Marriage in the Making?:
A Report on the Courtship Customs of Young Americans

In the course of the past century, the institution of marriage has changed in many ways. So, however, has the prelude to marriage, that period referred to traditionally as courtship. Indeed, the well defined and fixed socio-cultural forms that have traditionally led to marriages in Western society have largely eroded.

Courtship, as it traditionally understood, no longer exists. That is, in modern America our youth no longer looks forward to an accepted and anticipated stage in the human life cycle in which, governed by the intentional desire to seek a marriage partner, they subject themselves to certain ceremonies, strictures, obligations and communal oversight. There may indeed be accepted and even common cultural "scripts" by which interaction between single males and females are governed today. But while these scripts do sometimes lead to marriage, it is our thesis that they may not properly prepare young people for lasting marital commitments.

Bronislaw Malinowski noted that "marriage as an ideal is the end of a romance; it is the beginning of a sterner task... the production and maintenance of children." It is our view that as the formal process of courtship has slipped away, young people have become ever less prepared for the serious challenges of long lasting marital unions, and ever more prepared for viewing marriage as simply an ephemeral romantic union which will last only as long as romantic love lasts.

A Tentative Cross-Cultural Definition of Courtship

What is courtship? Because of the great variety in human culture, it is advisable to devise a cross-cultural definition. We need a definition that is species-specific rather than culture-specific to modern America, so that we avoid the trap of ethnocentrism.

Let us begin with establishing some criteria for the definition of courtship. First, courtship always includes wooing or pursuit, usually by men of women; that is, there is always a sexual component to courtship. Nevertheless, courtship is generally distinguished from casual dating, recreational seduction, and so on. True courtship is *institutionalized,* following recognized procedures. Its main distinguishing feature is that it involves behaviors *designed* to end in marriage.

One important criterion of courtship is that of *intentionality.* Courtship always has a purpose, or goal. This goal is the establishment of a marriage bond between a man and a woman. (It should be noted that in using the term marriage we mean only those unions that meet the local legal definition of wedlock, excluding casual cohabitation, concubinage, trial marriages, temporary marriages --as among some tribal peoples -- and the like.) Thus, courtship leads to legally sanctioned marriages of permanent or semi-permanent status. It leads to a nuclear domestic unit and the establishment of a conjugal pair. It includes some notions of sexual

exclusivity and presumes the eventual establishment of a family through procreation. Courtship, then, is intended to result in sexual unions that are child-producing.

We should also point out that sanctioned, normative rules of comportment are always involved in both courtship and marriage. These norms and rules are enforceable through informal cultural sanctions such as ostracism, shaming, religion, and the like. Courtship, then, follows a clearly defined cultural "script." The script is enforced by public opinion and by adherence to traditional morality.

In almost every culture courtship involves the participation of kinsmen beyond the conjugal pair. These kin are usually members of the couple's extended family: either lineage-mates, parents or parental figures. In addition, the kin who become so involved are almost always of the older generation. Consequently, part of any definition of courtship must include the notion of inter-generational cooperation and the guidance of elders.

Courtship most often involves some sense of mate selection; that is, there is some evaluation of the appropriateness of prospective marital partners. In this process, there is always some degree of supervision by elders.

In virtually all cultures known to anthropology, courtship involves negotiations between the prospective bride's and groom's families, often involving the ritual exchange of material goods or labor services. These pre-marital exchanges are thought to "seal" or "guarantee" marital continuity. Often such exchange items have to be returned upon the dissolution of the marriage--an added incentive for elders to discourage divorce.

Finally, and important for our purposes here, courtship is usually age-specific. It often comes at a specific period in the traditional life-cycle of young men and women, and often follows very specific rites-of-passage for both sexes. Courtship, then, figures as another pre-determined stage in the life cycle and cannot be separated from cultural norms governing appropriate age-specific conduct. This is true for most pre-literate, peasant, and even some industrial societies.

Before giving examples of courtship from some exotic cultures, we should stress that moral values governing sex are not always consonant with the degree of rigidity in courtship. Thus, a society in which a high degree of unregulated pre-marital sex is tolerated might also evince a highly structured courtship process. Some societies distinguish clearly between pre-marital sex and extra-marital sex, giving leeway for the former but not the latter. Recreational sex and procreative sex are in many cultures also clearly differentiated. These distinctions may or may not play a role in courtship styles. And while anthropologists separate cultures of sexual restraint from more sexually permissive, neither can be said to correlate to a particular courtship form.

Thus, even in what anthropologists define deceptively as “sex-positive” (i.e. permissive) cultures -- that is, cultures where generous allowances are made for pre-marital sex -- once "adulthood" is reached, parental and community supervision enters the picture and marriage is often arranged. Almost all pre-industrial societies distinguish between wooing, seduction,

and what might be called "institutionalized courtship," that is, a series of scripted behaviors leading to marriage and family.

