

Science: Choosing a Mate (washingtonpost.com)

Shankar Vedantam and Stephanie Coontz
Post Staff Writer and Professor of History and Family Studies
6,985 words
14 April 2008
Washington Post.com
English
Copyright 2008, The Washington Post Co. All Rights Reserved.

A <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/13/AR2008041301789.htm> recent study found that the romantic cliché of children disobeying their parents' choice for what type of person they should marry to be true.

Shankar Vedantam, who writes the Department of Human Behavior column, reports on the study in today's <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/13/AR2008041301789.html> science feature. He was online today to discuss generational differences in the criteria used to choose spouses along with Stephanie Coontz, professor of history and family studies at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash., and author of "Marriage, A History."

A transcript follows.

Shankar Vedantam: Welcome to our online chat about my science page article today about evolution and marriage and the evolution of marriage. I am delighted to be joined by Stephanie Coontz, author of Marriage: A History.

If anyone has any questions on my weekly Department of Human Behavior column, I will be happy to address those toward the end of the chat. Recent column topics have discussed Elliot Spitzer and what people get when they pay a premium for something, a column on why whites and blacks in America have different estimations about the state of racial equality, and today's column on the benefits of intra-party democracy -- allowing rank and file voters to elect presidential nominees, rather than have bigwigs and insiders choose party candidates.

We have a number of questions in the queue already for the marriage and evolution story, so pipe up soon if you have something you want to run by Stephanie. I should say, before we begin the chat, that if you haven't read Stephanie's book on marriage, run out and get a copy immediately (or right after this chat is done.) The opening chapter of the book can be read for free on Stephanie's <http://www.stephaniecoontz.com/books/marriage/chapter1.htm> Web site, and I found it terrific -- insightful, authoritative and very interesting.

I'm going to start us off with some general questions.

Shankar Vedantam: Stephanie, when people think of marriage nowadays, two ideas pop in our minds. One is "love." The other is "faithfulness." Yet, in your research you have found that romantic love and marital fidelity have not always been important aspects of the institution of marriage. Can you give us a brief history of when and how love came to conquer marriage?

Stephanie Coontz: Through most of history, most societies thought that marriage was too important a political and economic institution to be entered into for such an irrational and possibly fleeting reason as love. Some cultures thought love should develop AFTER marriage, while some thought love was something you got on the side, but it was generally agreed that marrying for love was unwise and even anti-social. While fidelity was frequently required of wives, to ensure that no "foreign" kinship lines were introduced into the family, it was seldom expected of men.

A wife was supposed to ignore it if her husband had a mistress, and when a wife DID make a fuss, her brothers and father -- instead of siding with her as they would today -- often wrote to her husband apologizing for her unseemly behavior. Young people have often dreamed of marrying for love, but through most of history they were expected to let their parents decide who they should marry. It was just 250 years ago, when the Enlightenment challenged the right of the older generation and the state to dictate to the young, that free choice based on love and compatibility emerged as the social ideal for mate selection. And only in the early nineteenth century did the success of a marriage begin to be defined by how well it cared for its members, both adults and children.

But of course, once people have the right to marry for love and believe that marriage should be for the good of the man and woman and their children, not for the good of parents or the state, they are bound to demand

the right not to marry at all if they cannot find love, and the right to divorce if the marriage doesn't meet their needs. Some will even claim that a "love child" is every bit as acceptable as a child born to a marriage of convenience.

So the ideal of marrying for love was a huge challenge to the traditional aims and functions of marriage, and although it took 150 years for the destabilizing impact of the love match to reach critical mass, the writing was on the wall as early as the 1790s.

Shankar Vedantam: If people did not marry for love, what has marriage been about traditionally?

Stephanie Coontz: Marriage was originally a way of forming alliances with other kin groups and societies. Indeed, the main point of marriage throughout history was to get in-laws. At first, among egalitarian band-level societies, marriage fostered social connection and reciprocity. It turned strangers into relatives, enemies into allies. The ancient Anglo-Saxon word for wives meant "peace weavers."

But as groups developed internal differences of status and wealth, people began to want to make alliances with families of higher or at least equal status, and to prevent their children from marrying lower-status individuals. So marriage became a way of limiting obligations and restricting interdependencies. The rules about who could and could not marry whom became more strict, and parents more harshly enforced their control over their children's mates. At this point, societies invented the institution of illegitimacy, which ensured that children born outside an approved match had no call upon the kin of either side of the family.

