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## TARGET ARTICLE

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### **The Suffocation of Marriage: Climbing Mount Maslow Without Enough Oxygen**

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*This article distills insights from historical, sociological, and psychological perspectives on marriage to develop the suffocation model of marriage in America. According to this model, contemporary Americans are asking their marriage to help them fulfill different sets of goals than in the past. Whereas they ask their marriage to help them fulfill their physiological and safety needs much less than in the past, they ask it to help them fulfill their esteem and self-actualization needs much more than in the past. Asking the marriage to help them fulfill the latter, higher level needs typically requires sufficient investment of time and psychological resources to ensure that the two spouses develop a deep bond and profound insight into each other's essential qualities. Although some spouses are investing sufficient resources—and reaping the marital and psychological benefits of doing so—most are not. Indeed, they are, on average, investing less than in the past. As a result, mean levels of marital quality and personal well-being are declining over time. According to the suffocation model, spouses who are struggling with an imbalance between what they are asking from their marriage and what they are investing in it have several promising options for corrective action: intervening to optimize their available resources, increasing their investment of resources in the marriage, and asking less of the marriage in terms of facilitating the fulfillment of spouses' higher needs. Discussion explores the implications of the suffocation model for understanding dating and courtship, sociodemographic variation, and marriage beyond American's borders.*

*Key words: goals, Maslow's hierarchy, needs, oxygen deprivation, reoxygenation, self-regulation, social support*

The institution of marriage in America has arrived at a unique place. Relative to the marriages of yesteryear, a successful marriage today can, on balance, foster a deeper emotional bond and stronger personal growth. At the same time, achieving a successful marriage today is, on balance, more difficult than in the past, with almost half of marriages ending in divorce and many intact marriages failing to flourish. In short, marriages today have more potential for greatness than ever before, but they frequently fall short of this potential.

In this article, we investigate the historical, sociological, and economic forces that have altered

the nature of marriage, concluding that marriage's *raison d'être*—its reasons for existence—have shifted markedly over time. These forces, we argue, have increased the importance of relational processes like communication, responsiveness, and support. Such processes are most likely to function optimally when spouses have deep insight into each other's needs and aspirations, which requires that they invest plenty of time and energy in facilitating the quality of their marital bond.

As reviewed next, however, the evidence suggests that spouses' investment of time and energy in their

marriage has decreased over time. We argue that these trends—this reduced investment in conjunction with the increased emphasis on complex relational processes—are likely to undermine personal and marital well-being on average, and the available evidence supports this view. Fortunately, the logic underlying the suffocation model suggests that spouses have several promising avenues for helping them maximize the quality of their marriage.

### Marriage as a Means to Goal Fulfillment

We begin with a fundamental question that scholars often neglect: Why do people marry? The most basic answer to this question is that people marry because they want to marry—because marriage is an end in itself.

This tautology misses the point, however, which is that marriage is also a means to various ends, a pathway through which people pursue certain goals. For example, people marry because they believe that doing so provides their best opportunity to love and be loved in the long run. They marry because they believe that spending a conjugal lifetime with their partner will make them feel happy and fulfilled. They marry because they believe that formalizing this particular relationship will help them become a better person. They marry because they wish to become a parent, and they believe that their partner will help them raise happy, fulfilled children.

To be sure, the list will vary from one person to the next. However, a major tenet of the scholarly literature on marriage is that cultures achieve reasonable consensus about the *raison d'être* of marriage, about what the primary functions of the institution are. Another major tenet is that there is wide variability across cultures and historical epochs in the content of this consensus. In this article, we examine historical changes in American marriage<sup>1</sup> since the late 1700s, the time of the nation's founding, adopting the perspective that America has witnessed three dominant models of marriage (Burgess & Locke, 1945; Cherlin, 2009). The first, which extended from the late 1700s until around 1850, was a practical model in which marriage was primarily oriented toward helping spouses meet their economic, political, and pragmatic goals. The second, from around 1850 until around 1965, was a breadwinner–homemaker model (which included romanticized and companionate subperiods) in which marriage was primarily oriented toward helping spouses meet their passion and intimacy needs. The third, from around 1965 until today, was (and contin-

ues to be) a self-expressive model in which marriage was (and is) primarily oriented toward helping spouses meet their autonomy and personal growth needs.

This historical analysis of marriage suggests that the *raison d'être* of marriage have been decreasingly oriented toward helping Americans achieve goals relevant to basic physiology and safety and increasingly oriented toward helping them achieve goals relevant to esteem and self-actualization. That is, the primary functions of marriage have ascended Abraham Maslow's (1943, 1954/1970) hierarchy of needs, which, from bottom to top, encompasses physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.

### The Suffocation Model of Marriage in America: Key Tenets

To provide a theoretical framework for our historical analysis of marriage in America, we summarize the preceding discussion in a more formal manner. Specifically, we present the key tenets of our *suffocation model of marriage in America*, which we abbreviate as “the suffocation model.” These tenets build upon three properties of Maslow's (1943, 1954/1970) theory of human motivation. The first property is that the needs people seek to fulfill are arranged hierarchically, with lower needs typically possessing greater motivational priority than higher needs. The second is that relative to the successful pursuit of lower needs (to eat, to feel safe, etc.), the successful pursuit of higher needs (to achieve mastery, to experience personal growth, etc.) is more likely to require self-insight, and the development of such self-insight frequently requires considerable cognitive and psychological effort over a sustained period. The third is that the fulfillment of higher needs yields especially high levels of happiness, serenity, and richness of life. With these three properties in mind, we now present the six key tenets of the suffocation model.

**Tenet 1:** One central means through which Americans seek to fulfill their needs is through their marriage, especially as their access to nonspousal significant others has declined.

**Tenet 2:** Since the nation's founding, the extent to which Americans look to their marriage to help them fulfill their lower needs has decreased, whereas the extent to which they look to their marriage to help them fulfill their higher needs has increased.

**Tenet 3:** Just as the pursuit of higher needs frequently requires substantial insight into the self, looking to the marriage to help individuals fulfill their higher needs frequently requires that each spouse have substantial insight into the partner, and the development of such

<sup>1</sup> Similar trends have emerged throughout the Western world, but our primary emphasis is on changes in marriage in America rather than on cultural variation in these changes. We revisit this topic in the Discussion section.

insight typically requires considerable communication and responsiveness over a sustained period.

**Tenet 4:** Even as Americans increasingly look to their marriage to help them fulfill their higher needs, they have, on average, reduced their investment of time and psychological resources in their marriage.

**Tenet 5:** In conjunction, the resource imbalance resulting from the trends described in Tenets 2, 3, and 4—insufficient investment to meet the emphasis on higher needs—has undermined spouses' marital quality and personal well-being (although those spouses who manage to invest sufficient resources experience especially strong marital quality and personal well-being).

**Tenet 6:** Spouses experiencing the adverse effects described in Tenet 5 have three general options for ameliorating or reversing these consequences: optimizing their usage of the resources that are available, increasing their investment of time and psychological resources in their marriage, and asking less of the marriage in terms of facilitating their higher needs.

### Situating Contemporary Marriage in a Broader Cultural and Historical Context

We contextualize our analysis of the suffocation of marriage in contemporary America by discussing the broader cultural and historical forces that have led to it. Specifically, we discuss three major models of this institution and touch on recent demographic shifts affecting marriage.

This historical analysis focuses on normative changes over time. To be sure, the nature and manifestations of these changes vary or fluctuate as a function of forces such as economic cycles, war, socioeconomic conditions, and individuals' personality qualities. Although such forces make occasional appearances in this article, they are not our primary focus. Rather, we investigate broad historical trends that characterize the experience of the vast majority of Americans, even if the potency of a given trend might be somewhat stronger or weaker for certain social groups or certain individuals. Certainly, this approach glosses over some important nuances and subtleties. We believe that such trade-offs are necessary, however, when addressing a topic as broad as the nature of marriage across the centuries-long history of a large and diverse nation.

### Three Major Models of Marriage in America

The contemporary American model of marriage is the product of a succession of cultural developments that altered marriage's *raison d'être* over time. Marriage facilitates the fulfillment of many goals, but the present focus is on the fundamental purposes of mar-

riage, the most central goals it is intended to fulfill. Scholars have argued that these *raison d'être* shifted from (a) economics, politics, and pragmatism (late 1700s to 1850) to (b) passion and affection (1850 to 1965) to (c) self-expression and personal growth (1965 to the present). Burgess and Locke (1945) characterized the shift from the first to the second emphasis as a transition from institutional to companionate marriage, and Cherlin (2009) characterized the shift from the second to the third emphasis as a transition from companionate to individualistic, or self-expressive, marriage.

In considering these shifts, it is important to recognize that, as with biological evolution (Darwin, 1859; Eastwick, 2009; Gould, 1980; Jacob, 1977), cultural evolution is more of a tinkering process than an engineering process (Eastwick, 2013; Richerson & Boyd, 2005). It adds to, subtracts from, or otherwise alters a preexisting cultural milieu. It is best to construe macrolevel cultural changes in the *raison d'être* of marriage less in terms of a wholesale overhaul of preceding norms than in terms of a tweaking or reorientation of the preexisting structures.

### The institutional model: Agrarian society and the practical marriage—late 1700s–1850.

Sociologist Ernest Burgess characterized institutional marriages as formal institutions that were strictly regulated by law, social norms, and religion (Burgess & Cottrell, 1939; Burgess & Locke, 1945). Sociologist Paul Amato (2012) summarized this practical model of marriage:

According to Burgess, farm families dominated the marital landscape prior to the last few decades of the nineteenth century. In early America, strong and stable marriages were essential to the welfare of family members and the larger community. Family members relied on one another to meet basic needs, including economic production, child care, education, and elder care. Marriage also created bonds between families that facilitated the sharing of resources. Because cohesive, stable, and interconnected families were necessary for survival, society had an interest in regulating marriage and the behavior of individual spouses. (p. 108)

In this model, the stability of the family was more important than the needs of the individual family members. Children typically were not allowed to marry without parental permission, and divorce was unacceptable except in the most extreme cases of abuse or abandonment. The *raison d'être* of marriage were, both directly and indirectly (via broader social processes), related to lower needs in Maslow's hierarchy. Spouses looked to their marriage to help them fulfill physiological needs such as having enough food to eat, keeping warm in the winter, and having a place

to sleep in inclement weather. Spouses also looked to their marriage to help them fulfill safety needs such as being protected from violent attack, having a predictable daily existence, and maintaining a sense of economic security.

To be sure, the novel idea that marriage and love should be linked began to gain steam during this era (Coontz, 2005). In many late-1700s American communities, market economies were strengthening, which began to enable young Americans to work for wages outside their home and to settle at greater distances from their family of origin. At the same time, the influence of Protestant churches, which had historically exerted substantial control over young adults' marital choices, was declining. These changes dovetailed with an Enlightenment-era worldview that valued the so-called natural passions, including love and romantic desire. Such economic, geographic, and philosophical developments began to reduce the influence of parental approval in marital decisions, which afforded individuals greater freedom in selecting a spouse (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012), trends that rapidly accelerated starting around 1850.

**The companionate model (and its romanticized variant): Industrialization and the breadwinner-homemaker marriage—1850–1965.** Even with the emergence of wage labor, the vast majority of the American population lived in rural areas well into the 1800s. Starting around midcentury, however, Americans experienced a sustained transition from predominantly rural to predominantly urban settings, with the percentage of the population residing in urban areas gradually increasing from about 10% in 1850 to about 80% in 2000 (Greenfield, 2013). This urbanization had profound consequences for the institution of marriage, including a redoubled emphasis on love as an important factor in marriage decisions.

One of the major factors undergirding this change was an increased schism between the domestic and the employment spheres. Even with the trend toward wage labor outside the home, there was still a need for someone to attend to domestic tasks. For a wife to specialize in domestic production was often efficient, especially given women's unique biological contributions to childbearing and early childrearing, and having women adopt the homemaking role aligned with prevalent views of women as delicate, virtuous, and sensitive (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988; Spain & Bianchi, 1996; Wood & Eagly, 2002). As wives' labor became less central to household economic success, society shifted to sentimental reasons for marriage. "As the rules surrounding marriage relaxed, a new idea gained prominence: rather being based on a code of obligations to society and religion, marriage should be based on ties of affection and companionship between spouses" (Amato, 2012, p. 109). Over time, this idea became so entrenched that

"no respectable middle-class couple could henceforth admit to marrying for anything but love" (Gillis, 1996, p. 70).

It is useful to divide the breadwinner-homemaker marriage period into two distinct subperiods, one from 1850 to 1900 in which the pair-bond was a romanticized but elusive ideal and the other from 1900 to 1965 in which greater informal interaction between spouses enabled them to foster a deep intimate connection.

**The romanticized marriage—1850–1900.** Starting around the mid-1800s, as Americans increasingly viewed love as a virtual precondition for entering a marriage, the ideal manifestation of this love was shifting. In contrast to earlier periods, in which spousal love was typically construed as feelings of companionship and affection that could be cultivated after a marriage began, potential spouses of this era increasingly hoped to be struck by passionate infatuation during courtship. They sought to marry the object of their infatuation so they could continue to experience these feelings in the long run (Coontz, 2005).

However, this emphasis on romantic love was oddly juxtaposed against a social structure that provided few opportunities for spouses to interact in a friendly, informal manner, even once married (Gillis, 1996). Husbands and wives existed in sex-segregated spheres, limiting how much spouses had in common and sharply restricting the time they spent together. Much of the time that men spent outside of the predominantly male world of work was spent in arenas of male leisure, including fraternal organizations, which essentially functioned as "alternative families" (Gillis, 1996, pp. 147). Similarly, women often associated in women's clubs and charitable organizations.

This juxtaposition of the ideal of intense romantic love with the lack of opportunity for partners to get to know each other as individuals led many people of this era to view their spouse less as a three-dimensional person than as "an object of worshipful contemplation" (Gillis, 1996, p. 71). This romanticization had more to do with an idealized representation of the spouse than with the spouse's actual qualities. Indeed, although many husbands in the late 19th century experienced romantic love toward their wife, the societal ideal (if not always the reality) was that this love should have a genteel, almost chaste flavor.

**The companionate marriage—1900–1965.** Beginning in the early 20th century, Americans began to add to the expectation of romanticized love a desire for deep intimacy, excitement, and sexual fulfillment. The emphasis on chastity and restraint weakened, and the focus on intimacy and connection strengthened. Furthermore, the ideal of intimacy and friendship became more achievable due to the rapidly changing

social environment of this era. The steady rise in female employment was accompanied by an easing of social restrictions, which allowed men and women to begin interacting casually in many of the same spheres (Coontz, 2005). An explosion of public commercial space, including dance halls, carnivals, theaters, and restaurants, allowed courtship to become more free-wheeling than before, fostering more sexual exploration outside of marriage and bolstering the incipient emphasis on excitement, romantic intrigue, and sexual desire in youths' marital choices. There was a budding awareness over this period that women, too, could experience strong sexual desire. In general, "by 1920, the distinctive spheres that sustained nineteenth-century sexual values were in disarray" (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012).

