

The Myth of the Perfect Marriage

When the reality of marriage doesn't meet our expectations, we tend to blame reality.

When it comes to marriage, we expect the fairy tale. Raised on Cinderella and Ozzie and Harriet, we're convinced that marriage will solve all of our problems, our partner will meet all of our needs, and that we'll live happily ever after.

But a great many of us don't get the happily-ever-after part; we get divorced. So where did we go wrong?

Mary Laner thinks that we expect too much. A professor of sociology at Arizona State University, Laner says that when the marriage or the partner fails to live up to our ideals, we don't recognize that our expectations were much too high. Instead, we blame our spouse or that particular relationship.

"We think that our partner can meet all our needs, know what we're thinking, and love us even when we're not terribly lovable. When those things don't happen, then we blame our partner," Laner says. "We think that maybe if we had a different spouse, it would be better."

The ASU sociologist studied the marital expectations of unmarried college students. She compared their expectations with those of people who have been married for about 10 years. The significantly higher expectations held by the students, she says, come straight out of the "happily ever after" fantasy.

"Such irrationality can lead us to conclude that when the 'thrill is gone,' or when the marriage or partner doesn't live up to our inflated ideals, divorce or abandonment of the marriage in some other form is the solution," Laner says.

In fact, the divorce rate in the United States is just over half of the marriage rate. Many researchers, including Laner, lay at least part of the blame for this statistic on those unrealistic expectations. Laner points out that much of the existing marital therapy literature is concerned with the problem. And, she adds, many of us continue to take our zealous ideas of what marriage should be into the next relationship and the next, and so on.

"People who marry again following divorce, one might think, would not carry along inflated expectations," Laner says. "Yet, these second and later marriages have higher divorce rates than do first marriages. As far as expectations are concerned, this may be a reflection of the primacy of hope over experience, followed once again by disillusionment."

The Ozzie and Harriet Myth

Why do we expect so much and doom ourselves to disappointment? Laner says one reason is the fact that we live in a mass society.

"We all feel, to some extent, depersonalized. We're treated in many places as though we're merely the numbers attached to our names and not whole persons," she says. "What that makes us long for is primary relationships — those close, warm, deep, extensive husband-wife, mother-child types of relationships — as opposed to the secondary, impersonal relationships we're surrounded with.

"It's our common lot in this kind of society to place very high expectations on those primary relationships to fulfill all of our needs, to match our dreams, to do everything for us that the seemingly cold outer society doesn't do," Laner adds.

The move away from tribal or village economies into a mass society also has fostered our sense of individualism; a sense that has had an impact on our expectations.

"When you break away from those kinds of economies and get into more depersonalized societies, you get individualistic thinking," Laner says. "We tend to think 'when I marry, this is what I want, these are the expectations I have for getting married.' More collective thinking would be: 'when I marry, it will be what's good for my village.'"

“Ultimately, you get expressions like ‘I’m not marrying her family, I’m marrying her,’” she adds. “But, of course, you are marrying her family and she’s marrying yours.”

This has led us to a point where we expect one person to meet an impossible volume of needs. We expect to fall in love with someone who will take care of us, raise the children, pursue a career and let us pursue ours, fix the plumbing, cook the meals, mow the lawn, keep the house clean and, of course, be a caring, considerate friend and lover.

“Think about the Ozzie and Harriet mythology,” Laner says. “One person does fulfill everything for Ozzie and one does fulfill everything for Harriet. And then the kids are kind of gravy—you know, isn’t life wonderful? Not only do we have all of our needs met by one another, but we also have these little gravies running around and making us happy. That’s what the mythology has been for a long time.”

Laner doesn’t foresee that our expectations will change.

“Why would we go back to a time when marriage was an economic or political kind of deal? We don’t live in the kind of society where families or tribes or villages want to tie themselves to one another through the marriage bond,” she says. “If anything, we’ll have more individualism and more failed expectations.”

A Lack Of Education

Laner believes that the only way those expectations will change is through education. But that will be a tough order. Laner teaches a Courtship and Marriage class at ASU. The results of a recent study revealed that even her own class had a minimal effect on lowering expectations in unmarried young adults (see sidebar).

“This college course is a drop in the bucket compared to what students really need,” Laner says. “We don’t adequately prepare anyone for marriage, even though we know that somewhere between 70 and 90 percent of the population is going to be married.

“If I were making the rules, I’d start somewhere in grade school. I’d begin systematic relationship training—boys and girls, how we get along, why don’t we get along, how we see things the same, how we see things differently. I would carry on such training in the high schools, where many kids already are parents. I certainly would continue the education in college, too.”

Students in Laner’s class concur. Debbie Thompson, a junior accounting major, thinks an earlier start could lower expectations.

“People expect too much of one another. All that does is cause so many bad relationships,” Thompson says. “People need to be more open-minded and educated more when they’re younger.”

Junior psychology major Rod Sievert agrees.

“If you had something like this course in high school, you wouldn’t set yourself up for such disappointments,” Sievert says.

But, one course, no matter how packed with good information, makes little headway against the myths young people have heard all their lives, he adds.

“It’s all right there in the research,” Sievert says. “But the information (about what to expect from marriage) is so opposite of what we’ve always thought. Not that it’s not true. It just doesn’t seem that way. I think the typical student may not take it to heart because it’s so different from the socialization we’ve had for 20 years or more.”

Laner says other students have suggested the same thing.

“They don’t relate what’s going on in the classroom to their own experience. You would think that students enrolled in a strongly problems-oriented class like this would somehow extrapolate from that focus and think, ‘Hey, I need to be on the lookout for these problems,’” she says. They don’t.

“But what happens is that they think this is about somebody else; that it has nothing to do with them. And so the thrust of the course does not get through.”

The ASU sociologist is not about to give up. She has plans for further research and is developing a curriculum that will focus directly on marital expectations.

And, she admonishes us all to lower those expectations.

“A colleague of mine once said that one way to approach this was to say to yourself, ‘You can never expect too little of marriage.’ But it’s like any other partnership,” Laner says. “You hope that your relationship is going to be a happy one, where you will be cooperatively solving problems and where the rewards will exceed the costs. “Inflated expectations aren’t going to do a thing positive for you. They’re going to spoil things,” she says. “You go into the relationship thinking it’s going to be worlds better than it has any likelihood of being. When those expectations aren’t met, the chances are pretty good you’re going to turn your anger and disappointment outward instead of inward.”

APA Reference

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