

**Courtship And Marital Choice: Why They Are Important  
And What We Need To Learn About Them**  
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In the past few years there has been an increase in expressions of interest in the promotion of stable and successful marriages in American society. This change has occurred among family social scientists, policymakers, religious leaders, journalists, and the general public. It has included increased research on the effects of marriage, and of marital quality, on both adults and their offspring; in increased and more sophisticated research on the bases of marital success; in movements, such as "Marriage Savers," to improve the quality of marriages; and in political concern about high divorce rates.

Current efforts to promote marital success include programs to help married couples deal constructively with conflicts, promotion of marriage-friendly social policies, and attempts to instill values and attitudes that are conducive to marital success. These and similar efforts are all worthwhile, are almost certainly to some extent having their intended effects, and may soon have greater effects than they have had so far. However, the rate of marital failure in American society, by any reasonable indicator, is still very high.<sup>1</sup>

In view of the great concern about promoting marital success and the apparent limited efficacy of current efforts to do that, it is surprising that relatively little attention has been paid recently to one of the most obvious and traditionally emphasized means for helping people have good marriages. That means is the promotion of wise choices of mates and appropriate marital matches. While research on marriage burgeoned in the 1990s, and there was a continuation of studies of "mate selection," surprisingly little research has attempted to chart

how couples meet, evaluate one another, and choose to marry one another under current conditions, which are substantially different from those that existed only two or three decades ago. We know of course that the average age at first marriage in the United States has risen appreciably in recent years, that a smaller percentage of people who marry now do so before or soon after they complete their formal education, that a larger percentage of people who marry have been married before, that the decision to marry more often takes place when persons are not very likely to be highly influenced by their parents and other kin, and that a large percentage of couples have a sexual relationship (and often are living together) long before they decide to marry. However, family social scientists have hardly begun to deal with the implications of these changes for how the process of marital choice works, for the nature of the marital matches that result, and for the quality of marriages. Nor have social activists interested in promoting good marriages given courtship and marital choice the attention they have given several other topics.

I do not mean that persons concerned with promoting marital success have ignored the importance of good marital matches, because they have not. Functional (practical) marriage and the family textbooks all still have chapters or large sections of chapters ostensibly designed to help students choose spouses wisely, and the advocates of compulsory marriage preparation courses in the secondary schools hope that such courses will help persons make better marital choices. The self-help sections of bookstores contain dozens of books that give advice on searching for and finding appropriate mates. However, much of the advice fails to take into account the new conditions under which marital choice typically occurs, and attempts to take into account the new conditions, while occasionally insightful, have little empirically-based

knowledge to draw upon.

The time has come to refocus attention on courtship and the process of mate selection and to make efforts to improve the process a prominent part of attempts to re-invigorate marriage in American society. Indeed, under current conditions, in which the ideal of marital permanence has weakened and many persons continue to compare their marriages with real and imagined alternatives to them even after many years, the importance of good matches is arguably more important than ever. Furthermore, the activities, relationships, and experiences that precede marriage are likely to affect marital success in ways other than their affecting the "goodness of fit" of the spouses.

Any constructive discussion of contemporary marital choice must be conducted with awareness of the fact that it has been largely "deinstitutionalized" in modern societies, even more so, I believe, than has marriage itself. The traditional rituals of courtship have been almost completely abandoned and few new institutionalized mechanisms of mate selection have emerged.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the process of marital choice that I describe in this paper is one in which individuals are left largely to their own devices as they search for spouses, guided mainly by their perceptions of their self interests and the informal influences of their friends and family members. Considerations of familial, religious, or other kinds of social obligation are not necessarily absent but are rarely paramount.

My task here is twofold, first to describe marital choice as I perceive that it occurs, then to suggest how the process might be changed to achieve better marital matches and fewer incidental negative consequences. I assume that restoration of traditional courtship is not going to happen but do not rule out the possibility of some degree of reinstitutionalization of

the process of marital choice.

