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還沒有結婚——新加坡青年婚姻觀念所帶來的啟示

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婚姻是社會建構出來的觀念，隨著社會發展而賦予不同意義。要理解人們為何結婚，我們需了解婚姻在他們心目中的意義。本文以新加坡作個案研究，討論亞洲地區婚姻的社會轉型。為理解遲婚及單身人口比例增加的趨勢，本文探索傳統規範與現代期望間之矛盾所造成的局限。在實踐的層面而言，雖然婚姻的地位依然崇高，但對婚姻的期望，卻令時間有限的年輕人難以覓得理想配偶。

關鍵詞：婚姻觀念、擇偶、社會轉型

Not Yet Married—The Implications of Meanings of Marriage on Youths in Singapore

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Marriage is a social construct that takes on different meanings as societies develop and mature. To understand why people get married, it is important that we understand what marriage means. This paper will discuss the social transformation of marriage in Asia using Singapore as a case study. To examine two demographic trends- delayed marriage, and the increasing proportion of people who remain single - this discourse also explores the constraints imposed by contradictions between traditional norms and modern expectations. In the midst of these ideological challenges, there are important implications for the practice of marriage among younger Singaporeans. We see that while the institution of marriage continues to be held in high esteem, changing expectations of what marriage should be poses barriers for time-strapped young adults in their search for the ideal spouse.

Keywords: marriage ideology; spouse selection; social transformation

The Social Transformation of Marriage

Much has been written about the social

transformation of marriage in western societies. Coontz (2004) detailed the shift in expectation of the social institution of marriage from “traditional” to “contemporary”. Traditional

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marriages which dominated marriage forms in 18th Century Europe and North America, Coontz argued, organized people's places in economic and political hierarchy of society. Marriage was the means by which capital was raised and political alliances were forged. Gender roles, which dictated marital roles, also facilitated the division of labour in the family by age and gender. In traditional marriage, individual needs and desires were secondary considerations.

Many scholars argue that marriage has been deinstitutionalized with the rise of industrialization, urbanization and modernization (Cherlin, 2004). While institutional marriage served the functions of expanding the family labour force, acquiring influential in-laws, and even facilitating business mergers and raising capital (Coontz, 2004), deinstitutionalized, or individualistic, marriage focused on individual needs. As a result, young adults in contemporary societies have raised individualized expectations of marriage, and expect marriage to fulfill personal needs of happiness and satisfaction, with a strong emphasis on personal choice.

Why did the shift occur? Cherlin (2004) offers that the change in the meaning of marriage was a result of shifts in cultural and material trends. Modernization saw the evolution of cultural trends that induced a rise in individualism, an increase in the importance of romantic love, and the greater significance of emotional satisfaction. On the material front, we note decreases in reliance on agricultural labour and child and adult mortality; and increases in the cost of living and the female labour force participation rate. Together, these resulted in a reduction of the social significance of institutionalized marriage.

With modernization and globalization, capitalism has transformed our world into one large mega-economy with fairly porous national boundaries. Have the shifts in cultural and material trends that changed the meaning of marriage in the West had similar effects on how young Asians view marriage? This paper explores the meanings young Singaporeans attach to marriage, how these are derived, and the implications they have for marriage patterns.

Marriage in Singapore: Historical Background and Recent Trends

Singapore is a fairly young nation which achieved independence only in 1965, but in its short 45-year post-independence history, underwent impressive transformation in both social and economical indicators. Rapid industrialization and urbanization propelled the small city from third world to first. In 1965, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was only S\$2,982.2 million (annual GDP at current market prices) and a primary concern for the new government was the high unemployment (estimated to be about 10%). The government, led by then-Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew embarked on an intensive industrialization program based on an export-orientated strategy (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2010). From 1960 to 1990, the GDP grew from S\$5 billion to S\$55 billion. In the same period, per capita indigenous GDP rose from S\$3,455 to S\$13,150 (Soon and Tan, 1997). By 2009, the GDP was registered at S\$265,057.9 million (Department of Statistics, 2010a). With limited geographical space and natural resources, Singapore depended primarily on manpower to facilitate the economic transformation.

The growth strategy adopted by the government had significant implications for the Singapore family. With rapid industrialization, there was an acute demand for skilled labour. As a result, demands from the job market offered access to paid work for all Singapore women. For the first time, marriage and parenthood were not the only life goals for women. Instead, they could choose to pursue formal education and skills training, and enter the workforce. Economic independence became a realistic goal. Inevitably, these opportunities began to transform the meaning of marriage in women's lives. Singaporeans married later, and the total fertility rate (TFR) began to decline.

