

Pre-wedding stories

Changes in customs and the institution of engagement



Summary

People form bonds and intimate relationships because this allows fundamental biological, psychological and social needs to be fulfilled. For centuries, the answer to these needs was the institution of marriage, whereas nowadays it is increasingly displaced by informal relationships. Although engagement, understood as a public promise to get married, is an institution with a long tradition, reaching back to Babylonian times, neither the ceremony nor the engagement period that follows, with its incumbent cultural and legal norms, have been given much attention by sociologists.

The aim of this study is to illustrate how matrimonial choice is reinforced by a host of cultural restrictions, which means that even in these times of autonomy in choice, the act of marriage is subject to social sanction. Expressed in these terms, the subject of this monograph refers to three fundamental contexts in which matrimonial selection is rooted. First and foremost, there is the context of entering into marriage. The second context for considerations relates to the development of small groups. The third context for the analysis of matrimonial selection is changing social customs.

This monograph is composed of two parts. The first chapter focuses on the analysis of the institutionalization and validation of heterosexual relationships. It also presents socially determined rules of selecting a marriage partner, as well as scientific ways of explaining the patterns that operate in the matrimonial market. This part of the book is based on the literature, i.e. publications on the history of the family and law. As such, it is an attempt to find the source of inspiration for the objective historical-social institutions in the process of validating the original customs of forming couples. It also points to the importance of power and culture in implementing strategies for matching men and women.

Chapter Two provides the reasons for making a decision to get married to a particular partner and presents the process of matrimonial selection. Two types of scientific theories are presented to explain different aspects of matrimonial choice. On the one hand, there are selection theories, which highlight the importance of partners' status and resources understood in the broad sense (social, cultural and economic capital as well as personality features). On the other hand, there are theories of matching which focus on

the regularities in the intimate dyad's dynamics. At this point three main social factors are discussed, which have an impact on the patterns of marriage: preferences for particular features, the pressure from social group, as well as structural limitations in the matrimonial market. Chapter Three provides a description of the process of establishing marriage in the traditional matrimonial ritual, which followed a rigid sequence of events determined by law, religion and custom. On the basis of various sources such as historical, sociological ethnographical publications, as well as selected autobiographies and diaries, all the consecutive phases of the ritual are described, i.e. beginning with courtship, reconnaissance, pre-engagement arrangements ('zmówiny'), engagement, hen- and stag nights and, finally, the wedding ceremony and reception.

The core of this publication comprises a report on the author's research on 680 people from Lubuskie and Wielkopolskie voivodship who got married between 1945 and 2014. This part presents the process of establishing marriage, starting from the process of the intimate relationship creation and its trajectory, the way that the relationship developed from the point of establishing a closer relationship up until the marriage vows and the wedding ceremony. The development of the pre-nuptial relationship is treated here as a process of construction and formalization of the intimate dyad, establishing the affinity relationship with the spouse-to-be's family, which is directly connected with changes in commitment, an intensified process of evaluating each other and taking up new roles. The research findings provided here serve to diagnose the contemporary situation with reference to customs that are characteristic for the first phase of the marriage-family cycle. But most importantly, they point to the directions and range of transformations in the process of matrimonial choice and the way the pre-nuptial relationship develops that have taken place for the last seventy years.

The main aim of this monograph is to record the continuity and changes in the rules that determine matrimonial choice, as well as attempt to explain the root cause of these transformations. What has not changed? The results obtained allow us to conclude that the basic rule of matrimonial choice, i.e. the tendency for homogamy, has resisted change. Irrespective of the decade when the marriage was established, this rule remains unchallenged. The socially determined map of selection remains an area that is carefully determined and also exhibits homogamy features, i.e. it serves the same purpose as space in the geographical sense used to have. In the postmodern society characterized by temporariness, risk, excess and superficiality of intimate relationships, uncertainty and fluidity of rules, entering into a formalized relationship is seen as act of adapting to this reality. Those who get married define it as anchoring and a safe haven, although they do not see marriage as the way towards the traditional roles in the family, losing autonomy and changing their lifestyle. Nevertheless, marriage is still perceived by many young people as a "natural chain of events", a lifetime project that has been encoded in their minds during the socialization process, with women especially seeing marriage as a way to access what is socially perceived as normal, as a license to "social value". Therefore it can be concluded that marriage still remains a type of particular "certificate".

Research has proved that women have always let themselves be chosen by demonstrating their submissiveness and susceptibility to male efforts to choose a partner for a long-term relationship, which paradoxically strengthens the traditional gender roles.

It is men that play an active part by dominating the courtship and expressing their interest in a female partner. It is men who openly aim to establish the intimate dyad and take direct control not only of this important point of the relationship's biography. They are the ones to determine the trajectory of the relationship at the point of its formalization, i.e. between the phase of exclusiveness with trust and the engagement phase.