### **Why the Quality of Marital Choice is Crucial**

Virtually everyone concerned about marriage would agree that a "good match" of spouses is important, but the understanding of why it is important is often not very sophisticated. The reason given is often simply that husbands and wives need to be compatible, or that they need to have similar interests and values. Even academic discussions of the suitability of spouses to one another often seem to be based on the assumption that good matches could be made with such information as that yielded by personality tests, interest inventories, and assessments of values. Such information can at least to some small degree help predict which couples will marry, and among those who marry, which ones will have successful marriages. By itself, however, it can provide only limited insight into what constitutes a good marital match. I turn to a simple conceptual scheme and a simple theory of what, under current conditions, constitutes a good marital match to argue that other matters must be considered before one can have a good understanding of marital suitability.<sup>3</sup>

The most popular theories of marital choice devised by social scientists all use the concept of *marriage market* and draw a rough analogy between the search for a suitable spouse and the search for goods and services in the economic marketplace. According to these theories, just as consumers try to get as much in the way of desirable goods and services as they can given the amount of money they have to spend, persons searching for spouses try to get mates who are as desirable as possible given what the searching persons have to offer on the marriage

market. No one claims that there are not important differences between economic markets and marriage markets, and most of the theories take into account nonrational elements that affect marital choice.

In any one society, there is considerable agreement about what characteristics make a person a desirable husband or wife, and therefore it is useful to conceive of *general marital desirability*, or a person's average desirability to persons of the opposite sex who are also on the marriage market. In spite of the tendency toward agreement on standards of desirability, the agreement is far from perfect, there being considerable variation in the tastes and preferences persons use when they evaluate potential spouses. Therefore, we can also conceive of *person-specific marital desirability*, or a person's desirability to a specific other person of the opposite sex. What a person on the marriage market tries to maximize, of course, is the person-specific desirability (to himself or herself) of the person he or she marries.<sup>4</sup>

Although marital desirability is not amenable to precise measurement, for theoretical purposes it is useful to assume that it can be measured on an eleven-point scale, varying from ten for the highest desirability to zero for the lowest. If there were no variation in standards of desirability, if there were an equal number of males and females on the marriage market, and if everyone had perfect knowledge of everyone else's characteristics, the tens would end up married to tens, the nines to nines, and so forth, with the zeroes being left to marry one another. Fortunately, the lack of perfect agreement on standards prevents the existence of such a harsh system of mating. Even those persons with very low general marital desirability usually have fairly high person-specific desirability to a few other persons. With ideal functioning of the market, almost everyone should be able to marry someone whose person-

specific marital desirability to them is considerably higher than their own general marital desirability. Of course, among persons of rather low general desirability, those whose standards are most nearly unique are the ones most likely to be able to marry persons highly desirable to them.

The most stable and successful marriages are likely to be those in which the spouses are substantially more desirable to one another than they are to most other people. An example would be spouses who are both threes in general desirability but are eights to one another. These persons are likely to be highly appreciative of one another, and neither will have abundant desirable alternatives to lure them out of, or to lessen their commitment to, their present marriage. Conversely, those marriages in which the spouses are more desirable to others than they are to one another are very unlikely to succeed. An example would be spouses who are both nines in general desirability but are only fives to one another. In this case, each spouse could benefit from divorcing and marrying one of the many available persons who are more desirable to him or her than the present spouse. A marriage with intermediate prospects for success, and one rather likely to occur, is one in which the spouses are about as desirable to one another as they are to most other people.

An obstacle to achieving matches in which the spouses are considerably more desirable to one another than to most other persons is the fact that person-specific marital desirability tends to be enhanced by high general marital desirability. That is, most persons want to have a spouse whom others will consider desirable. However, the weight given to "display value" in the assessment of the person-specific desirability of prospects varies substantially among persons on the marriage market, and the smaller that weight is, the greater are the prospects for

a good marital match.

Marriages with optimal combinations of marital desirabilities are likely to occur only in very efficient, well-functioning marriage markets, that is, in markets in which participants have extensive knowledge of one another's characteristics. Without such knowledge, persons more desirable to one another than to most other persons are unlikely to connect and become spouses. In less well-functioning marriage markets, persons are likely to decide to marry before they meet or get to know the person in the market to whom they are best suited and who is best suited to them. Rather, they are likely to decide to marry someone whose general marital desirability is similar to their own, but someone who is not uniquely desirable to them and to whom they are not uniquely desirable. Unfortunately, under current conditions, marriage markets are not likely to function very well—a point to which I return below.

It is important to point out that a well-functioning marriage market is not simply one that allows persons to maximize the person-specific marital desirability to them of those they marry. Two prospects with equal desirability to the person may not be equally appropriate spouses, if one has a larger number of desirable alternatives than the other. The one with the smaller number of desirable alternatives will be, all else being equal, the more committed and the more appropriate spouse.

