

# **Coexisting detraditionalization and retraditionalization in young white middle class women's marriage attitudes**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on a study into the meanings of marriage for young women in the Hunter region. Using data from 73 interviews, the paper examines the meanings of marriage for women aged 18-35. Looking at multiple narratives, it considers young women's attitudes towards marriage in terms of detraditionalization and retraditionalization. Although conjugal diversity has increased, and crude marriage rates have decreased, the majority of couples still marry. Despite high divorce rates, marriage remains the most powerful and widely acknowledged form of social contract. Few empirical studies focus on the meanings young women ascribe to marriage, instead viewing marriage as a stable concept, around which to research. This paper discusses the 'fit' of respondents' attitudes towards marriage with the 'detraditionalization' arguments posited variously by Beck, Giddens and Bauman. It argues that attitudes towards marriage reflect the detraditionalization process to some extent, yet concurrently indicate the retraditionalization process, for example in the desire for church weddings and defending housework.

**Key Words:** Young Women, Marriage, Detraditionalization, Retraditionalization

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### **Introduction**

Although marriage rates in Australia have decreased, the majority of women still desire marriage. For study purposes, marriage is usually viewed as a stable concept, around which to research and investigate. The shifting meanings of marriage, particularly how young women identify marriage in the life trajectory, tend to be ignored. Marriage has sustained its centrality within sociological enquiry, yet without adequate problematising. In gender studies meanwhile, the tendency is still to assume that marriage is an outdated concept, superseded by the sexual revolution and by second wave feminism. Neither addresses the apparent persistence of marriage as a goal for young women.

### **Methodology**

The data is from doctoral research: 73 semi-structured interviews, part of a wider multi-methods study, probing the meanings of marriage for young women<sup>i</sup>. Participants were aged 18-35, predominantly white and middle class, of various relationship statuses<sup>ii</sup>, in the Hunter region, NSW. Whilst the scope of this paper prevents lengthy description of methodology, participants were purposefully sampled to cover a spread of age and relationship status. A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967) was employed to determine attitudes and feelings towards the place of marriage and intimate relationships in the life trajectory.

Interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo. The focus of this paper is on interviewees who indicated a desire to marry (83%).

### **Marriage and Detraditionalization**

Marriage is 'detraditionalized' at the macro-sociological level to the extent that it is postponed until later in life than previous generations. The average marrying age has risen to 30 for males and 28 for females for 2007 in Australia (ABS 2008). This fact signifies changes in economic restructuring, and women's altered entry and access to education and employment. It also explains some features of the perceived ideal life trajectories of participants. Participants want to achieve specific goals before they marry, and offer imagined life biographies that show evidence of both reflexivity and individualization.

The detraditionalization 'thesis' is part of a large framework of theorizing around 'individualization'. The theoretical concept of individualization in the era of late modernity has been championed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995; 1996; 2002), Giddens (1991; 1992) and Bauman (2000) as a productive way of explaining contemporary trends in intimate relationships. Individualization is the shift from following a predetermined traditional trajectory to the capacity, if not necessity, to apply freedom of choice to intimate relationships. It forces individuals into making their own personal decisions concerning intimate relationships, particularly marriage and children. Identity in intimate relationships thus shifts from a 'given' to a 'task' (Bauman 2000: 31). Decision making has now become firmly aimed at the individual, correspondingly diminishing traditional lifestyles and behaviours (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996).

Constraints here do not allow exposition of the many critiques of individualization. However, individualization does downplay the relevance or existence of structure, even though for women in intimate relationships the individualization process remains 'incomplete' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