Let us start our overview with a very sexually permissive society: the Muria. The Muria are an aboriginal tribal people of south India. They permit their children, starting at about age 10 to go off on unsupervised "sex picnics" (called *ghotul)* during which the youngsters engage in sexual exploration, leading among the elder adolescents to intercourse. These sex outings continue until the young people reach the age of 18 or so, after which time they begin to pair off with favorites. At this point, the elders, who are already known to each other since the community is small, step in and consult. They exchange gifts and the couple, now in their early twenties, are said to be engaged. Ritual exchanges follow, leading to an elaborate marriage ceremony. Despite the promiscuity before marriage, there is adult supervision at every stage, even if this is somewhat distant.

Such permissive patterns of adolescent sex, followed by early adult regulations, in fact, is fairly common in the pre-literate world. For some Polynesian peoples, e.g. the Mangaians and Trukese, sex is a favored adolescent pastime; young men and women can have up to sixty or seventy sexual partners by the time they are 20. The same pre-marital promiscuity has been reported in the Truk Lagoon in Micronesia. As in the case of the Muria, the Trukese believe that after the age of twenty, young people are "responsible." Community norms dictate a pairing off, parental supervision of ritual exchange, consultation, and in-law negotiation, all leading to marriage.

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski reported a similar situation in Melanesia, especially in the Trobriand Islands. He documented an unusual degree of promiscuity before marriage, followed by parental intervention in the late teens. In this and all the above cases, it appears that late menarche (at about the age of seventeen or eighteen) prevents pre-marital pregnancy in all but a few cases. Thus, illegitimacy does not seem to present too much of a problem.

Once again, after adolescence, in the early twenties, the unmarried Trobriand youths are considered "responsible" and must change their freewheeling ways. A youth indicates his choice for a mate, his older kinsmen consult with hers', gifts are exchanged, and preparations are made for marriage.

Despite Margaret Mead's famous attestations in Coming of Age in Samoa, it seems that before World War II the Samoans were not as tolerant of pre-marital affairs as other Polynesian peoples. They chaperoned their maidens during adolescence. Suitors would sometimes crawl into their the girls' huts at night for secret trysts while chaperons were asleep; and these trysts were often winked at. But for the girl, these nocturnal visits were often thought of as presaging courtship and marriage (although the boy might have different ideas). Usually Samoan couples were "discovered" sooner or later. At this point the boy usually agreed to marry the girl and they were allowed to sleep together openly on the condition that they marry soon. Gifts were exchanged and the marriage took place within the year. Sometimes the couples would run away to elope; such unions were recognized as common-law marriages.

A similar, two-tiered approach to sex and marriage occurs in aboriginal South America, for example among the Mehinaku and Kalapo of Brazil, where, again, pre-marital sexual promiscuity gives way after age twenty or so to supervised courtship and marriage.

In many societies, this age-determined, two-layered approach is written into the culture in the form of life-cycle rituals and rites-of-passage. For example among many East African tribes, such as the Maasai, Samburu, Turkana, and so on, the boys are isolated at age 13 or so into age-set villages where they undergo various trials and rites-of-passage prior to being inducted into "manhood." In these all-male adolescent villages, the boys learn warfare, herding, and farming. But they also conduct nightly "raids" into the regular villages for the purpose of seducing unmarried girls and even married women. In fact, these nocturnal "raids" are tacitly recognized functions of the boy's isolation period. The sexual predation is considered a part of their training in stealthy warfare techniques. The youths are beaten if caught.

Once the African boys graduate from this life-cycle stage at age 19 or so, they indicate to their elders their preference for a wife, and this selection initiates a series of ritual visits and exchanges in which the boys themselves are passive participants. The elders simply show up at the girl's hut with a number of head of cattle, sheep, and other valuables. If the gifts are accepted by her elder relatives, negotiations begin for marriage. Marriage is accompanied by further material exchanges, as well labor exchanges and other forms of reciprocal giving.

Let us now turn to societies where far more pre-marital sexual restraint is practiced. One example of such a society are the peasants of rural southern Spain. As elsewhere in the Mediterranean World, here the sexes were segregated up until the 1970s: boys and men outdoors, girls and women indoors. Sexual morality followed a strict double standard: boys were expected to be sexually aggressive ("machismo"), girls reticent and virginal upon marriage. This was true for all social classes, although perhaps honored more in the breach among the lower classes.

Since boys and girls were not allowed to meet openly, the villages participated in weekend *paseos* (or "promenades") in which the youths roamed up and down the main streets with their parents watching discretely from chairs set up along the sidewalks. In groups, boys would approach the passing girls and talk to them. If the girl answered his greeting, the boy was encouraged and he sought her out at fiestas, fairs, and succeeding weekly promenades--the few times the sexes mixed. Youngsters usually met in groups until the girl indicated a willingness to "get serious." At this point couples often began necking in doorways and hidden places in the village. Entrance into the girl's house was strictly forbidden, and this rule was rarely broken, for the couple risked parental wrath.