The probability of marital success is maximized only if persons on the marriage market connect with others who are appropriately desirable, given what those searching for partners have to offer. Those who marry before adequately testing their marital desirability, or who marry in poorly functioning marriage markets, may settle for someone less desirable than they are able to attract. When such persons realize that they have "undersold" themselves on the

marriage market, as will almost inevitably happen eventually, dissatisfaction and withdrawal of marital commitment are likely, especially under current conditions.

Another useful distinction is between real and apparent marital desirability. The former is how desirable a mate the person will really be and the latter is how desirable it appears the he or she will be on the basis of incomplete knowledge of the person's characteristics. Initial screening in the marriage market occurs on the basis of apparent marital desirability, of course, but so does the final decision to marry, because real marital desirability can be assessed precisely only after marriage. However, in the well-functioning marriage market, at the time of marriage the apparent desirability of persons to their spouses will not greatly exceed their real desirability.

It is obvious that the formation of good marital matches depends heavily on the ability of persons seeking spouses to get to know a reasonably large number and wide variety of prospective spouses and on their ability to get to know those prospects well enough to be able to predict with reasonable accuracy what kind of spouses they would be. This need for knowledge of those on the market and the need for persons on the market to test their own apparent desirability lie behind the common advice to young people to "shop around" and not to marry the first person they have a chance to marry. This is good advice.

There is tension between the need to test for the closeness of the correspondence between the real and apparent desirabilities of marital prospects and an equally important requirement for good marital choice, namely, avoidance of premature entanglements as the prospects are assessed. The trick is to get to know each serious prospect well enough adequately to assess his or her marital desirability without reaching a "point of no return," beyond which withdrawal

from the relationship will be extremely difficult. The problem of premature entanglement has always plagued marriage markets in this country but may be an even more serious problem now than previously. Under current conditions the most common reason for premature entanglement is likely to be an ill-considered decision to cohabit. As the song says, "breaking up is hard to do," and it is likely to be much harder if the couple are living together.

Discussions of marital choice sometimes seem to be based on the assumption that most people who decide to marry have multiple opportunities when the choice is made--that they can mentally line up a number of prospects, compare them, and choose one from the lineup. In fact, it is rare for a person to have more than one opportunity to marry at a time; it is typically only very early in the mating process that choices can be made among several prospects. Opportunities to marry almost always occur sequentially, not simultaneously; the choice typically faced is to take advantage of an opportunity to marry or not to do so, and the only comparison made is with opportunities the person thinks he or she may have in the future. Unless the person chosen perfectly fits the chooser's image of an ideal spouse, which is probably rare, the decision to marry reflects a pessimistic assessment of future opportunities. The more realistic this assessment is, the better the marital match is likely to be. Ideally, the person making the decision will have sufficient knowledge, based in part on past experiences, to make a realistic assessment.

As I point out above, the well-functioning marriage market enables those on the market to get spouses with as much person-specific marital desirability to them as is possible given what they have to offer on the market. Persons on the market are of course highly motivated to make the market function well, but that does not mean that they will always act wisely and

rationally to achieve that end. Both conditions external to the participants and those persons' poor judgement can prevent optimal functioning of the market and the achievement of optional matches. For instance, a person searching for a mate may focus on short-term rather than long-term considerations. The good match is one that maximizes the desirability of spouses to one another in the long run and not just at the time of marriage, and thus participants on the marriage market should emphasize desirable characteristics of prospects that are likely to endure rather than be ephemeral. In addition, some enduring characteristics of prospective mates may elicit feelings of infatuation or intense feelings of romantic love but fail to contribute much to long-term desirability.

Given the fallibility of the judgement of persons searching for mates, the best choices are likely to be made by persons substantially influenced by friends and family members, who can be more objective and rational about the choice than the persons themselves. Of course, the influence of these other persons is likely to improve the selection process only if the others have sufficient knowledge of the prospects being evaluated.

The effectiveness of the marital selection process should be judged not only in terms of the appropriateness of the matches that result from it but also in terms of the effects it has on those who participate in it. By its very nature, the process subjects participants to the risks of rejection and exploitation. Of course, rejection cannot be avoided, because the participants in a well-functioning marriage market must be neither reluctant to reject nor overly fearful of rejection. However, institutionalized rituals and social controls can mitigate the brutality of rejection and minimize the risks of exploitation.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of such mechanisms, participation in the marriage market can leave persons cynical, jaded, and unable to trust--in

other words, it can adversely affect the participants' marital desirability. Mating activities can also engender habits, attitudes, and patterns of relating that can have either positive or negative effects on the marriages that persons eventually enter. Furthermore, if participation in the marriage market becomes extremely painful or distasteful, persons may drop out and forgo the benefits of marriage.

