

# Marriage

*in*

# Men's

# Lives



STEVEN L. NOCK

# Marriage in Men's Lives

STEVEN L. NOCK

New York      Oxford  
*Oxford University Press*  
1998

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogota Bombay  
Buenos Aires Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam  
Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne  
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore  
Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

and associated companies in  
Berlin Ibadan

Copyright © 1998 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.,  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,  
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Nock, Steven L.

Marriage in men's lives / Steven L. Nock.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-19-512056-6

1. Men—United States—Attitudes. 2. Men—United States—Psychology.
3. Husbands—United States—Attitudes. 4. Husbands—United States—Psychology.
5. Masculinity—United States. 6. Marriage—United States. I. Title.

HQ1090.3.N63 1998  
305.31—dc21 98-21949

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

# Acknowledgments

I have been the lucky beneficiary of help from many people in the course of conducting the research reported in this book. Many colleagues at the University of Virginia offered help with methods, logic, and arguments. Chuck Denk, Steve Patterson, and Steve Finkel gave valuable assistance on statistical matters and methods of analysis. Tim Tolson and Doug Lloyd managed to keep my computer running despite the enormous demands made on it.

To my friend and colleague, E. Mavis Hetherington, I offer my most sincere thanks for the many lunches we shared to discuss the ideas in this work. Our conversations and friendship sustained me throughout the project. Margaret Brinig, Paul Kingston, and Steve Rhodes read the entire manuscript at various stages and offered advice and suggestions. Elizabeth Scott at the University of Virginia Law School provided needed guidance in my study of family law and read several chapters of the manuscript. Susan McKinnon and Ellen Contini Morava guided my search of materials in cultural anthropology.

Colleagues elsewhere were equally generous in their help. Suzanne Bianchi at the University of Maryland offered advice on the design of the research. Diane Hansen at the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin gave assistance with the acquisition and analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households. Steve McClosky at the Center for Human Resource Research at the Ohio State University guided me through the acquisition and analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. William Marsiglio at the University of Florida offered suggestions about fatherhood as an element of marriage. Alan Booth and Nan Crouter gave me the chance to present some of the earliest results when they invited me to participate in the Men in Families Conference at Pennsylvania State University.

This work staddles several academic disciplines beyond my own (sociology), including law, anthropology, and psychology. I count myself lucky to have generous colleagues here, and elsewhere, willing to offer assistance to a novice in their fields.

To my friends at Oxford University Press who helped create and produce this book, I offer my sincere thanks. Joan Bossert, Executive Editor, offered valuable advice on almost every page of the manuscript. And special thanks to Will Moore who supervised the production. Together, we learned about the problems of using graphs produced by statistical software. He solved them with admirable patience and creativity.

My most profound debt is to my wife, Daphne, to whom this book is dedicated. She discussed the thesis on countless occasions, read every draft, offered detailed comments and criticisms, and retained her sense of humor about a husband explaining why he benefits so enormously from his marriage to her.

# Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Marriage as a Social Institution	11
3. Marriage and Masculinity	43
4. Adult Achievement	63
5. Personal Communities	84
6. When Men Help Others	112
7. The New Normative Marriage—Is It Good for Men	130
Appendix A. Multivariate Results for Chapter 4: Pooled Cross-Section Time-Series with Fixed Effects	143
Appendix B. Multivariate Results for Chapter 5: Conditional Change Models	145
Appendix C. Multivariate Results for Chapter 6: Conditional Change Models	151
References	153
Index	161

# Marriage in Men's Lives







## Introduction

My goal in this book is to answer two questions: *How* and *why* does marriage change men? The many beneficial effects of marriage are well-known. Married people are generally healthier; they live longer, earn more, have better mental health and better sex lives, and are happier than their unmarried counterparts. Further, married individuals have lower rates of suicide, fatal accidents, acute and chronic illnesses, alcoholism, and depression than other people (Crago, 1972; Crum, Helzer, and Anthony, 1993; Ernster, Sacks, Selvin, and Petrakis, 1979; Layne and Whitehead, 1985; Lillenfield, Levin, and Kessler, 1972; Lynch, 1977; Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1957; Morowitz, 1975; Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Smith, Mercy, and Conn, 1988; Stack, 1992; Verbrugge, 1979; see Waite, 1995, for a review). Some disagreement may exist about the magnitude of such effects, but they are almost certainly the result of marriage, rather than self-selection. Married people do not simply *appear* to be better off than unmarried people; rather, marriage changes people in ways that produce such benefits (Coombs, 1991).