Since the boys were generally inducted into military service at age 20, returning at age 22, it was expected that a girl who had waited for a boy's return would become engaged to him. Engagement was a big event. The boy would ask the father for the girl's hand in a ceremony called "entering the house." The father then would officially bring the mother into the picture to arrange a visit of the families. At this point, there would follow a series of ritual exchanges and gifts, and *noviazgo* (engagement) was announced in the parish church. The girl and boy continued to "date," now openly, but with a female chaperon, usually the girl's

mother or elder sister. The couple were now *novios,* or engaged lovers. This noviazgo period was often a long one, lasting sometimes for years, even decades. As late as the 1970s, one pair of novios known to researchers had postponed their marriage for 15 years as the young man built up the necessary equity. Sexual relations were quite common during this time and were winked at by the community. However, a broken engagement was anathema: the girl lost her reputation and no other man would approach her. She became "soiled goods." The boy also suffered, as he got the reputation of being a Don Juan. These rules are still followed, though liberalized, in some elite Spanish families.

The above is a fairly typical pattern among peasant peoples worldwide. A similar pattern is reported for Meso-American Indian peoples, for example, the Maya of Yucatan. When a Mayan peasant boy reaches the age of sixteen or seventeen he begins to look over the girls he sees in the village paths. He chooses one and alerts his parents of his choice. There follows a series of complex rituals. The first step in the courtship is for the boy's parents to select two "petitioners," respected men in the village who are reported to be good orators. These "petitioners" ask permission to enter the house of the girl and they speak to her father and mother. Bottles of liquor are exchanged. If the petition is accepted, the boy, his parents and the petitioners visit the house of the girl bringing a basket of gifts, including food and drink. (A 20-liter jug of rum is considered appropriate.) There are numerous speeches. The only person silent during this time is the girl herself, who sits demurely with downcast eyes. She has already given her consent to her parents. (She can refuse, but may be subject to pressure from her parents if the match is a good one.) The marriage is sealed and the ceremony takes place after the exchange of numerous other gifts a year later.

The Cheyennes of the US Great Plains have traditionally been a sexually restrained people with very strict notions of propriety. Among the Cheyenne, courtship was an arduous and drawn out process. Girls were expected to be virgins at marriage and the sexes were kept apart, so much so that brothers and sisters did not speak. Under such circumstances it usually took four or five years for a boy to betroth himself; and he was supervised at every turn by the elders of the clans. If a boy saw a girl he liked, he would ask his mother or another older female relative to approach her family. He made his feelings known to the girl by tugging surreptitiously at her robe as she passed in a footpath, or by staring at her from afar. If his mother's approach was accepted, the boy and girl might begin to talk outside her teepee, but there was no physical contact. Finally, the menfolk of the two clans visited and talked. If the decision was "yes," the boy and girl exchanged gifts as did all the relatives. Later the two families exchanged the most prized of all gifts: ponies. Marriage followed within the year.

All of the above are partially arranged marriages, in which courtship is at least *initiated* by the boy or boy and girl. But fully arranged marriages with little or no participation of the conjugal pair have also characterized many cultures. In some villages in south India, for example, the young man's elder kinsmen traditionally asked a marriage broker to find a suitable wife, that is, a suitable girl of the right caste and social status. Negotiations occured between the families and the broker, and the girl was handed over for marriage without her participation in the process, although lip service was usually paid to her right of refusal. In this and many other cases in pre-industrial societies, the bride and groom might see each other for the first time on their wedding day.

Well into the twentieth century, arranged marriages were quite common in Western societies - marriage brokers being used by many peoples, among them the Ashkenasi Jews. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were big debates among intellectuals about the justness of such traditional, arranged marriages as compared to modern "love matches." The latter were sometimes referred to as "English style" marriages and were considered more "modern" and "European."

Even more bizarre to our modern way of thinking than brokered marriages, many societies practiced forms of bride-capture and wife-theft. Bride capture, a practice we know from classical antiquity, is still practiced today among some "primitive" refuge peoples, like the Yanomamo of the remote Amazon rainforest. The Yanomamo men raid enemy villages to abduct women for wives. The Yanomamo are polygynous, a fact that is not coincidental to their "hostile takeover" form of courtship. Bride capture is often performed in polygynous societies, especially where warfare and raiding are prevalent.

As we see, in most societies, the process of courtship has traditionally been marked by clear parameters of behavior, and also by distinct ceremonies of betrothal, most of which involve an exchange of gifts between the families of the betrothed. But that does not mean that courtship is everywhere a formal, well outlined process. In one very sexually restrained culture we know about, courtship has traditionally been very informal. For example, in western rural Ireland there is a lack of clear courtship pattern or tradition. This amorphousness is often mentioned by bachelors as a hurdle. They contend awkwardness in approaching women and an inability to find wives. Indeed, western Ireland's lack of institutionalized courtship has contributed to a serious rural exodus and demographic decline.

Generally, anthropologists have found that informal courtship patterns are indicative of unhealthy social systems. Often a breakdown in courtship patterns is the result of a breakdown of traditional cultural mores and institutions, a process of deculturation associated with the challenges of colonization or modernization.