### **Implications of the Changed Conditions Under Which Marital Choice Occurs**

One important unmistakable change in marital choice in the United States in recent years is a substantial increase in the average age of the participants. In just one decade, from 1980 to 1990, the percentage of men who married who were under 20 years old went from 8.5 to 4.3 and the comparable percentage for women dropped from 21.1 to 10.6.<sup>6</sup> The percentage of persons who married who were under age 25 declined from 44.2 to 29.0 for men and from 58.2 to 39.9 for women. In 1990, 27.4 percent of the men and 21.0 percent of the women who married were age 35 or older, compared with 19.7 percent and 13.8 percent, for men and women respectively, a decade earlier. These changes started in the 1970s and have continued since 1990. The longer-term trend in the median age of those entering first marriages is shown in Table 1.

--Table 1 about here--

Most social scientific students of marriage seem to believe that the increase in the average age of persons on the marriage market has led to distinctly positive influences, on balance, on the quality of marital choice. That belief may not be correct, for reasons that I discuss below,

but there are several reasons why the decline in marriage among very young persons has very likely had beneficial consequences.

Numerous studies have shown that persons who marry very young are much more likely to divorce than those who marry when they are well into adulthood.<sup>7</sup> For instance, among white persons, the probability of divorce in the few years following marriage is almost three times greater for those who marry in their teens than for those who marry in their middle to late twenties. This relationship between age at marriage and divorce is partially spurious, that is, it results partly from the fact that the two variables are commonly affected by some of the same influences, including those from the socioeconomic status of the family of origin and region of residence. However, most scholars and researchers who have discussed the relationship give reasons for thinking that early marriage is conducive to marital failure.

For instance, among persons on the threshold of adulthood, both the characteristics that form the basis for their own marital desirability and their standards for evaluating the desirability of others tend to be very changeable. To illustrate, to the 17-year-old woman just completing high school, the popular high school athlete may seem highly desirable, even if he lacks the characteristics that are valued in the adult world and that would make him a desirable husband. Persons' own desirability and their standards of desirability never become absolutely fixed but tend to stabilize considerably in the first few years of adulthood. Obviously, marriages formed while these characteristics are still changing rapidly are not likely to be very good matches in terms of the maximization of the desirability of the spouses to one another. Even if these characteristics are reasonably stable, persons who marry early are unlikely adequately to test their desirability on the marriage market.

While the decline in very early marriages has almost certainly been beneficial, the overall increase in the ages of persons on the marriage market may not have contributed to better marital matching. The data on divorce and age at marriage suggest that little or nothing in the way of marital stability is to be gained by postponing marriage beyond about age 23 for women and age 25 for men, and first marriages entered at age 30 or older seem to be somewhat more prone to divorce than those formed when the spouses are in their middle to late twenties. As the median age of those marrying rose after 1970, the divorce rate at first rose and then levelled off, and the average quality of intact marriages apparently declined.<sup>8</sup> There was a lack of improvement in marital success in spite of, rather than because of, the increase in the typical age at marriage, but except for the decline in marriages of very young people, the changes in the age distribution of marrying persons may have exerted generally negative influences on marital stability and quality.

Several changes that have almost certainly resulted from the increase in the typical age at first marriage have probably had negative effects on the quality of marital choice. For instance, because young adulthood is characterized by movement--both geographic and social--away from parents, other kin, and long-time friends, the longer marriage is postponed, the less likely it is that those persons most likely to exert positive influences on marital choice will do that. Furthermore, the longer marriage is postponed, the less likely it is that the one married will be a long-time acquaintance and one well known by parents and long-time friends. To use the terminology I introduce above, the later marriers, and especially those who marry away from their home communities, run a greater risk of marrying someone whose apparent marital desirability is substantially higher than his or her real desirability.

