

**BACK TO THE FUTURE,
FOR BETTER OR WORSE?
MEANINGS OF MARRIAGE FOR YOUNG
WOMEN IN THE LOWER HUNTER REGION,
AUSTRALIA**

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Back to the future, for better or worse?
Meanings of marriage for young women in the
Lower Hunter region, Australia

by
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Bachelor of Science (Hons.)

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Some of the findings contained in Chapter Eight of this thesis can be found in a paper entitled 'Coexisting Detraditionalization and Retraditionalization Trends in Young White Middle Class Women's Marriage Attitudes', in the Refereed Conference Proceedings for The Australian Sociological Association Conference, The University of Melbourne: December 2-5, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-7340-3984-2.

Abstract

Why do young women still choose to marry in the new millennium? Although conjugal diversity in Australia has increased and crude marriage rates have decreased, the majority of young women still desire marriage. Marriage clearly remains important. The institution of marriage, despite high divorce rates, continues to exist as the most powerful and widely acknowledged form of social contract. Few empirical studies have focused on the meanings young women ascribe to marriage. Rather, marriage tends to be regarded as a stable concept around which to research and investigate. The meanings and definitions of marriage, particularly how young people identify marriage within their wider identity, has been ignored in much of the literature. This acceptance of marriage and its meaning within existing literature universalises and reinforces marriage as a dominant social and societal norm, whereby prestige is attached across cultures and through time. Marriage has sustained its centrality within social science research, yet without justification or adequate problematising. Meanwhile, in gender studies there is a tendency to assume that marriage is an outdated concept which has been superseded by the sexual revolution and by second wave feminism. As a result, feminist studies have not addressed the apparent persistence of marriage as a goal for young women. This thesis project contributes to filling that identified gap by addressing the apparent persistence of marriage as a goal for young women in Australia.

This mixed methods study maintains a focus on qualitative methodologies and feminist epistemologies, aiming to provide rich subjective accounts of marriage. The study

comprises data from 225 surveys. It also includes data from in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 75 of the survey participants. All three kinds of data collection asked about the meanings of marriage for young women. The participants were women aged 18 to 35 years, of various relationship statuses, from the Newcastle and Lower Hunter region of New South Wales, Australia. Participants were purposefully sampled to allow a spread of age and relationship status. Although this was not specifically intended, as a cohort they can be described as predominantly white and middle class. A grounded theory approach in line with Glaser and Strauss (1967) was employed to uncover subjective narratives that revealed attitudes and feelings towards the place of marriage and intimate relationships in the young women's life trajectories.

The findings of this study result from descriptive statistical analysis of survey data, and from content and discourse analysis of interviews and focus groups that indicate participants' discursive constructions of marriage. The study finds that participants position marriage as a marker of status, as important for child bearing, as well as the major factor in achieving a competent and legitimate mature feminine identity. This study presents an overview of young Australian women's aspirations for, and experiences of marriage and intimate relationships. It offers fresh insights into the ways these women imagine marriage and the marital relationship within their life trajectory. An integrated account of feminist critiques of marriage, and theorising on individualization and detraditionalization, allows us to see how gender inequalities are maintained in marital relationships under the discourse of individualization. This study offers evidence that emphasises the need for continuing feminist critiques of marriage

and the family.

The findings of this study suggest that the neo-liberal discourse of individualization has encouraged the idea of gender neutrality, equality and autonomy within the marital relationship. At the same time the young women indicate that they expect to put the interests and wishes of a future husband ahead of their own. High levels of personal compromise are foreshadowed. Yet their imagined futures include more than marriage. They do wish for self-fulfilment and many want careers. However, marriage is constructed as the anchoring status and identity that makes those goals legitimate and achievable. The study finds evidence of both detraditionalization and retraditionalization trends in the aspirations, expectations and lived realities of the young women interviewed. It is argued that attitudes towards marriage reflect the detraditionalization process to some extent, yet concurrently indicate the retraditionalization process; for example in the desire for full church weddings and in the defence of women taking responsibility for housework and raising children.

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