Data from the Singapore Department of Statistics show the demographic trends relating to marriage patterns. (see Table 1). Overall, we see that Singapore youths are marrying later, and as procreation is sanctioned only with legally recognized unions, the fertility rate has also decreased. Also noteworthy is the divorce data. While Singapore fares well in global comparison of divorce trends, we observe a year-on-year rise in divorce rate, a development which has worried policy makers.

As more people have delayed marriage, the proportion of singles aged 35-39 years has increased. Based on marriage trends, the likelihood of singles in this age group eventually getting married is very low. Taken together, the implications of delayed marriage, smaller family size and increased proportion of singles in the population is a "graying society" in which median age has inched up annually. Of concern is the fall in the old-age support ratio, which reflects stress on the economically-able to sustain economic productivity. Additionally, for an anti-

welfare state like Singapore, where the family is expected to provide for its vulnerable members, a shrinking family size threatens the viability of the family as a social safety net. The statistics also point to stressors in this area: shrinking household sizes and the rise in proportion of 1-person households.

In a nation where the only resource is human resource, these trends have certainly alarmed policy makers. When the nation first gained independence, TFR was at 4.7 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2002). The aim of the government at the time was population control. Singapore's population increased twofold from 1947 to 1970 (Wong & Yeoh, 2003). The intent was to moderate population growth so that efforts could be concentrated on improving infrastructure and the skills level of the labour force. The Family Planning and Population Board was set up in 1966, and tasked to manage family planning for Singapore (Wong, 1979). The campaign tag line was "Stop at Two". Family policies were designed with disincentives for those who had more than two children, and incentives for those who conformed. By 1975/1976, TFR had dropped to replacement rate, and has remained at below replacement rate since (see Straughan, 2008a, 2008b for detailed discussion on implications of family policies).

To attribute the drop in TFR solely to effective population control policies is too simplistic. In the case of Singapore, population control is the outcome of several important developments that converged at a similar time in the state's history. First, the development of safe, effective and accessible birth control. This important medical development effectively delinked sexual relations from marriage and

Table 1: Marriage and Fertility Indicators

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2009
Median age at first marriage:					
Brides	23.1	23.6	25.3	26.2	27.5
Grooms	26.9	26.7	28.0	28.7	29.8
General divorce rate:					
Males (per 1000 married resident males)	n.a.	3.7	6.1	6.5	7.7
Females (per 1000 married resident females)	n.a.	3.8	6.1	6.5	7.3
Total fertility rate (per female)	3.07	1.82	1.83	1.60	1.22
Proportion single among residents aged 35-39 years:					
Males	10.8	10.5	18.1	19.7	19.4
Females	5.1	8.5	14.8	15.1	15.6
Median age	19.5	24.4	29.8	34.0	36.9
Percentage in population 65 years and over	3.4	4.9	6.0	7.2	8.8
Old-age support ratio (number of aged 15-64 years per elderly aged 65 years and older)	17.0	13.8	11.8	9.9	8.3
Average household size	n.a.	n.a.	4.2	3.7	3.5
Percentage of 1-person households	n.a.	n.a.	5.2	8.2	10.3

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics (2010b)

procreation. But perhaps the more significant trigger for the downward spiral in the TFR is the transformation of the Singapore economy. The onset of industrialization in post-independent Singapore saw abundant job opportunities in the numerous industrial parks that were fast replacing agricultural spaces throughout the island. To meet the demand for skilled labour, formal education and training opportunities were stepped up and opened to all, regardless of race or gender. Women were trained alongside their male counterparts, and became an indispensable part of Singapore's labour force. The female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) rose from 28.2% in 1970 to 55.2% in 2009 (Department of Statistics, 2010c). As expected, while FLFPR rose with economic growth, it was negatively

correlated with TFR (Straughan et al., 2009). Thus began the social transformation of gender relations which would have a significant impact on marriage and family formation.

Meaning of Marriage in Contemporary Society: The Case of Singapore

To appreciate what marriage means in contemporary Singapore, I drew from two sets of data from recently concluded studies I headed: a large-scale community survey on marriage and fertility issues, and a qualitative study focused on singles who were still searching for the right

partner. The sociological questions that framed the researches included: why are Singaporeans delaying marriage and parenthood? Is marriage still held in high esteem by younger Singaporeans? What are the barriers to seeking a life partner?