The effective functioning of marriage markets depends on those seeking spouses being able to meet and get to know a large number and variety of potential mates. Secondary schools and colleges and universities are probably the arenas that provide the greatest opportunities for contacts with eligible persons of the opposite sex. In the recent past, a substantial proportion of the persons who ended their education with high school graduation married persons they met in school, and many of those who went to college met their spouses at college. I know of no data on the subject, but the increase in the average age at first marriage must have resulted in a decline in marriages of persons who met in school or college. Unfortunately, once one goes into the world of work, opportunities to meet interesting and desirable persons of the opposite sex typically decline substantially. The social contacts people have on the job are often superficial and impersonal and are usually with persons who are not of the right age and/or marital status to be prospective spouses. There are major obstacles, including anti-fraternization rules, to romantic involvement with work associates, especially those above or below oneself in the hierarchies of work organizations. The search for a spouse is often restricted to leisure time, which may be quite limited for ambitious young adults starting their careers. The movement away from school or college into the work place almost certainly exerts negative influences on the effectiveness of mate selection processes, although other changes that accompany aging and career advancement may offset those influences.

A second unmistakable recent change in marital choice is that a substantial proportion of the people who go on the marriage market and eventually marry cohabit before they marry. Among some of the more liberal and secular portions of the American population, cohabitation has become a normal and expected stage of courtship. Many students of marriage

have encouraged this change, because they believe it should, in the language I introduce above, lessen the disparity between apparent and real marital desirability. According to this point of view, it is desirable for couples to test their compatibility, to see how they get along while living together, before they decide to marry.

Research on cohabitation during the past decade has rather conclusively refuted the view that premarital cohabitation is an effective means to prevent inappropriate marital matches.<sup>9</sup> It probably does prevent some marriages that should not occur, but the divorce rate for couples who have cohabited before marriage is substantially higher than that for couples who have not cohabited. This difference, almost all scholars who have addressed the topic seem to agree, is partially spurious; persons with values and attitudes that are not conducive to marital success are more likely to cohabit before marriage than others. However, several observers believe that habits and patterns of relating developed during cohabitation have a detrimental effect on marriage, and that is likely to be the case.

An additional reason for the negative relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital success may be that although cohabitation prevents some inappropriate marital matches, it leads to others. As I point out above, in a well-functioning marriage market, those seeking spouses gain as much knowledge of prospective spouses as possible while avoiding premature entanglement. Premature entanglement occurs when the relationship with one person progresses to the point that it inhibits obtaining knowledge about alternative prospects and when knowledge of those prospects is still inadequate. In addition, premature entanglement initiates pressures toward marriage that are hard to resist, even if one discovers that the prospect is not as desirable as one had thought. In the case of young adults living

together, these pressures often come from parents and other kin--an instance of pernicious influence from those whose influence is typically beneficial. As I point out above, breaking up with someone with whom a person is living can be difficult, and perhaps it sometimes is so difficult that it is easier to marry, and to convince oneself that the match is not as bad as it really is. Traditionally, the railroad train to marriage was extremely difficult to stop only after the announcement of an engagement, a milestone usually passed after much more deliberation than typically lies behind the decision to cohabit.

A third unmistakable recent change in marital choice in the United States is an increase in the proportion of participants in the marriage market who have been married and have returned to the market to find a second or subsequent spouse. In 1970, 68.6 percent of all marriages were between previously unmarried brides and grooms, but by 1988, the percentage was only 54.1.<sup>10</sup> More recent data are not available, but the percentage was virtually stable during the eighties and has probably changed little during the nineties.

This increase in previously married persons on the marriage market is a major reason for the increased average age of those on the market and has probably tended to lessen the influence of kin and long-term friends on marital choice. Previously married persons face the selection process with more experience and maturity than they had when they first decided to marry, but it is not clear that they are necessarily typically better equipped than other marriage market participants to make wise judgements and choices. Those who have financial responsibility for and/or custody of children suffer some loss of general marital desirability as a result, though having children may enhance their desirability to some prospects. Single parents have relatively little time and energy to spend searching for spouses--a condition that must to

some degree diminish the quality of their choices. Previous experience with marriage should contribute to wisdom, but it may also leave some persons cynical and fearful of commitment.

The situation of single parents on the marriage market is crucially different from that of other participants, because the parent and his/her child or children are essentially on the market as a package. Anyone considering marrying a single parent is contemplating simultaneously taking on two roles--spouse and stepparent--rather than just one and is likely to evaluate the characteristics of the prospective stepchildren as well as those of the prospective spouse. Furthermore, the child or children of the single parent may participate, if only indirectly and subtly, in the selection process. Whereas the influence of kin on marital choice should usually be beneficial, the influence of those lacking mature judgement may not be. Emotional attachment of children to a parent's prospective spouse may lead to premature entanglement, especially when there is cohabitation.