In many ways, the marital model that emerged in the early 20th century fulfilled the 19th-century ideals that had rarely reached fruition during that era. The desire to feel deep, albeit chaste, passion during courtship had been replaced by the possibility of actually experiencing passionate physical intimacy before marriage. The companionship and warmth that couples often struggled to achieve in the 19th-century home were now becoming actualized.

Marriage gained new prominence as adults' most important social relationship, annexing functions that had theretofore been fulfilled by friends, parents, or siblings. The normative practice of sharing a home with older parents became less prevalent. Even social life outside of the marriage became shaped by the marital unit, as married couples increasingly socialized with other married couples rather than having each spouse socialize in sex-separated spheres (Coontz, 2005).

**The self-expressive model: The countercultural revolution and the self-expressive marriage—1965–present.** Beginning with the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, Americans increasingly looked to marriage as a means of pursuing the free choice and self-expression that were newly prized during this era (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). In contrast to previous incarnations of American individualism, which emphasized self-sufficiency and self-determination (Emerson, 1836/1995; Thoreau, 1854/1906), this new brand of *expressive individualism* revolved around individuals' right to create their own identity and craft their own trajectory of personal growth. In expressive individualism, "a relationship is created by full sharing of authentic feelings," and love "becomes the mutual exploration of infinitely rich, complex, and exciting selves" (Bellah et al., 1985, pp. 107–108). To be sure, there were strains of expressive individualism in 19th-century marriages, but the loosening of the stranglehold marriage held as the only socially sanctioned means of reproduction substantially bolstered the view that a primary

function of marriage is to foster the spouses' personal growth.<sup>2</sup>

The countercultural revolution consisted of many interconnected movements oriented toward challenging the staid social order of the 1950s and empowering women and underprivileged minorities. For example, the sexual revolution, which was catalyzed in the early 1960s by the advent and widespread availability of the birth control pill, greatly increased the distinction between sexual and reproductive activity, fostered women's sexual empowerment, and yielded a marked reduction in social sanctions for promiscuous sexuality. The pill gave women substantially greater control in making independent decisions about their fertility. The second-wave feminist movement, which was launched by *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 1963), sought to reduce gender-based power inequities in domains such as sexuality, family life, and employment. The choices available to many women proliferated rapidly: higher education, a career, postponing or even forgoing marriage, restricting fertility, and so forth (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012).

More generally, the countercultural revolution spurred men and women to cast off traditional obligations in favor of liberation, authenticity, and self-expression. They were less likely than in previous eras to view marriage as an essential institution and more likely to view it as a means of achieving personal fulfillment—one lifestyle option among many. If a central aim in life is to pursue self-discovery, an ideal marital partner will not just support this ambition but also facilitate it. If sexual fulfillment is tantamount to a basic right, a potential spouse's bedroom prowess becomes less of a luxury than a necessity (Celello, 2009).

During this era, women and men increasingly came to interact more like partners, if not always complete equals. As more women pursued higher education and intensive careers, men increasingly recognized that their wife could engage with them on more levels than they had previously assumed, and women increasingly insisted that their unions include this level of partnership and respect. In short, Americans increasingly expected marriage to encompass genuine friendship between near-equals.

### Recent Demographic Shifts in the Nature of Marriage

In summary, throughout American history, marriage

changed from a formal institution that meets the needs of the larger society to a companionate relationship

<sup>2</sup>The disentangling of reproduction and marriage continues today, with the percentage of Americans who believe that children are very important to a successful marriage plummeting from 65% in 1990 to 41% in 2007 (Taylor, Funk, & Clark, 2007).

that meets the needs of the couple and their children and then to a private pact that meets the psychological needs of individual spouses. (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2009, p. 70)

However, these changes in the *raison d'être* marriage are not the only ones to bear in mind as we consider the nature of contemporary marriage. In particular, the self-expressive era has witnessed enormous changes in the demographics of American marriage. The median age at first marriage rose from 23.2 to 27.4 for men and from 20.8 to 25.6 for women between 1970 and 2008 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). The proportion of American women who had never been married by age 40 more than doubled (from 6% to 14%) from the early 1980s to the early 2000s (Ellwood & Jenks, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the prevalence of alternatives to marriage has increased sharply. Nonmarital cohabitation increased from about 500,000 couples in 1970 to about 7,600,000 couples in 2011 (Marquardt, Blankenhorn, Lerman, Malone-Colón, & Wilcox, 2012). The divorce rate doubled in the 1960s and 1970s before stabilizing at just below 50% since 1980 (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). The percentage of births to unwed mothers rose linearly from 5% in 1960 to 37% in 2005 (Taylor et al., 2007). Meanwhile, Americans have become less disapproving of cohabitation, divorce, bearing children out of wedlock, same-sex marriage, premarital sex, and so forth (e.g., Amato et al., 2009; Wells & Twenge, 2005). Americans have also become less disapproving of divorce, even when the major problem in the marriage is simply that it no longer makes the spouses feel happy or fulfilled (Campbell & Wright, 2010; Campbell, Wright, & Flores, 2012; Waite, 2000). This loosening of norms regarding the permanence of marriage was a major factor that spurred the rise and spread of no-fault divorce laws in the 1970s and early 1980s (Celesello, 2009; Cott, 2000; Waite, 2000).

Such shifts vary markedly as a function of socioeconomic status. For example, although Americans without a high school diploma have long been more prone to divorce than Americans with at least a college education, this discrepancy tripled from 10 percentage points (38% vs. 28%) for marriages that began in the late 1970s to 30 percentage points (46% vs. 16%) for marriages that began in the early 1990s (Martin, 2006). In general, socioeconomic status differences are sufficiently large, and the scholarly literature on them is sufficiently vast, that any report on marriage runs the risk of being overrun by them. Given that our primary goal is to provide a novel conceptual analysis of the

changing nature of marriage in America—effects that are likely to be present, to a greater or lesser extent, across sociodemographic categories—we sidestep sociodemographic considerations until the Discussion section.

Before concluding this section on demographic shifts, it is important to note the paradox that, by and large, Americans continue to respect the institution of marriage and to feel optimistic about it (Cherlin, 2009). For example, even today, virtually all Americans hope to marry (Lichter, Batson, & Brown, 2004; Mauldon, London, Fein, Patterson, & Bliss, 2002), and about 90% will in fact marry at least once (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). Three fourths of high school seniors report that marriage is “extremely important,” a number that has remained virtually unchanged since scholars began assessing it in the 1970s (Bachman, Johnston, & O’Malley, 2011). Adolescents continue to believe that cohabitation cannot substitute for marriage (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007). In addition, despite the elevated marital challenges confronting poor, uneducated, and racial minority Americans, members of such groups remain highly respectful of and optimistic about the institution (Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Lichter et al., 2004; Mauldon et al., 2002; Trail & Karney, 2012).

### Climbing Mount Maslow

Bearing in mind these historical, demographic, and attitudinal trends, we now provide a detailed discussion of the suffocation model. First, we introduce the Mount Maslow metaphor and discuss how American marriage has been both *freighted* (asked more of) and *defreighted* (asked less of) over time vis-à-vis the essential functions it is intended to serve. Then we introduce the suffocation model’s oxygen deprivation and suffocation metaphors, discussing various ways in which American culture is sapping away precisely those resources that are most essential for meeting the higher altitude demands Americans have placed on contemporary marriage. Next, we discuss adverse consequences of the suffocation of marriage and present several model-implied pathways through which Americans can improve their marriage. We conclude by discussing the implications of our analysis for partner selection, sociodemographic variation in the suffocation of American marriage, and marriage beyond America’s borders.

### Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

As noted previously, the historical changes in American marriage exhibit intriguing parallels to Maslow’s (1943, 1954/1970) famous theory of human motivation. This theory introduced the concept of a *hierarchy*

<sup>3</sup> Although highly educated Americans married as frequently as in previous generations, they did so later in life; in contrast, less educated Americans experienced an overall decline in the percentage who would ever marry (Cherlin, 2010; Goldstein & Kenney, 2001).

Category of Need	Specific Examples	Mount Maslow
<b>Self-Actualization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-expression</li> <li>• Personal growth</li> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Spontaneity</li> <li>• Veridical self-assessment</li> </ul>	
<b>Esteem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-esteem</li> <li>• Self-respect</li> <li>• Sense of mastery</li> <li>• Prestige</li> <li>• Respect from others</li> </ul>	
<b>Belonging and Love</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Love others</li> <li>• Be loved by others</li> <li>• Trust others</li> <li>• Sexual intimacy</li> <li>• Belong to a group</li> </ul>	
<b>Safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic safety</li> <li>• Control</li> <li>• Predictability</li> <li>• Psychological safety</li> <li>• Physical safety</li> </ul>	
<b>Physiological</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hunger</li> <li>• Thirst</li> <li>• Warmth</li> <li>• Sleep</li> <li>• Respiration</li> </ul>	

Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, including his five categories of need and specific examples (adapted from Maslow, 1943, Maslow, 1954/1970), and the introduction of Mount Maslow.

*of needs*, a motivational structure in which “the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need” (Maslow, 1943, p. 370). As illustrated at the left and middle of Figure 1, Maslow's hierarchy includes five major categories of needs, each of which encompasses a range of specific needs. The most basic needs are physiological, including respiration, sleep, warmth, thirst, and hunger. The needs one step up the hierarchy involve safety, including physical safety, psychological safety, predictability, control, and economic safety. The needs at the middle of the hierarchy pertain to belonging and love, including belonging to a group, experiencing sexual intimacy, trusting others, being loved by others, and loving others. The needs at the next level up pertain to esteem, respect from others, prestige, a sense of mastery, self-respect, and self-esteem. Finally, the needs at the top of the hierarchy involve self-actualization, including veridical (nondefensive) self-assessment, spontaneity, autonomy, personal growth, and self-expression.

According to Maslow (1943, 1954/1970), a person experiencing frustration of lower needs (e.g., starvation) typically becomes obsessed with satiating that need, frequently at the expense of all other higher needs (e.g., belongingness). The hunger commandeers her attentional and motivational resources, preventing her from focusing on her loneliness. Once she slakes her hunger, however, her need for social connection comes to the fore, sometimes with sufficient force to do its own commandeering of attentional and moti-

vational resources. In short, the needs are not created equal—the more basic a need is (i.e., lower in the hierarchy), the more pre-potent it is.

Scholars frequently depict Maslow's hierarchy in the form of a triangle, with the broad base representing physiological needs and the narrow top representing the self-actualizing needs. In developing our model, we find it useful to conceptualize Maslow's hierarchy in the form of a mountain, “Mount Maslow,” rather than a triangle. On this mountain, which is illustrated at the right of Figure 1, physiological and safety needs reside at lower altitudes, belonging and love needs at middle altitudes, and esteem and self-actualization needs at higher altitudes. We suggest that, as with any major mountain, air becomes thinner (and oxygen scarcer) at higher altitudes. We also suggest that, just as mountaineers find it easier to scale major mountains when they have access to plenty of oxygen, spouses who ask their marriage to facilitate the fulfillment of their higher altitude needs find it easier to achieve success when they have built a deep emotional bond with, and have developed a profound mutual insight vis-à-vis, their partner, as these relational properties serve to fuel effective higher altitude goal support.

### Maslow's Hierarchy and Marital Dependence Zones

It is useful to revisit the three models of marriage in America in light of Maslow's hierarchy. The three panels in Figure 2 depict rough approximations of the

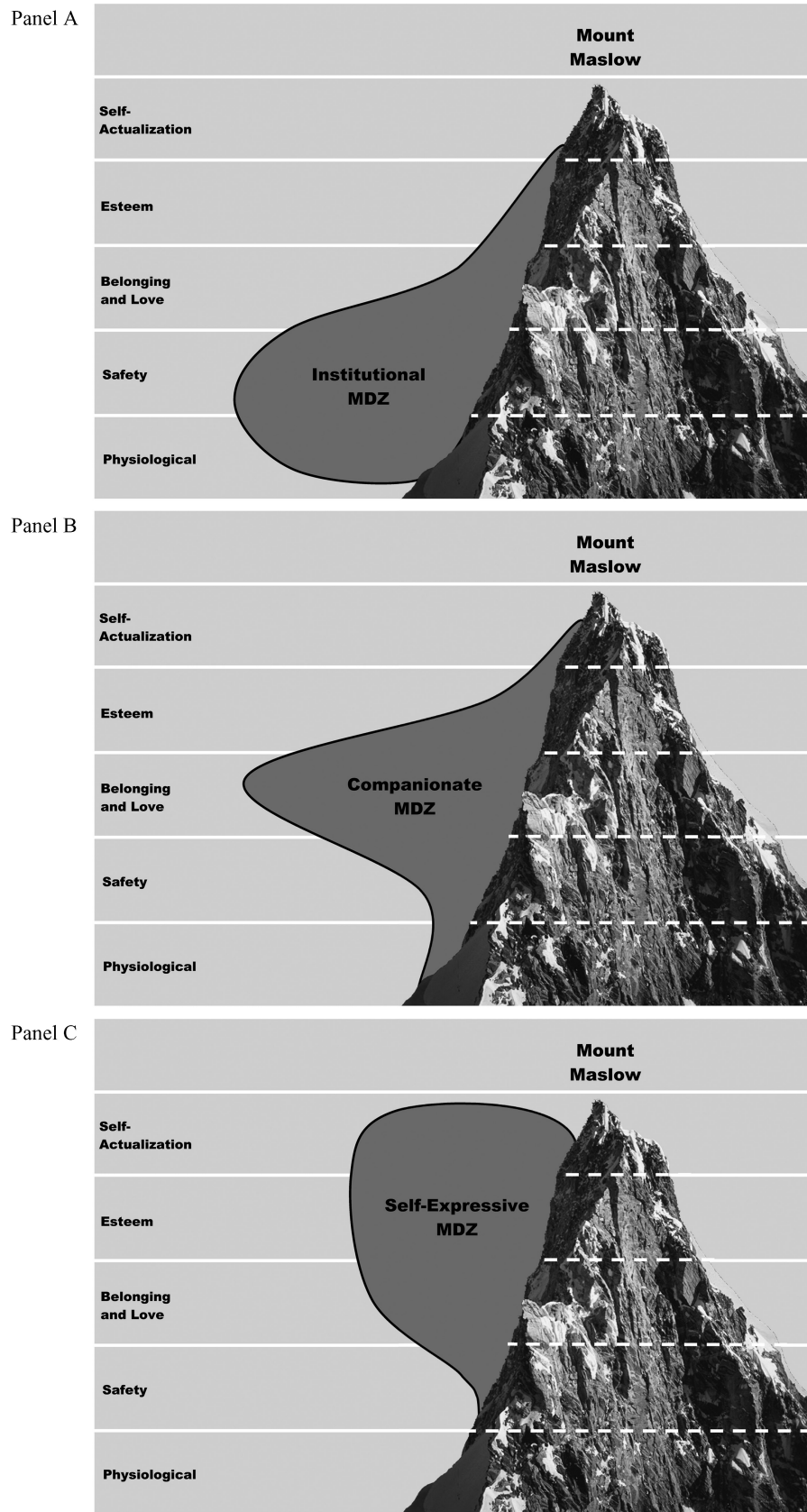


Figure 2. Mount Maslow and marital dependence zones. Panel A: Marital dependence zone (MDZ) for the institutional marriage, Panel B: Marital dependence zone (MDZ) for the companionate marriage, and Panel C: Marital dependence zone (MDZ) for the self-expressive marriage.