Marriage – From the Converts’ Perspective

The main findings from the quantitative study on a cross-section of married Singaporeans provided empirical evidence that expectations of marriage as a social construct varied with gender, age and education. The data was part of a large-scale study on family and fertility issues which surveyed a probability sample of 1512 married couples. As Singapore’s population policies shifted from population control to population growth in the mid-1980s, our target population was couples who married in 1980 or later. This allowed us to capture a broad range of ages, and include couples who were married during the population control era (when the tagline was still “Stop at Two”) as well as those who were married during the aggressive pro-family policy period, which saw the introduction

of incentives that favoured larger families. The government announced these new initiatives in 2000, and these were significantly enhanced in 2004, and again in 2008.

Field work for the survey was completed in 2007, and the response rate was 65%. Median age for the sample was 43 years (mean = 43.2, standard deviation = 7.9) and median age at first wed was 27 years (mean = 27.2, standard deviation = 5.1). Most of the respondents achieved secondary school education (similar to high school, cumulating in an average of 10 years in formal education). There were slightly more females (53.6%) than males (46.4%) in the sample.

The survey instrument included seven statements on various perspectives on marriage (the extensive questionnaire had several sections on fertility issues, some of which are discussed in Straughan et al. 2009, 2008a). The statements (see Table 2) ranged from expectations of marriage as a life-long commitment (statements 1 and 2), perceived societal prestige on being married (statements 3 and 4), and general attitude towards marriage (statements 5, 6 and

Table 2: Indicators on Meanings of Marriage

Statements
● Marriage must be a life-long commitment; no matter what happens, we must never dissolve a marriage.
● We must stay married even if we are not happy with our spouse.
● People respect you more if they know you are married.
● In our society, if you are not married by a certain age, people think there’s something wrong with you.
● The happiest people in the world are those who are married.
● Marriage is an out-dated institution.
● A marriage is not complete unless you have children.

7). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the respective statements. Their responses were recorded in a 4-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree).

To test the effects of gender and education (both categorical measurements) on attitude towards marriage, cross-tabulations were conducted. The statistically significant outcomes are discussed in the following sections.

Meanings of Marriage – A Gendered Perspective

Statements 1 and 2 captured sentiments on marriage as a life-long commitment, regardless of personal happiness. Those who agreed with the statements were more likely to embrace a more traditional, institutional perspective on marriage. Those who disagreed would hold a more individualized perspective on marriage where personal happiness is considered important. The cross-tabulations of gender against attitudes showed a significant difference between men and women (see Table 3). Men

were more likely to hold a more institutional perspective on marriage. Men also held more positive views on marriage, and were more likely to think that married couples were happier and received more respect from society.

These findings are not surprising as the traditional institutional marriage tends to favour men more than women. As women gained economic independence through the opportunities in formal education and paid work, they became less dependent on marriage as a means of self-actualization. Unlike in pre-industrial Singapore, when women had to depend on either their family of origin, or their husband's, to sustain them economically, women now view marriage as more than a means of economic survival. Women engaged in the labour force enjoy economic independence, and their expectations of marriage have transformed to include meeting individual needs like happiness.

A noteworthy outcome is the analysis of statement 6, that "marriage is an outdated institution". More than 80% of the respondents disagreed with the statement, which lends strong

Table 3: Statements on Meanings of Marriage by Gender

	Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Statement 1: Marriage is a lifelong commitment*	F	32.7%	38.3%	25.3%	3.7%	793
	M	42.0%	39.0%	16.3%	2.7%	693
Statement 2: We must stay married even if we are not happy*	F	4.0%	27.1%	51.3%	17.6%	772
	M	7.2%	33.1%	48.6%	11.1%	656
Statement 3: People respect you if you're married*	F	6.9%	35.6%	47.9%	9.6%	793
	M	10.7%	45.8%	37.8%	5.8%	721
Statement 5: Happiest people are those who are married*	F	6.1%	25.3%	55.7%	12.9%	727
	M	13.1%	33.6%	44.0%	9.2%	639

* $p < 0.05$, χ^2 test

empirical support to the view that marriage as a social institution is still much valued (see Table 4). But perhaps more significant is the strong endorsement articulated by those with more formal education. The more educated respondents were, the more likely they were to disagree than marriage is an outdated institution. This pattern was consistent for both males and females, and the bivariate association was statistically significant and strong (Kendall's tau-b > 0.16, indicating that at least 16% of the variation in attitude was explained by education).