It is clear that the conditions under which marital choice typically occurs in the United States are quite different now than they were just a few decades ago. There are few reasons to believe that the changes have improved the quality of marital choices and several reasons to believe that they have had the opposite effect, although there is no conclusive evidence on the trend in the goodness of marital matches.

Most of what social scientists know about mate selection and the functioning of marriage markets is based on studies conducted when conditions were different; there is very little solid evidence about how people currently seek appropriate spouses and the failures and successes of their efforts. I turn now to a discussion of what we need to know, but do not, about courtship and mate selection under current conditions.

## **What We Need to Know: An Agenda for Research**

There are two kinds of knowledge likely to be useful to efforts to improve the quality of marital choice, namely, (a) knowledge of what institutional arrangements and personal courses of action promote appropriate marital matches and (b) knowledge of weaknesses in how marriage markets now function. Most research on marital choice and marriage markets has not been designed to contribute to these kinds of knowledge.

Although the topic of mate selection has been the focus of considerable social scientific research since early in the 20th century, knowledge of the exact nature of selection processes has never been great. Most studies have focused on who marries whom, especially in terms of similarities and differences of spouses' race, ethnicity, religion, education, values, attitudes, and personalities. The why and the how of the matches described have been more a matter of speculation than of empirical investigation, though a moderate amount of research on courtship had been conducted by the early 1980s and is well summarized in a book titled *Paths to Marriage* written by Bernard Murstein and published in 1986.<sup>11</sup> Most of this research is now quite dated and much of it is seriously deficient in terms of the representativeness of the persons studied and other aspects of research design.

In the past 20 years or so, psychologically oriented longitudinal studies of how intimate relationships begin and develop have tended to supplant the more traditional research on courtship, and this research has provided important insights into the social psychology of relationship development.<sup>12</sup> However, it has left the most basic questions about how marriage

markets now function unanswered, and it is not apparent that it has provided much knowledge that could be used to help improve the quality of marital choice.

In sociology, the study of courtship has become virtually moribund, except for research about the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital success. There has been considerable research on what is called "courtship violence" but which in fact is primarily on violence between couples who are dating but not necessarily considering marriage. This research has contributed little to the understanding of how courtship leads to good or poor marital matches. Few recent social scientific publications other than those dealing with cohabitation even mention the adequacy of present institutional arrangements for marital selection.

Even the most basic descriptive information about the current nature of marital choice is absent. For instance, we do not know how and where people meet the persons they eventually marry or those they consider prospects for marriage. We do not know what proportion of prospective and eventual spouses are met at work, through leisure activities, at school or college, through commercial dating services, at church or through activities sponsored by churches and other religious organizations, through introductions by friends and kin, and through proximity of residence? Even though there are reasons to think that the methods of meeting prospective spouses have changed considerably in recent decades, there apparently is no good empirical evidence concerning such changes. Likewise, we do not know how many prospective spouses are dated by persons on the marriage market before a mutual decision to marry is made, nor do we know how long persons stay on the market before they connect, if they do. Nor do we know how long persons know one another before they marry. There is

little or no information on how these basic facts differ according to age at marriage, between first and higher order marriages, or even between men and women in the case of variables that can differ by sex.

More important, we know little or nothing about how the method and place of meeting, length of acquaintance, number of other prospects dated, and other aspects of courtship aside from cohabitation relate to marital success. These relationships were once the focus of considerable research, but given the inadequacies of the methods and samples used, there has never been very good evidence relating to them.

In spite of a few studies devoted to the newer mechanisms of matchmaking, very little is known about the effectiveness of any of them. For instance, the proliferation of commercial dating services is evidence that the traditional means of meeting and mating are not working very well, but just how well the commercial services are meeting the needs they have arisen to serve is not known. Such devices as newspaper advertisements are almost certainly not very effective, but they continue to be rather widely used and deserve more study than has been devoted to them. The newest widely used method of connecting with marital prospects, through chat rooms on the internet, has obvious limitations; for instance, with this method there are no good safeguards against exploitation and deception. However, it may allow persons who are introverted, orally inarticulate, and not very physically attractive to display desirable characteristics, such as intelligence and sensitivity, without being screened out in the initial phases of the mating process, as they tend to be with more conventional methods. In other words, it may work better than other methods for some persons whose real marital desirability is higher than their apparent desirability. This and similar hunches and hypotheses

are worth testing through carefully conducted research.