*marital dependence zones* for these three models. The total surface area of the marital dependence zone represents the quantity or extensiveness of the needs individuals expect the marriage to help them fulfill, and its vertical allocation represents the emphasis on lower versus higher altitude needs.

During the pre-1850 era of the practical, institutional marriage, the fundamental purposes of marriage were oriented toward the fulfillment of lower altitude needs. In particular, as depicted in the institutional marital dependence zone in Panel A of Figure 2, the marriage was heavily oriented toward physiological and safety needs. To be sure, many people in that era wished to have a loving relationship with their spouse and appreciated the self-esteem that marriage brought them. On occasion, they might even have hoped to achieve some self-expression in their marriage. But, by and large, the primary functions of marriage during this era, and the qualities individuals considered most important when making decisions about whether or whom to marry, pertained to helping people meet their basic physiological and safety needs during an era where threats to those needs were vastly more prevalent than they are today.

As the nation became wealthier and more technologically advanced, it became easier for Americans to fulfill their lower altitude physiological and safety needs outside of marriage. Consequently, during the 1850–1965 era of the breadwinner–homemaker, companionate marriage, the fundamental purposes of marriage ascended toward the fulfillment of the middle-altitude needs on Mount Maslow. In particular, as depicted in the companionate marital dependence zone in Panel B, marriage was heavily oriented toward belonging and love needs. Many people in that era continued to seek safety from their marriage, and they increasingly sought esteem (and a modest amount of self-actualization) from it as well. But, by and large, the primary functions of marriage during this era pertained to helping people meet their needs for belonging and love. Whether these needs involved idealized romantic love, a full-fledged intimate friendship, or some other variant, the key was to help the individuals feel a deep sense of social connection with their spouse.

During the post-1965 era of the self-expressive marriage, the fundamental purposes of marriage ascended once again, this time toward the fulfillment of higher altitude needs on Mount Maslow. In particular, as depicted in the self-expressive marital dependence zone in Panel C, the marriage was heavily oriented toward esteem and self-actualization needs. Contemporary Americans continue to seek a healthy dose of belonging and love from their marriage, but, to a certain extent, even these needs have become increasingly linked to self-actualization. Consider the explanation rationale offered by Carrie Bradshaw (played by Sarah Jessica Parker), a protagonist of the HBO series *Sex and*

*the City*, for terminating a romantic relationship that was successful in many ways (from the 2004 episode “An American Girl in Paris: Part Deux”): “Well, maybe it’s time to be clear about who *I* am. I am someone who is looking for love. Real love. Ridiculous, inconvenient, consuming, can’t-live-without-each-other love” (emphasis in original). Yes, Carrie was disappointed in the level and type of love in the relationship, but her decision to terminate it also involved her pursuit of a particular self-actualizing form of love that is essential to her sense of identity (“... who *I* am”). In a sense, Carrie was less concerned with building a bond with any particular partner than with achieving a self-expressive emotional experience. The primary functions of marriage during this era emphasized this self-expressive variant of belonging and love needs, and they increasingly revolved around helping people meet their needs for esteem and self-actualization.

### **Defreighting Marriage vis-à-vis Lower Altitude Needs**

Upon first blush, this Mount Maslow metaphor seems to echo a view that is prevalent in both the scholarly literature and among the public more generally: that Americans have increasingly freighted (asked more of) marriage over time, systematically weighting it down with higher and higher expectations. Table 1 provides illustrative quotes representing variants of this “freighted marriage” view, which we also held when we began reviewing the evidence. However, the “suffocation of marriage” view differs from the freighted marriage view in a crucial way: It does not imply that there has been a main effect of time on the freighting of marriage but rather an Altitude × Time interaction effect—a change in *altitude* of the needs met by marriage over time. In Figure 3, Panel A provides a rough representation of the freighted marriage perspective that Americans have systematically asked more of marriage over time, whereas Panel B provides a rough representation of the suffocation of marriage perspective that Americans have asked more of their marriage vis-à-vis higher altitude needs but less vis-à-vis lower altitude needs. According to the suffocation perspective, the total area encompassed by the marital dependence zones has been relatively stable over time, but the shape and altitude of these zones have changed.

As illustrated in the quotes in Table 1, the various thinkers who have lamented the increasing expectations regarding the higher altitude needs—what de Botton (2012, p. 152) called marriage’s “insane ambitions”—have generally neglected the crucial ways in which marriage has become defreighted. In fact, in those rare cases where thinkers consider lower altitude needs in this context, they typically oversimplify the narrative by lumping such needs together with higher altitude needs. For example, DePaulo and

**Table 1.** *Various Perspectives of the View That Americans Have Increasingly Freightened Marriage Over Time. Although these Perspectives Have a Large Kernel of Truth, They Contrast with our Suffocation of Marriage Perspective (see main text and Figure 3).*

Thinker	Elizabeth Gilbert	Alain de Botton	John Gillis	Bella DePaulo	Pamela Druckerman	Esther Perel
Profession	American novelist and memoirist	Nonfiction writer and philosopher	Professor emeritus of history at Rutgers University	Visiting professor of social psychology at UCSB	American journalist / non-fiction writer	Couples and family therapist
Source	Interview in the PBS series "This Emotional Life" (2010, episode 1; Gilbert et al., 2010)	<i>How to Think More About Sex</i> (2012, p. 152)	<i>A World of Their Own Making</i> (1996, p. 151)	DePaulo & Morris (2005, p. 76). <i>Psychological Inquiry</i>	<i>Lust in Translation</i> (2007, pp. 273)	<i>Mating in Captivity</i> (2007, pp. 178-179)
Quote	It's not enough that you have this sort of decent relationship with this person. He also has to be your best friend. He also has to be your only romantic partner. He also has to be somebody who inspires you every day. He has to be somebody who is going to help your career. He has to be somebody who co-parents with you. He has to meet you on 25 different levels of intersection. It's this giant sack of expectation that we've piled on to this sort of wobbly head of this old institution that was never necessarily about that in the past.	The real fault in the [marital conflict] situation lies in the ethos of modern marriage, with its insane ambitions and its insistence that one person can plausibly hope to embody the eternal sexual and emotional solution to another's every need. Taking a step back, what distinguishes modern marriage from its historical precedents is its fundamental tenet that all our desires for love, sex and family ought to reside <i>in the selfsame person</i> . No other society has been so stringent or so hopeful about the institution of marriage, nor ultimately, as a consequence, so disappointed in it. In the past, these three very distinct needs—for love, sex and family—were wisely differentiated and separated out from one another.	In the late twentieth century, when lifetimes are as much as one-third longer than they used to be, it becomes very difficult to sustain romance for the duration of a marriage. The situation is made even worse by the fact that the standard of conjugality has risen so dramatically. The perfect couple must now be everything to one another—good providers, super sexual partners, best friends, stimulating companions—roles that earlier generations turned to others to fulfill.	Adults now expect their sex-linked partner to fulfill an expanding number of roles, needs, and desires once satisfied by a matrix of relationships rather than just one person. . . . Adults in couples look to each other for companionship, sexual intimacy, soul-matery, caring, coparenting, economic partnership, advice, sharing of household tasks, and just about everything else. The contemporary model, in short, is this: Adults should look to their sexual partners to fulfill most of their emotional, interpersonal, economic, and practical needs and desires.	Women of my grandmother's generation didn't usually fret about whether their marriages were personally fulfilling or not. But since it became much easier to divorce in the 1960s, we've been holding our marriages—and our lives—to an extremely high standard. We strive for perfect health and fitness, and we expect emotionally satisfying marriages and complete fidelity.	These days, we are our own matchmakers. No longer obligated to marry who we must, we set out with a new ideal of what we want, and we want plenty. Our desiderata still include everything the traditional family was meant to provide—security, children, property, respectability—but now we also want our Joe to love us, to desire us, to be interested in us. We should be confidants, best friends, and passionate lovers. Modern marriage promises us that there is one person out there with whom all this is possible if we can just find her. So tenaciously do we hold to the idea that marriage is for everything that the disenchanting opt for divorce or affairs not because they question the institution, but because they think they chose the wrong person with whom to reach this nirvana.

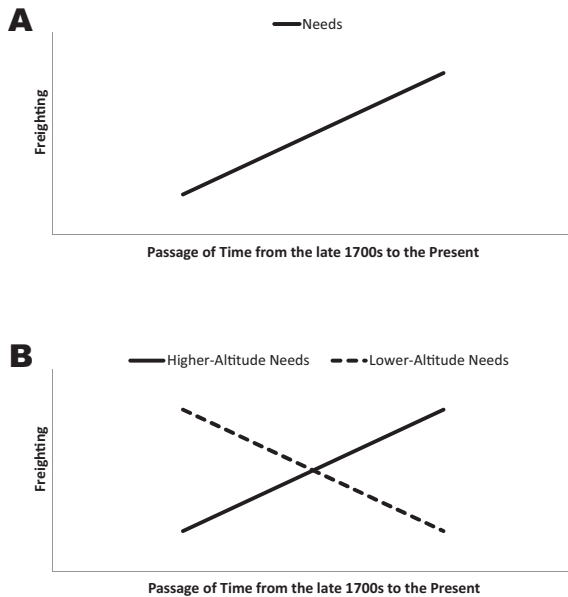


Figure 3. Changing expectations in America for need fulfillment in marriage. Contrasting the freighted marriage model (Panel A) and the suffocation of marriage model (Panel B).

Morris (2005) summarized their view of the prevailing model of marriage as follows: “The contemporary model, in short, is this: Adults should look to their sexual partners to fulfill most of their emotional, interpersonal, economic, and practical needs and desires” (p. 76). Yes, it is true that contemporary Americans look to their marriage to help them fulfill their economic and practical needs, but it is important to appreciate that they do so much less Americans in earlier eras did.

We now discuss various ways in which marriage in America has become defreighted over time (this section) and freighted over time (the next section). Our goal is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of such trends but rather to illustrate the defreighting and the freighting processes by discussing a handful of relevant domains.

**Reduced economic dependence.** Although life in the late 1700s was not necessarily nasty, brutish, and short, it was certainly nastier, more brutish, and shorter than it is today. Indeed, preindustrial Americans lived under economic conditions that would seem insufferable to most present-day Americans. The privy was mighty cold in the winter, and a major flood was much less likely to yield a call to one’s insurance broker and much more likely to yield death by starvation.

In this climate, the social and political connections fostered by marriage served crucial economic functions. Even within the nuclear family, economic interdependence was much stronger in earlier eras. Because a given household was much more likely to function

as its own unit of economic production in the late 1700s than it is today, spouses frequently depended on each other for basic subsistence. Offspring were contributors to household economic production, with many children, some as young as 4 years old, working as laborers inside or outside the home to help the family survive. This work, which continued into the 1900s, involved a broad range of agrarian tasks, and it increasingly involved factory or mining work in the early industrial era. Children frequently offered a net positive contribution to the family’s economic circumstances rather than the net negative contribution that we are accustomed to today. Given the stigma associated with out-of-wedlock childbearing, however, the benefits from having children accrued more frequently to married than to unmarried individuals.

Over time, Americans’ economic well-being became less closely linked to the institution of marriage. One major development was the significant bolstering of the social safety net, especially the Social Security Act of 1935, which reduced the potential deadliness of poverty. By making social isolation or a lack of family ties less devastating economically, this expanded safety net reduced the discrepancy in economic precariousness between married and unmarried Americans.

Although these economic changes have defreighted marriage for both men and women, the effects have been especially strong for women, particularly over the past century. Whereas only 3% of American women worked outside the home in 1900, 20% did so in 1950 and 60% did so in 1998 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; Goldin, 1991). Married women specifically have also experienced rapid increases in employment. Whereas 42% were unemployed in 1980, only 25% were unemployed in 2000 (Amato et al., 2009). Indeed, in 2000, married women were more than twice as likely to be employed at least full time than to be unemployed (54% vs. 25%).

To be sure, economic considerations remain important today. However, because of the decreased difficulty with which unmarried individuals today can achieve economic subsistence, such considerations are much less central to the institution today than they were in the past.

**Reduced labor required for housework.** Technological innovation—including the widespread use of appliances like washing machines, dishwashers, microwaves, and power drills—has made domestic labor substantially easier over time, and, indeed, American spouses do considerably less housework than they used to. One study investigating how much time American spouses invested in eight types of nonparental housework from 1965 to 1995 (cooking meals, meal cleanup, housecleaning, laundry and ironing, outdoor chores, repairs, garden and animal care, and bills and other financial accounting) revealed that the total amount of

housework decreased from 39 hr per week (88% of it by wives) to 30 hr per week (65% of it by wives), a 23% decline (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000).

The amount of labor required to meet one's children's basic needs has also declined substantially. The fertility rate—the number of children born to a given woman—dropped sharply during the countercultural revolution, plummeting from 3.65 in 1960 to 1.84 in 1980 before stabilizing near 2.0 since the 1980s (Marquardt et al., 2012). To be sure, the fertility rate in 1960 was relatively high—higher than the rate during the Great Depression in the 1930s, for example—but the sustained rate of 2.0 is much lower than the typical rate throughout American history. This relatively low fertility rate, in conjunction with various technological and sociocultural developments that have made it simpler to meet children's basic needs—to keep them fed, clothed, diapered, and so forth—has reduced the burden associated with meeting the basic requirements of parenting. As elaborated below, parents frequently invest substantial additional childrearing time to help their children flourish today, but this pursuit is unrelated to children's most basic needs.

**Reduced danger linked to living alone.** The aforementioned Social Security Act of 1935 was crucial in helping to alleviating the burdens of singlehood, but it was hardly the only governmental action that has done so. For example, an increasingly robust criminal justice system, not to mention a broader trend toward declining violence in general (Pinker, 2011), has reduced the extent to which Americans rely on familial connections to protect their assets and their physical well-being. Long-standing feuds—like that between the Hatfields and the McCoys, which claimed more than a dozen lives between 1863 and 1891—have become less common as Americans have increasingly favored governmental criminal justice procedures over vigilantism. Along the way, the role of family alliances in the protection of one's assets and physical well-being has declined.

In like manner, the emergence of a massive health-care apparatus has reduced the extent to which Americans depend upon their spouse and broader familial network for access to medical attention, particularly long-term care. The advent and increasing pervasiveness of nursing homes and similar care facilities means that Americans battling chronic health issues, including the sorts of progressive organ failure that older people sometimes experience in their later years, need not rely on their spouse or other family members to serve as their primary source of medical support. Although the spouse frequently continues to be a primary source of emotional support in such cases, the widespread availability of nonspousal (and nonfamilial) medical support has reduced the gap in

medical risk faced by unmarried relative to married people.

**Increased nonmarital and extramarital options for sexual expression.** For most of American history, sex outside of marriage was strongly stigmatized. Even within marriage, norms of appropriate sexual conduct were quite strict. These norms have eased significantly over time, especially since the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, whereas premarital—and, more generally, nonmarital—sex was highly stigmatized and relatively rare in earlier generations, it has become widely accepted and widely practiced today (Wells & Twenge, 2005). Indeed, among large swaths of American culture, it is considered normative or even optimal to have multiple sex partners before one marries. Consequently, the importance of marriage in helping individuals meet their sexual needs has declined substantially over time.