For thousands of years, then, marriage was a weapon in the competitive struggle for power. Among the upper classes, it was a way of acquiring influential in-laws, bolstering claims to political authority and succession, sealing peace treaties and military alliances, and consolidating land or capital. Getting "connected" in-laws was a preoccupation of the middle classes as well. For the lower classes, marriage was a way of expanding the family labor force, so fertility, compatible skills and a good work ethic counted more than love.

Shankar Vedantam: Why do you think marriage has become less about political and economic ties today and more about love and companionship? What are the factors that have driven this change?

Stephanie Coontz: Marriage has ceased to be the main way that society organizes people's economic rights and work commitments. It no longer determines people's citizenship rights and social status as adults, or legally assigns a particular division of labor and power in the home. Banks, bureaucracies, and markets now regulate who does what work and who gets wages, profits, or business loans, and they do this on the basis of objective criteria that are not linked to a person's status as a husband or wife. Local elites and employers have lost their ability to impose a particular lifestyle on individuals, and democratic reforms such as the abolition of restrictions on interracial marriage and removal of the legal penalties of illegitimacy have made it harder for the state to prevent some groups from marrying and to pressure other groups into marriage. The economic independence of women has reduced the pressures that used to force women to enter or stay in a marriage. And legal changes have also transformed marriage into an association of equals. As late as the 1970s, many states had "head and master" laws, giving the husband the final say over many family decisions, and they defined the duties of husband and wife in very distinct ways: The husband, but not the wife, had the duty to support the family; the wife, but not the husband, had the duty to keep house, raise the children, and provide sex. That's why there was no such thing as marital rape. Now marriage is defined as an association of two individuals who have equal responsibilities and rights and can negotiate their roles as individuals rather than adhering to gender stereotypes. All this encourages couples to have a much more individualized and intimate relationship.

Shankar Vedantam: You have found that arranged marriages and marrying for economic and political ties are not just limited to non-western cultures, but have long been a part of marriage in the West. Can you talk about how economic and political considerations played a role in marriage in the West -- and whether they still play such a role today?

Stephanie Coontz: After the collapse of the Roman Empire, marriage was a central way that the leaders of emerging kingdoms in the West jockeyed for power. Kings (and sometimes queens as well) would marry someone who could claim descent from royalty or who controlled important resources and armies, and if a better match came along, they would try to get out of the first marriage. So in the early Middle Ages, church officials, nobles, and aspiring kings fought pitched battles over who had the right to declare a marriage valid or invalid, and these battles led to some unique features of Western marriage.

But in the West as elsewhere, the upper classes used marriage to make alliances and expand their control over serfs and fighting men. In the middle classes, until the late 18th century, the dowry a man received at marriage was usually the biggest economic stake he would acquire before his parents died, so the size of the dowry took precedence over the attraction to the daughter. Peasants also sought connections with families who had neighboring land or connections with local elites, and artisans sought work mates and business partners. Society has gradually developed other ways of organizing work, property transfers, and

political succession. But as long as women were economically dependent on men, they had to consider economic factors in marriage.

We tend to think of women as the more romantic sex, but it was men who first embraced the love revolution -- because they could afford to. As late as 1967, a poll of college students found that 2/3 of the women, but only 5 percent of the men, said they would consider marrying someone they didn't love in order to achieve goals such as financial security.

Today, marriage allows two people to merge resources, divide tasks, and accumulate more capital than they could as singles. So it still plays an economic role, but in a different way than 50 years ago. Today the big economic advantage of marriage is having two earners, and there is evidence that men as well as women increasingly look for mates who can share the breadwinning role. While intermarriage has increased between people of different races, ethnicities, and religions, it has decreased between people of different educational attainment and class standing. So despite the priority of love as a conscious motive, economic factors still affect whom we fall in love with.

Shankar Vedantam: In our interview, you said the evolution of marriage into an institution that is primarily about love and companionship had both positive and negative elements. Can you share with our readers what you meant?

Stephanie Coontz: When a marriage works today, it is fairer, more intimate, more satisfying, and more beneficial to its members than ever before in history. Through most of history -- and still today in many parts of the world -- marriage channeled resources from kids to parents and from women to men. That's not true in the West today. But the same things that have made marriage more intimate and satisfying have made it more optional -- and made an unsatisfying marriage seem less bearable to people. The right to divorce has been in many ways positive -- for example, economists Justin Wolfers and **Betsey Stevenson** found that in every state that adopted no-fault divorce, the next 5 years saw a 20 percent decline in the suicide rate of wives, and an even greater decline in domestic violence.