Even though marriage contributes to the well-being of both men and women, husbands are the greater beneficiaries. Men reap greater gains than women for virtually every outcome affected by marriage. When women benefit from marriage, it is because they are in a satisfying relationship; but men appear much less sensitive to the quality of their marriages and gain by simply *being married* (Gove, Hughes, and Style, 1983). Marriage itself improves men's lives; the quality of the marriage affects women's lives.

When I began this project my intention was to explain how and why marriage changes men and women. In the course of the research, however, I realized that marriage has different effects for men and women because it is a very different experience for each gender. Husbands and wives experience their marriages differently because the cultural definition of what it means to be a married person is different for men and women (Bernard, 1982: 9). Both genders benefit from marriage but for different reasons. Thus, *Marriage in Men's Lives* is the first of two projects. The next will consider marriage in women's lives.

What is it about being married that matters for men? And why would the *qual-*

ity of the relationship be less important for husbands than for wives? The answer to both of these questions, I believe, is that marriage is a social institution. That means conventional expectations are associated with it—customary ways to be a good husband. In this sense a man does more than simply marry a woman. He also binds himself to a system of rules, some quite formal and some little more than conventional expectations. As a husband, a man becomes the subject of others' expectations and will be expected to do things differently than he did as a bachelor. When children are born, others automatically assume he is the father, and his responsibilities and obligations to his children will begin immediately. As a husband and as a father, he will be treated differently. No matter what a marriage may mean to a particular man and his wife, the fact that a man is a husband carries great significance to others. This means that in the search for how and why marriage matters to men, marriage emerges as much more than a relationship between two partners. It also is a relationship defined by cultural assumptions. By their marriages, husbands and wives accept an obligation to be faithful, to give and receive help in times of sickness, and to endure hardships. Not everyone will be able to remain true to such vows. However, it is more difficult for a married than for an unmarried person to break such promises *because* they are part of our laws, religions, and definitions of morality. Others have taken identical vows throughout history. Collectively, society enforces these ideals both formally and informally. Nothing of the sort can be said about any other type of intimate relationship between two adults. Understanding this helps us make sense of why marriage changes men.

My own research (as well as that of many others) has shown, for example, that couples in long-term cohabiting relationships differ in predictable ways from married couples. The cohabiting couple is united by bonds of love and affection, but very little else. Such individuals have more freedom than their married counterparts. No formal laws and few informal norms dictate the terms of the cohabiting relationship. There are no conventional assumptions about how people who are living together should behave. But such freedom comes with a cost. Cohabiting couples are less satisfied than married spouses with their partnerships, are not as close to their parents, are less committed to each other, and, if they eventually marry, have higher chances of divorce (Nock, 1995b).

The ubiquity of marriage suggests how highly it is valued by Americans. In 1995, 9 in 10 (92.3%) individuals older than 35 had married at least once. The U.S. Census Bureau projects similarly high rates of marriage until 2010, when 91% of Americans >35 will have married (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996b). The overall percentage of adults expected to ever marry may have dropped somewhat in recent years, but the decline has been from about 95% to about 90% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992b). Even those who divorce remarry at very high rates. Indeed, remarriage is so common that half (46.3%) of all marriages involve at least one previously married person (National Center for Health Statistics, 1995: Table 6). Current national estimates show that between two-thirds and three-fourths of di-

vorced persons remarry (Bumpass, Sweet, and Castro Martin, 1990; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992b: 5).

Despite our high regard for marriage and high marriage rates, there is a widespread belief that American marriages are weak and troubled. Two-thirds (66%) of American adults believe that couples do not take marriage seriously enough when divorce is easily available. And only half (53%) of Americans believe that married people are generally happier than unmarried persons (General Social Surveys, 1994). Even though divorce rates have remained stable since the late 1980s, the current levels are higher than in any prior historical period (National Center for Health Statistics, 1995: Figure 2). How can marriage be so good for people when they perceive it to be so bad?

In fact, marriages are not that bad. Individual spouses may focus on their personal relationships with one another and with children. But every marriage is much more than the sum of such associations. Even for the troubled partner whose private married life is unhappy, there are potential benefits to being married. These benefits accrue from others' assumptions about married people and treatment of them. Marriage, despite the details of intimate life, is part of an identity. A husband is a married man regardless of the quality of his marriage. To understand this aspect of marriage means that one must focus on the public rather than the private dimensions—on what is expected of men *because* they are husbands.