Even individuals who are already married have a broader range of sexual options available today. Some of these options, such as the increased acceptability of masturbation and adventurous sexual practices with one's spouse, do not involve any extramarital behavior. Other options, however, involve third parties in some manner. For example, as elaborated next, practices such as swinging and polyamory have been pursued by a nontrivial minority of Americans over the past 50 years. In addition, graphic pornography was almost nonexistent until the second half of the 20th century, but it is pervasive today. Indeed, the stunning rise of Internet commerce has, over the past 20 years, made virtual all types of graphic pornography available at any hour of the day, frequently for free. (Intrepid scholars interested in plumbing the depths of human sexuality may wish to peruse a website like [pornhub.com](http://pornhub.com), albeit perhaps not from the office computer.)

**Loosening of marriage's stranglehold as the primary acceptable lifestyle.** Changes in sexual mores have occurred alongside many additional changes in the acceptability of alternative lifestyles. Collectively, these changes have defreighted marriage in terms of the necessity of marriage for basic acceptance as a normal or typical member of the community, a need toward the bottom of the belonging and love needs on Mount Maslow. Between 1970 and 2010, the percentage of Americans aged 35 to 44 who were unmarried increased from 12% to 35%, approximately a three-fold jump (Wilcox, Marquardt, Popenoe, & Whitehead, 2011). As noted previously, the number of unmarried cohabitating couples increased from 500,000 to 7,600,000, approximately a 15-fold jump (Wilcox et al., 2011), and Americans today have a broader range of options for having children outside of marriage (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993). In addition, social and

legal changes, including stigma reduction and no-fault divorce laws, have reduced divorce's threat to spouses' mainstream involvement in the community (Celello, 2009; Cott, 2000; Waite, 2000).

**Defreighting marriage: Conclusion.** Americans have become decreasingly dependent on marriage to fulfill their lower altitude needs and even some of their middle altitude needs. Marriage is much less crucial than it used to be for facilitating economic well-being, domestic production, safety, sexual fulfillment, and belonging in the community. As we look to higher altitudes, however, the historical trajectories start to trend in the opposite direction.

### **Freighting Marriage vis-à-vis Higher Altitude Needs**

We now discuss various ways in which marriage in America has become freighted over time, illustrating the freighting process regarding a handful of higher altitude needs. Such needs tend to be much more partner specific than lower altitude needs. Whereas many individuals can help one meet one's physiological and safety needs, few can help one meet one's esteem and self-actualization needs. In particular, higher altitude needs require, to a much greater extent, that the partner understands one's distinctive qualities.

**Increased importance of friendship and emotional intimacy.** As discussed previously, a defining feature of the shift from institutional to companionate marriage was an increased emphasis on emotional intimacy and love as an essential component of marriage. Even with the advent of the self-expressive marriage, these demands have remained strong over time, and in some respects have become even stronger (Coontz, 2005). For example, although data are elusive on this point, it seems that people are much more likely today than in the past to believe that they should marry their dating partner because they view him or her as their best friend. Indeed, according to some current models of marriage, including the "peer marriage" model advocated by sociologist Pepper Schwartz (1994), spouses should "give priority to their relationship over their work and over all other relationships" (p. 13), developing a sufficient level of emotional connection that "they have to be careful not to make their own children feel excluded" (p. 15).

**Increased expectations for sexual passion and fulfillment.** Riding sidecar with this increased emphasis on deep intimacy and friendship with one's spouse is an increased emphasis on deep sexual fulfillment within the marriage. The goal is not simply to have regular sex or even to have orgasmic sex, but rather to have sex that achieves a potent blend of in-

timate connection and ecstatic pleasure (Gillis, 1996). Indeed, in the wake of the sexual revolution, Americans increasingly believed that "having a healthy, exciting sex life was virtually a prerequisite for a happy, satisfying marriage" (Celello, 2009, pp. 143–144). In contrast to earlier eras, in which Americans might have viewed an exciting sex life with their spouse as a delicious little perquisite of their marriage, today they frequently experience the lack of an exciting sex life as an indication that the marriage is rotten in a fundamental way, perhaps sufficiently so to warrant divorce.

**Increased expectations for the facilitation of social prestige.** Pivoting from belonging and love needs to esteem needs, Americans have become increasingly reliant upon their marriage as a means of achieving high-level social prestige. Although the decreasing stigma linked to alternative lifestyles has defreighted marriage as a means of achieving basic belonging in one's community, the increasing pervasiveness of these alternative lifestyles has, in important respects, enhanced the prestige linked to marriage. Marriage has increasingly become a capstone achievement for individuals who have already achieved some level of social and economic success. As observed by Cherlin (2004), "although the practical importance of marriage has declined, its symbolic significance has remained high and may even have increased. It has become a marker of prestige and personal achievement" (p. 848). He added that Americans "marry now less for the social benefits that marriage provides than for the personal achievement it represents" (p. 857).

**Increased expectations for the facilitation of personal growth.** Climbing even higher up Mount Maslow, Americans increasingly look to their spouse to facilitate their pursuit of personal growth. When Jerry (played by Tom Cruise) says, "You complete me" to Dorothy (Renée Zellweger) in the 1996 film *Jerry Maguire*, and when Melvin (Jack Nicholson) says, "You make me want to be a better man" to Carol (Helen Hunt) in the 1997 film *As Good As It Gets*, they are indicating that a major reason why they seek marriage (or at least a marriage-like relationship) with their beloved is that she helps them in their pursuit of self-actualization.

To be sure, the seeds of this idea that spouses can play a crucial role in helping each other pursue self-actualization predated the widespread adoption of the self-expressive marriage ideal. For example, in the 1950s, Dorothy Carnegie (1953), the wife of the self-help maven Dale Carnegie, published *How to Help Your Husband Get Ahead*, which sought to help women "fulfill their obligations as helpmates, and assist their husbands up the ladder of success" (p. 4). She discussed how she remembered the names of party attendees so she could feed him this information at the optimal time,

thereby bolstering his social efficacy and career success. However, although this sort of support was crucial in helping spouses achieve their personal goals, it was less oriented toward self-actualization than toward more practical assistance with the tasks of everyday life. In addition, although there were early cases in which people looked to their spouse for assistance with the pursuit of self-actualization (including Elizabeth Barrett Browning: “I love you not only for what you are, but for what I am when I am with you . . . for what you are making of me”), this emphasis has become far more pervasive than ever before (Cherlin, 2009).

We are not aware of historical data on the link between marital processes, or romantic processes more generally, and personal growth, but several lines of evidence suggest that this link is crucial in contemporary relationships. Self-expansion theory suggests that humans have a fundamental drive toward personal growth, and an essential means through which they pursue such growth is through romantic relationships (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Aron, & Norman, 2001). The Michelangelo phenomenon suggests that people seek to grow toward their ideal self, and their romantic partner plays a crucial role in how successful they are in doing so (Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2009). Research on social support suggests that humans thrive (in part) through a process of discovering and making progress toward their purpose in life, and their romantic partner can facilitate such thriving by comforting and fortifying them in times of duress and by fostering engagement in opportunities that promote self-discovery and growth (Feeney & Collins, 2014). Indeed, when contemporary college students report on what makes someone a valuable mate, the fourth most common category of responses (after compatibility, commitment, and physical attractiveness) was *improving one’s life or self*, which was exemplified by this response: “I really feel like someone of ‘mate value’ would be someone who helps me become the best person I can be, the best version of myself” (Eastwick & Hunt, in press). In short, whether Americans are in an established relationship or seeking such involvement, they look to their partner to help them experience psychological growth and development.

**Increased potential marital duration.** Not only have Americans increasingly freighted marriage vis-à-vis emotional, sexual, prestige, and self-expressive needs, but they have done so while life expectancy has expanded from less than 50 years, as it was in 1900, to nearly 80 years, as it is today.<sup>4</sup> This increased life

expectancy magnifies the effects of freighting because it means that Americans are asking marriage to meet these higher altitude needs for a much longer span of time. In 1900, two thirds of American marriages ended with the death of one partner within 40 years (Pinsof, 2002). By 1976, due in large part to a combination of increased life expectancy and skyrocketing divorce rates, that figure had dropped to slightly more than one third (Uhlenberg, 1980). In 1974, for the first time, more marriages ended in divorce than in death (Hagestad, 1988). Indeed, even though Americans are marrying at older ages than in the past, the magnitude of the life expectancy gains means that, on their wedding day, spouses today have many more years ahead of them. Consequently, given that most Americans today continue to adopt a “till death do us part” mind-set regarding their own decision to marry, those who marry today intend for their union to persist for much longer.

**Reduced access to social outlets outside of marriage.** Spouses have increasingly freighted marriage not only in terms of facilitating the fulfillment these higher altitude needs but also in terms of reduced access to nonspousal significant others. In the terminology of goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al., 2002), married Americans looking to their social network to help them fulfill their higher altitude needs have less “substitutability” today than in the past—fewer close relationship partners, and, consequently, a much stronger onus placed on the spouse.

Ample evidence suggests that American spouses have experienced a marked decline in the robustness of their social connections outside of the marriage. Contemporary spouses have a smaller number of *confidants*—significant others in whom they can confide intimate or significant information, akin to “attachment figures” (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007)—than did spouses in previous eras. Although scholars debate the size and nature of people’s network of confidants, there seems to be no debate that (a) the size of Americans’ confidant social networks has shrunk in recent decades and (b) spouses make up a larger proportion of these confidants today than they did previously (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006, 2008, 2009; also see Fischer, 2009; Paik & Sanchagrin, 2013; Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013). For example, American spouses reported having 6.0 close friends in 1980 but only 5.4 in 2000, a 10% decline (Amato et al., 2009).

Consistent with this increasing “spousification” of the confidant role is evidence that married individuals socialize with (nonspousal) significant others in their social network much less frequently than never-married individuals do. For example, as depicted in Figure 4, never-married individuals were, over the previous 12 months, 62% more likely to see their parents and 81% more likely to see their siblings at least

<sup>4</sup>This enhanced life expectancy is not simply an artifact of child mortality. For example, a 20-year-old Caucasian American’s mean life expectancy was 43 additional years in 1900 but 58 additional years in 2000, a 35% increase (Pearson Education, 2013).

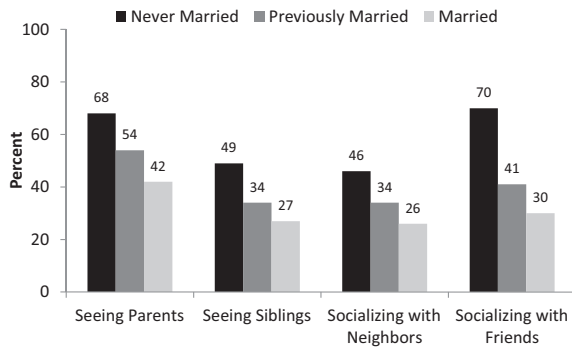


Figure 4. The percent of never married, previously married, and married individuals who see their parents and their siblings at least weekly (left half of the figure) and who socialize with their neighbors and their friends multiple times per month (right half of the figure) (adapted from Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006). © SAGE Publications. Reproduced by permission of SAGE Publications. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rights holder.

once per week, and they were 77% more likely to socialize (to “spend a social evening”) with neighbors and 133% more likely to socialize with friends multiple times per month (Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006). The frequency of significant-other socializing among previously married individuals was intermediate.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, it seems that the tendency for married individuals to spend relatively little time with non-spousal significant others is becoming stronger over time. As depicted in Figure 5, the amount of time married Americans spent alone with their friends or relatives (i.e., without their spouse present) on the typical weekend day declined precipitously between 1975 and 2003 (Dew, 2009). The decline was 24% among individuals without children at home and 53% among individuals with children at home.

These trends for American spouses to have fewer nonspousal confidants and less social time with nonspousal significant others than in previous eras are complemented by a robust decline in American spouses’ civic engagement. Indeed, consistent with political scientist Robert Putnam’s (2000) famous *Bowling Alone* analysis, which suggests that Americans became substantially less involved in various civic and political institutions during the last third of the 20th century, Amato et al. (2009) demonstrated that, relative to American spouses in 2000, American spouses in 1980 had 51% more friends and 168% more organizational memberships.

**Freighting marriage: Conclusion.** Americans have increasingly relied upon marriage to fulfill their higher altitude needs and some of their middle altitude

<sup>5</sup> Sarkisian sent unpublished information about these analyses to Finkel via e-mail on October 6, 2013. The percentages in Figure 4 are model-implied values that control for age, income, education, employment status, parenthood status, race, and gender.

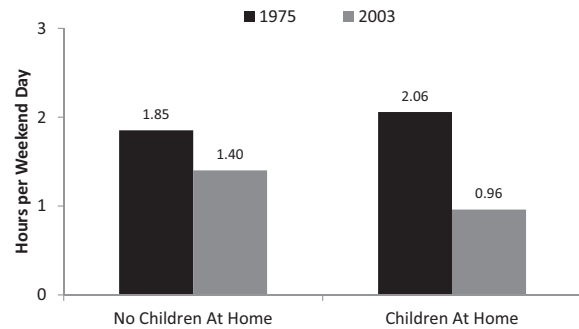


Figure 5. Hours per weekend day that married individuals spent (without their spouse) with friends or relatives in 1975 and 2003, as a function of whether the individuals have children at home (adapted from Dew, 2009). © Oxford University Press. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rights holder.

needs. Marriage is much more crucial than it used to be for fulfilling Americans’ needs for friendship and emotional intimacy, sexual passion and fulfillment, social prestige, and personal growth, especially as spouses have increasingly withdrawn from their broader social networks. The rapid lengthening of life expectancy means that marriages are, in theory, responsible for meeting these sorts of higher altitude needs for a greater duration than ever before.

According to the suffocation model, these trends toward freighting marriage vis-à-vis higher altitude needs are likely to strengthen the link between marital quality and personal well-being. The logic underlying this prediction derives from Maslow’s (1954/1970) analysis that, relative to lower need gratifications, “higher need gratifications produce more desirable subjective results, i.e., more profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life” (p. 99). Consequently, as the needs Americans ask their marriage to fulfill continue to ascend Mount Maslow, the extent to which the marriage fulfills those needs should be an increasingly strong association with their psychological well-being.

Consistent with this analysis, happiness in one’s marriage today is perhaps the single most robust predictor of global life happiness (Headey, Veenhoven, & Wearing, 1991), and, as hypothesized, this link is becoming stronger over time. Figure 6 depicts data from the 14 longitudinal studies between 1979 and 2002 that reported links between baseline marital quality and subsequent personal well-being, controlling for baseline personal well-being (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007).<sup>6</sup> In addition to demonstrating that baseline marital quality uniformly predicts better (never worse)

<sup>6</sup> Proulx sent the study-level information to Finkel via e-mail on September 16, 2013. Two additional studies were omitted because they were outliers. These outliers altered the magnitude of the association in opposite directions, and the pattern of results remained similar when those additional studies were included.