Courtship today among the northern polar Eskimo (Iñupiat) is a case in point. It seems that in recent years the boys and girls simply cohabit until the first child is born. At that point their parents, the community, and local authorities (teacher, priest, other leaders) pressure them into getting married. One might add that Iñupiat traditionally practiced what is called a "spouse-exchange" marriage, in which two or more married couples exchanged partners, creating a sexual union of six or more people.

The Breakdown of American Courtship Traditions

In the past hundred years we have seen immense changes in what anthropologists and sociologists might call the American "mating script." Where once young people met, interviewed perspective mates and betrothed under the auspices and supervision of family and communal institutions, today they no longer do so. Indeed, neither communal institutions (churches, schools, social organizations) nor parents and other communal elders

are actively involved in the process of spouse selection. Neither, it seems, is there any distinct moment when American young people acknowledge explicit intentions to seek a spouse. Today, distinctions between ephemeral romantic pursuit and courtship are blurred to the point of obscurity. Romantic attachments (i.e. sexual involvements) may or may not lead to cohabitation, and cohabitation may or may not lead to marriage.

One thing is telling: Over 50% of Americans who marry today are registered at the same address. This fact indicates that the majority of Americans tend to 'morph' into marriage via cohabitation. Thus, young American men and women have been left pretty much to their devices in the selection of a marriage partner, in the negotiation of betrothal, and in the timing of marriage.

The drama of traditional courtship, then, with its connotations of deferred sexual gratification, adult supervision, and denouement in ceremonies of betrothal and marriage is dead. Indeed, for all intents and purposes we have seen the end of the former intense involvement of family, church, and educational institutions in initiating, mediating and encouraging mate selection. What is left of the cultural formalities of courtship, in essence, is the engagement party, where the families and friends of a couple about to marry come to celebrate an event in which they have had virtually no formal interest or participation.

How did we come to this pass?

One important factor over the course of the past century has been the emancipation of American youth from parental supervision in general. Once American children leave the nest, at approximately age 18, they tend not to return, and not to regard the values, lifestyles or even the advice of their parents as important components of their existence.

Historically, most young people remained in the parental home until marriage, or left it for short periods of time (to live with neighbors or relatives, or learn a trade) only to return later. Typically, when young people finally left home for good prior to this century, it was to form a new family. Even once they had acquired their education or a trade, young, unmarried men and women remained at home "to contribute to the family economy." [1]

In the middle 20th century,however, a new pattern emerged. This pattern involved leaving home to establish an independent residence before marriage. Today, the youthful life course is remarkable for its freedom and autonomy, a fact which demographers Frances and Calvin Goldscheider note is a rarity both in historical and cultural terms.[2]

Living independently has important consequences for young people, altering their expectations of work and family lives, and making them more individualistic in their attitudes and aspirations. Indeed, the absence of parental monitoring and control, according to demographers Waite, Goldscheider and Witsberger (These scholars conducted a longitudinal survey of 10,000 females 14 to 24 years of age.) weakens the link between parents' values and those of their children. Thus, American young people, owing to their extended period of independent living, are less attached to their families than previous generations, and less wedded to traditional ideals of marriage and family life.

Added to their independence as young unmarrieds, Americans marry much later than they did 100 years ago. In fact, they marry at historically late ages. The first appended graph to this paper shows how the typical age at first marriage has risen over the past one hundred years. Suffice it to say, however, that today's first marriages occur long after most people have finished schooling, established a separate residence, and begun their careers.

Because marriage today occurs in early adulthood rather than in late adolescence, it is understandable that men and women who have lived independently for many years, have established work lives and have even obtained positions of respect in their communities would not feel obliged to consult their elders in questions of spouse selection. Indeed, a full appreciation for the role of courtship, or any form of mate selection, must begin with an understanding of when, in the life course, decisions about marriage are first made.

Thus, the emancipation of American youth has been accompanied, quite naturally, by a corresponding retreat of elders from involvement in the entire process of mate selection. A century ago, after reaching their teen years, most youths joined social institutions established and monitored by adults. Thus, peer interaction occurred not independently but under adult supervision. Young men and women who did not meet at home or through their parents' social circles met each other at church socials, charity balls or self-improvement societies. These institutions, led by communal elders, mediated the process of courtship.

But during the early twentieth century, the social life of our youth became increasingly segregated from that of the older generation. Beginning in the early years of the century with the birth of the automobile, young men and women typically planned their own recreation, rather than having it planned for them. Perhaps the most salient evidence of the new social independence of youth was the rise of a new form of social interaction between the sexes: dating.

The rise of dating, in fact, signaled not simply a new kind of courtship, but the gradual demise of courtship. An historically unique form of social interaction leading to mate selection, dating had little in common with courtship. First of all, dating stressed attractiveness, thrills and competition above the more traditional concerns of courtship: family name and social position. Dating was peer supervised, not elder supervised. Finally, dating was a form of social interaction that stressed immediate rather than deferred gratification.