A positive correlation between education and perceptions of marriage as a relevant social institution provides some degree of optimism for pro-marriage proponents: the trend is for more young people to stay in full time education for longer. These findings lend support to Gillis' (2004) arguments that while fewer people in contemporary society live in conventional marital relations, the symbolic standing of marriage has

never been higher and more people now live by a conjugal ideal. This, he argued, is because marriage has become the repository of powerful utopian desires.

To further appreciate what marriage means, especially to those who were not yet married, I conducted a qualitative study on single youths who were actively seeking a life partner.

Still Not Married - From the Singles' Perspective

The primary aim of the "Cupid" Project was to tease out the dynamics involved in spouse selection and dating behavior among youths in Singapore. Through a series of nine focus groups and 27 in-depth face-to-face interviews, a grounded-theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was engaged to derive meanings of marriage from those who were not yet married. The interview guide included, among other

Table 4: Statement 6 by Education controlled for Gender

		Primary	Secondary	Diploma	University
Male	Strongly Agree	1.6%	2.8%	0.6%	1.7%
	Agree	27.0%	14.8%	7.6%	7.8%
	Disagree	55.6%	57.2%	66.5%	50.3%
	Strongly Disagree	15.9%	25.2%	25.3%	40.2%
	Total	63	250	158	179
	N = 650				
	Kendall's tau-b = 0.17	$p < 0.001$			
Female	Strongly Agree	2.8%	2.1%	1.2%	1.8%
	Agree	25.4%	16.3%	12.8%	8.4%
	Disagree	60.6%	62.6%	63.4%	56.9%
	Strongly Disagree	11.3%	19.0%	22.7%	32.9%
	Total	71	326	172	167
	N = 736				
	Kendall's tau-b = 0.16	$p < 0.001$			

topics, questions on expectations of marriage, characteristics of the ideal spouse, and perceived barriers to spouse seeking.

Altogether, the “Cupid” Project interviewed 82 young singles – 27 respondents in in-depth individual interviews and 56 respondents in nine focus groups. The purposive sample was a good mix of gender, ethnicity (Chinese, Malays, Indians – the 3 main ethnic groups in Singapore), religious background, education (from secondary school education through post-graduate degrees), and age group (in their twenties and thirties). Respondents in the focus groups tended to be younger (in their twenties) and were generally less anxious about finding a life partner. Because of their perception that they still had time, being single was not a social stigma and thus, they were happy to discuss the topic in a group setting. Singles in their thirties however were less willing to discuss their dating experiences and expectations in a group setting. In order to adjust to the demands of the field, one-on-one interviews were conducted for this group. The interview schedule was similar for both focus groups and individual interviews.

Three themes that emerged from the qualitative study will be discussed – expectations of marriage, attributes of the ideal spouse, and perceived barriers to spouse selection.

Expectations of Marriage

In almost all the interviews, notions of commitment, trust, fidelity, self-fulfillment and love were highlighted. There is evidence of a shift towards deinstitutionalized marriage, as noted by Cherlin (2004).

Marriage ... is about love. It's about commitment as well ... I want to enter into a marriage to be happy and not to worry about a lot of things. (Female, 35 years, Business executive, Interview 17)

Marriage is a life-long commitment. I expect my partner to be faithful to me and not do anything that may embarrass me in front of my relatives and friends. (Marriage) consists of tender loving care every day even when we are already married. He should never take me for granted and still love me as if he is still wooing me. Everyday should be like (the) honeymoon. So sweet ... the kind of love. (Female 24 years, Chinese, University graduate, Focus Group 1)

Female respondents were also keen to register that they did not expect to fall back on traditional gender roles when they married.

My partner would have to understand that... and not expect me to just be a mere wife or a stay-at-home mother...because well, you see, in the past women didn't have higher education, and patriarchy and all that made the woman stay at home, but now you see many women are empowered and having a tertiary education has opened up a lot of opportunities for me, for self-actualization so to say (laughs)... He would have to understand that my needs are equally important as his and that I have goals that I want to achieve. Of course I also want kids and a family, but added to that, maybe complicating it in this way, is that I also have my own ambitions, and that they don't die after marriage... because I see marriage as not... to be another stage of my life... but

more of a big part of my life. (Female, 24 years, Malay, University graduate, Interview 11)

Many of the singles also reiterated that they did not perceive any pressure to get married as there were many singles in their friendship networks. And they were not prepared to get married unless they found the right person to share their lives with.