We also need to know how effectively persons on the marriage market are using traditional means of meeting and getting acquainted. These include participating in social activities sponsored by religious organizations, belonging to leisure and hobby organizations, and joining singles clubs. If these means are not being used very effectively, we need to know why. It is likely that some of these do not work very well because of unbalanced sex ratios among the participants, because they require too much time, or because many unmarried people are unaware of the opportunities they provide.

The basic factual parameters of the mate selection process, such as methods of meeting prospects, could be established through conventional large-scale survey research. Surveys could also provide some information on how recent participants in the marriage market perceive their experiences and evaluate the adequacy of the processes and activities through which they became married or failed to find a spouse. Respondents to surveys are likely to be reasonably honest and accurate even in reporting such emotions as frustration, disappointment, and the emotional bruises of rejection, provided they are interviewed within a few months or at most a few years after the experiences that elicited those emotions.

Nevertheless, the best understanding of how well marriage markets are functioning can be attained only through in-depth interviews and case studies that probe beneath the routinized responses to structured survey questions. For instance, it is unlikely that many recently married persons will readily admit to an interviewer administering a structured questionnaire that their marriage resulted from premature entanglement or that they had such limited opportunities to meet prospective spouses that they decided to marry the first minimally acceptable prospect

they had a chance to marry. However, such facts may emerge from in-depth interviews if the interviewer has established good rapport with the subject. Case studies based on repeated interviews with the subject and interviews with friends, relatives, and the spouse could be even more instructive.

Already collected data might yield considerable insight into how well marriage markets are functioning. Even though the longitudinal social psychological studies of relationship development have not focused on the institutional mechanisms of mate selection, it is likely that their data, including especially the responses to open-ended questions, could cast considerable light on the functioning of those mechanisms.

### **Can Anything Be Done to Improve the Quality of Marital Choice**

Implicit in most of what I have said so far is the assumption that if we sufficiently understand what promotes good marital choices and can identify weaknesses in how marriage markets are now functioning, we can improve the quality of marital choice. That assumption is not obviously correct, and not all students of marriage believe it is correct. The changes in the conditions under which marital choice occurs that probably have lessened the effectiveness of the process may be irreversible, or at least those of us concerned about the present state of American marriage lack the ability to reverse them. Many social scientists and social commentators apparently believe we can do little more than leave people to their own devices as they seek suitable spouses. It is probably pessimism about improving marital choice that accounts for very little attention being given to the topic recently by pro-marriage authors and

social activists.

I do not share this pessimism, although there surely are limits to what can be done to improve the quality of marital matches. If the research I recommend should discover major weaknesses in the functioning of marriage markets (and I am confident that it would), there are possibly effective means that concerned persons and groups could employ to try to rectify those weaknesses. These are not panaceas; each is piecemeal, but together they might make an important difference.

For instance, it may be possible to improve the effectiveness of education for marital choice not only by making it more extensive but also by providing it at a more appropriate time than when it is now usually provided. Education for marital choice in schools and colleges should be continued and expanded, but it may come too early for many if not most people. For instance, most high school students will not seriously consider marrying for several years, and what they read and hear about marital choice in marriage preparation courses is not immediately relevant to their lives and may be forgotten before it is relevant. Education for marital choice needs to begin early, but it should also occur when it is most relevant, that is, when or shortly before persons go on the marriage market. Much of it should, therefore, be a form of adult education, which could be given by such organizations as churches and other religious and civic organizations as well as by colleges that have adult education programs.<sup>13</sup>

The advice about marital choice in self-help books and in popular magazines may generally be helpful, but it could be more useful if it were based in part on a large body of findings from well-conducted relevant research. I have examined only a small sample of this literature, but it is my impression that it generally fails to draw on many of the most relevant research findings

that exist, such as those on the relationship between cohabitation and marital success. Therefore, pro-marriage organizations could usefully commission the preparation of educational materials on marital choice that would be sounder and more effective than those now available.

Business organizations and other employers could take steps to facilitate good marital choices by their employees, though whether it is in their interest to do so is arguable. Much has been written about the need for family-friendly policies and practices on the part of businesses and other employers, and some such policies have been implemented. Unfortunately, however, these policies generally do nothing to promote family formation among unmarried employees and fail to benefit those who are both unmarried and childless. Indeed, efforts to relieve married persons from unwanted evening and weekend work often overburden unmarried employees and interfere with their social lives and thus their search for spouses. Furthermore, discouragement of work place romances by employers may go well beyond what is necessary to prevent sexual harassment and promote fairness and efficiency. And when employers sponsor social and recreational activities for their employees, they do not always take the needs of unmarried persons into account, for instance by trying to give those who work in different departments opportunities to meet and get to know one another.