Still, our high expectations of love and companionship can also shade into unrealistic expectations that may lead people to be impatient with the inevitable ups and downs of any relationship. Overall, I think people are better off with high expectations of marriage than the low ones that caused many women to tell interviewers in the 1960s and 1970s that "we have a good marriage -- he's hardly ever hit me." But another down side of the very positive increase in marital commitment and altruism -- especially in America, where the idealization of love is higher than in most other societies -- has been a tendency to make love and marriage our ONLY source of commitment and obligation. Over the past two decades, the percentage of people who said their spouse was a close confidante rose from less than a third to almost 40 percent. That's good. But even as more spouses reported being each other's close confidantes, the number of neighbors, co-workers, club or church members, and extended kin with whom Americans discussed important matters dropped. The number of people who had no one other than their spouse to talk with soared. Almost half of all Americans now say there is just one person or no one at all with whom they discuss important matters. And other studies show that married people today actually spend less time offering practical help to neighbors and parents than do singles. So marriage can become a sort of emotional equivalent to today's gated communities.

Washington, D.C.: I found that any attempts to codify what marriage means for a society fall far far short of what an individual marriage means. Do you find that it's useful to look at marriages by generation or isn't that an impossibility. My single friends tried to get my wife and I to accept that when we got married we somehow became part of a group of married people who excluded homosexuals, or somehow I treated my wife more as "property" after marriage than before, but I found all attempts to place our marriage into some larger cultural group just didn't fit. Nor did any of my married friends really fit any group. Some are soulmates, others got married after accidental pregnancies, others got married out of desperation, others got married and divorced within a few years, others got married and seem to live separate lives (either as workaholics, volunteeraholics or Mr-Basement-workshop), many got married and were joined at the hip, some have kids and others haven't. Some are completely sexist, some completely open. I was shocked that there seems to be almost no difference between my parents' WW2 generation friends and my friends-- Particularly because my parents dealt with the war and the cold war and didn't get married until the 1960s when they and their friends were in their late 30s.

Stephanie Coontz: There has always been huge variation in individual marriage, no matter how rigid the cultural rules. Tolstoy once said that happy marriages were all alike, but each unhappy marriage was unhappy in its own way. In my research, I actually found the opposite: The unhappy marriages had a lot more in common cross-culturally and over history than the happy ones -- partly because what counts as a happy or good marriage is so culturally varied. But I do think marriage is more of an individualized project than it used to be. In the 1950s, almost everyone married around the same age -- and if you got 2 or 3 years beyond the average age, you were unlikely to ever marry. And people generally adhered -- at least in public -- to pretty stereotyped gender roles. They also faced social censure if they didn't have kids (or felt it). Today people have a lot more choice about how to organize their marriage, and they increasingly do it on the basis of their individual needs and abilities rather than on the basis of what husbands and wives "ought" to do.

Shankar Vedantam: I happen to be listening on my iPod to "Anna Karenina" (the only way I find the time to "read" fiction anymore) and although Tolstoy's opening line in the book is great, I think the novel itself contradicts the idea that happy marriages are all alike and unhappy marriages are all different. Much of the novel seems to support the opposite conclusion, which is what Stephanie's research has found.

Leawood, Kan.: What are the divorce statistics when people marry after first cohabiting and how does this compare with pre-arranged marriages in America?

Stephanie Coontz: We don't have good statistics on the few marriages that are arranged. But there's a lot of confusion about the impact of cohabitation on marriage. On average, people who cohabit before marriage have higher divorce rates, but most researchers don't think that cohabitation "causes" divorce. In fact, a more likely explanation is that the minority of people who don't cohabit nowadays are likely to be more religious and to have strong moral objections to "living in sin." Such people are also less likely to divorce, even if the marriage is bad. The one danger in cohabitation is when people "drift" into marriage, rather than consciously making a decision. One benefit, though, is that men who cohabit before marriage tend to do more housework afterwards --- and that's a big plus for marital stability nowadays.