According to Heelas (1996: 2), detraditionalization 'entails the decline of the belief in pre-given or natural order of things. Individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of the disorder and contingency which is thereby generated'. Giddens (1992) asserts that traditional institutional factors now hold less substance or relevance. Religion, family, and societal pressures provide less meaning for marriage than in previous decades, and social attitudes towards relationships have become more relaxed with the rise of the welfare state. He claims that the importance of intimacy and mutual disclosure - the 'pure relationship' - now far outweighs institutional pressures. Marriage has become just one of many available and appropriate relationship options.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 5) argue that individualization results in the decrease of standardised types of intimate relationships, where the 'normal' biography is replaced by the 'do it yourself' biography. Traditions do not disappear, but instead lose their hold over individuals, and are less likely to be taken as given or normative (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 27). Yet applying the 'coexistence' thesis of detraditionalization/retraditionalization proposed by Heelas (1996), it seems too simplistic to treat the 'traditional' and the apparently 'post-traditional' as separate, binary, or a linear trajectory. 'Traditions' as repeated and ritualized life practices, are embodied in everyday activities and social roles, over time and space - maintained and reworked by different and successive groups. Thus processes of

detraditionalization, tradition-maintenance and retraditionalization are in fact mutually reflexive - inevitably and unavoidably grounded in traditions and quasi-traditions, with their associated authority. Despite its many critics, detraditionalization has come to the fore in explaining and examining contemporary intimate relationships because few would argue that processes of detraditionalization are not observable in intimate relationships. Here I examine the 'fit' of detraditionalization in explaining participants' real and perceived choice processes in their intimate relationships. There were differences between participants according to age and varying life stages, however the scope of this paper does not allow a more detailed discussion of these differences. A general picture of processes of detraditionalization and retraditionalization will be given here.

#### *De-institutionalization and liberalised attitudes*

Cherlin (2004) asserts that marriages have become deinstitutionalized. According to Giddens (1992), intimacy is now primarily regulated by the two people involved, based on emotional communication. Participants' narratives in this study both support and challenge this assertion. Participants' explanations of their decision to marry were based primarily on notions of romance and love. Marrying is constructed as an individual decision, yet negotiated by the two partners involved. Narratives imply a certain extent of freedom from institutional ties: - a relationship, not an institution. For instance, religious discourse was largely dismissed and appeared to have little relevance to their discursive constructions of marriage.

I'm not religious...at all. So it [marriage] isn't about all that for me.  
(Angela, 19 unmarried – currently in a relationship)

As Cherlin (2004) notes, premarital sex, and cohabitation as an alternative to marriage have become more accepted, and this liberalisation is a key indicator of de-institutionalization and

detraditionalization. All participants said they would personally engage in pre-marital sex, and viewed pre-marital sex as acceptable behaviour for others. Attitudes towards cohabitation as an alternative to marriage were positive, while premarital cohabitation was considered by most as vital.

Of course I'd move in with them first! (Barbara, 20, unmarried – in a relationship)

However, as for child birth outside marriage, this was normatively positioned as acceptable for 'others' rather than themselves. The usual personal ideal entailed premarital cohabitation, then marriage, then children.

#### *Continued Institutional/Traditional Influences*

Many institutional elements of marriage remained. Most planned to have children only once married, although many stressed they would not judge others who had children out of wedlock, as Hannah says:

Before having children I'd prefer to have the commitment of being married. I'm not against it; I'd just prefer to be married first. (Hannah, 21, unmarried – in a relationship)

Participants' discursive constructions of companion relationship status (particularly in middle/old age) also implied the continuing institutional relevance of marriage. Moreover they implied that people are more likely to remain in a marital relationship and work through problems. Marriage is perceived by many as an 'important' institution for society, while Gemma (18, unmarried – cohabiting) says marriage is 'worth holding onto'. Dedication to the ideal of marriage is played out through frequent references to the 'effort' that couples must make to remain married:

Its hard work, but you have to stay together despite any problems you might have (Eliza 31, unmarried – not in a relationship).

The widespread awareness of divorce rates uncovers strong attitudes in favour of, as Jade (20, unmarried – not in a relationship) says, ‘not messing up’. Divorce is perceived as ‘failing’ the sanctified institution of marriage which should not be taken lightly.