If research should reveal relatively low effectiveness of such means of meeting and getting acquainted as joining singles clubs and leisure organizations and participating in church sponsored activities, it might be possible to improve that effectiveness. For instance, if it were to be found that many persons on the marriage market are unaware of the opportunities offered by these means, pro-marriage groups in each community could compile directories of

the relevant organizations and distribute calendars of their scheduled activities. If the opportunities were found to be inadequate, new organizations could be formed and new activities sponsored by the existing organizations. Distributing information on the sex ratios of the memberships of the organizations might help to rectify gross imbalances in the numbers of men and women.

These and similar efforts to improve the quality of marital choices should of course be in addition to, not substitutes for, other means being employed to strengthen marriage in American society. The other means may well be, by themselves, more effective than efforts to improve the functioning of marriage markets could ever be. However, we should not forget the importance of good marital matches, and if pro-marriage scholars and activists were to turn their collective imaginations to the topic, they might be able to devise some surprisingly effective methods for improvement.

## Endnotes

1. The divorce rate in the United States peaked around 1980, when the number of divorces per 1,000 married women age 15 and older was 22.6. In 1996, the latest date for which data are available, this same rate was 19.5, or only 14 percent lower than it was in 1980. See U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, Page 111, Table 156. The United States divorce rate is still the highest among those countries for which reasonably accurate divorce data are available.

2. See Leon R. Kass, "The End of Courtship," *The Public Interest*, Winter, 1977, pp. 39-63.

3. I devised the conceptual scheme and simple theory presented here, except that the concept of marriage market is not original. The theory resembles, but is not directly based on, the several "exchange" theories of mate selection that have been presented in the literature, the most influential being in, or based on the theories presented in, Peter M. Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, New York: Wiley, 1964; George C. Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961; and J. W. Thibaut and H. H. Kelley, *The Social Psychology of Groups*, New York: Wiley, 1959.

I do not present a complete theory of marital choice, leaving out the elements of such a theory that are not directly relevant to my task here. For instance, I ignore concepts, such as "field of eligibles," that would have to be included in a complete theory, and I sidestep such problems as the delineation of marriage markets.

4. I need not deal here with the specific standards that persons use to evaluate prospective spouses. Suffice it to say that the standards differ between men and women and seem to have changed at least moderately in recent years. Those characteristics that make a person desirable to a specific other person of the opposite sex are to a large extent intangibles not well understood by the attractee and not susceptible to measurement and incorporation into scientific studies.

5. See Judith Martin, "Love's Progress," *The Wall Street Journal, Weekend Journal*, Friday, February 12, 1999. For an excellent general discussion of the benefits of traditional courtship rules and practices, see Leon R. Kass, *loc cit*.

6. All data in this paragraph come from, or are computed from data in, U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1988*, Page 112, Table 158.

7. For instance, see Norval D. Glenn and Michael M. Supancic, "The Social and Demographic Correlates of Divorce and Separation in the United States: An Update and Reconsideration," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Volume 46, 1984, pp. 564-575. The data on divorce and age at marriage discussed in this paper are from this article or are from more recent analyses of data from the General Social Surveys.

8. See Norval D. Glenn, "Values, Attitudes, and the State of American Marriage," in David Popenoe, Jean Bethke Elshstain, and David Blankenhorn, editors, *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996, Figure 2.1 and related discussion.

9. For a summary of the relevant findings, see David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: The National Marriage Project, 1999.

10. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, Page 111, Table

157.

11. Bernard I. Murstein, *Paths to Marriage*, Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1986.

12. Summaries of this literature are contained in Rodney M. Cate and Sally A. Lloyd, *Courtship*, Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1992; and Catherine A. Surra, "Research on Theory on Mate Selection and Premarital Relationships in the 1980s," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Volume 52, 1990, pp. 844-865.

13. Many aspects of education and socialization can contribute to wise marital choices without that being their explicit purpose. For instance, the tendency to choose spouses wisely should be enhanced to the extent that persons are taught by their parents and others to emphasize character and morality in their judgements of people.

Table 1. Median Age of Persons Who Entered First Marriages, by Year and Sex, United States

Year	Men	Women
1950	22.8	20.3
1960	22.8	20.3
1970	22.5	20.6
1980	23.6	21.8
1990	25.9	24.0
1997	26.8	25.0

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P20-506, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March 1997 (Update)" and earlier reports.