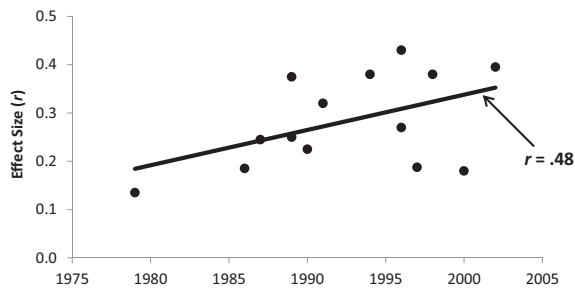


Figure 6. The meta-analytic link between baseline marital quality and change over time in personal well-being, 1979-2002 (adapted from Proulx et al., 2007). Each data point represents a study, and the trendline represents the change in effect size over time. © John Wiley & Sons. Reproduced by permission of John Wiley & Sons. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

personal well-being over time (average  $r = .28$ ), the figure reveals that this effect is becoming much stronger over time ( $r = .48$ ). In short, the discrepancy between good and bad marriages in their ability to predict personal well-being has become much stronger over time.

According to the suffocation model, a primary reason for this temporal trend is that the extent to which one's partner facilitates one's higher altitude needs is a strong predictor of both personal and relationship well-being. For example, the extent to which one's partner helps to facilitate one's growth regarding one's ideal-self goals predicts not only growth toward the fulfillment of those goals over time but also elevated relationship quality (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2009). As marriages increasingly emphasize such higher altitude needs over time, the link between need fulfillment and marital quality becomes stronger.

### Oxygen Deprivation: Insufficient Investment to Achieve High-Altitude Need Fulfillment

It seems that the ascension of American marriage up Mount Maslow has unlocked the potential for achieving previously unattainable levels of connection and meaning from the marital bond. If spouses are compatible, and if they work to promote each other's higher altitude needs, contemporary marriages can successfully summit Mount Maslow, reaching heights that few could have attained in previous eras.

On the other hand, if spouses are not especially compatible, or if they do not find sufficient time and psychological resources to invest in the marriage, contemporary marriages are much more likely to falter than were their predecessors. After all, relative to meeting higher altitude needs within the marriage, meeting lower altitude needs does not require such intensive investment and nurturance. By analogy, consider Miles's (played by Paul Giamatti) dis-

cussion of the wine grape pinot noir in the 2004 movie *Sideways* (London & Payne):

It's a hard grape to grow. . . . It's thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It's not a survivor like cabernet, which can just grow anywhere and thrive even when neglected. No, pinot needs constant care and attention. In fact, it can only grow in these really specific little tucked-away corners of the world. And only the most patient and nurturing of growers can do it, really. Only somebody who really takes the time to understand pinot's potential can then coax it into its fullest expression. Then, I mean, its flavors, they're just the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and ancient on the planet.

As the primary functions of marriage ascend Mount Maslow, the marriage shifts from something approximating cabernet to something approximating pinot noir. That is, it shifts from an entity that "can grow anywhere and thrive even when neglected" to an entity that "requires constant care and attention," one that requires spouses to be extremely "patient and nurturing." However, spouses who are willing and able to invest time and nurturance in their high-altitude marriage have the potential to achieve a marital bond that is "haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and ancient"—one that is, in other words, spectacularly fulfilling.

In this section, we discuss why higher altitude marriages require greater investment and nurturance than their lower altitude counterparts. We then review the evidence suggesting that spouses are actually investing less in their marriage than in previous eras. Finally, we discuss how the mutual, reciprocal nature of contemporary marriage further reduces the resources available for the marriage, as spouses are not only in the role of seeking support from their partner to help them fulfill their higher altitude needs, but also in the role of giving support to their partner in return.

### Greater Investment and Nurturance Is Required at Higher Altitudes on Mount Maslow

Meeting one's needs in the late 1700s was no small feat, and doing so depended to a large extent on the marriage. However, building and sustaining a high-quality marital relationship was less important for meeting one's needs than it has become today, as people ask their marriage to meet their higher altitude needs. Yes, as with married partners today, such partners had to coordinate tasks, and it was surely more pleasant to share their lives with somebody they loved rather than somebody they disliked. And, to be sure, humans have evolved to pair-bond, primarily as a means of promoting offspring survival (Eastwick,



2009; Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008), and many spouses fell in love during the course of their marriage. Nonetheless, developing a deep emotional bond or profound insight into each other's true self was less essential in an era where the *raison d'être* for marriage involved lower altitude needs.

As marital dependence zones ascended Mount Maslow, the quality of the marital relationship became increasingly important. As such, spouses' emotional, intellectual, and spiritual compatibility, and the amount of time and effort they were able and willing to invest in their relationship, became increasingly essential. In accord with these changes, Americans increasingly viewed marriage as requiring *work*—the investment of time and effort toward the goal of making the relationship flourish rather than falter (Celello, 2009). Indeed, as early as 1939, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt told an interviewer from *Good Housekeeping* magazine that newlyweds

should understand that they are undertaking a full-time job which is going to be part of their everyday existence from the time the marriage ceremony is read until "death do them part," a job which they cannot neglect for a day without being confronted with failure. (as cited in Celello, 2009, p. 42)

Consistent with this emerging ethos, marriage counseling began to proliferate as a means of helping spouses achieve a strong marital relationship, a trend that continues today.

This increasing emphasis on working on the marriage altered how Americans construed diverse aspects of their marriage, including conflict. In particular, they increasingly focused on the importance of communication with their spouse. Whereas Americans had long blamed marital problems on the emotional immaturity of one or both spouses, they increasingly, during the second half of the 20th century, blamed poor communication (Celello, 2009). This shift in the locus of blame exemplified a broader shift in Americans' marital ideal to focus on a companionate and self-expressive union between two emotionally and intellectually compatible people who were willing and able to exert themselves to make their marriage work.

Consider the recent analysis, offered by psychologists Brooke Feeney and Nancy Collins (2014), of the importance of close relationship partners, perhaps especially spouses, for promoting personal growth and development. This analysis suggests that partners can foster such growth and development by comforting and fortifying each other in times of duress and by fostering engagement in opportunities that promote self-discovery and growth. However, partners do not foster each other's salutary outcomes through magic. Rather, many of the processes through which they do so re-

quire a deep emotional bond and profound insight into the partner's core essence. For example, Feeney and Collins argued that individuals are especially effective at facilitating the partner's personal growth and development when they, among other things, (a) express empathy, understanding, acceptance, and reassurance; (b) nurture the partner's latent or manifest talents; (c) help the partner "rebuild the self" following a setback; (d) reframe adversity as a mechanism for positive change; (e) validate the partner's goals and aspirations; (f) help the partner recognize life opportunities; (g) encourage the partner to set attainable goals; and (h) offer encouragement. In short, individuals are especially effective to the extent that they love and understand the partner and that they are willing to exert themselves to help him or her.

Figure 7 reproduces the three panels in Figure 2, but with one major change: It gradually shifts from light gray at the bottom to dark gray at the top to represent the increasingly sparse oxygen availability at higher altitudes. The idea is that, as with Miles's analysis of growing cabernet versus growing pinot noir, the needs located at lower versus higher altitudes on Mount Maslow differ vis-à-vis their ease of fulfillment within the marriage. The deoxygenation has minimal impact on the institutional functions of marriage (Panel A), but it has moderate impact on the companionate functions (Panel B) and significant impact on the self-expressive functions (Panel C). In other words, whereas two spouses can coordinate to meet basic survival and safety functions without having deep insight into each other's fundamental essence, lacking such insight makes it difficult to facilitate the fulfillment of each other's esteem and self-actualization needs, and to a lesser extent their belonging and love needs (D'Emilio & Freedman, 2012). Consequently, greater "oxygen" (investment in the marriage) is required for fulfillment of the higher altitude needs.

### Reduced Resources Available for the Marriage

It is reasonable for contemporary Americans to aspire to immerse themselves in a marriage with the primary purpose of meeting higher altitude needs, but it is probably unreasonable for them to expect their marriage to succeed at doing so unless they are both able and willing to invest considerable time and psychological resources in cultivating the relationship. Unfortunately, it appears that, on average, Americans are investing less in their marriage today than in the past.

**Reduced spousal time.** Earlier (e.g., in Figure 5), we presented evidence suggesting that Americans spend less time with nonspousal significant others today than in the past. If the explanation for this trend had been that Americans are spending more time with

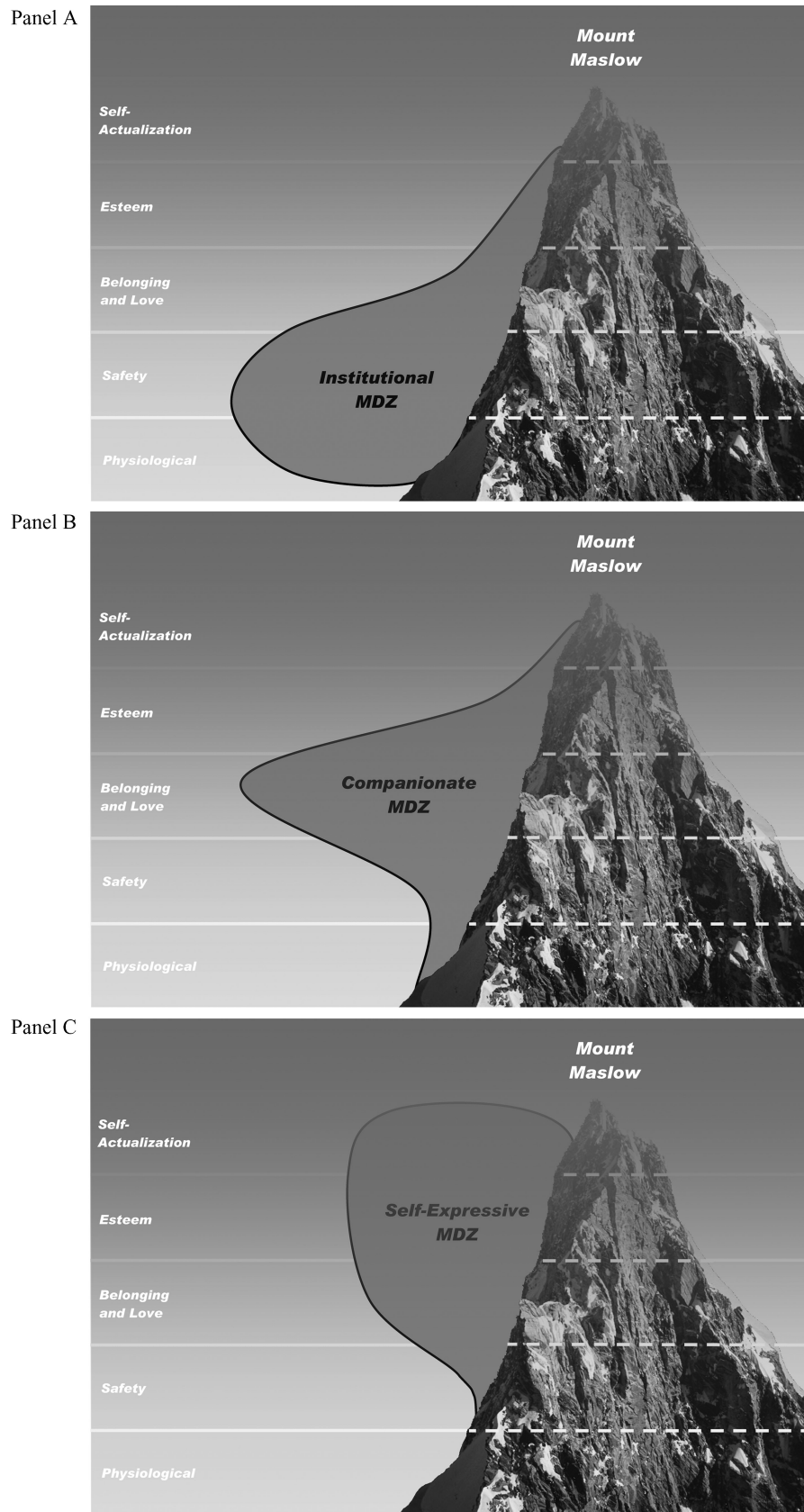


Figure 7. Increasing deoxygenation at higher altitudes on Mount Maslow. Panel A: The institutional marriage, Panel B: The companionate marriage, and Panel C: The self-expressive marriage.

their spouse, that would have suggested that they might be investing more time in a manner that can help these higher altitude marriages flourish. Unfortunately, this explanation is inaccurate: As discussed shortly, Americans are actually investing less rather than more in their marriages over time. Before discussing such trends, we briefly consider how Americans *are* spending their time.

First, even though the amount of time required to meet a child's basic needs is lower than in previous generations, Americans are spending much more time parenting today than in the past (Aguiar & Hurst, 2007; Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Dew, 2009; Ramey & Ramey, 2010; Sayer, 2005; Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Figure 8 illustrates the results of a study that tracked parenting activity of college-educated and less educated fathers (Panel A) and mothers (Panel B), aged 25 to 34, from 1965 to 2008 (Ramey & Ramey, 2010).<sup>7</sup> Between 1965 and the early 1990s, fathers spent about 4 to 5 hr per week engaged in childrearing, whereas mothers spent about 10 to 15 hr per week. Then, suddenly, both fathers and mothers sharply increased their investment in childrearing. From 1993 to 2008, college-educated fathers increased their investment in childrearing from 4.2 to 9.7 hr per week, and less educated fathers increased theirs from 3.8 to 8.0 hr (Figure 8, Panel A). Although this increase in paternal involvement might have served to reduce maternal investment, the opposite trend emerged. During that 15-year interval, college-educated mothers increased their investment in childrearing from 12.0 to 20.5 hr per week, and less educated mothers increased theirs from 10.5 to 16.0 (Figure 8, Panel B).

Second, spouses without children at home are spending more time at work. According to Dew (2009), such spouses spent 26 additional min per day in paid employment in 2003 than in 1975.<sup>8</sup> Especially given that the additional 26 min that one spouse spends at work are unlikely to be precisely the same additional 26 min that the other spouse spends at work, this additional work time cuts deeply into the time available for spouses to be alone together.

With this information about time spouses spent in parenting and work activities in mind, we review evidence that spouses are spending less time together than they used to (Amato et al., 2009; Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Dew, 2009). Figure 9 illustrates how many hours of *spousal time*—time that the two spouses spend alone together—married couples without children at home (Panel A) and with children at home (Panel B) tended to have per weekend day in

<sup>7</sup> Although the overall hours of childcare varied as a function of the age of both the parents and the children, the temporal trends were comparable across ages.

<sup>8</sup> Spouses with children at home spent 21 fewer min per day in paid employment in 2003 than in 1975, but it seems that all of this time, plus a whole lot more, went to childrearing.