You don't get married for the sake of getting married, for the sake of pressure, for the sake of meeting other people's expectations. (Male, 28 years, Chinese, University graduate, Focus Group 2)

I think it's ok to marry late. Late marriage better than bad marriage. (Female, 23 years, FG9)

This shift in demographics, where we see a rise in the proportion of singles, also serves to normalize singlehood. When marriage was the norm, those who were still not married by a certain age were negatively stigmatized and the suspicion attached to remaining single was a strong social policing factor to encourage marriage. However, as more educated and professionals delay marriage, the stereotypical image of the single has shifted from a "left-on-the-shelf old maid" icon to one that is attractive and positive.

The Ideal Spouse

A discourse on expectations of marriage inevitably will include discussions on expectations of the ideal spouse. In popular culture, physical traits are often highlighted as pivotal norms, under which the slim and attractive

'damsel' would end up with the macho, tall and handsome hero. As new ideals of marriage transform to include provision of intrinsic needs of companionship and love, are looks still important in the ideal spouse?

Apparently, yes – if we look at the feedback from the singles in the study. Traditional expectations of physical attraction were still important for the women. Many articulated that the ideal husband had to be taller, financially stable, and of a certain educational level. In addition to physical attributes and social class background, "soft skills" were also highlighted.

Same or higher (educational) qualification, witty, understanding, compassionate. (Female, 25 years, Indian, University graduate, Focus Group 1)

Tall with broad shoulders, clear skin with straight teeth, degree from reputable university. (Female, 27 years, Chinese, University graduate, Focus Group 1)

Tall ... at least 1.75m, well-mannered, humorous, financially independent, must be of the same caste and ethnic background. (Female, 31 years, Indian, University graduate, Focus Group 7)

Both men and women elaborated at length on intrinsic "soft" qualities that they look for in a potential life-partner.

(There must be) chemistry. Common interests. Sense of humour. Intelligent, kind, responsible. (Male 25 years, Chinese, University graduate, Focus Group 3)

Independent, intelligent, humorous, cheerful. Has similar family background and religion.

(Male, 24 years, Chinese, University graduate, Focus Group 5)

Perhaps one of the more demanding respondents was a single female in her early thirties who had a very clear ideal of a suitable partner in mind:

Taller than me. Much taller than me! ... humorous, ... of the same faith, mature in thinking, and he must have goals for himself. Someone who is motivated. And I must be able to accept his looks. Not (necessarily) good looking, but presentable. And cannot be fat. Degree holder. Income maybe around S\$3000 and above so that he can feed the family. (Female, 32 years, Chinese, Diploma Holder, Interview 5)

Many also stressed the importance of communication in sustaining a life-long partnership, and demonstrated an appreciation of the hard work that goes into making a marriage work.

We must be able to communicate and listen effectively to each other. I think this is most important because once the romance and honeymoon period is over you have to be able to do the most basic thing, to talk to maintain the communication between the both of you ...on top of this, he must be willing to commit to a relationship, and make the necessary compromises... I mean when both people come together there has to be some kind of adaptation to each other's lives, changes have to be made to make things work out ... It would be ideal if the guy has the same or maybe better education qualifications...I'm not trying to exclude those

who have a lower educational level but I feel pragmatically its crucial for... the long term betterment of the relationship (laughs). It would make things a lot better actually because it's not a matter of how much money he would be bringing home, but it's the mindset that he would have. (Female, 24 years, Malay, University graduate, Interview 11)

Given these expectations, we begin to appreciate why contemporary youths have such difficulties finding an acceptable partner. Physical appearance and social class background are certainly relatively easier traits to look out for than character attributes and shared values. The latter intrinsic qualities only surface when we get to know a person better. Physical looks continue to serve as a first level filter that the potential partner has to clear before a more in-depth relationship can develop.

Barriers to Spouse Selection

The singles were candid about the numerous barriers they faced in spouse-selection. Almost all cited a lack of time as they were all working full-time and felt that they were not yet able to achieve a good work-life balance. Many also lamented that because of their lack of time, they were not able to expand their social network of eligible singles.

Further, there were also pragmatic concerns about being financially and mentally prepared before getting married.