Comparing the older custom of courtship to the newly emerging pattern of dating John Modell noted:

"Under the older system there was no normatively sanctioned way for an adolescent to get 'serious' about someone of the opposite sex without submitting the relationship for parental approval. Chaperonage asserted parents' oversight of what boys and girls might do together, and the home visit assured girls' parents of some control over whom their daughters might be seeing. Both were important and both vanished with dating, which substituted peer oversight. Not the occurrence of emotional or physical intimacy but the question of whose advice guided young people in developing heterosexual ties was the critical difference

between dating and the practice of 'calling' and 'keeping company' that it was rapidly supplanting in the 1920s."[3]

Thus, the most important way in which dating defied the unspoken rules of courtship was that dating was immune to parental involvement. Dating liberated women much more so than it did men. Under the old system of courtship, it was the girl's father's responsibility to safeguard her virtue in earlier times. While her behaviors were subject to considerably greater scrutiny than were her suitor's, the young male was required to proffer a good reputation when he came calling --justifying his proper intentions and deserving the trust of his intended's father. In dating, by contrast, the double standard with regard to a girl's virtue was explicitly challenged. Indeed, the rise of dating posed provocative sexual challenges for women who were now forced to balance the requirement to be a desired date against the negative consequences of being too "easy" and losing their reputations among their peers.

In sum, between the turn of the century and the end of the 1920s, the life course of youths had been significantly altered. A stable parent-run (or elder-run) system of courtship had largely given way to a participant run system of dating. Casual heterosexual pairing was accepted as a normal part of growing up, and parental supervision was replaced by the peer culture. Dating imposed strong pressures on youth to conform to widely shared standards of sexual propriety. But at the same time, it challenged traditional notions of sexual propriety, substituting them with a more libertine approach to sexuality.

The dating culture, then, in promoting casual heterosexual pairing, peer direction and immediate gratification was not as conducive to steering young people toward the selection of marital partners as were the more stringent procedures of pre-dating courtship. It was not long before social scientists made the observation that while there were four recognized forms of dating, dating as a means of "play," as a means of social "education," as sexual "dalliance" and as courtship, only the last was "consciously and deliberately directed toward the selection of a mate.[4] By the 1950s, sociologists Bernard, Buchanan, and Smith observed that for too many young people dating had become mostly a high stakes social game of "excitement...prestige or even conquest." It was a game, they charged, that varied "from mild competition for status to serious exploitation." "The old concept of courtship," these scholars noted, did "not fit the present day dating relationship between young people."

Oddly, at the very same time they were writing, the dating scene was significantly changing. Where young men and women in the 1920s, 30s and 40s had dated primarily for prestige and popularity, by the fifties and sixties more and more young people tended to "go steady." High school and college students of the fifties found that steady relationships promised greater intimacy and removed a good deal of the competitiveness from the dating scene. Indeed, going steady seemed to provide an ideal alternative to the emotionally unsatisfying world of the casual date, while constituting, in a society of autonomous young people, no great sacrifice of personal freedom to early betrothal and marriage.

By the 1980s, in fact, what had become a 'serial dating' culture in the 30s and 40s had been fully transformed into what could be described as a 'serial mating' culture. That is, young men and women serially pair-bonded during a heavily prolonged adolescence -- from the approximate ages of 14 to 28 years. While by the 80s the expression "going steady" had

long gone out of style, the nature of the relationships young people engaged in looked very much like the "going steady" model: these were relationships of shorter-term albeit steadfast commitment, as well as acute emotional intimacy.
They were also more commonly relationships of sexual involvement. In most of these relationships, marriage was never even considered, since it was in any case postponed in the life cycle to make room for both men's and women's autonomous career development.

Serial Mating Among the Young: Love among the Ruins of Courtship

The recent work of sociologists Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann and Gina Kolata (See *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* [Warner Books: New York, 1994] provides an interesting statistical portrait of the 'serial mating' culture -- a portrait of Americans who, for the past fifty years, have largely abandoned the sexual reticence of former courtship and dating customs for intenser pre-marital romantic committments. Their work shows that by mid-century, a pattern of sexual interaction between non-married Americans had developed that has held up pretty well until today. This pattern is characterized by a small number of love affairs, some of which lead to cohabitation, a smaller portion of which lead eventually to marriage.

Promiscuous sex, even among today's adolescents and college students, insist these authors, is a relatively rare phenomenon. Their statistically valid survey, which included a sampling of 3,500 American adults between the ages of 18 and 59, shows that the average number of sexual partners before marriage has not really changed for successive generational cohorts since 1943. Men generally have 3-4 sexual partners before marriage; women, 1-2.[5]

'Serial mating,' with its connations of pre-marital sexual involvement, then, is a phenomenon that is hardly new, and certainly not a product of the revolution in birth control of the late 1960s. It is a cultural practice involving a constellation of attitudes about male/female pre-marital social interaction to which Americans not only have long been accustomed, but which we seem to automatically transmit to our adolescent population.