Shankar Vedantam: I think there are also problems with self-selection here. It is not as though we randomly divide people into cohabitators and non-cohabitators. People who cohabit might be more likely than non-cohabitators, for example, to believe in the ideal of marrying for love -- they want to find out if their partner is really a soulmate. I would find it unsurprising if these people also had a higher rate of divorce down the road -- but the causative factor might not be cohabitation but that they have different expectations of marriage in the first place.

Washington, D.C.: I have talked with several of my friends comparing my parents' generation (baby-boomers) with ours (25-35 year olds). The consensus is that my parents' generations were more "all or nothing" while my generation is more conscious about opportunity costs and more methodical about soulmate searching. In a way, you think this method of looking for a mate is better, when you look at how many baby boomer "all or nothing marriages" have led to divorce. At the same time, you really wonder if this "methodical search" is good when it seems that a lot more people in my generation are lonely, single, and/or still looking. Why is this so? Why is it that my generation who seems more committed to the soulmate search actually isn't finding him/her?

Stephanie Coontz: I think the "all or nothing" applies more to the parents of the baby boomers, and it had mixed effects: Yes, that attitude made them more committed to stay through good time and bad, but it also led many people to enter and stay in marriages that were destructive to both the adults and the kids. The baby boomers actually have higher divorce rates than the new generation -- in fact the divorce rate has been falling since 1980. There's still a high rate of breakup -- about 45 percent of marriages end in divorce -- but it varies hugely by class and education: College-educated women and women who marry at an older age have much lower divorce rates than women with a h.s. education and women who marry early. And couples who marry at age 35 or older have the most stable marriages of all. So it seems there are some advantages as well as some risks to prolonging the search.

Shankar Vedantam: I would also add, in keeping with the nitpicky mood I seem to be in today, that it seems problematic to automatically assume divorce is a bad thing. Sure, no one gets married expecting they are going to get divorced and most people considering marriage do so in the hope their bond will last a lifetime, but surely we all know people who are better off divorced than married. I understand the intuitive appeal of judging different approaches to marriage by studying the divorce rate, but I wonder if this is too crude an approach to capture the complexity of the phenomenon?

Silver Spring, Md.: Summary of your article states that "Marrying for love--and expecting fidelity--are both relatively new developments." Not according to the New Testament. Jesus quoted Genesis of the Old Testament to reinforce monogamy. St. Paul commands husbands to love their wives, and proscribes, again and again, out-of-wedlock sex. Of course, this type of marriage was very different from the predominant marriages of the Roman Empire. Why does your article overlook the historic Christian view of marriage?

Stephanie Coontz: My book has a detailed account of the Christian approach to love. Most religious and moral leaders through the ages have recommended monogamy, but few have enforced it. The early Christian church, for example, debated how many concubines a man had to have before they denied him communion! Jesus was unique among the major religious leaders in encouraging monogamy for both men and women, and prohibiting divorce, but the early Christians were actually highly suspicious of both love and marriage because they distracted people from the task of organizing and recruiting to the movement. That said, for the 1st 16 years of its existence, the Catholic church did provide an out that many churches did not when young people defied their parents and married for love. That was the doctrine of consent, which held that if 2 people claimed to have exchanged vows in the present tense -- out by the haystack, behind the barn, without witnesses or the blessing of a priest, even through a locked door -- they were validly married. IN 1215 the church said a "licit" marriage had to take place in church, with the banns read 3 weeks in a row, and the woman had to have a dowry. But the church accepted an "illicit" marriage as valid.

Washington, D.C.: Two questions: First, do I understand correctly that in the cited study, "What my parents don't want" is drawn from what the children, not their parents, say? I ask because I think children often misread their parents about this sort of thing. So I'm wondering what you think about this way of gathering the data and how it might skew the results?

Second, and perhaps related, I'm really shocked by how high "different ethnic background" ranks on the parents' side (for each of the the three groups) and that didn't seem to be addressed in the article, so would love to hear your thoughts on that particular finding.

Since we're supposedly heading in this "post-racial" direction (or so I hear in discussions about the presidential race), I'm especially wondering how you think this finding illuminates such discussions about race and ethnicity at our historical moment.

But perhaps it just suggests that children underestimate what their parents could actually handle. I've seen parents surprise their children many times by actually being happy when their children are. There seems to be a tendency for concrete experience to overturn abstract prejudice, especially when it comes to our loved ones -- from children coming out as gay, to dating outside their ethnicity, to choosing a different profession than the parents have been pushing....

I love "Dept of Human Behavior" and I'm a big fan of Stephanie Coontz's work, happy to see you together in this article and look forward to the discussion!

