

## Reporting on Marriage in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain

Anastasia de Waal, 2011

### Social changes have drastically altered the place of marriage

- Living alone, cohabiting and having children outside marriage have all become socially acceptable options: in particular amongst the young.
- This has, of course, not always been the case: pre-1960 marriage was the only socially acceptable form of relationship, especially once children were involved.
- Marriage today has shifted to becoming a **choice** amongst a range of options.

### But the young are interested in marrying

- We can talk loosely about an 'Ipod generation', a cohort of young people for whom a selection of lifestyles is available when it comes to adult relationships.
- In spite of significantly lower marriage rates than in the past there is a lot of interest in marriage amongst young people.
- The question is **why**.

### What insight do we have from research?

- To answer this and gain an understanding of what marriage signifies to young people today, attitude survey evidence gives us valuable insight.
- One example is a survey Civitas commissioned Ipsos Mori to carry out, looking at a population of 1,560 British men and women between the ages of 20 and 35 years-old.
- The underlying question was: what were their attitudes to marriage?
- Notably, this survey reiterated the findings of other research, showing that the majority of young people—70 per cent—wanted to marry one day.

### **So what are the main *reasons* for wanting to marry?**

- Again, survey evidence tells us that the number one reason for wanting to marry is to make a commitment.
- Interestingly, reasons which might have been the main motivations in the past—tradition and religion, social requirement, for example—come through as much less important today.
- This emphasis on personal commitment reflects the move towards today's far more 'de-institutionalised' conceptualisation of marriage.

### **Marriage today is both a choice and an ideal**

- This de-institutionalisation connects strongly to marriage's popularity and idealisation today.
- Less pressure to marry has unambiguously affected marriage rates, but notably it hasn't led to the end of marriage as a widespread ideal – or rather, has turned it *into* an ideal.
- Without the 'need' to marry anymore, it's fair to say that, quite counter to many portrayals, marriage is actually more *popular* today than ever.

### **So how does cohabiting fit in?**

- Research demonstrates that, for the majority of young people, marriage has a differentiating significance from other forms of adult relationships.
- Illustrating this differentiating significance, in the Ipsos Mori/Civitas survey, marriage was most popular amongst cohabiting respondents.
- Marriage's popularity amongst cohabiters in survey data contributes to a body of evidence illustrating the way in which marriage is perceived as a progression, rather than a deviation, from living together.
- Research from LSE, for example, has analysed the marital aspirations of young people surveyed in the British Household Panel Survey. When asked about their future

intentions, three-quarters of men and women reported that they were either planning, or expected, to get married.

### **What we are seeing are new relationship trajectories**

- Rather than rendering marriage redundant, the availability of alternative relationship options have generated new trajectories.
- With cohabitation this is important because it demonstrates the way in which living together unmarried and getting married are not mutually exclusive, but complementary processes.
- Cohabitation is not replacing marriage; it may be *displacing* it, in the sense that people no longer have to marry in order to have a live-in relationship, contributing to lower marriage rates.
- With by far the most popular reason for wanting to marry in survey evidence being to commit to one's partner, it is clear that marriage is perceived to be distinctive from living together.

### **Importantly, the animosity towards marriage is largely over**

- Little sense of the animosity towards marriage which might have been expressed by young people in the past is reflected in the views of young people today.
- How different this is from the past. Regarded by feminists as the home of female oppression, in the 1970s Germaine Greer famously branded married life 'a legalised form of slavery' for women. For a long time afterwards, marriage was considered to be fundamentally at odds with women's emancipation.
- What is evident today is that marriage has largely been conceptually extricated from gender inequality.

### **So who is *not* marrying? And why should we worry**

- A significant body of research has identified a strong connection between lower marriage rates and lower socio-economic background.

- Sociological evidence shows that often marriage may be held in such high esteem, requiring a set of prerequisites so ambitious, that it is considered unrealistic. Sociologist Kathryn Edin has argued that marriage is increasingly viewed as a ‘luxury good’. This means that marriage can drop off the agenda of those on lower incomes.
- Research from the ESRC shows the way in which, once children are involved, cohabitation instead of marriage is strongly connected to income in Britain. Their data has found that the areas in Britain where cohabitation with children is most prevalent are the poorest areas ‘...with the highest proportions of working-class parents...’ and areas ‘...notorious for the economic breakdown of once thriving working-class industries...’
- It is vital we recognise and investigate this relationship between money and marriage in order to understand societal patterns, as well as to be able to facilitate people’s aspirations.

### **To sum up**

- Marriage has moved from being a social norm, to being problematised by feminism, to becoming a personal aspiration.
- The *private* significance of marriage today helps to explain why only 20 per cent of those respondents in the Ipsos Mori/Civitas survey who would like to get married think that married people *generally* are happier – and why the British Social Attitudes survey has found that: ‘Two-thirds (66 per cent) of the population think there is little difference socially between being married and living together.’
- The divergence between responses to ‘generalising’ questions and respondents’ personal aspirations reveals the comfortable co-existence in Britain today of personal aspirations to marry and liberalised social norms.