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.)

A thesis submitted
in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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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 Meanwhile, in gender studies there is a tendency to assume that marriage is an outdated concept which has been superseded by the sexual revolution and by second wave feminism.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.
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter One: Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My interest in marriage in Australia</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why study young women?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research aims and questions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation of the thesis</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Two: Theorising Marriage and Intimate Relationships</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Feminist critique of marriage</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The foundations of contemporary feminist critiques of marriage</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-wave feminist positions on marriage</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage as a sexual contract</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage and women’s choices</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary marriage – a feminist stalemate?</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ‘wife’ and the nuclear family</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage and the division of labour</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes and effects of the feminist critique of marriage</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The implicit shortcomings of feminist critiques of marriage</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary theories on marriage and the family – a paradigm shift?</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The significance of Beck, Beck and Beck Gernsheim and Giddens</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Risk Society and The Normal Chaos of Love</em></td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Giddens</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>The Transformation of Intimacy</em></td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Giddens’ ‘romantic’ and ‘confluent love’ and the ‘pure relationship’</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The shortcomings of individualization</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detraditionalization</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The shortcomings of detraditionalization</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The paradox of marriage in reflexive modernity</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter Three: Literature Review</strong></td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage in Australia</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Family Values movement and the advantages of marriage for women</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meanings of the institution of marriage</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘Marriage is less important today than it was 25 years ago’ 137
Analysis of Demographic Variables 138
The relevance of age 138
The relevance of current relationship status 140
The relevance of income and educational achievement 140
The relevance of childhood experience 140
Typologies of women’s meanings of marriage – qualitative and quantitative 141
‘Romantics’ 141
‘Traditionalists’ 142
‘Hopefuls’ 142
‘Non-conformists’ 144
Participants brought up by two unmarried (biological) parents 148
Conclusion 151

Chapter Six: Participants’ Meanings of Marriage through the Life Trajectory
Introduction 153
Youth 154
  Childhood experience 154
  Love, commitment, stability and security 157
  Marriage as ‘more’ 160
  Marital dissolution 161
  Marriage and children 166
  Premarital ‘tests’ 171
  Adulthood and settling down’ 174
Middle age to old age 179
  Middle age 179
  Old age – growing old alone? 186
Conclusion 188

Chapter Seven: Legitimacy, Authenticity and Competence:
Marriage as a Socially Acknowledged Relationship
Introduction 190
‘First comes love, then comes marriage...’: Appropriate life trajectories 192
  The timing of transitions – missing the ‘window’? 194
  The appropriate relationship trajectory and avoiding stigma 197
Married status and the construction of a legitimate and competent feminine identity 199
  ‘Doing’ being married in the workplace 200
  - Negotiating relationship status at work 204
Married status and social life 207
  ‘Doing’ good mothering 212
  - Responsibilities for child care 214
  - Unmarried (single) parenting 218
Being more than ‘just’ a wife 220
References

Appendices
Appendix One: Survey 328
Appendix Two: The Interview and Focus Group Participants, an Introduction 344
Appendix Three: University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee Approval Notice 354
List of Tables

Chapter 3: Literature Review
Table 3.1 Crude Marriage Rate for New South Wales: 1997-2006 (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics) 57

Chapter 5: Survey Participants
Table 5.1.1 Survey sample: Relationship status by age group 123
Table 5.1.2 Survey sample: Education level by age group 125
Table 5.2 Intention to marry by age group 127

Chapter 5: Survey Participants – Attitudes towards Marriage, by Age Group
Table 5.3.1 ‘Being married means more to me than living together’ 129
Table 5.3.2 ‘Being married means more to me than having a successful career’ 130
Table 5.3.3 ‘I think I will be/am more successful as a married woman’ 131
Table 5.3.4 ‘I would only have children if I was married/getting married’ 133
Table 5.3.5 ‘My childhood experience of relationships has shaped by views on marriage’ 134
Table 5.3.6 ‘Marriage is important for women in Australia today’ 135
Table 5.3.7 ‘Marriage is less important today than it was 25 years ago’ 136
Table 5.4 When would you ideally like to marry? 138

Table 5.5 Appendix Two: Interview and Focus Group Participants 342
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