Shankar Vedantam: Thanks for your kind words about my column. And I agree with your high estimation of Stephanie Coontz!

You are right in pointing out that the evolution and marriage study by Abraham P. Buunk, Justin H. Park and Shelli L. Dubbs at the University of Groningen asked young people what values their parents might look for in a potential mate, as opposed to asking the parents themselves. It is possible the parents may have provided different answers, but I find it interesting (and instructive) that across different cultures, young people predicted their parents would care most about the group characteristics or affiliations of their potential mate -- their ethnicity, religion, social class etc. It seems unlikely that all the young people would collectively reach for the same kinds of stereotypes about their parents' preferences, unless there really was something to it.

As for the fact that parents tended to prefer children to marry people from their own ethnic group, I can't say I am surprised. It is one thing to say interracial marriages are not illegal, and something else entirely to say that race and ethnicity no longer play a role in people's preferences. But I agree with you in that the concrete experience of dealing with a mate who is not someone you may have picked for your offspring can prompt parents to reach new conclusions ...

Walnut Creek, Calif.: How does one break the chain that consists of women going back many generations, who marry controlling men?

Stephanie Coontz: A large part of that chain in the past was caused not be women CHOOSING controlling men but by men having the cultural expectation and legal right to control women. Now that there is less pressure on men and women to have a male-dominant marriage, many more marriages are based on equal decision-making. But of course, some women haven't gotten rid of the cultural baggage that encourages them to confusing a controlling man with a competent and caring man.

Shankar Vedantam: Right, and I should also say that just because more people are marrying for love and more women are able to tell controlling men to take a walk that does not mean a host of other economic, social and cultural pressures don't exist to maintain the old order. Like biological evolution, social evolution is a messy business, and age old customs pop up in our lives in the same way a skeletal structure that originated hundreds of millions of years pops up in the fingers I am using to type this answer!

Washington, D.C.: So, society has largely replaced economic jealousy with romantic jealousy. Does not sound like a social, economic or psychological advance to me.

Stephanie Coontz: The more I study these kind of historical changes, the more I see them in terms of tradeoffs rather than purely better or worse. I do think that there is more possibility of building a deep and intimate marriage today than there was in the past. But there's also more temptation to confuse infatuation with love, which creates destructive kinds of jealousy.

Shankar Vedantam: I have to say that this is what I find interesting and attractive about Stephanie's book and work. It isn't about drawing simple (simplistic?) conclusions about one system being better than another; I doubt you will discover from the book whether the old system was better or the new system is better. (You

will probably find evidence to support whichever conclusion you prefer!) I find it fascinating to understand how institutions such as marriage have changing -- by contrast, I think my own opinions about which approach is better reflects little more than the happenstance of my upbringing and personal circumstances ...

Rockville, Md.: Many years ago, I heard a quote stating that "The person you choose to marry, like which side you fight on in a war, is determined more by geography than anything else." Having been very happily married for over 36 years, I know that had I gone to a different college, I would not have ever met the woman I married and we would not have enjoyed these past 36 years together.

Your thoughts?

Stephanie Coontz: Geography -- and social class as well, yes. In fact, social class not outweighs local origins, and while intermarriage is becoming more common across religion and race, it is becoming less common across class. (Which is why the idea that poor and uneducated women can marry themselves out of poverty is somewhat unrealistic). But your comment also points out that even today, when we think about finding our "soul mate," it's pretty clear that there must be more than a few of those floating around! I suspect you and your wife could have been happily married to other mates had you gone to different colleges.

Shankar Vedantam: The sociologists call this idea homophily -- the fact that birds of a feather flock together. It plays a surprisingly powerful role in our lives which is why, for example, most people have friends who share their political views. If you're a Democrat, most of your friends will be Democrats, and if you are a Republican, most of your friends will be Republicans. This happens without anyone (or most people, at least) checking with potential friends about their political views before embarking on a friendship. But the neighborhoods we live in, the states and cities we choose, our occupations and avocations, our educational backgrounds and religious interests guide us toward others who share our views.

I have a small caveat to add to Stephanie's point that "even today, when we think about finding our "soul mate," it's pretty clear that there must be more than a few of those floating around! I suspect you and your wife could have been happily married to other mates had you gone to different colleges"

... the caveat is that, although this is certainly true, I want to make clear the Washington Post isn't telling you that you can be happy in multiple relationships with all these soulmates at the very same time!