After paying off my study loan. \$700 per month ... takes 4 years. And I have to save enough money, to have 20 tables at the

wedding dinner. (Male, mid-late 20s, sports worker, FG 6)

Marriage is ... a commitment, affirming that the two of you are meant for each other, that there is no one else, a promise that you will be there for each other no matter what ... I will not marry until I'm sure that I can provide for myself and my wife, materially and spiritually, which explains why I am not so anxious to get married so early. (Male, 25 years, Malay, University graduate, Interview 10)

There were also those who lamented on the failed marriages of friends and family, and the pain they witnessed when unions finally dissolved. These realities served to reinforce their concern that marriage was hard work and that they might not be prepared for the commitment.

I've seen a lot of marriages around me that are on the rocks, on the verge of breaking up. It's not so beautiful after all ... So it's through looking through people's experiences that I realize it's not so easy to tie that knot. And a lot of mental preparation in order to get married. (Female, 32 years, Chinese, Diploma Holder, Interview 5)

One respondent felt that there was still a very strong social stigma against divorce, and that she would rather live her life as a single than a divorcee.

I think being a divorced woman is worse than being an andartu (old maid). Being an andartu is actually much better, you know, because you can earn your own keep, you can do what you want, you can go on holidays and cheer yourself up. You have your

freedom, what is just missing is love, but love is relative, you can get it from your friends, through friendship, through family ... (Female, 26 years, Malay, University graduate, Interview 6)

If these barriers are not eradicated, the longer the individual remains single, the harder it is for him/her to lower their expectations in their search of a life-partner. This is because over time, they gain self-sufficiency, grow to appreciate the merits of being alone, and singlehood status is normalized as part of their everyday life.

I think when I was younger, marriage was like something every girl gets to. It's like a milestone in life; ... it's like a natural part of life. We all think that we will get married some day and have children. But now as I get older, and the fact that I don't seem to meet anybody ... I do consider the possibility that I might remain single, and the thought is not exactly scary I suppose. I mean – I think I have to be realistic ... I can provide for myself now, and I don't really need a guy to provide for me ... So if I really marry it'll be for companionship and love; it's not really for material provision. (Female 28 years Chinese Grad, Interview 13)

Discussions

New Meanings of Marriage

From the survey of married couples, we find evidence that marriage remains a much revered social institution. It is noteworthy that those endowed with more education were more likely

to affirm the relevance of the social institution of marriage. The strong correlation between education and positive perspective towards couple-hood speaks well for the future of marriage as the population will continue to level-up in terms of formal education. Similarly, qualitative interviews with singles also provided evidence that marriage is still very much a desired life goal for these younger Singaporeans.

Cherlin (2004) argued that the draw of marriage lies in the promise of enforceable trust. Marriage is a legal contract that is socially recognized and the union is publicly announced. This public validation of couple-hood lowers the risk that the partner will renege on the contractual agreements made ("till death do us part") and the promise of long-term commitment facilitates long-term investments in the relationship. With marriage, couples have greater confidence when they engage in long-term investments like homeownership and having children. Cohabitation, on the other hand, is a purely a private agreement between two individuals, and the informal promise of commitment is not enforceable. Though marriage rates have gone down globally and many young adults are delaying marriage, the symbolic importance of marriage remains high. As Coontz noted, "Marriage as a relationship between two individuals is taken more seriously and comes with higher emotional expectations than ever before" (2004, p. 15). It has evolved from being a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige.

The data also suggest that the social meaning of marriage among young Singaporeans converges with Cherlin's (2004) definition of deinstitutionalized marriage, in which young singles envision marriage as enriching

their personal lives. Nothing was said about marriage as a responsibility, family duty or community obligation. Instead, all the articulated aspirations were focused on how marriage can enable self-actualization and fulfil individual needs. Data collected on marriage elsewhere result in similar findings. In a survey for the study of marriage and divorce, 42% of the married couples reported that they married because of romantic love (Straughan, 2009). The significant finding is that these singles have embraced a socially reconstructed notion of contemporary marriage, thus rendering this age-old institution relevant and central in modern society.

Yet, demographic trends alert us of the delay in marriage for young adults. While almost all our respondents among the single young adults embraced marriage as an important life goal, it is evident that singles are finding difficulties in their search for a life partner.

One key barrier is raised expectations resulting from the over-idealization of marriage ideals. In positioning marriage as of central relevance in contemporary society, pro-family activists may have embedded too high expectations of what marriage can bring. Further, popular culture has also fully exploited the draw of romantic love and happy endings, and both print and visual media have flooded the market with fiction that embodies lofty marriage ideals and promise tremendous added value to our lives. While all this ideological work may have sustained the social institution of marriage as a desired life goal, the danger is in overstating the expectations. As a result, many singles find themselves aspiring for an ideal that they have difficulty achieving. The singles in the qualitative study show their very demanding check-list for

the ideal partner, and the difficulties they faced in their search for Mr/Miss Right.