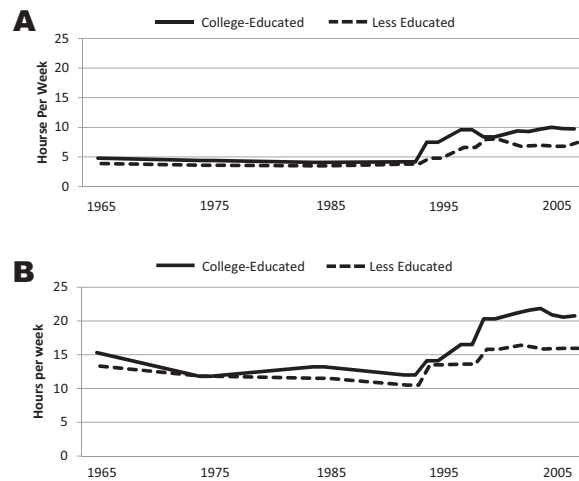


Figure 8. Hours per week that fathers (Panel A) and mothers (Panel B) spent in childcare, 1965–2008 (adapted from Ramey & Ramey, 2010). © The Brookings Institution. Reproduced by permission of The Brookings Institution. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

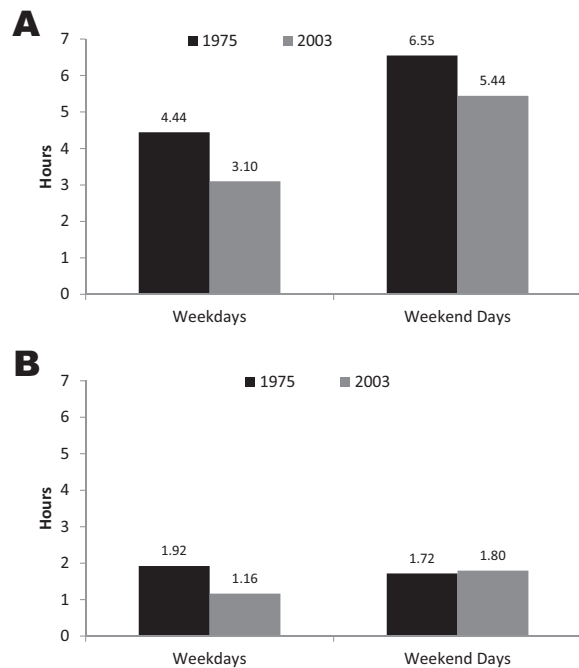


Figure 9. Hours per weekday and weekend day that married individuals either without children at home (Panel A) versus with children at home (Panel B) spent alone with their spouse, 1975 and 2003 (adapted from Dew, 2009). © Oxford University Press. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

1975 and 2003 (Dew, 2009). Not surprisingly, collapsing across year of assessment, spouses without children at home on average experienced much more spousal time on both weekdays (3.77 vs. 1.54 hr) and weekends (6.00 vs. 1.76 hr) than did spouses with children

at home (Panel A vs. Panel B). Of greater relevance to the suffocation metaphor, spousal time decreased substantially from 1975 to 2003 (black bars vs. red bars). Spouses without children at home experienced a 30% decline in weekday spousal time (left two bars in Panel A) and a 17% decline in weekend spousal time (right two bars in Panel A). Spouses with children at home, whose spousal time tended to be quite limited in general, experienced a 40% decline in weekday spousal time (left two bars in Panel B). Despite one anomalous finding—that weekend spousal time was virtually unchanged from 1975 to 2003 (and, if anything, increased by 5%)—it is clear that spouses in 2003 tended to have much less time alone together than did spouses in 1975.

Another way of measuring spousal time is by assessing how frequently spouses engage in various everyday activities together rather than separately; this measure, too, suggests that spouses are spending less time together than they used to. For example, Figure 10 illustrates the percentage of spouses in 1980 versus 2000 reporting that they “almost always” pursue major activities of daily life together rather than separately—rather than “never,” “occasionally,” or “usually” pursuing such activities together (Amato et al., 2009). Relative to spouses in 1980, spouses in 2000 were 15% less likely to report that they almost always ate their main meal of the day together, 29% less likely to report that they almost always went out for leisure together, 36% less likely to report that they almost always visited friends together, and 21% less likely to report that they almost always worked around the house together. These are large changes over a short period, and they suggest that spouses not only spend much less time together than they did 20 to 30 years earlier but also are substantially less likely to pursue the general activities of daily life together, regardless of whether they are alone or in the presence of others.

These findings caused Amato et al. (2009) to conclude that “people may be bowling alone these days, as Putnam (2000) argued, but married couples increasingly are eating alone” (p. 236).

Amato et al. (2009) also reported on another metric of spousal time, albeit a less direct one. They showed that American spouses shared 76% of their friends with their partner in 1980 but only 69% in 2000. Not only are Americans spending less time alone with their spouse than they used to, they are also engaging in fewer shared activities with their spouses (even when other people are present), and a smaller proportion of their friends are also friends with their partner.

**Reduced psychological resources.** The reduction in spousal time contributes to the suffocation of marriage—to the insufficient oxygenation required to meet the high-altitude needs spouses ask contemporary marriage to help them fulfill—but it is not the only contributor. Scholars have shown that stress depletes psychological resources (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000; Vohs, 2013) and undermines constructive behavior in relationships (Buck & Neff, 2012; Demerouti, Bakker, Sonnentag, & Fullagar, 2012; Finkel et al., 2012), and Americans are experiencing more stress today than in previous eras. Figure 11 illustrates the extent to which American men and women felt stressed in 1983, 2006, and 2009 (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012). Specifically, participants completed the 10-item perceived stress scale at all three time points (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983; Cohen & Williamson, 1988). This scale began with the stem “In the last month, how often have you felt” and was followed by items like “that difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them” and “that you could not cope with all the things that you had to.” The figure demonstrates that American men and women were more stressed in the 2000s than they had been in the 1980s, a trend that

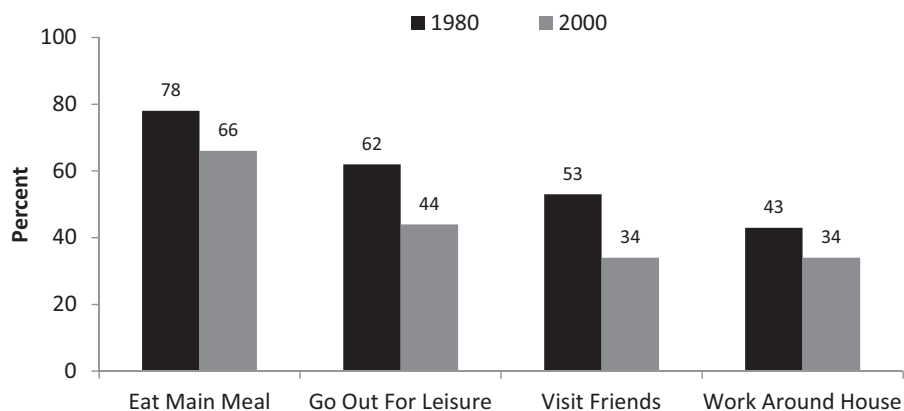


Figure 10. The percent of married individuals who “almost always” engaged in certain key activities together, 1980 and 2000 (adapted from Amato et al., 2009). © Harvard University Press. Reproduced by permission of Harvard University Press. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.



Figure 11. Self-reported stress, 1983-2009 (adapted from Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012). © John Wiley & Sons. Reproduced by permission of John Wiley & Sons. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

may be depriving them of the psychological resources required to engage in the sorts of high-investment interpersonal processes that are most helpful as spouses seek to meet their high-altitude needs.

One major cause of Americans' increased stress seems to be their increasing inability to achieve work-life balance. Figure 12 illustrates the percentage of American men and women in 1980 and 2000 who indicated that their job interferes with their family life "somewhat" or "a lot" rather than "not at all" or "a little bit" (Amato et al., 2009). Relative to 1980, husbands in 2000 reported this sort of work-family conflict 83% more often (left side of Figure 12), and wives in 2000 reported this sort of work-family conflict 43% more often (right side of Figure 12).

### Two Roles: The Support-Seeker and the Support-Provider

We have argued that contemporary marriages are imbalanced because they have ascended to higher altitudes without investing the additional resources required to function effectively up at those heights (indeed, they are, on averaging, investing *less* rather than

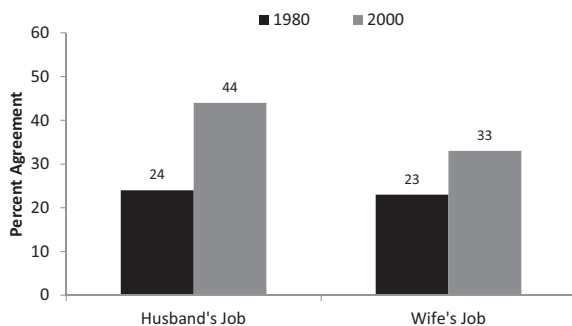


Figure 12. Percent of married men and women who reported that their job interfered with their family life, 1980 and 2000 (adapted from Amato et al., 2009). © Harvard University Press. Reproduced by permission of Harvard University Press. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

more). This issue is complicated by the symmetrical, reciprocal nature of contemporary marriage in which both spouses expect the partner to help them fulfill their higher altitude needs. That is, both spouses are not only in the support-seeker role but also in the support-provider role.

This symmetrical arrangement can sometimes facilitate spouses' ability to meet each other's needs, such as when having intimate conversation helps both of them gain insight into their own essences. In addition, the support-provider may find that helping the spouse achieve his high-level goals helps her achieve an optimal balance between her own personal and her relational concerns (Kumashiro, Rusbult, & Finkel, 2008). Individuals strive to achieve a balance between autonomy and interdependence in their close relationships (Hull, Meier, & Ortyl, 2010), and they are frequently able to do so, even when making sacrifices for the partner (Gaine & La Guardia, 2009).

However, to the extent that the support-provider feels pressured to relinquish the pursuit of her own goals, she may experience a diminished sense of autonomy and reduced relationship satisfaction (Patrick, Knee, Canevello, & Lonsbary, 2007). In addition, given limited energy, time, and resources, it is not uncommon to encounter interpersonal situations in which the support-provider's goals conflict with the partner's goals (Holmes & Murray, 1996), especially when both spouses are feeling stressed and overworked. In a recent *New York Times* article on dual-earner couples (Warner, 2013), a wife poignantly articulated this problem: "I think a big issue is that we both want to be taken care of at the end of the day, and neither of us has any energy to take care of the other. . . . When you're absolutely exhausted, it's hard to be emotionally generous."

### Oxygen Deprivation: Conclusion

Fulfilling higher altitude needs within the marriage requires greater time and psychological resources than does fulfilling lower altitude needs, which means that the amount of investment of such resources required for marital success is higher in contemporary marriages than in marriages from previous eras. Nonetheless, contemporary Americans are generally investing less time and fewer psychological resources in their marriage, leading to an imbalance in which the available resources are insufficient to meet the demands placed on the marriage, an imbalance that is exacerbated by the symmetrical structure of marriage.

### Consequences of Climbing Mount Maslow Without Enough Oxygen

According to the suffocation model, this imbalance is consequential. We noted previously (e.g., in

Figure 6) that, as American marriage has ascended Mount Maslow, the link between marital quality and personal well-being has gotten stronger. Now that we have introduced the oxygen deprivation metaphor, we revisit the consequences of this ascension, this time focusing on its normative effects across marriages rather than on the influence of variation in marital quality. We investigate such normative effects on both personal well-being and marital quality.

**Reduced Personal Well-Being**

The suffocation model suggests that the ascension of marriage up Mount Maslow and the decline in how much Americans are investing in their marriage have combined to exert adverse effects on spouses' personal well-being. In reviewing the relevant evidence, we examine both the support-seeker role and the support-provider role. Of course, both spouses occupy both roles in virtually all marriages, but distinguishing between these roles allows for a more precise discussion of the effects of the suffocation process on personal well-being.

**Effects on the support-seeker.** The suffocation model suggests that married Americans are increasingly asking their spouse to facilitate the fulfillment of their higher altitude needs but that they are not investing the time or psychological resources required for such facilitation to be effective. An implication of this analysis is that married Americans, who have fewer extramarital social options for fulfilling such needs than in the past, are likely to experience a deficit in the extent to which their higher altitude needs are being met. If so, we should expect to see that the *marriage benefit*—the superior health outcomes of married rel-

ative to unmarried individuals—has declined in recent decades. In addition, given that married Americans increasingly depend upon their spouse to help them fulfill such needs, the adverse consequences of relationship dissolution should be more severe than in the past, both because their postbreakup social network is weaker and because their identity had been robustly linked to the relationship.

An impressive recent study provides direct evidence regarding the size of the marriage benefit over time (Liu & Umberson, 2008). Figure 13 presents results from this study, illustrating trajectories from 1972 to 2003 in the probability of experiencing excellent/good health as a function of marital status. Comparing the first two lines reveals that, consistent with the suffocation model, the health advantage enjoyed by married individuals over never-married individuals has decreased over time, virtually disappearing in the 21st century.

This study also provides evidence relevant to adverse effects of relationship dissolution on well-being. In particular, as illustrated in Figure 13, marital dissolution is linked to poorer health outcomes today than in the past. Comparing Lines 3, 4, and 5 to Lines 1 and 2 reveals that the adverse links between all three forms of marital dissolution and health are becoming exacerbated over time, and comparing Line 5 to Lines 3 and 4 reveals that the adverse effects of widowhood are much more severe than the adverse effects of divorce and separation. These findings are consistent with the suffocation model's prediction that marital dissolution is more destructive today than in the past, perhaps because the high-altitude nature of contemporary marriage means that the now-separated spouses have fewer avenues through which they can meet these crucial needs for belonging and love and, especially, esteem and self-expression. That the temporal trend is worse for widowed than for divorced or separated

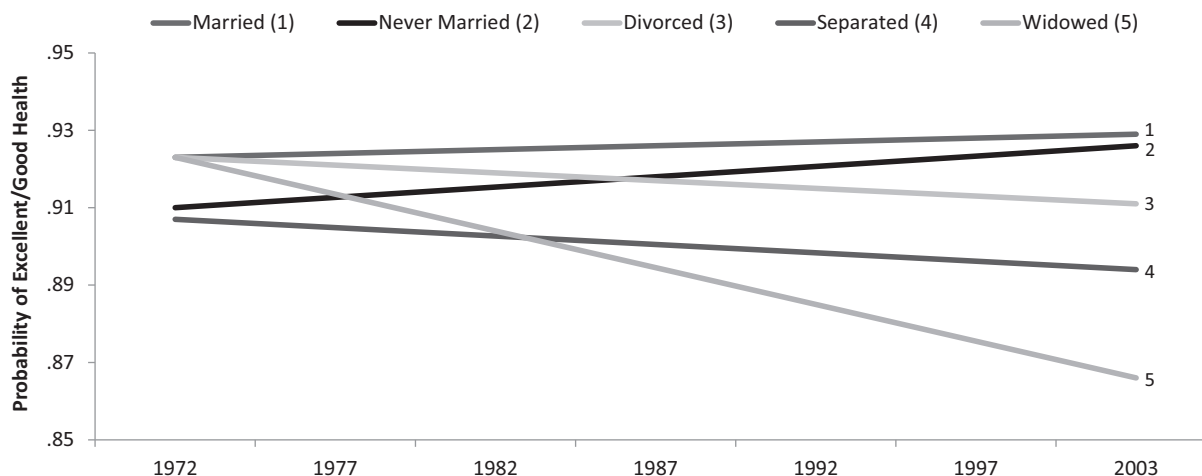


Figure 13. Health as a function of marital status, 1972-2003 (adapted from Liu & Umberson, 2008). © SAGE Publications. Reproduced by permission of SAGE Publications. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder. (Color figure available online).

