

Rebecca L. Davis, marriage historian

By Linda Lee

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How did Americans come to view marital bliss as synonymous with a stable democracy?



"Marriage counseling in the United States has had the ironic effect of making marriage seem simultaneously more flawed and more essential to the well-being of the individuals involved and communities to which they belong," says Davis.

In her new book *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss* (Harvard University Press, 2010), University of Delaware historian Rebecca L. Davis explores the evolution of the uniquely American idea that successful marriages are essential not only for personal happiness, but also for the nation's well-being.

How did British settlers in colonial America deal with marital conflicts?

They idealized the family as a little commonwealth, a model for orderly government on the edge of the wilderness. One Puritan minister called marriage "the first foundation of Humane Societies." Family members, ministers, neighbors—everyone felt a stake in ensuring the stability of the community. They meddled in one another's marriages fairly frequently.

Was divorce permitted?

Divorce from bed and board allowed a couple to set up separate households but not remarry. Legal divorce, though rarer, could be obtained in most of the British colonies by an act of legislature. You had to show that one spouse was at fault, often with neighbors testifying to prove adultery: "I saw the Good Wife Jones consorting with Mr. Brown." Most homes didn't have curtains and there wasn't a lot of privacy, so neighbors knew.

What were the historical origins of marriage counseling?

In the 1920s, marriages—and relationships between men and women in general—were changing rapidly. Married women were entering the work force in larger numbers and having fewer children. The divorce rate was going up and, while still low by today's standards, seemed dangerously high. Progressive reformers, who had already tackled labor and food safety, saw

marriage as the next institution in crisis. That led, in the 1930s, to the advent of marriage counseling.

Who were its main proponents?

Lots of people jumped on the marriage counseling bandwagon in the '30s and '40s. Eugenicians, social workers, psychiatrists, physicians and ministers all agreed that marriage needed fixing. By then, Americans often lived many miles from their relatives, so when problems arose, they turned to outsiders.

What did these experts consider an ideal marriage?

In the '40s and '50s, counselors tended to hold traditional notions of the roles of men and women. They ignored economic conditions and problems like alcoholism and desertion, and looked instead for neuroses and personality disorders. A woman who complained about housework, or who said that her husband did not want her to work, was seen as someone not adequately in tune with her femininity.

What other drawbacks were there in early marriage counseling?

When women were hit, slapped, belittled or raped, the attitude was "Let's look at your psychology and figure this out." It wasn't "Let's put safeguards in place for women who are being abused."

When did that change?

Eventually, marriage counselors saw how much emotional anguish all that advice was causing women. Clients let counselors know that the traditional approach wasn't helping. By the '60s, counselors were talking about self-fulfillment and personal growth. Couples were being told to communicate their feelings. Emotional equality, rather than accepting conventional roles, became the norm.

Was religion a factor in any of these changes?

Priests, rabbis and ministers quickly adapted to the idea of marriage and family counseling. They taught Americans to imagine their faith as an indispensable component of marriage, and in turn made marriage a more central part of American religion. Marriage Encounter, originally a Catholic program, stressed the idea that God was the third party in any strong marriage and became the most popular marriage enrichment program in the world.

How has marriage counseling grown as a field?

When the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists was founded in 1942, it had 35 members. There are now 24,000 members and many more divorce counselors, sex therapists, and licensed marriage and family therapists, as well as those

leading weekend Marriage Encounter retreats.

Why do modern Americans idealize marriage?

Marriage counselors taught us that the search for more perfect marriages would enrich our lives and build a more prosperous, stable society. Americans really believe in self-improvement and we've come to see the state of our marriages as a yardstick for how well we are doing in the world. In other societies, larger community and family groups are viewed as the foundation of social stability. Here it's the married couple. That's distinctly American.

