harm, by these lights, would have been for marriage to remain as confining as it was half a century ago.

As a psychological researcher who studies human relationships, I would like to offer a third view. Over the past year I immersed myself in the scholarly literature on marriage: not just the psychological studies but also work from sociologists, economists and historians. Perhaps the most striking thing I learned is that the answer to whether today's marriages are better or worse is "both": The *average* marriage today is weaker than the average marriage of yore, in terms of both satisfaction and divorce rate, **but the best marriages today are much stronger, in terms of both satisfaction and personal well-being, than the best marriages of yore.**

Consider, for example, that while the divorce rate has settled since the early 1980s at around 45 percent, even those marriages that have remained intact have generally become less satisfying. At the same time, consider the findings of [a recent analysis](#), led by the University of Missouri researcher Christine M. Proulx, of 14 longitudinal studies between 1979 and 2002 that concerned marital quality and personal well-being. In addition to showing that marital quality uniformly predicts better personal well-being (unsurprisingly, happier marriages make happier people), the analysis revealed that this effect has become much stronger over time. **The gap between the benefits of good and mediocre marriages has increased.**

How and why did this divergence occur? In answering this question, I worked with the psychologists Chin Ming Hui, Kathleen L. Carswell and Grace M. Larson to develop a new theory of marriage, which we will publish later this year in a pair of articles in the journal *Psychological Inquiry*. Our central claim is that **Americans today have elevated their expectations of marriage and can in fact achieve an unprecedentedly high level of marital quality — but only if they are able to invest a great deal of time and energy in their partnership.** If they are not able

to do so, their marriage will likely fall short of these new expectations. Indeed, it will fall further short of people's expectations than at any time in the past.

Marriage, then, has increasingly become an "all or nothing" proposition. This conclusion not only challenges the conventional opposition between marital decline and marital resilience; but it also has implications for policy makers looking to bolster the institution of marriage — and for individual Americans seeking to strengthen their own relationships.

TO understand marriage today, it is important to see how we got to where we are. Throughout America's history, its populace has experienced **three distinct models of marriage**, as scholars like the sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin and the historian Stephanie Coontz have chronicled. In the era of the ***institutional marriage, from the nation's founding until around 1850***, the prevalence of individual farming households meant that the main requirements Americans had for their marriage revolved around things like food production, shelter and protection from violence. To be sure, Americans were pleased if they experienced an emotional connection with their spouse, but such affinities were perquisites of a well-functioning marriage rather than its central purpose.

In the era of ***the companionate marriage, from roughly 1850 until 1965***, American marriage increasingly centered around **intimate needs such as to love, to be loved and to experience a fulfilling sex life**. This era overlapped with the shift from rural to urban life. Men increasingly engaged in wage labor outside of the home, which amplified the extent to which the two sexes occupied distinct social spheres. As the nation became wealthier and its social institutions became stronger, Americans had the luxury of looking to marriage primarily for love and companionship.

Since around 1965, we have been living in the era of the *self-expressive marriage*. Americans now look to marriage increasingly for self-discovery, self-esteem and personal growth. Fueled by the countercultural currents of the 1960s, they have come to view marriage less as an essential institution and more as an elective means of achieving personal fulfillment. "You make me want to be a better man," from the 1997 movie "As Good as It Gets," could serve as this era's marriage ideal. In the words of the sociologist Robert N. Bellah, **love has become, in good part, "the mutual exploration of infinitely rich, complex and exciting selves."**

As a psychologist, I could not help noticing that this history of marriage **echoes the classic "hierarchy of needs"** outlined in the 1940s by the psychologist **Abraham Maslow**. According to Maslow, human needs fit into a five-level hierarchy: The lowest need is that of physiological well-being — including the need to eat and drink — followed by the need for safety, then for belonging and love, then for esteem and finally for self-actualization. The emergence of each need characteristically depends

on the prior satisfaction of a more basic need. A person unable to satisfy the need for food, for example, is wholly concerned with meeting that need; only once it is met can he focus on satisfying the need above it (safety), and so on.

My colleagues and I contend that an analogous process has occurred in our expectations about marriage. Those expectations were set at the low levels of Maslow's hierarchy during the institutional era, at medium levels during the companionate era and at high levels during the self-expressive era.

This historical ascent is, on its own, neither good nor bad. But it has **major implications for marital well-being: Though satisfying higher-level needs yields greater happiness, serenity and depth of inner life, people must invest substantially more time and energy in the quality of their relationship when seeking to meet those higher-level needs through their marriage.** To be sure, it was no small feat, circa 1800, to produce enough food or keep a house warm, but the effort required to do so did not require deep insight into, and prolonged involvement with, each other's core essence.

As the expectations of marriage have ascended Maslow's hierarchy, the potential psychological payoffs have increased — but **achieving those results has become more demanding.**

HERE lie both the great successes and great disappointments of modern marriage. **Those individuals who can invest enough time and energy in their partnership are seeing unprecedented benefits.** [The sociologists Jeffrey Dew and W. Bradford Wilcox have demonstrated](#) that **spouses who spent “time alone with each other, talking, or sharing an activity” at least once per week were 3.5 times more likely to be very happy in their marriage than spouses who did so less frequently.** The sociologist Paul R. Amato and colleagues have shown that spouses with a larger percentage of shared friends spent more time together and had better marriages.

But on average Americans are investing less in their marriages — to the detriment of those relationships. [Professor Dew has shown](#) that relative to Americans in 1975, Americans in 2003 spent much less time alone with their spouses. Among spouses without children, weekly spousal time declined to 26 hours per week from 35 hours, and much of this decline resulted from an increase in hours spent at work. Among spouses with children at home, spousal time declined to 9 hours per week from 13, and much of this decline resulted from an increase in time-intensive parenting.

Though this is not a specifically socioeconomic phenomenon, it does have a socioeconomic dimension. One of the most disturbing facts about American marriage today is that while divorce increased at similar rates for the wealthy and the poor in the 1960s and '70s, those rates diverged sharply starting around 1980. [According to the sociologist Steven P. Martin](#), among Americans who married

between 1975 and 1979, the 10-year divorce rate was 28 percent among people without a high school education and 18 percent among people with at least a college degree: a 10 percentage point difference. But among Americans who married between 1990 and 1994, the parallel divorce rates were 46 percent and 16 percent: an astonishing 30 percentage point difference.

The problem is not that poor people fail to appreciate the importance of marriage, nor is it that poor and wealthy Americans differ in which factors they believe are important in a good marriage. The problem is that the same trends that have exacerbated inequality since 1980 — unemployment, juggling multiple jobs and so on — have also made it increasingly difficult for less wealthy Americans to invest the time and other resources needed to sustain a strong marital bond.

What can be done? Government actions that reduce inequality and family-friendly work policies like on-site child care are likely to help strengthen marriage. But they are not the only options, particularly for individual couples.

First and foremost, couples can choose to invest more time and energy in their marriage, perhaps by altering how they use whatever shared leisure time is available. But if couples lack the time and energy, they might consider adjusting their expectations, perhaps by focusing on cultivating an affectionate bond without trying to facilitate each other's self-actualization.

The bad news is that insofar as socioeconomic circumstances or individual choices undermine the investment of time and energy in our relationships, our marriages are likely to fall short of our era's expectations. **The good news is that our marriages can flourish today like never before. They just can't do it on their own.**

Eli J. Finkel is a [professor](#) of psychology and a professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University.