My first task, therefore, is to develop a definition of marriage as a social institution. I identify those dimensions of marriage about which there is very strong consensus. I rely on three diverse sources to assess consensus. First is domestic relations law, including appellate cases from state and federal courts. The law is a conservative statement of our collective ideals and embodies our beliefs about how things should be. The second source is public opinion surveys. Large nationally representative surveys of adults have been conducted repeatedly for three decades. The surveys I use provide a glimpse into what Americans think about important social and personal issues. Overwhelming agreement about some statement or question about marriage in the General Social Surveys, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the National Survey of Families and Households, the National Health and Social Life Survey, or other national surveys consulted for this project may be taken as evidence of consensus among Americans on a particular issue. Finally, religious doctrine, especially the Bible, is the third source. Marriage is a core ritual in all religious traditions. Most marriages are conducted by religious officials; very few Americans claim to have *no* religious affiliation. The traditional, well-known ceremonial vows (e.g., for better or worse, in sickness and in health, until death us do part, etc.) are part of our collective understanding of the institution. Not surprisingly, my study of these diverse sources revealed similar definitions of marriage. Any other result would have been quite remarkable because marriage is such a central element of our culture.

Americans generally agree about six dimensions of marriage. Together, these constitute a *normative definition* of marriage. They are ideals that define what marriages *should* be:

1. Marriage is a free personal choice, based on love.
2. Maturity is a presumed requirement for marriage.
3. Marriage is a heterosexual relationship.
4. The husband is the head, and principal earner, in a marriage.
5. Sexual fidelity and monogamy are expectations for marriage.
6. Marriage typically involves children.

Not all married couples conform to such canons, and not all wish to. Still, these dimensions are a statement of how marriage is understood in America. My attempt to understand how and why marriage changes men relies on these core elements of the institution and inform my theory about how and why each one matters to husbands.

This traditional model of marriage also assumes a husband who supports his wife and children. Few acceptable alternatives exist for married men. Even though a majority of wives are gainfully employed and contribute economically to their families, virtually all working-age husbands are employed. To be a married man in America means that a husband is expected to be engaged in the business of earning a living. The husband who cannot do so may be pitied. But the husband who *will not* work is scorned. This simple commonplace observation contains the key to understanding much about marriage in men's lives.

That key is the connection between marriage and conventional ideas about masculinity. Historically, masculinity has implied three things about a man: he should be the father of his wife's children, he should be the provider for his wife and children, and he should protect his family. Accordingly, the male who refused to provide for or protect his family was not only a bad husband, he was somehow less than a man. In marriage, men do those things that are culturally accepted as basic elements of adult masculinity. This is the central theme of *Marriage in Men's Lives*: marriage changes men because it is the venue in which adult masculinity is developed and sustained. Normative marriage, as outlined above, requires and venerates behaviors that are central to cultural definitions of manhood.

Does this mean that men are forced to accept a particular model of marriage? After all, husbands and wives have great discretion about how to arrange their intimate lives. But the simple fact is that most men and women organize their married lives in broad accord with the outlines of normative marriage. My explanation is that normative marriage is the only way by which *most* males can become "men." Once this basic premise is understood, it becomes much easier to understand why marriage has positive effects for men.

I suggest that masculinity is precarious and must be sustained in adulthood. Normative marriage does this. A man develops, sustains, and displays his mascu-

line identity in his marriage. The adult roles that men occupy as husbands are core aspects of their masculinity. I believe this is a clue to why marriage is beneficial in men's lives.

Cultures differ in how they recognize and foster masculinity. In some, elaborate rites of passage mark the transitions from one stage of boyhood to another along the route to eventual adult masculinity. In others, such as our own, however, there are few public markers. At what point is a young male a man? And how do we know? In the absence of ritualized transitions or other clearly defined points in the life course that establish the attainment of mature adulthood for a man, attention shifts to marriage. As I will argue, marriage is a *rite of passage into manhood*. Once married, a man is a different social and legal person and is held to different standards and accorded different treatment by others.

In marriage, a man will find the means necessary to develop and sustain his masculinity. The dimensions of normative marriage are powerful symbols and tools for doing the things expected of men *as men*. As fathers, providers, and protectors, married men are expected to differ from unmarried men in their legitimate outlets for *adult achievement*, in their involvement, participation, and *engagement in social life*, and in their expressions of *generosity or philanthropy*. Each of these will be shown to be a component of masculine gender in American society. Many are related to basic cultural standards of *providing for* and *protecting* others. Some are related to methods of *displaying* gender. All, however, are integral components of masculinity.