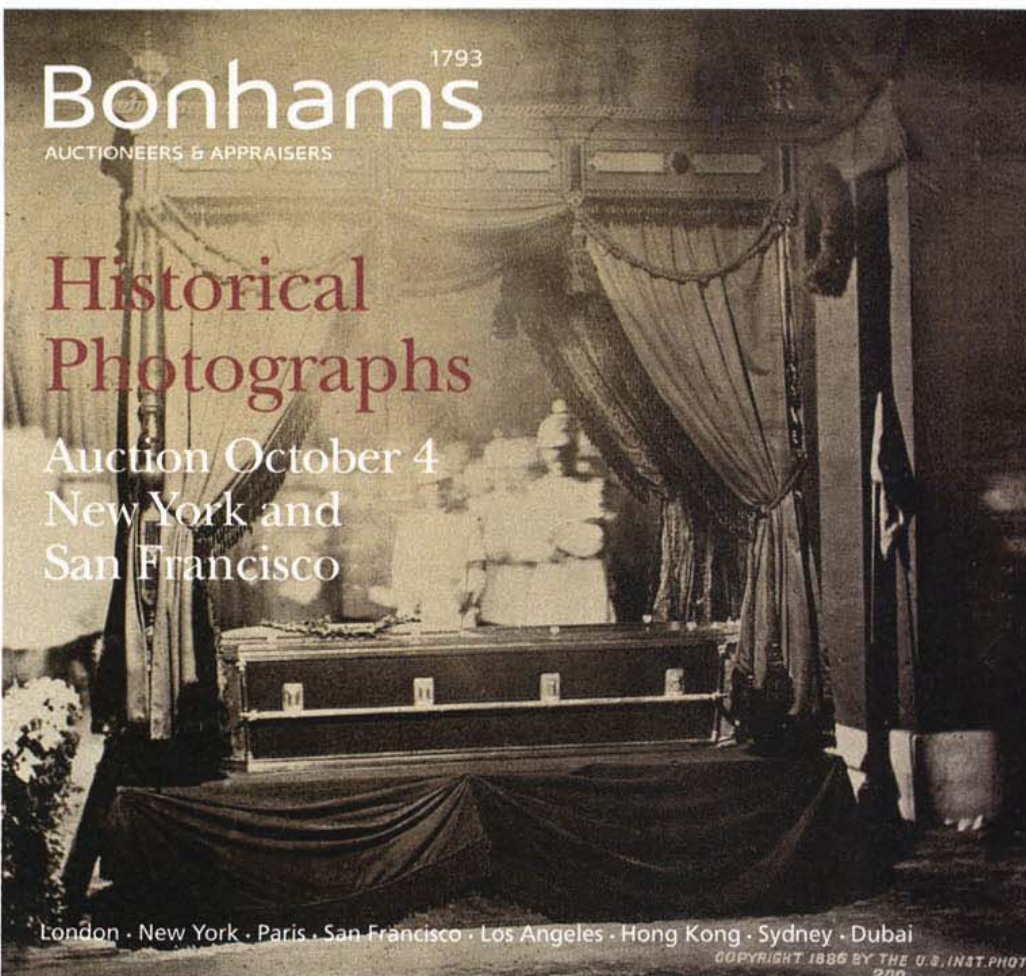
How well are we doing?

Americans aren't very good at staying married, but they remain eager to get married. A higher percentage of Americans will marry than will adults in Europe, Canada or Britain,

but Americans divorce just as energetically. Faith in marriage is especially strong among divorced Americans, who remarry more than their European counterparts.

How does the idealization of marriage influence social policy?

American policy fosters the idea that happy marriages can fix social problems. Marriage is promoted among low-income parents, and federal programs support marriage counseling. The ideal of marriage also shapes the debate over same-sex marriage. Opponents may say that same-sex marriage weakens the institution of marriage. Proponents might argue that gay men and lesbians deserve the same marital happiness as heterosexuals. As Americans, we've come to believe that which people marry, and whether they stay married, affects our lives in profound and personal ways. ■



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