SUFFOCATION OF MARRIAGE

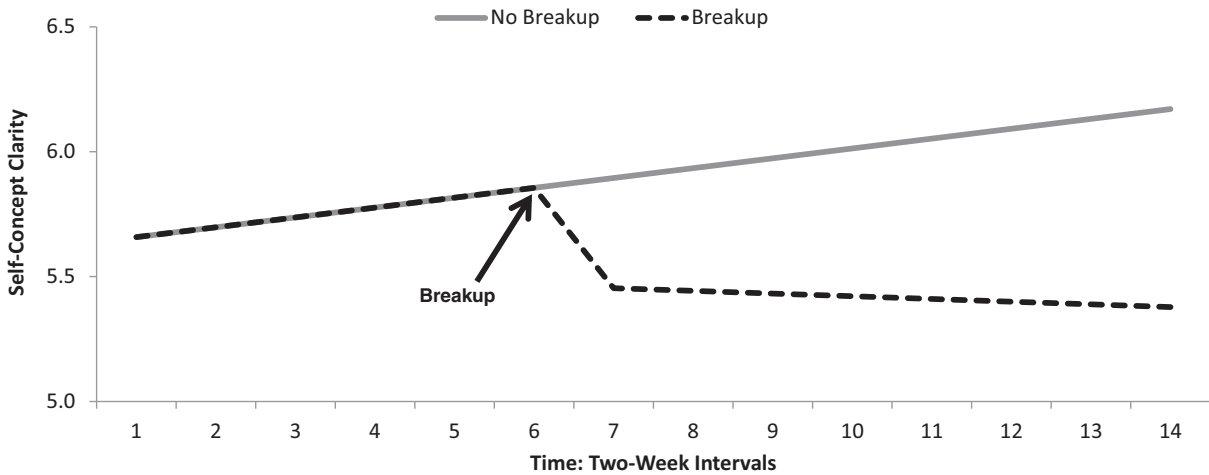


Figure 14. Longitudinal links between romantic breakup and self-concept clarity (adapted from Slotter et al., 2010). © SAGE Publications. Reproduced by permission of SAGE Publications. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rights holder.

individuals is consistent with the prediction that the adverse effects of dissolution are becoming more severe over time for well-functioning marriages, presumably because such marriages are especially influential in helping the spouses meet their higher altitude needs, which makes the dissolution especially devastating.

Another way of conceptualizing this issue is that contemporary Americans are especially likely to link their most fundamental sense of themselves to their relationship, which means they are especially likely to be cast adrift by the dissolution of the relationship. Although we are not aware of research investigating this idea among married individuals, a recent longitudinal study of college freshmen provided some empirical support for it (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). All participants were involved in a dating relationship (averaging more than 1 year in duration) at study intake and followed intensively over the subsequent 6 months, during which time 38% of the partners experienced relationship dissolution. As depicted in Figure 14, students whose relationship remained intact exhibited increasing self-concept clarity throughout their freshman year (red line in Figure 14). In contrast, students whose relationship ended experienced an immediate decrement in self-concept clarity, an effect that only became stronger, when compared to the students whose relationship remained intact, over the ensuing months (black line in Figure 14). In short, the dissolution of contemporary romantic relationships appears to shake people's sense of self and to exert increasingly adverse effects on their self-reported health.

The logic underlying the suffocation model's predictions regarding these effects is that relying on one person for help with the fulfillment of so many high-altitude needs is, all else equal, problematic. To be sure, depending upon one's spouse to achieve a wide variety

of higher altitude needs may be convenient, especially given that normative living arrangements provide ready access to him. However, spouses differ in their ability to provide various types of support, and although a spouse may be an effective support-provider on average, it seems unlikely that he will be the optimal source of support across all domains. For instance, a sibling who already has children may be a better source of emotional support and empathy than one's spouse regarding pregnancy-related concerns, and a coworker may be a better source of instrumental support than one's spouse regarding career advancement. In short, Americans' increasing tendency to turn to their spouse (rather than a different significant other) to facilitate the fulfillment of a larger number of high-altitude needs is likely to produce a situation in which they do so regarding domains in which the spouse is not optimally suited to provide effective support.

Even in cases for which the spouse really is the best support-provider for virtually all of one's support needs, he is not always available. He may be away on business, preoccupied with childcare, or tending to more pressing personal goals. As such, having an arsenal of potential support-providers may be a more effective strategy for helping people fulfill their higher altitude needs than having their spouse be the central support-provider across virtually all domains.

This problem of having the spouse be the central support-provider across virtually all domains is exacerbated by spouses' normatively high levels of interdependence. After all, the interdependence means that spouses are especially likely to require higher than typical levels of support at the same time, especially insofar as some of the stressors they experience affect both of them simultaneously. For example, moving to a new city, a child's illness, or the financial strain from a job loss could seriously affect both spouses, leaving

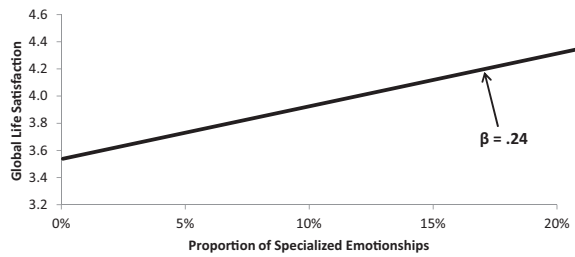


Figure 15. The link between the proportion of specialized emotionships (i.e., significant others who serve only one emotional support role) and global life satisfaction (adapted from Cheung et al., 2013). © Elaine Cheung. Reproduced by permission of Elaine Cheung. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rights holder.

both of them in need of support. In such circumstances, support from a nonspousal significant other may be especially important.

Research on social networks provides compelling evidence that people with a more diversified social network for helping them fulfill their higher altitude needs tend to experience greater psychological well-being than do people with a less diversified network. In particular, Americans with more diversified networks of significant others with whom they can share emotional experiences tend to experience better personal well-being (Cheung, Gardner, & Anderson, 2013). In this research, participants nominated up to four people they would seek out to help them regulate their emotions across seven different emotional domains (e.g., cheering up when sad, calming down when anxious). Each nomination was termed an *emotionship*, which was further characterized as specialized or unspecialized as a function of whether the emotionship was with an individual who regulated only that one versus more than one emotional domain.

Consistent with the logic of the suffocation model, participants who had a more specialized emotion regulation portfolio—that is, who had a greater proportion of specialized emotionships out of the total number of emotionships listed across emotional domains—reported greater life satisfaction. As illustrated in Figure 15, the proportion of specialized emotionships predicted global life satisfaction, even after controlling for potentially confounding effects linked to loneliness, relationship quality, the breadth of emotional domains participants listed as receiving support from, the average number of individuals listed per emotion regulation domain, and the degree to which they felt regulation was mutual (Cheung et al., 2013). In short, it appears that having an array of social support *specialists* may be preferable to relying on a few generalists.

This conclusion is consistent with the possibility that the trends for spousal relationships to shoulder so much responsibility for helping individuals fulfill higher altitude needs might be undermining Ameri-

cans' happiness and perhaps even making them especially susceptible to adverse health outcomes. More direct evidence for this conclusion comes from research investigating the moderating role of social network characteristics on the link between marital processes and health-related outcomes. For example, although spouses tend to experience less healthy diurnal cortisol slopes on days characterized by higher than usual marital conflict, this adverse effect is diminished among spouses who are highly satisfied with the support they get from their broader social network (Keneski, Loving, & Neff, 2013). In addition, although spouses who are highly satisfied in their marriage tend to gain weight over time (Meltzer, Novak, McNulty, Butler, & Karney, 2013), this adverse effect is diminished among spouses who highly value their friendships (Carswell, Finkel, Meltzer, McNulty, & Karney, 2013).

We conclude this discussion with a caveat: Although we have focused on the potential benefits of a diversified social support network, maintaining such a network has costs. Managing the demands that arise from such social connections can be difficult. That said, people tend to have substantial discretion regarding which friends and potential support providers will be a part of their life, and they can select individuals who present fewer conflicts. Thus, although maintaining such networks has costs, the net effect of increasing social support beyond one's spouse is likely to be positive, especially insofar as one builds a network of support specialists.

**Effects on the support-provider.** An individual's expectation that his spouse help him fulfill an increasingly substantial proportion of his higher altitude needs also has consequences for his spouse. Although some of these consequences are positive—it feels good to be needed, and people are generally willing to endure costs to support the partner (Clark & Grote, 1998; Clark & Mills, 1993)—many are negative. In particular, an individual's reliance on his spouse to help him fulfill his higher altitude needs frequently requires that his spouse neglect some of her own needs.

At the most basic level, given limited energy, time, and resources, but increasing mutual dependence, spouses frequently encounter situations where the support-provider's and the support-seeker's personal goals are in conflict. Everyday activities, such as performing household chores or sharing in the support-seeker's positive news, take time and energy away from the support-provider's ability to pursue other goals. For instance, a woman may forgo private weight training to save money for a surprise getaway with her husband, slowing her progress in becoming fit. A man may forgo an opportunity to work as a foreign correspondent out of a reluctance to ask his wife to make the career sacrifice associated with moving abroad.



This issue is exacerbated by the narrowing of Americans' social networks, which means that today's spouses must support each other across more domains than in the past, and they might not be a skilled support-provider in some of them. Consequently, the partner is more likely than in the past to feel guilty or inadequate in her support-provision, which might, in turn, cause her to worry that her husband is disappointed in her (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). Moreover, even if she has provided competent support, he might not appreciate that support if he perceives it as untimely, intrusive, or insensitive (Feeney, 2004; Feeney & Thrush, 2010; Howland & Simpson, 2010; Maisel & Gable, 2009), which is especially likely if the needs in question are higher altitude, as such needs tend to be particularly delicate. Her insecurities about whether she is providing adequate support are likely to be exacerbated by self-expressive norms regarding the acceptability of divorce if he finds the relationship unfulfilling (Campbell & Wright, 2010; Campbell et al., 2012; Waite, 2000).

### Reduced Marital Quality

These adverse effects of the suffocation process on the support-seeker and the support-provider are substantial, but they are not the end of the story. Such effects extend into the domain of marital quality. We begin with a discussion of temporal trends in marital quality in recent decades. Next, we illustrate one issue associated with the ascension of marriage up Mount Maslow—that some of the higher altitude needs Americans expect their marriage to meet might, to an extent, be inherently contradictory—with an analysis of the challenges associated with simultaneously maximizing intimacy and passion in one's marriage.

**Temporal trends.** On average, Americans are becoming less satisfied with their marriage over time. Figure 16 illustrates the percentage of American men

and women who reported that they were “very happy” (rather than “pretty happy” or “not too happy”) with their marriage from 1973 to 2010 (Marquardt et al., 2012). During this period, the percentage of men who said they were very happy dropped 9%, and the percentage of women dropped 8%. However, this temporal trend does not reach statistical significance in every study, including the Amato et al. (2009) study comparing marriages in 1980 and 2000.

What are we to make of the fact that declines in marital happiness are modest in magnitude and sporadically significant? The straightforward explanation is that American marriages in the new millennium are only modestly less satisfying than their counterparts in the 1970s and 1980s. However, closer inspection suggests that the decline in marital satisfaction may be much steeper than they seem (see Glenn, 1990). Consider the analysis offered by Amato et al. (2009), who noted that, of all adults who had ever been married, 13% were divorced or separated in 1980, whereas 19% were divorced or separated in 2000—a 46% increase. Given that people in unhappy marriages are much more likely to divorce than people in happy marriages, the increased prevalence of formerly married Americans in 2000 relative to 1980 suggests that a greater proportion of unhappy marriages had ended in 2000 than in 1980. As such, extremely unhappy spouses were much more likely to be excluded from the 2000 than the 1980 sample of married individuals, which means that the pool of people who remained married in 2000 would be happier, on average, merely on the basis of this divorce artifact alone. In the words of Amato et al. (2009):

With increased selection out of troubled marriages, one might expect remaining marriages to be of higher quality in 2000 than in 1980. If this is true, then the apparent stability in marital happiness . . . would

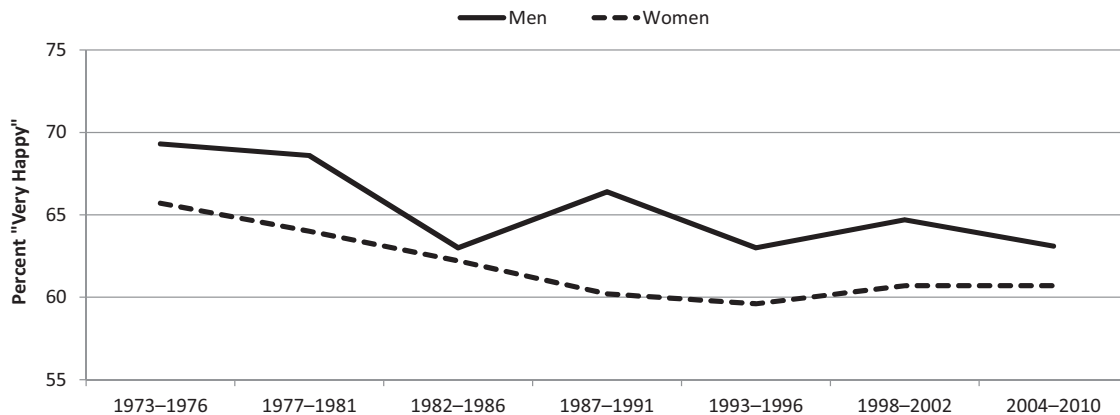


Figure 16. Percent of men and women who reported being “very happy” in their marriage, 1973–2010 (adapted from Marquardt et al., 2012). © National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values. Reproduced by permission of National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

represent a decline in the real level of these variables over time. (p. 273)

One potential reason for the normative decline in marital quality over time is that the processes through which individuals achieve personal growth and self-actualization can be arduous. Consequently, some forms of support required for personal growth and self-actualization involve behaviors that may be inimical to smooth marital functioning. For example, a man struggling to complete his first novel might benefit from honest, even critical, feedback about which of his time-management tendencies are especially likely to undermine his writing production. A woman training for a marathon might benefit from honest, even critical, feedback about which of her eating tendencies are especially likely to yield weight gain. Given how central the marital relationship has become for helping people meet many higher altitude needs, it might be hard for spouses to provide the sorts of challenging or critical feedback that can be beneficial in cases like these while making the partner feel, for example, loved, competent, and sexy (Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009).

**Potentially contradictory high-altitude needs: The case of intimacy and passion.** Another potential reason why the suffocation of marriage tends to undermine relationship quality is that some of the crucial higher altitude needs that Americans are increasingly expecting their marriage to fulfill are, under some circumstances, incompatible with others. Consider, for example, the increasing emphases on both intimacy and passion within the marriage. *Intimacy* refers to “the feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness one experiences in loving relationships” (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119). It involves “a process in which one person expresses important self-relevant feelings and information to another” and, as a result of the latter’s accepting response, comes to feel understood, validated, and cared for (Reis & Shaver, 1988, p. 628; also see Reis & Patrick, 1996). In contrast, *passion* refers to “the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual consummation” with him or her (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119). It involves a “state of intense longing for union” with the partner (Berscheid & Walster, 1969, p. 9).

