

Young Americans' Neotraditional Views of Marriage

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Several observers have drawn a connection between the rise of expressive individualism and major family changes in the United States in the past half-century, including the increase in divorce and other changes in the institution of marriage. Some have viewed the alleged value change and the attendant family changes critically, while others have applauded them or viewed them neutrally. Among the latter is Bernard Farber, who described the trend toward “permanent availability” on the marriage market, whereby all adults, whether currently married or not, remain on the marriage market, and married persons can be lured out of their marriages if they perceive they can attract a more desirable spouse. Among the critical observers of this trend are those in the communitarian movement, who perceive a general decline in feelings of social obligation, as well as feelings of obligation to family members.

Attitudinal changes that can reasonably be considered part of a trend to expressive individualism are well documented. One of the most important changes, in regard to marriage, being a steep decline in the belief that parents in unhappy marriages should stay together for the sake of their children. However, the extent of any overall individualistic trend is not clear. Critics of *Habits of the Heart* point out that major conclusions in this book are based on interviews with a possibly atypical sample of subjects and that qualitative research such as that conducted for the book is always subject to being biased by the preconceptions of the researchers. Data from large-scale surveys that have used representative samples of respondents have found evidence of some anti-individualistic trends in the United States during the past few decades. For instance, disapproval of marital infidelity seems to have risen steadily during the last quarter of the twentieth century, according to the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center.

Furthermore, a common view of family change among family social scientists is that it has resulted primarily from economic, technologic, and demographic change, and that value change has followed, not prompted, changes in family structure and behavior. According to this view, values are largely epiphenomenal, lacking strong causal power. Proponents of this thesis do not deny an increase in individualistic values, but they attribute little causal significance to the change.

Still a different point of view is that whereas the Bellah thesis is correct in regard to what has happened to marriages

and families in the United States, there recently has been a reaction against extreme individualism. This reaction is reflected in less individualistic values among current young adults than existed among baby boomers when they were young adults. Few would claim that a trend away from expressive individualism is more than incipient, but any change in that direction might augur a strong future trend.

The lack of clarity concerning what has happened, and what is happening, in regard to individualism in America has recently prompted research that can provide insight into how values are affecting marriage. David Popenoe and Barbara Whitehead, of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, have held a number of focus groups with young adults and commissioned a national survey of persons in their twenties conducted by the Gallup Organization (subsequently called the NMP Survey). The Institute for American Values put together a research team, which I head, to do in-depth interviews with women on eleven college and university campuses and to do a national survey of unmarried, heterosexual undergraduate women at four-year colleges and universities (subsequently called the IAV Survey). The preliminary findings from these two studies are now available and largely form the basis for this report. However, I also draw on data from the Monitoring the Future surveys of high school seniors conducted annually since 1975 by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan for evidence of trends in the marriage-related attitudes of young Americans.

My examination of the evidence from the qualitative research and the large-scale structured surveys has led me to characterize the marriage-related attitudes of a majority of young American adults as “neotraditional,” though I am now inclined to view those attitudes as more “neo” than “traditional.” The data from the large-scale surveys indicate that current young adults in the United States have more traditional goals concerning marriage and the family than media depictions of these people would lead one to expect. However, the more one probes, the more apparent it becomes that these apparently traditional attitudes mask a highly-prioritized and individualistic view of marriage and other family relations. I will first give examples of the survey data that make American young adults appear highly traditional, and then I will consider the evidence that requires a modification of that initial impression.

Young Americans, as a whole, express a strong interest in marriage. For instance, 83 percent of the college women who

responded to the IAV Survey agreed with the statement "Being married is a very important goal for me," and 94 percent of the never-married respondents to the NMP survey said that having a good marriage and family life was extremely important (83 percent) or quite important to them. These percentages may have increased modestly in recent years in view of the fact that the percentage of high school seniors who said that having a good marriage and family life was extremely important was slightly higher in the 1990s than in the 1970s or 1980s. Furthermore, most young adults apparently have not rejected the ideal of marital permanence—Bernard Farber's thesis about a trend to permanent availability on the marriage market notwithstanding. Of the one thousand respondents to the IAV Survey, only two failed to agree with the statement "If I marry I want my marriage to last for life," and 98 percent agreed that "If I marry I expect my marriage to last for life." Eighty percent of the respondents to the NWP Survey agreed that "Unless a couple is prepared to stay together for life, they should not get married," and 86 percent agreed that "It is important to look at marriage as hard work and a full-time job."