To understand more fully the dynamics of the 'serial mating' culture, in particular the effct of the collapse of well delineated courtship patterns and elder oversight of romantic relationships on teenagers, we analyzed the results of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. This study, conducted in 1991, surveyed a nationally representative sample of 12,105 adolescents. These junior high and high school students were asked to sort a stack of seventeen cards, each of which described an event that might occur in a romantic partnership (e.g. go out in a group, kiss, hold hands, have sex, etc.) First the student was asked to identify those events that would be part of his or her "ideal" relationship, and sort the cards in the order such events should occur. Second, each student was asked to do the same task for his or her actual romantic relationships. We focus here on relationships described by youths age 16 and older since they are more likely to have access to an automobile, and have greater autonomy than their younger colleagues (who were also interviewed).

The second appended graph shows the percentage of male and female students who described each event as part of an ideal relationship. The most striking finding from this analysis is the broad similarity between boys and girls. Both sexes today seem to endorse the "going steady" pattern. Large majorities (about 95%) of both say that an ideal relationship would include going out together alone, holding hands and thinking of themselves as a couple, and telling others that they are a couple. Slightly fewer believe an ideal relationship would involve meeting the partner's parents (90% of boys, 94% of girls), exchanging gifts, or words of love (about 90% for each sex) or going out in a group (82% of boys, 89% of girls).

Physical intimacies (other than kissing and holding hands) are the only events that receive less than overwhelming endorsement as part of ideal relationships. While 75% of boys see touching bare skin as part of an ideal relationship, only 62% of girls do. Two thirds of boys (68%) and only half of girls (51%) believe that sexual intercourse should be part of an ideal relationship.

A little over a quarter of youths this age see marriage as part of an ideal relationship (followed by pregnancy for about half of these students). Clearly, marriage is not on the minds of most high school students when they date. In this, today's youths have embraced a model of romantic involvement which only partially derives from the dating scene of the 1930s when, as sociologist Willard Waller observed, dating was pursued for "thrills and excitement" rather than for a marriage partner.[6] There is a steadiness to their commitments to the people with whom they go out, though these commitments are consciously temporary ones.

When we focus on the sequence of events in an ideal relationship, we find three important turning points. First, boys and girls go out in a group before they ever go out alone together, and they meet each other's parents. Then, they hold hands and go out alone, and think of themselves as a couple. The third turning point in ideal relationships involves the exchange of gifts and words of love. Following this, kissing and (for some) touching occurs. After these phases, a minority of youth go on to sexual intercourse.

Significantly, actual relationships correspond very nearly to the expressed ideal sequence of events. The analysis of actual relationships focuses on the most recent one in the past two years. The third appended graph shows the percentage of students who actually experienced each of these events.

These comparisons are easily summarized. On all matters except physical intimacies, boys and girls are somewhat less likely to experience an event than they are to believe it is a part of an ideal relationship. For example, where more than 90% of boys and girls said they thought an ideal relationship would involve meeting the other's parents, 82% actually did. And where almost all boys and girls thought an ideal relationship would involve going out alone, only 87% of both sexes did. The same general pattern is true of the exchange of gifts and words of love.

Where we see more divergence between actual and ideal relationships is with respect to physical intimacy. Not surprisingly, boys experience as much or less physical contact than

they believe is ideal, and girls experience more than they see as ideal. For example, 75% of boys said that touching bare skin is a part of an ideal relationship. In fact, 73% report actually doing this in their last relationship. By contrast, only 62% of girls see this as a part of an ideal relationship, despite the fact that 76% report that it actually happened. More pronounced differences are found with respect to sexual intercourse. While 68% of boys see sex as a part of an ideal relationship, only half (51%) actually had sex in their last partnership. Girls, on the other hand, are much more likely to have sex than they are to see it as a part of an ideal relationship (51% say it is a part of an ideal relationship, while 59% had sex with their last partner).

Thus, the "going steady" or partnership approach to romance occupies a distinct place in the youth culture of high school. It is a form of heterosexual pairing that is pursued as an end in itself with no thought of anything but the immediate future. In other words, young people's romantic relationships are not typically thought of as preludes to marriage or even as a social education for mate selection, but as temporary pair bondings.

Serial Mating and the Practice of Cohabitation

Once emancipated from the home, young people are likely to pursue a pair bonding strategy different only in degree to the "going steady" model we see in high school. That is, once independent, they are likely to cohabit. The practice of cohabitation has increased dramatically in the past three decades. As of 1997 there were 4.1 million opposite-sex partners living in the same household with no other adult, while in 1970, there were only 1 million such households. Since about half of all marriages begin as cohabiting relationships, and 60% of all cohabitations lead to marriage, there is a debate as to whether cohabitation can be considered a prelude to marriage or a substitute for marriage. It is our contention that cohabitation is rapidly becoming the modal path to marriage, but in a way that may seriously weaken the institution of marriage. Of course, whether cohabitation weakens marriage, or simply attracts those who are more likely to divorce anyway, is debated among researchers. But we believe that both possibilities are likely. Consider what is known:

First, the type of couple that has cohabited before marriage is statistically more likely to divorce, though we cannot know whether such couples would have divorced without cohabiting.