Washington, D.C.: I was recently told that young people are no longer marrying for love, by your estimation, how true is this? What other factors are now contributing to marriage?

Stephanie Coontz: I don't think that's true. But I do think that many young people are rethinking how they define love, with friendship, common interests, and practical experience of sharing takes well becoming as important as romantic attraction.

Shankar Vedantam: Also, the research I wrote about today is really about averages, and no one would suggest that the data will tell you about the experience of every single person. On average, more people than ever before seem to be marrying for love. That does not mean that there aren't sizable numbers of people who marry for economic convenience or social necessity or allow their parents to pick a bride or groom for them.

Chicago: From my own experience, I don't think that much has changed from my parents' generation and mine in how women choose a mate. (The press and media would like us to believe otherwise.) Having gotten a degree from a prestigious university, I had difficulty getting dates. The moment I went into medicine, I found no problem, even as a medical student, finding women who wanted to date me.

The idea of a male spouse providing financial security for a woman remains important, even though many women now would like us to believe it has changed.

Stephanie Coontz: Sure, there are still lots of women who are looking for prestige and security -- but it is pretty clear from solid scientific studies that there are fewer such women than there used to be. For example, there are far more marriages than in the past between women who earn more than their husbands and who have higher degrees (and being in one myself, I have to say that from MY personal experience, it works great!)

Shankar Vedantam: And I am married to a woman who is better educated than I am (and much better looking) and it works great for me, too!

Washington, D.C.: Did anyone actually ask the parents what they thought about their child's potential mates? Because it could be that parents don't actually care so much about ethnicity, poverty and family background -- the kids just -think- they do!

Shankar Vedantam: Yes, this came up in an earlier question. It's possible kids are misreading their parents, but it seems unlikely that all the kids from different cultures would misread their parents in exactly the same way.

Munich, Germany: find it interesting that attractiveness and a sense of humor are considered to be "good genes traits", but "bad parent traits", according to the parents' perspective.

In the parents' perception of a good parent and a team player, how important do you think that the parents' perception of pecking order is in their verdicts? A good sense of humor could make someone a good team player, but it could also make their ensuing popularity jeopardize a parent's position of authority.

Shankar Vedantam: Interesting question. I am not sure there is a good way to get inside the heads of the parents here, as a couple of people have pointed out. In general, the study was trying to make the point that the young people getting married located attractiveness in individual qualities, whereas the parents located suitability in group qualities. As you implicitly point out, there are qualities that overlap ...

NYC: "... the caveat is that, although this is certainly true, I want to make clear the Washington Post isn't telling you that you can be happy in multiple relationships with all these soulmates at the very same time! " But surely, the Washington Post is not saying that I cannot? Within some reasonably practical limit, say, 6 or 8?)

Shankar Vedantam: Ah ... um ... er ... I cannot say more, given the high probability that the aforementioned spouse I mentioned is likely to read this chat ...

Shankar Vedantam: Stephanie, I think you had something you wanted to add on the cohabitation and divorce questions that came up recently.

Stephanie Coontz: Yes, I agreed with your points but wanted to supplement them. It's interesting, for example, that there are several European countries where people who cohabit before marriage have lower divorce rates than people who don't, so these associations are not inevitable and universal.

And on divorce, I also want to agree that it's not always bad -- or at least it is not always so bad as to outweigh the price of staying in a bad marriage. Two economists recently found that in every state that adopted no-fault divorce, the following 5 years saw a 20% decline in the suicide rate of wives and a sharp drop in domestic violence -- not to mention a reduction in the rate of wives killing their husbands! As for the effect on kids, another complicated issue. Next week, the Council on Contemporary Families is going to release a new study by a demographer showing that the impact of divorce on kids has been greatly exaggerated by studies that fail to take into account prior differences in families that divorce and families that don't.

Bend, Ore.: In my opinion, a person's future mate has to be your best friend at the beginning. After being married for 48 years, I have realized the truth of this.

Stephanie Coontz: I think that this has always been true for GOOD marriages, but not necessary for stable marriages. Today it is more important than ever for both, because without friendship, love seldom lasts, and when love doesn't last, men and women are now more free to divorce.

Greenville, S.C.: It is my understanding that most churches still teach that the man should be the head of the household and the maker of final decisions. What % of American women (religious and non-religious) subscribe to this?