The sexual standards that college women embrace for their own behavior are surprisingly restrictive. Only 19 percent of the IAV respondents agreed that "When it comes to sex, there is no right or wrong" and that "I wish women were freer to have sex with as many partners as they wanted." Only 12 percent said "I would personally consider having a child out-of-wedlock," and almost two-thirds (64 percent) agreed that "Sexual intercourse without commitment is wrong." Furthermore, a surprisingly large percentage of college women (39 percent) claimed never to have had sexual intercourse, and that included almost a third (31 percent) of the seniors. As a whole, the nonvirgins seemed not to have been extremely sexually active in that 36 percent of them said they had not had intercourse in the past month.

The data reported so far seem to indicate that young Americans, as a whole, are quite traditional and not highly individualistic in their views of marriage. However, a more complete look at the evidence reveals a different story.

Although college women seem to be moderately restrictive in their personal standards of sexual behavior, they are generally permissive toward other persons. For instance, 87 percent of the IAV Survey respondents agreed that "I should not judge anyone's sexual conduct except my own." A majority of the twenty-somethings surveyed by the National Marriage Project were similarly accepting of non-traditional sexual behavior and family arrangements in that 62 percent agreed that "While it may not be ideal, it's okay for an adult woman to have a child on her own if she has not found the right man to marry." In other words, there is a widespread notion that in regard to sexual behavior and family relations, it is up to each individual to set the standards

for himself or herself, and others should not be judgmental. Such an attitude is, of course, a crucial element in expressive individualism.

The in-depth interviews of college women conducted for the Institute of American Values confirm that to be nonjudgmental is a widely and strongly held ideal among college students. This is illustrated by attitudes toward what might be called the "hookup culture" on college campuses in which, according to our national survey, about 40 percent of college women have participated to some extent. "Hookups" are sexual encounters that usually occur when both participants have been drinking, when there is no expectation that they will lead to a continuing relationship between the persons. They may involve kissing or sexual intercourse, or anything in between. The majority of the women who do not participate in hookups consider it unwise to do so, but they are reluctant to criticize the women (or the men) who do. There is an apparent lack of awareness that the existence of the hookup culture affects the general social climate on the campuses and thus the prospects for anyone to get to know persons of the opposite sex under more favorable circumstances. The general attitude is "Let everyone do their own thing, and it is none of my business."

The widespread interest in marriage, and the almost universal verbal commitment to the ideal of marital permanence, seem traditional, and in some respects they are. However, a careful examination of the national survey data and of the in-depth interviews of college women reveal that many, probably most, young adults have a very individualistic, privatized conception of marriage, and there is a tendency to view marriage as just a special kind of close relationship rather than a social institution.

Consider, for instance, the apparent commitment of young adults to the ideal of marital permanence. They want their marriages to be permanent, but many of them think marriages should endure only if the couple remain "in love." Forty percent of the NMR survey respondents agreed with the statement that "When married people realize that they are no longer in love with each other, they should get a divorce and get it over with," and 58 percent said that "Parents who do not get along should not try and stay together for the sake of their children." Seventy-nine percent of the NMP respondents agreed that "Marriage today is nobody's business but the two people involved" and 45 percent agreed that "The government should not be involved in licensing marriage."

The in-depth interviews of college women also indicate that a highly individualistic view of marriage is common among young Americans. I used Scott Loveless' threefold typology of approaches to happiness—hedonism, individualism, and altruism—to classify sixty-two women in terms of their approaches to happiness in relationships and in their

future marriages. It is clear that altruism, the putting of the needs of others before personal desires, is the approach most conducive to harmonious marriages, but as far as I could tell from the interview transcripts, only about 10 percent of the women were altruistically oriented. Most of the others had an individualistic orientation, whereby they made judgments between worthwhile and harmful desires, but hedonism, the relatively indiscriminate pursuit of satisfaction, was at least as prevalent as altruism. Of course, the sixty-two women interviewed are not necessarily representative of American college women as a whole, and altruism may increase somewhat as the women mature, but the interview materials are generally consistent with the view that expressive individualism is the dominant orientation among young adult Americans.

Overall, the results of the NMP and IAV research do not augur particularly well for the future of the American marriage, though of course the results could be a great deal less favorable than they are.

I should add, parenthetically, that the study of college women was concerned not just with the values and attitudes of the women but also with institutionalized mating processes. We were concerned especially with whether or not old-fashioned courtship, which everyone agrees is largely dead, has been replaced with adequate functional substitutes that provide effective pathways to marriage. I will not elaborate, but unfortunately the answer to that question seems to be "no." Young women know what they want (a happy and stable marriage), and most are optimistic that they will get it—eventually. Yet, they lack a cultural script for getting where they want to go; they generally lack the age-old insight that a direct, self-interested pursuit of happiness is not the best way to achieve it.