Second, it appears that the quality of cohabiting relationships is poorer than marriages of comparable lengths. Third, cohabiting couples have poorer relationships with their partner's parents than do married couples.[7]

Most importantly, cohabitation may psychologically reinforce the going steady or serial mating model of heterosexual relationships. That is, it may reinforce a pattern of romantic behavior in young men and women that draws them to seek the more emotionally acute, more ephemeral attractions of short term romantic commitment, and to prevent them from appreciating the steadier rewards and sacrifices of long term married life. Put bluntly, if traditional American courtship patterns prepared the young for steady marriages, modern

American serial mating patterns may be preparing them for marital disappointment and divorce.

Is There Hope for Courtship?

Is there any hope that courtship might be resuscitated as an institutionalized prelude to marriage? A revival of courtship is not totally out of the question. Indeed, there seems to be growing public sentiment for such a revival. The recent success of Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider's The Rules, (a book which can be described as nothing less than a courtship manifesto) indicates a real yearning among American young women for a more structured, traditional form of marriage partner selection. So also the return of personal advertisements for marriage indicates a need on the part of both men and women for a forum in which they may explicitly express their intentions (if they harbor such intentions) to find a spouse. Churches and synagogues today are also becoming more involved in the business of steering singles toward marriage, by providing under spiritual auspices informal meeting places, activities and social events for young people who might be longing for that special someone with whom they can settle down and raise a family. Even technology is stepping (albeit lightly) into the courtship vacuum, with the proliferation of computer "dating" services and Internet meeting places for singles.

All that being said, however, we are forced to acknowledge that many of the contextual institutions that encourage supervised courtship are either lacking in contemporary American culture or are their way out. Let's review some of the typical characteristics of a society in which there is courtship: The first is that young people accept limitations on their personal autonomy. The second is that elders rule the young and make decisions for them. The third is that society evinces respect for tradition (especially religious tradition), and backs that respect by sanctions against those who violate tradition. The fourth may be the existence of sexual double standards, perhaps even sequestering of females or segregation of the sexes. The fifth is the existence of clearly and generally acknowledged life-cycle stages in which marriage is regarded as the gateway to adulthood and to full to full participation in the community. (This means that there are personal benefits to be gained from marriage aside from sex-on-demand and children.)The sixth is that courtship becomes a cooperative effort between individuals and society. The seventh is that courtship and marriage are often business-like arrangements that have little to do with romantic love. Finally, there is often a factor of economic dependence for young people, spurring them to filial piety and obedience with regard to the selection of a marriage partner.

While the return of some of the above characteristics commonly associated with traditional courtship systems might be welcome, others are quite obviously inimical to the freedoms, privileges and life-styles modern Americans take for granted. We would be very hesitant today to want to reimpose limitations on personal autonomy for men and women over 18. Similarly double standards, seclusion of nubile women, and gerontocracy are also unattractive to most
modern Americans.

What then is to be done? How do we bring men and women together in ways more conducive to stable marital unions without reviving institutional forms and social customs -- a prime example being pre-marital celibacy -- that many Americans would consider backward?

One thing we might recognize is that institutionalized courtship may not necessarily be dependent upon an ethic proscribing all young adult pre-marital sexual involvement. In many cultures in which there is great latitude in pre-marital sexual experience, successful marriages are made. Indeed,the official "break" from adolescence to adulthood is recognized at that point where the young person takes on the "responsibility" of embarking on an elder supervised search for a life-long mate.

On the other hand, while in many cultures pre-marital sexual activity is not the enemy of stable marital unions (and while the late age at which Americans marry may make it unreasonable to expect pre-marital celibacy), we must be careful, in our own modern American cultural context, not too freely to endorse sexual experimentation. First of all, we cannot tolerate the sad fact laid bare in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health that too many high school girls are coerced into sexual involvement by boyfriends whose notion of "ideal" relationships includes far more physical involvement than they would like. These girls need the protection and support of their elders.

Second, Any return to communal participation in the courtship process must involve active discouragement by parents, churches and schools, of the type of intense emotional and sexual intimacies among non-married persons that promote a weakening of interest and faith in the institution of marriage, and also in the possibility of marital permanency. This does not mean we need to stigmatize all pre-marital sexual involvement in order to reexert some appropriate communal pressures on young adults to "court." Rather, we must warn young people that certain widespread sexual practices among them today -- e.g. serial mating and cohabition -- may be undermining their emotional preparation for lasting marriages.

Besides pre-marital sexual activity, however, there is another even greater threat to marital stability which must be acknowledged and considered: namely, the process of deculturation that has in the context of the vicissitudes of modernization chipped away at courtship forms and rituals, leaving the best intentioned young men and women in search of mates in an cultural environment totally lacking in support, direction, or even communication sign posts.

Teenagers seem to be aware of the vacuum in social forms. In fact, on their own they have devised a formal cultural script for heterosexual pair bonding that includes nothing less profoundly meaningful than that primal cultural rite, the exchange of gifts. But they need more.