Moreover, men arrange much of their lives in accordance with expectations of them *as husbands*. The traits expected of married men *as husbands* are the same traits expected of husbands *as men*—responsibility (for wife and children), maturity, and fidelity. In this sense, marriage is a metaphor for much else in men's lives. Married men are more productive and achieve more than bachelors. They depend less on others. Marriage changes the nature of men's engagement with others. Friendships and contacts with friends change, as do organizational memberships and allegiances. And patterns of help and generosity are transformed. As a husband, a man is expected to be an active, independent provider who lives in a world of objective and often impersonal rules. Married men's relationships with others are not created so much as they are *joined*. Little effort is required to establish them. Instead, they require that men conform to the accepted standards that apply to them as members or incumbents of social roles.

Once married, men are more likely to become *members* of a church and less likely to spend time with friends. Once married, men often drop their involvements in informal groups in favor of more formal organizations. Men are more likely to spend time with their relatives once they are married. In all such endeavors, husbands are bound to relationships with others by virtue of their membership in an organization or in a kinship group. In each, well-defined standards determine acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The married men in this research

resemble those described by Carol Gilligan: "Relationships [for men] are often cast in the language of achievement, characterized by their success or failure. . . . Instead of attachment, individual achievement rivets the male imagination" (1982: 154,163).

Men can judge themselves as good or bad husbands because the standards of normative marriage are also well-known. Good husbands are mature, faithful, generous fathers and providers. Good husbands are expected to achieve, to help others, and to remain true to their promises. Good husbands are good men.

Does this mean that the traditional male-dominated form of marriage is better than more egalitarian models? Do these results imply that equality in marriage is undesirable? And, most critically, do the results of this analysis imply that contemporary, less traditional models of marriage and living arrangements are undesirable? These have been the most challenging questions in this project. Some readers will interpret this book as a strong rationale for every aspect of traditional marriages. Some will construe the results as an indictment of the goals of modern feminism. Indeed, much in the following analyses shows "traditional" marriage patterns to be quite beneficial for men. But this is not a criticism of gender equality, and the findings should not strike anyone as surprising. Marriage has historically been organized to men's advantage. The news in this book is about how and why that arrangement matters for men. Once this is understood, I believe it will be easier to understand how and why the prevailing model of normative marriage is changing, as it must.

The basic research strategy used throughout this project relies on two types of comparisons. First, I assess men before and after they get married to see how various dimensions of their lives change in the interim. Here the question is whether marriage creates predictable changes in men's lives. Second, I follow these married men as they experience changes in the basic dimensions of normative marriage. For example, over the course of several years, children are born or leave home, wives enter the labor force or leave it, and incomes rise or fall. Each dimension of normative marriage is measured by an indicator of this type. The question is whether there are predictable changes in men's lives when there are changes in the normative dimensions of their marriages. Throughout, I focus on three aspects of men's lives suggested by the theory: adult achievement (e.g., income, weeks worked), social participation (e.g., church attendance, membership in organizations), and generosity (gifts of money or kind to relatives, friends, or others).

The results are consistent with the theory. Marriage brings about predictable changes in all dimensions studied. Once married, men earn more, work more, and achieve more. Once married, men see less of their friends and drop memberships in relatively unstructured types of organizations (e.g., health clubs). They are more likely to participate in organized, formal relationships governed by clear standards of performance and membership (e.g., church). And, once married, men are less likely to contribute money or assistance to individuals they are not related to by

blood or marriage. Moreover, when men's marriages change toward more normative patterns, there are comparable shifts of the sort just described.

American marriages are slowly changing in consistent ways. Most generally, what it means to be a married woman today is very different from what it was in the recent past. Increasing rates of female labor-force involvement, delayed marriage, reduced fertility, and higher chances of divorce all require changes that signal a departure from some aspects of normative marriage. These changes have significant implications for men and women. But the biggest challenges in the future will confront men. The battles for greater equality and opportunities for women have been (and continue to be) waged openly in law, the economy, education, religion, and politics. Strangely, the basic institution of marriage has not yet been redefined to accommodate the significantly changed lives of most women. Americans have not, as yet, arrived at a common definition of marriage based on extensive dependencies that accommodate the greater gender equality found elsewhere in society. It is quite clear, however, that we must. All social institutions are integrated affairs. It is not possible to have profound changes in one or two without corresponding changes in all others. To the extent that our public lives have been changed by transformations in ideas about men and women, then our private lives must also change. Indeed, many of the problems faced by contemporary families result from new ways of thinking that originated in these public institutions—in the economy or in schools, for example. Those problems are best seen as the cost we are paying to bridge the gulf between our family lives and our public lives. The idea of what it means to be married and to have a family will change, albeit slowly, as all other institutions change.