Stephanie Coontz: Actually, more and more churches are reinterpreting the scriptures and emphasizing the passages that stress mutuality rather than submission. And while I don't have the percentage of religious women (and men) who now think that husbands and wives should be equal, it seems to grow every year. Of course, change doesn't happen overnight, and one reaction to the international changes in family, marriages and gender roles has been a rise of fundamentalism.

re: some thought love was something you got on the side: Let's be clear: what MEN got on the side.

Stephanie Coontz: Yes, usually it was men who had the right to take lovers on the side, but not always. Among the upper classes in medieval Europe, women as well as men often took lovers. And some societies extended sexual rights to women. My favorite example of a society that confounds our notions of what is "normal" is the Bari of Venezuela. There, people believe that any man who sleeps with a woman during her pregnancy contributes something to the child. When the woman gives birth, she names all the men she has slept with and the midwife goes to them and says, you have a child. In that culture, instead of producing jealousy and violence and screwed-up kids, these men feel bound to contribute part of their hunting and

fishing catches to the child from then on, so a child whose mother has taken lovers during pregnancy is more than twice as likely to survive into adulthood as a child whose mom didn't!

Silver Spring, Md.: My nephew is a Jewish-American engaged to a Japanese woman (not Japanese-American). She has agreed to convert to Judaism. What would be the attraction to the Japanese woman versus a Jewish woman or Japanese-American woman?

Stephanie Coontz: Not being a pop psychology guru, I wouldn't want to speculate about 2 people I don't know!

Munich, Germany: OK, intelligence and physical attractiveness may have replaced good housekeeping and industriousness, but I've heard that money and power make at least men sexy. Does this mean that money and power are "good genes' traits" (only half joking here)?

Stephanie Coontz: I think money and power still make men attractive mates, which translates for many women into making them sexy. But here's something interesting. We are increasingly finding that men find power, money and intelligence sexy in women, in ways they didn't 50 years ago. Also, cross-cultural studies show that the more equality there is between men and women, the less likely women are to turn men into "success objects," and the more they are likely to value kindness, communication -- and sharing housework! -- over money and power.

Richmond, Va.: I experienced homophily phenomenon recently when I noticed how few women in the bridal announcements kept their name. I assumed SINCE I, MY SISTERS, AND MOST OF OUR FREINDS all kept our names, that was the norm now. So I was in my own little homophily world.

Seems like there was a bubble of women keeping their names and now it's gone. Young women now have returned to changing their name to their husband's. I always hoped that tradition would find a more egalitarian way to work out, but there seems to have been a backlash. (I'm on a volunteer committee that makes a big deal, every conference call about being confused about a woman who's name is different from her husband.)

Shankar Vedantam: Right. The interesting thing about homophily is how invisible it is to us ... come October, I bet you will hear many people (especially in "Blue" states) say, "how can 50 percent of the country be Republican when I don't know a single one?" while others (especially in "Red" states) say, "how can 50 percent of the country be Democrats when I don't know a single one?"

Richmond, Va.: Even the free boomers associated sex with love. I wonder how the Gen Y-ers' "friends with benefits" affects their marriage expectations. It seems like it COULD influence them to see marriage as a calculated business partnership like in the old days because they can get their sex needs met outside marriage and not confuse it with love.

Stephanie Coontz: That's an interesting question. So far, though, it hasn't led there. I think the "friends with benefit" and the "hookup" patterns are responses to a fact that too many politicians fail to take into account: that as the age of marriage continues to rise (on average, 26 for men, and 30 for women with professional degrees) and the age of sexual maturity continues to fall, young people are likely to live a decade or more in a stage of life where they are sexually mature but where marriage is not really wise (note my earlier pt about how people who marry late have lower divorce rates). So young people are still figuring out how to handle that, and I think some us old fogies, of which I count myself one in some ways, need to accept that these non-romantic sexual arrangements are not necessarily destructive and do not necessarily hurt their ability to -- later -- form lasting relationships.

Shankar Vedantam: That's all we have time today for -- boy, this hour has gone by quickly.

A big round of applause, please, for Stephanie Coontz. There were a lot of questions she was not able to get to, which means we must have Stephanie back soon.

Finally, given what Stephanie just said about men doing housework getting those pheromones raging, I have a sink of dishes to attend to!

Editor's Note: washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions. washingtonpost.com is not responsible for any content posted by third parties.

Document WPCOM00020080415e44e00007