The normative uncertainty of social reality increasing since the 1990s has brought about important changes, for instance, in the rules of matrimonial choice, both on the level of selection and dynamics of the intimate relationship. Research has shown the decreasing importance of family ties for the establishment of a long-term intimate relationship in favour of the growing importance of friends and the Internet. The process of searching for a matrimonial partner is perceived these days as a time-consuming challenge which requires self-discipline and patience. Matrimonial choice is seen as a very difficult task because of burdens related to studying, professional career or training, in other words due to the pressure to invest in yourself. On the other hand, due to the feeling of excess and superficiality of intimate relationships in postmodern times, the process of evaluation and change in commitment to the relationship requires much more effort from men and women than was the case in previous decades. It is definitely much more common to enter into marriage with a baggage of failed intimate relationships that is much greater than in the years straight after the war.

When compared to the 1940s and 1950s, the average time span between establishing a closer relationship and getting married has extended, but more importantly the phase of being engaged, as counted from the promise about getting married and the date of the actual wedding, has doubled. Irrespective of the decade, a relationship that leads to marriage starts at more or less the same age, i.e. about the age of 20 for women, and about 22 for men. However, when compared to the years directly following the war, the age at which people experience their engagement as well as their wedding, has risen. This tendency is partly connected with the common practice of cohabitation as a pre-marriage phase, which delays the decision to get married.

Individualisation processes and the widening scope of individual autonomy translate into changes in the engagement customs which never disappeared from the wedding rituals. Since the turn of the millenium, the public pronouncement of marriage vows is increasingly less frequent, becoming rather an incredibly intimate ceremony. Research shows that the engagement ceremony, in general, the ritual of stag and hen nights, and the marriage ceremony itself are subject to gradual diffusion, becoming less standardized and more private.

Similarly destandardized practices in family life have led to differentiation in the trajectories of relationships in terms of the sequence of life events, such as the moment of moving in together, promising to marry, stag and hen nights, the marriage ceremony and wedding reception. Since 2000, it has been increasingly less common for this sequence to resemble the traditional formalization of the intimate dyad. Research shows that in the second decade of the 21st century married couples-to-be are exposed to two different forces at the same time – autonomy and compulsion. The 'dictatorship' of long-standing scenarios is being replaced by the 'dictatorship of individualized choices'. The privatization of life and the value of 'being yourself' drive young people who seek to marry

towards destandardized practices, but on the other hand, it is clear that this also becomes a frustrating compulsion.

This study presents selected aspects of matrimonial choice in a new light. Contrary to popular opinion, nowadays the conditions for marrying are not objective factors, such as the right age, length of acquaintance, completion of education, one's residence situation or the ability to support oneself, but the candidate for marriage having the right character traits and personality. Maturity, kindness, trust, loyalty and solidarity are highly-prized features.

The study revealed current trends in the correct development of pre-marital relationships. From the subjective point of view of the experiences of participants in my study, it can be seen that there is a particular model of changes occurring in the dyad. Presently, the process of marrying is a sequence of six phases, starting from courtship, fascination, tentative stability, conflict, trust and exclusivity, ending in engagement. The model proposed in this book relates to R. Huesmann and G. Levinger's incremental exchange theory, focussing on the dimensions of time and change. However, in contrast to this theory, my research project identifies new factors previously unexplored in sociology, which contribute to the transformation of the intimate dyad and the relationship's progression to the next stage. The most important stage which pushes the dyad towards marriage is trust as a feature of the relationship. Trust, in addition to radical sexual fidelity, has become the basis of long-term relationships and a necessary condition for mutual commitment in the form of an engagement.

A significant novelty is that my research reveals the differences based on gender in relationships leading to marriage. In contrast to men, women initiate long-term intimate relationships in an earlier phase of their life, during the formal education years and while financially dependent on parents. Men do this most often once they are financially independent. Moreover, women assure themselves of their choice of potential husband and take the decision to marry significantly later than men, at later stages of the relationship – some women only do so once engaged (not during), and even just before the actual wedding.

Collecting data allowed a typology to be constructed of engagement relationships differentiated by how they start and the course they take. It also makes it possible to explain the circumstances within which they are practised: traditional engagements – arranged, quasi-traditional, private, sham and anti-engagement.

Placing matrimonial choice in the context of postmodern society reveals a certain tension between a declared orientation towards modernity and the fetters of post-traditional society, of which Poland is an example. The theoretical and empirical material collated and presented in the monograph do not provide an exhaustive account of biographical relationships, nor does it aspire to a complete description of the directions in which patterns of matrimonial choice are changing. Showing past and present practices is in itself a contribution to the discussion on the strength and permanence of social rules, which reflect the collective order with regard to the first phase of a marriage's development.

Translated by Rob Pagett