The reflections from singles also warned that the longer individuals stay single, the more difficult it is to relax one's expectations. They are likely to normalize their singlehood status and seek self-fulfilment through other avenues. And if they fail to find a suitable partner who could meet their expectations, they would rather not marry than settle for second best. Thus, given the negative impact of increased proportion of singles and delayed marriage on society, it is critical that we search for solutions to overcome barriers to family formation.

Barriers to Spouse Selection

The new ideals that dominate courtship expectations and spouse selection are social constructs that are hard to identify and recognise. It takes time to find a potential partner that promises to be a compassionate and passionate companion who shares similar world views, life goals and aspirations. Intrinsic notions of love and companionship need time to grow. However, from the qualitative feedback, it seems that time is a resource that is lacking among young singles who are still nurturing their careers. Most respondents point to three main obstacles in their courtship endeavours: lack of time, limited social circle, a work-life equation that favours investment in paid work. If we are serious about raising marriage rates and the TFR, we must free our young to invest in social relationships.

To expand the social spaces where like-minded singles from similar educational backgrounds can connect socially, the Social Development Unit (SDU) was set up in 1984.

Tasked as the government "matchmaker", its mandate was to boost marriage rates among graduates. A similar unit, the Social Development Service (SDS) emerged to offer similar services to non-graduates. SDU and SDS were merged in 2008 to form the Social Development Network (SDN) which leveraged the existing infrastructures to broaden dating services without educational boundaries. While the number of successful matches through SDU and SDS was quite impressive, many single adults are mindful of the negative stigma that comes from relying on the government to find a spouse. To overcome this, initiatives were launched to grow the private matchmaking sector and an accreditation framework was announced to provide singles with the assurance that private dating agencies will be able to provide reliable service. The Accreditation Council was formed, and tasked to safeguard the professionalism of accredited private dating agencies (see Ministry of Development, Youth and Sports 2010 for more details on SDU accreditation). This is an attempt to regulate the private sector and develop attractive alternatives for singles to meet their potential life partner. However, take up from singles for dating services is still low. As reflected by the singles in our study, many still feel that in a participant-run dating culture, singles should be able to find love naturally and not have to rely on the formal help of a dating service.

To construct a social environment that is conducive for courtship, we must continue to put in place policies that support marriage. It is not sufficient to just invoke the pro-marriage rhetoric. There must be serious and sustained investment in pro-family policies. We must work at removing barriers in our social structure that derail

investment in the family. If our social and structural environment fails to sustain marriages, the increase in divorces will certainly contest the notion of marriage as providing value-added satisfaction to life.

As we see more individuals getting married to advance personal well-being and satisfaction, the expectations on marriage also increase. The transition of institutionalized marriage to individualized marriage creates higher expectations of the union, which in turn result in greater disappointments when marriage fails to deliver. Any observed contradiction between ideals and practice will challenge the social desirability of getting married. More people now file for divorce because their partners fail to provide love, companionship and emotional intimacy

With rising expectations of marriage, it is inevitable that divorces will also increase. Those who marry for self-fulfilment are less likely to want to hold on to an unhappy marriage, especially if the partners involved are economically independent. In our drive to promote marriage, we must be careful not to stigmatise divorce. A negative stigma on divorce only serves to raise the stakes of marrying the wrong person. Thus, the hesitancy to commit among singles who are not certain if their partner is “the right one”. This is demonstrated in the overemphasis on quality attributes of the ideal spouse among our respondents. To ensure that they find the right partner, singles raise their expectations, resulting in the articulation of a near-utopian ideal that is impossible to locate.

Instead, we should raise the tolerance for marriage dissolution and acceptance of