It is, of course, not within the purview of this paper to offer solutions to the demise of insitutionalized courtship. But we wish to take the liberty of offering one of two suggestions:

1. Let's create more church and community sponsored social opportunities for young people -- even "young" people well into their late twenties and early thirties -- to meet and interview perspective mates.

2. Parents who disapprove of cohabitation should take steps to discourage their children from engaging in this practice, even if those children are financially independent adults living away from home. These steps would include expressing disapproval, refusing to host cohabiting couples in their home or take them on family trips, and exercising financial sanctions against financially dependent children who cohabit. At a minimum, parents and children should understand and remind their adult children that cohabitation may not be the best route to a stable marriage.

3. Parents, schools and churches might join together to create an informal community "courtship" policy that revives some of the older etiquette of dating and courtship for adolescents. Young people marry late today, but they begin to pair-off in their early teens. Training them to "court" -- or at least "date" -- rather than "mate," would help establish healthier, less emotionally volatile habits of interaction between the sexes that might last well into adulthood. For example, children of parents who sign onto a community "courtship" policy might be required to introduce girlfriends and boyfriends to parents before going out together. Boys would be required to pick girls up at their homes, and return them to those homes. Parents, schools and churches might organize intergenerational community events in which young people could be informally chaperoned without feeling they are being officially "watched." Finally, communities would warn young people unambivalently of the emotional as well as physical health risks of early sexual involvement.

4. Parents must talk honestly to their children about the challenges and rewards of durable marriages. Further, they should explicitly express their expectations that their children will eventually marry and that these children will choose mates of whom their parents approve.

5. Most marriages that fail do so in the first five years. Families, churches, psychotherapists, marriage educators and marriage counselors must take steps to support newlyweds in the early, most vulnerable years of marriage.

Amorphous Courtship: Parallels To American Trends?

Are there any extant, viable ethnographic examples of an amorphous courtship pattern, or absence of institutional courtship, that parallels the current situation in American life? Are we Americans going where no man has gone before?

Actually, there is at least one very good parallel we can point to. Numbering only a few thousand, the Semai Semang people of the Malay peninsula are very much like ourselves in evincing an absence of institutional courtship, high rates of non-marital cohabitation, high rates of unilateral divorce and serial mating. An aboriginal farming and hunting society, the Semai follow a gentle, non-violent culture that forbids coercion of one person by another.

This includes parents and children. Parents never punish or even admonish their children harshly. One person may never order another around.

The Semai have no word for "marriage," and so must use foreign words to express this concept. There are no marriage ceremonies, and sometimes the community and the couple themselves are not sure if a couple is married or not. The Semai are sexually promiscuous; Semai adolescents have many affairs. Gradually in early adulthood, couples pair off and start living together. After a few months of this casual cohabitation, they may call themselves by the terms for husband and wife, and the community, including their biological parents, assume they are "married." Loosely defined to begin with, the marriage is dissolved when one or both of the couple decide it is. The man or woman simply wanders off and takes another lover. One woman told an anthropologist that after her "husband" abandoned her, she "thought" she was no longer married, but was not sure. Extra-marital affairs are common, and people say of these, "It's just a loan." Men show little or no jealousy and both sexes can take a second spouse (rare for women), although this usually leads to a "divorce."

Despite the surface similarities, a big difference between the Semai and ourselves is that the Semai, as a community, take care of all children born in the village, whether legitimate or illegitimate. Children are cared for by neighbors, relatives, and others. For the Semai, there is no greater "tragedy" than an unattended child, a situation they find heartrending. So in this very important sense the Semai are all "married."

The Semai example shows that even with all the other impinging institutions absent, stability in child-rearing might still be achieved in small, tightly knit communities. Our own staunchly nuclear-family and "personal privacy" preferences would seem, however, to obviate such a communal child-rearing solution. In fact, in our highly complex and atomized modern society, we are already witnessing many of the failures of a communal approach to child-rearing.

Indeed, the example of the Semai only reminds us of the extent to which we may have to reach back in the evolution of Western cultural forms in order to regain our bearings as a functioning child-rearing culture.

End

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[2] Calvin Goldscheider and Frances K. Golscheider, "Moving Out and Marriage: What do Young Adults Expect?" American Sociological Review 52 (April 1987) p.278-85.
[3] John Modell, *Into One's Own: From Youth to Adulthood in the United States,* 1920-1975 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989, p. 88.

[4] Jessie Bernard, Helen E. Buchanan, William M. Smith, Jr., *Dating, Mating and Marriage Today* (New York: Arco Publishers, 1959) p. 47.

[5] See Robert T. Michael, et al. *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (Warner Books: New York, 1994), pp. 100-104, esp. the Table 6, page 102, "Number of Sex Partners in Past Twelve Months and Since Age Eighteen."
[6] Willard Waller, "The Rating and Dating Complex," *American Sociological Review 2* (October, 1937), p. 727-34.

[7] See Steven Nock, "A Comparison of Marriages and Cohabiting Relationships. *Journal of Family Issues*,16 (January, 1995), p. 53-76