So while the decision to marry appears almost universally based on intimacy and individual romantic relationships, the ‘weight’ of the institution remains. Yet it is no longer a wholly naturalised given, even though residual institutional elements symbolise a strong bond to have faith in or believe in. Nicole’s parents divorced when she was 12, but she retains memories of both her parents stressing the importance of marriage:

Theirs’ ended badly, yes, but that was them... just ‘cos theirs’ didn’t work doesn’t mean I won’t be happily married one day. (Nicole 23, unmarried – in a relationship)

### **Retraditionalization**

The dominant desire to marry throughout the participant group raises questions about the ‘fit’ of the detraditionalization proposition in explaining the aspirations of these young Australian women. As Gross (2005) asks, how can we classify intimacy in the form of marriage as individualized or detraditionalized, when the moral and social importance of the marital relationship remains so strong, reflected in continued uptake of marriage? As long as marriage is expected for most people by most people, and divorce remains for the most part frowned-upon, traditional, conventional discourses of marital intimacy continue to be hegemonic.



### *Anxiety*

For Beck-Gersheim (2002), individualization results in a striving for security. Participants' narratives certainly illuminated their anxieties. All were aware that their life trajectories were to an extent 'up to them', however they did not give much evidence of feeling 'freed' by this. Instead, as Beck-Gersheim suggests, they were eager to escape uncertainty and shore up a secure and stable long-term relationship, ideally by the late twenties. They were wary and anxious about the diversity of relationship options, and reluctant to be perceived as different or marginal, or less competent, particularly through remaining unmarried into middle age. In their view, people who deviate from conventional marriage are perceived as less socially acceptable or morally inferior. In short, the increased risk and uncertainty of detraditionalization seems to increase the attractiveness of traditional forms of living, hence pointing to retraditionalization.

### *Romantic love and cultural authority*

Another indicator of retraditionalization is the prevalence in participants' narratives of what Giddens terms 'romantic love'. Embracing romantic love highlights the effort the individual makes to solve the impossible and unrelenting questions of 'who am I?', 'what do I want?' and 'what will make me happy?'

I want to find my knight in shining armour...someone who I'll meet and fall completely in love with, get married, have kids, live happily ever after...that's all I really want. (Maria, 27, unmarried – not in a relationship)

The presence of romantic love as highly significant in discursive constructions of marriage is evidence of retraditionalization, contradicting Giddens' claims for the new detraditionalized 'pure relationship'. Participants' narratives imply both elements of traditional romantic love

(with associated unequal gendered relations), and elements of the ‘pure relationship’ (emphasizing mutual self disclosure and gender equality).

Further evidence of retraditionalization was found in efforts to legitimise relationships. For example, despite never attending church in everyday life, both Chloe and Nina wanted to marry in a church. The performative statement of the priest in marrying a couple adds cultural authority to the marriage, indicating the church’s religious authority may be fading, but remains culturally valued.

I like the setting of the church. It’s more traditional, old fashioned.  
(Chloe, 26, unmarried – in a relationship).

[A wedding] in a hotel or on the beach is okay, but those places aren’t...a church is designed for people to get married. (Nina, 25, unmarried – in a relationship).

### *Competent and legitimate feminine identity*

The desire to be viewed as a competent feminine woman is central to participants’ constructions of marriage, in stark contrast to the ideals of equality and mutual disclosure in relationships typified by detraditionalized living and the pure relationship. For example,

I love my boyfriend, but I don’t want him to know [about her sexual history]...I know he’d probably be okay with it, but I don’t want to make it an issue. He doesn’t need to know....I’ve been with over 40 guys...and I told him I’d been with two...No way...he’d say I was a slut. (Jenna, 24, unmarried – cohabiting)

Describing discussing her current relationship as ‘serious’, ‘monogamous’ and ‘committed’, Jenna highlights attributes she identifies as respectable and appropriate. She is reluctant to disclose her previous sexual encounters in the fear that it will not be deemed feminine or proper, in the framework of her ‘legitimate’ current relationship.

I don't want to be one of those women who sleeps around, and gets a reputation...I want to be in a stable loving relationship where I know I can trust my partner. (Elizabeth, 20, unmarried – not in a relationship)

Elizabeth's comments emphasise the continued dominance of conventional discourses of femininity as women approach marriage. The prospect of being a wife and/or mother lends authenticity to identify as a 'competent' woman, rather than as a young woman who is sexually free and disreputable.