*Marriage in Men's Lives* suggests how these changes might occur. As marriages become less traditional, there are profound implications for men because the institutional framework of matrimony is largely organized around traditional assumptions about husbands. However, husbands and wives are becoming more equal because both partners increasingly depend on one another's incomes. The contemporary married couple typically includes two earners. But the power imbalances that are part of the assumption that husbands are the heads of their families may be inconsistent with this pattern. The challenge is to recast the institution as one in which pervasive dependencies exist without inequity. Without dependency, there is little to bind couples together, except their love and mutual affection. Studies of cohabiting couples show that such glue is weak and destabilizes the entire arrangement. Therefore, complete equality in all matters cannot sustain enduring marriages. Something else is needed. I propose it is an institutional framework, or model, of marriage that casts husbands and wives in *mutually dependent* roles.

The newly emerging model of marriage is similar in many respects to the normative model already outlined. Most dimensions of traditional marriage are intact and will probably remain so. The greatest change is that dependencies in marriage

are equalizing. The normative expectation for a married man is that he must provide for his wife and children. This means that wives and children are *dependents*. But it is no longer true that husbands are expected to do *all* the providing. That task is now partly shared, and, undoubtedly, provider roles will continue to expand among wives.

This does not abolish the wife's dependence on her husband. But it does mean that husbands depend on their wives. Married couples are defining marriage as an arrangement that depends on the combined resources generated by both partners. For the vast majority of people, neither husband nor wife alone is able to afford any other arrangement. In this sense, Americans are returning to a *more traditional* form of marriage. The typical marriage in the first half of the twentieth century was an unusual one. The arrangement in which husbands were responsible for the entire family economy was an historical aberration that lasted only about half a century. Until the turn of this century, and since about 1970, most married couples relied on a combination of economic efforts by both spouses to keep the household going. Contemporary marriages will more closely resemble earlier arrangements than those of the early twentieth century. Such marriages will still require that husbands provide for wives and children. But they also will require that wives provide for husbands and children.

The changes we are beginning to see in the institution of marriage do not portend the end of gendered marriages. But they probably do mean the end of many of the invidious inequalities based on gender in marriage. The model of marriage now emerging will be good for men, just as the traditional model was. But the new model of marriage will be better for women than the traditional one was.

Marriage is probably the last basic social institution to change as a result of new ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman. My hope is that *Marriage in Men's Lives* will offer a perspective on the implications of these changes.



## Marriage as a Social Institution

A marriage is much more than the sum of two spouses. It is also a relationship defined by legal, moral, and conventional assumptions. While one can imagine a variety of close personal affiliations uniting two adults, the variety of marriage affiliations is much narrower because marriage is an *institution*, culturally patterned and integrated into other basic social institutions, such as education, the economy, and politics. Marriage has rules that originate outside any particular union of two spouses and that establish *soft boundaries* around the relationship that influence the partners in many ways. The boundaries around marriages are the commonly understood allowable limits of behavior that distinguish marriage from all other kinds of relationships. The social norms that define the institution of marriage identify married spouses in ways that distinguish them from others. Married couples have something that other couples lack: they are heirs to a vast system of understood principles that help organize and sustain their lives.

One explanation for how marriage matters to men is that it provides structure to their lives and organizes their ambitions. This is an old argument, first suggested a century ago by Emile Durkheim, who demonstrated the protective role of marriage in preventing suicide. Durkheim observed that since basic human necessities (food, housing, clothing) are more or less available in all advanced societies, desires among modern humans are focused on well-being, comfort, luxury, and prestige. Sooner or later, however, the appetite for such rewards becomes sated. One of the central problems in modern society, therefore, is establishing legitimate boundaries around such desires. This, Durkheim believed, can be accomplished only by social institutions such as marriage (1951: 247–49).

Durkheim explained the function of marriage for men by noting how unrestrained longings and desires must be checked. Marriage benefits men, Durkheim believed, because, as an organ of society, it restrains their otherwise uncontrollable impulses. Discussing such desires and impulses, Durkheim observed:

By forcing a man to attach himself forever to the same woman, marriage assigns a strictly definite object to the need for love, and closes the horizon. This deter-