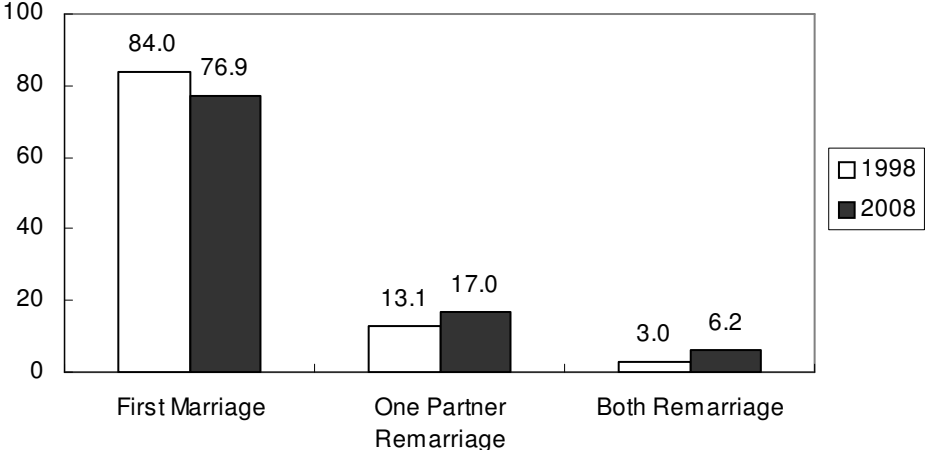
reconstituted families. Data from the 2008 Statistics of Marriages and Divorces report showed a sharp rise in remarriages (Department of Statistics, 2008). While first marriages continued to form the bulk of all marriages (75%), 17% of marriages involved remarriage for one partner, and 8% of marriages were the union of two divorcees. The data also showed that more grooms were remarrying compared to brides, which suggests that there is still strong social stigma against female divorcees. Figures 1 and 2 show the increase in remarriages from 1998 to 2008. All non-Muslim marriages in Singapore are registered with the Women’s Charter. Muslim marriages are registered under the Muslim Law Act. That those who suffered a failed marriage were willing to remarry is a positive development and we must continue to facilitate such attempts at reconstitution of family.

A Final Note – On Love as Precondition for Contemporary Marriage

The notion of romantic love features prominently in any discourse on courtship expectations. Singles in our study invoked love as a precondition for marriage. But what exactly is love? Amato (2007) provides a cognate definite which captures the essence of this elusive concept.

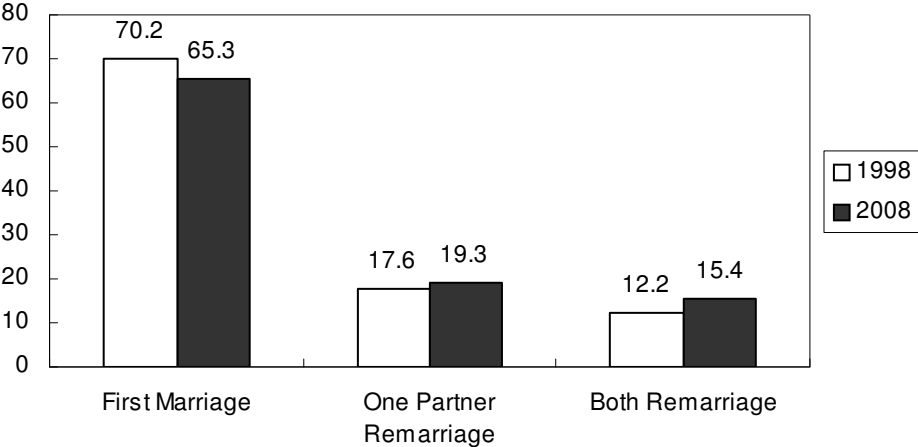
He conceptualized love as a multidimensional construct which encompasses commitment, sacrifice and forgiveness. Strong feelings of love lead people to overlook their partner’s faults, and frame them to focus instead on their virtues. Instead of attributing poor performance in their spouse to lapses in judgment or lack of self-

Figure 1: Statistics on Remarriages - Women' s Charter



Source: Singapore Department of Statistics (2008)

Figure 2: Statistics on Remarriages - Muslim Law Act



Source: Singapore Department of Statistics. (2008)

control, those in love would excuse poor behaviour and attribute it to external and uncontrollable causes. The final dimension is commitment, which Amato defines as a positive process – not a cage. He wrote, “Commitment is a decision to stay in a relationship that is less than satisfying – even in the absence of structural barriers to leaving – because the people want to stay in the relationship and believe that the relationship has a reasonable probability of improving” (Amato, 2007, p. 308). This argument resonates with observations in Singapore. Couples who married for love were more likely to remain married (Straughan, 2009).

Taking all these into consideration, the discourse suggests that there is indeed hope for marriage. The data shows that in Singapore, while singles are marrying later, the delay is not a result of rejecting the relevance of marriage as a social institution. Rather, it is a manifestation of an over-glorification of marriage, which results in the ratification of an ideal that is difficult to recognize in real life.

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