### *Contingency and compromise*

Accounts of decision-making and choice once married were framed as highly contingent on the desires of a husband.

I guess it depends on what my husband wants (Leah, 21, unmarried – in a relationship)

Holmes (2004: 252) notes that women are 'very aware' - 'that the expectation is that the woman will do the compromising'. Most participants' narratives of their personal desires acknowledged that a husband would be likely to have his own personal goals and aspirations which could clash with theirs. The common attitude was that sharing life with a partner was based on mediating and resolving two individual sets of aspirations, rather than finding a husband who shares similar goals. A desirable 'husband' was economically prosperous, reliable and mature, with whom compromises could be reached. Yet imagined marital life seemed highly contingent on a husband's desires, including 'important' decisions like children:

I really want children, but if my husband doesn't...(Lisa, 24, unmarried – in a relationship)

Lisa positions her desire to have children as something to be discussed once married, rather than relevant to choice of partner. Karen (19, unmarried – not in a relationship) also constructs

childbearing as contingent on the views of a potential imagined husband. So, despite her strong desire for children, if her husband ‘really doesn’t want them, it’s something I’ll have to deal with’.

Compromise and contingency also applied to desire for overseas travel. Even time spent on personal hobbies was imagined as contingent on a husband’s attitudes, as well as issues such as housework and paid work. Variations on the phrase ‘I guess it will depend on what my husband wants’ were frequent. The division of labour in the home was a site for retraditionalization. Many participants imagined taking on a large proportion of domestic duties in marriage, positioning this not as gender inequality, but because they enjoyed domestic tasks.

It should be 50:50 [division of domestic duties in marriage] I know, but I’ll do the ironing and laundry ‘cos I like to. (Emily, 24, unmarried – not in a relationship).

He hates doing the housework, and I don’t mind. I quite enjoy some of it. (Mel, 29, cohabiting)

In summary, the data supports to some extent claims for detraditionalization in the context of individualization, given the specificity and individuality of participants’ desires in the imagined life trajectory. There is no doubt they felt a sense of choice. Yet at the same time there was a strong retraditionalization trend signalled in the extent to which participants seemed willing to compromise on life goals to maintain the marital relationship. An important meaning of marriage for them was protection against risk through investing in security through retraditionalization and reinvigoration of conventionally gendered marital roles, for example:

Its quite traditional...I’m a modern woman, but yes, I do the cooking and the cleaning and Mike cuts the grass and does all the handyman stuff...and he makes most of the decisions...finances and things like that...it’s just easier that way. (Naomi, 28, married)

I take care of our home, and he takes care of me. I know it's a bit old fashioned to be like it, but it's good to have someone to take care of you (Simone, 30, married)

These young marriages rely upon traditional gender divisions of labour and emotional behaviour in the home; they are certainly not representative of the detraditionalized intimate relationships identified by Giddens.

## **Conclusion**

Participants illustrated both detraditionalization and retraditionalization, asserting their desire to 'choose' marriage options, while actively holding onto certain elements of perceived traditional practices to which they attached interest or value. The extent to which traditional practices are grasped seemed to vary according to age, and a participant's material and emotional circumstances. Although the institution of marriage is certainly less of a natural and objective force on individuals than in previous eras (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996), symbolic facets of the institution, namely traditional or conventional gender division of labour and emotional investment, remained. Although beyond the scope of this study, researching whether processes of detraditionalization and retraditionalization are present in men's accounts of marriage would be of interest.

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<sup>i</sup> Only women were interviewed within the scope of the project following the feminist critiques of marriage and the family, where men and women experience marriage differently (Bernard, 1982), and women encounter disadvantage (eg – Pateman, 1988). Jackson (1997), Pocock (2003) and VanEvery (1995) for example assert that the prevailing norms of the roles of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ result in the legacy of subordination of women in marriage continues, through the allocation of domestic work and childcare.

<sup>ii</sup> Relationship statuses were categorised as Married, Engaged, Formal De Facto, Unmarried – cohabiting, Unmarried – currently in a relationship, Unmarried – not currently in a relationship and, Unmarried – Divorced