Upon first blush, it may seem that intimacy and passion are entirely compatible, and in many respects they are. Mutually satisfying sexual experiences can facilitate emotional bonding, and vice versa. However, the establishment and maintenance of intimacy between spouses often undermines the passion between them (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; de Botton, 2012; Perel, 2007). Psychologist Dorothy Tennov (1979) argued that intense romantic passion results from an alchemic blend of *hope* that partner is in love with the self and *uncertainty* about whether the partner is ac-

tually experiencing this affective state. The problem is that it is difficult for individuals to feel strong levels of intimacy and security vis-à-vis their spouse while experiencing strong levels of uncertainty about whether the spouse is in love with them. As such, achieving the intimacy that scholars argue is essential for relationships to flourish (Clark & Lemay, 2010; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Murray et al., 2006; Reis, 2007) may, over the long run, be inimical to experiencing high levels of passion in the marriage.

This analysis dovetails with the work of Baumeister and Bratslavsky (1999), who argued that passion is the first derivative of intimacy over time—that it is high when intimacy is increasing and low when it is not. In other words, a stable level of intimacy, regardless of whether the level is high or low, yields low passion. Consistent with this analysis, a recent marriage study revealed that daily increases in intimacy predicted higher probabilities of having sex, greater sexual satisfaction and enjoyment, and greater reported passion in their relationship that day (Rubin & Campbell, 2012). A crucial implication of this model is that couples who have achieved and sustained extremely high levels of intimacy will frequently cease to experience increases in intimacy, which can ultimately undermine their passion for their partner. This analysis provides an explanation for the robust decline in passion during the early years of romantic relationships (Beck, 1999; Brewis & Meyer, 2005; Clement, 2002; Levine, 2003), as partners presumably find it increasingly difficult to elevate their already high levels of intimacy.

In short, experiencing sustained high levels of intimacy and security in one’s marriage has the potential to undermine passion for one’s spouse. The partial incompatibility between these two powerful affective experiences represents one example of the ways in which various means of higher altitude freighting are, in an important sense, difficult to satisfy with the same person.

### Consequences: Conclusion

The suffocation of marriage appears to be linked to a range of adverse effects on both personal well-being and marital quality. It is linked to diminished personal well-being, in both the support-receiver and the support-provider roles, and to diminished marital quality.

This suffocation model analysis hints at a dark perspective on the stabilization (or even slight decline) in divorce rates since the early 1980s (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). Scholars and other analysts have tended to view this trend in a positive light, and we generally share the view that bucking the rapidly rising divorce rates of the 1960s and 1970s has many positive elements. On the other hand, it is possible that one major reason why some Americans are remaining in their

**Table 2.** *Three Pathways to the Reoxygenation of Marriage, Along With Examples of Each.*

Optimizing Available Resources	Investing in Supplemental Oxygen	Requiring Less Oxygen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The marriage hack intervention</li> <li>• The relationship excitement intervention</li> <li>• The relationship awareness intervention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Couple time</li> <li>• Shared social activities</li> <li>• Shared civic activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selectively seek support from another member of the social network</li> <li>• Living apart together</li> <li>• Consensual nonmonogamy</li> </ul>

marriage is that the alternatives to marriage—including spending time with one’s broader social network or engaged in civic activities—have deteriorated in recent decades as spouses’ social networks have shrunk and civic engagement opportunities have diminished. It is possible that these broader social trends are causing people who otherwise would have divorced to stay married because they fear that divorce would leave them lonely and isolated.

### Reoxygenating Marriage

Given that the suffocation of marriage appears to have adverse effects for personal well-being and marital quality, it is worth considering how individuals might *reoxygenate* their marriage—how they might recalibrate the balance between what they are asking from their marriage and what they are investing in it. The logic underlying the suffocation model suggests that individuals can reoxygenate their marriage through three avenues, which are summarized in Table 2 along with examples of each. First, they can pursue strategies designed to optimize their resource use, thereby bolstering the extent to which they can achieve high-altitude need fulfillment without a major infusion of additional time or psychological resources. Second, they can invest in supplemental oxygen, strategically reallocating time and psychological resources away from other pursuits and toward the marriage, thereby increasing the ability of the relationship to meet the high-altitude demands the spouses are placing upon it. Third, they can require less oxygen by asking their spouse to shoulder less responsibility for helping them fulfill their higher altitude needs, thereby bringing the demands on the marriage into closer alignment with the available resources.

Spouses are best served by considering all three of these three avenues before deciding on a course of action, as the pursuit of one avenue can have important implications for the pursuit of one or both of the other avenues. For example, if spouses discover, as they pursue the third avenue, that they are unable to identify needs that they can outsource to other members of their social network, that discovery may have important implications for their pursuit of the second avenue. They might conclude that they need to invest considerably more in the marriage, perhaps promising to take nightly

walks together or to have sex at least once per week. If, in contrast, their pursuit of the third avenue had revealed some major needs that they can outsource, then the need to invest more in the marriage is likely to be much lower. It is useful to keep the interdependence among the avenues in mind while we discuss the three avenues.

### Optimizing Available Resources

First, spouses can seek to optimize the efficiency of their resource investment, working to enhance how much need fulfillment “bang” they can get for their resource investment “buck.” Scholars have recently designed several low-investment interventions that can yield notable improvements in marital quality. In one such intervention, called “the marriage hack” (Finkel, 2013), spouses write for 7 min every 4 months about a recent conflict in their marriage, seeking to reappraise the conflict from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for everybody (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013). In a recent test of this intervention, 120 married couples were randomly assigned either to this marriage hack condition or to a control condition in which they wrote about a significant recent conflict but did not perform the additional 7-min reappraisal task. This experimental assignment took place in the 2nd year of a 2-year study in which the 1st year did not include any intervention. Figure 17 illustrates the trajectories of marital quality over time for participants in the two conditions. In a replication of previous research (Glenn, 1998; VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001), marital quality declined over time (Finkel et al., 2013). However, this downward trend was eliminated among spouses in the reappraisal condition. Specifically, spouses in that condition managed to sustain marital quality over time (dashed black line). In contrast, the marital quality of spouses assigned to the no-intervention condition continued to decline in the 2nd year of the study (solid gray line).

Another recent low-investment intervention, a “relationship excitement” intervention based on theoretical and empirical work in the self-expansion theory tradition (Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993; Tsapelas, Aron, & Orbuch, 2009), provides couples with ideas

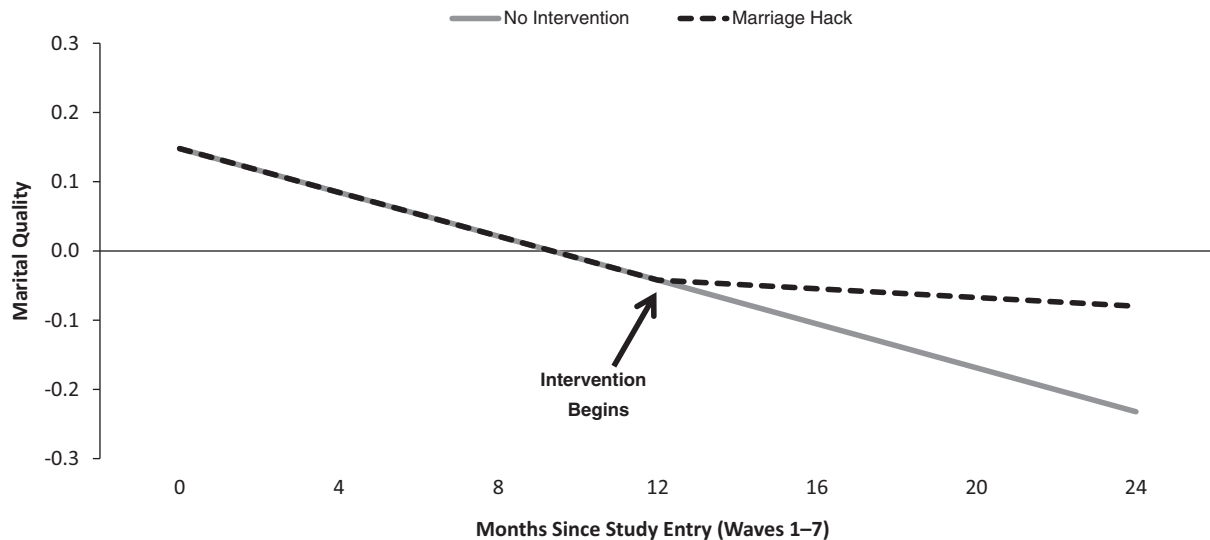


Figure 17. Trajectories of marital quality as a function of assignment to the no-intervention control condition versus the conflict-reappraisal (“marriage hack”) condition (adapted from Finkel et al., 2013). © SAGE Publications. Reproduced by permission of SAGE Publications. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

for exciting activities and encourages them to participate in shared exciting activities for 90 min per week for a 4-week period (Coulter & Malouf, 2013). In a recent test of this intervention, 101 couples, virtually all of whom were married or cohabitating, were randomly assigned either to this relationship excitement intervention or to a wait-list control condition. At the end of the 4-week study, participants in the relationship excitement condition exhibited greater romantic-relationship excitement, positive affect, and relationship satisfaction. They also exhibited sustained elevated levels of relationship well-being (relative to baseline) at a 4-month follow-up. Similar results, albeit with a somewhat more intensive relationship excitement intervention, were shown by Reissman et al. (1993), who also demonstrated that the excitement intervention yielded better outcomes than a pleasant activities intervention.

In a third recent low-investment intervention, a “relationship awareness” intervention, spouses attend a 4-hr session (in a group of 10–15 married couples) and then, every week for 4 weeks, watch a relationship-focused movie with their spouse and then engage in a semistructured discussion of it (Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, & Bradbury, in press). In the initial 4-hr session, couples thought about current behavior in their relationship and were encouraged “to decide for themselves if their behavior was constructive or destructive.” In addition, “they were introduced to the idea that regular every day events—particularly those captured in commercial films—could be used as prompts to accomplish these goals.” Although this intervention was designed to be as minimally directive as possible, it yielded marital outcomes that were not

only better than those experienced by couples in a no-intervention condition but also just as positive as those experienced by couples assigned either to a Compassionate and Accepting Relationships through Empathy condition (CARE; Rogge, Johnson, Lawrence, Cobb, & Bradbury, 2002) or a Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program condition (PREP; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994), both of which experienced intervention procedures requiring much more substantial investment of time and psychological resources. Specifically, relationship dissolution over the subsequent 3 years was 24% in the control condition but only 11% across the three intervention groups, which did not differ any a reliable manner from one another. The three intervention groups also did not differ in terms of marital satisfaction.<sup>9</sup>

Taken together, the success of these minimalist interventions suggests that spouses have an array of user-friendly options for strengthening their marriage. Spouses seeking to help their marriage flourish may be well served by starting with the adoption of one of these interventions.

<sup>9</sup>Couples were assigned to one of the three treatment conditions—relationship awareness, CARE, or PREP—at random, but they were assigned to the no-intervention condition if they either declined their assignment to an intervention or could not be scheduled for their intervention. This lack of random assignment to the no-intervention group means that causal conclusions regarding that group must remain tentative. Nonetheless, the comparisons among the three intervention conditions are not compromised by the assignment procedures to the no-intervention condition, which suggests that it is legitimate to conclude that the minimalist relationship awareness intervention was about equally effective as the labor-intensive CARE and PREP interventions.

### Investing in Supplemental Oxygen

Although these minimalist interventions are likely to be helpful, they are unlikely to be sufficient, on their own, to counteract substantial imbalances in what people are asking their spouses to do for them and how much they are investing in the marriage. As such, spouses seeking to help their marriage flourish may also wish to explore how they can invest more, how they can ask for less, or both. We discuss the investment avenue first.

In terms of investment in the marriage, spouses in one study who engaged in couple time (“time alone with each other, talking, or sharing an activity”) at least once a week were about 3.5 times more likely to report being “very happy” in their marriage, an effect that remained robust beyond potential demographic confounds such as income, age, education, race, and ethnicity (Wilcox & Dew, 2012; also see Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002; Hill, 1988; Kingston & Nock, 1987). In addition, at a 5-year follow-up assessment, baseline couple time predicted higher marital happiness and lower likelihood of divorce. Beyond time per se, spouses whose psychological resources are intact rather than depleted tend to behave in relationship-constructive ways (Buck & Neff, 2012; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel et al., 2012), presumably because the depletion leaves them with insufficient ability or motivation to invest in their relationship.

The suffocation model predicts that the links between resource investment and marital quality are likely to be especially strong to the extent that spouses have limited or otherwise compromised access to social outlets outside of marriage, and the Wilcox and Dew (2012) data are strongly consistent with this prediction (also see Dew, 2009; Kingston & Nock, 1987; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). For example, among wives (the effect was not significant for husbands), couple time interacted with the extent to which their friends and family members were supportive of the marriage, such that couple time—at least once per week versus less frequently—predicted a 2.5-fold increased likelihood of being very happy when support was high but a 6.5-fold increase when support was low. Similar moderation effects emerged for volunteering and religious attendance, with couple time exhibiting a much stronger association with marital happiness among spouses who were less rather than more embedded in their broader social networks. In short, to the extent that spouses (perhaps especially wives) treat their partner as a means of meeting a broad range of needs, and particularly to the extent that they do this to in the exclusion of other means, it is crucial that they invest sufficient resources to ensure that the marriage can flourish in light of all that responsibility. Given that contemporary Americans have less access to social outlets outside of marriage than did Americans in previous eras, these data

suggest that investing spousal time in the marriage is more crucial today than ever before.

As predicted by the suffocation model, the link between couple time and marital quality is statistically mediated by perceived need fulfillment. For example, couple time predicts greater need satisfaction in the domains of communication and sex, which significantly mediates the link between couple time and overall relationship quality (Wilcox & Dew, 2012). In general, need fulfillment within a relationship is positively associated with the quality of that relationship (Knee, Hadden, Porter, & Rodriguez, 2013; La Guardia & Patrick, 2008). In one study, for example, individuals reported nightly on the extent to which their partner helped them fulfill each of five needs that day: security, intimacy, companionship, sexual, and emotional involvement (Le & Agnew, 2001). Participants’ reports of the extent to which their partner fulfilled these needs on a given day were strongly correlated with their reports of relationship well-being that day. In short, couple time facilitates need fulfillment, which in turn predicts relationship quality.

Additional evidence of this reoxygenation process comes from a study demonstrating that spouses with a larger percentage of shared (but not unshared) friends tend to spend more time together and to have better marriages (Amato et al., 2009). This study also showed that spouses who attend religious services together more frequently tend to spend more in general and to have better marriages, an effect that is not explained by differences in religiosity.

Although a straightforward implication of this discussion is that spouses are well served by carving out additional time and psychological resources for each other, it is important to note that doing so is not always simple. Some couples can make such changes relatively easily by, for example, replacing television time with date-night time, replacing independent leisure activities with shared leisure activities, or sending their children away to summer camp. However, a major roadblock for many couples is that their stress levels or economic circumstances make it extremely difficult to carve out additional time, psychological resources, or money to invest in the marriage.

Indeed, socioeconomic discrepancies in marital outcomes appear to be driven largely by the greater economic and social challenges confronting low-income Americans rather than by diminished valuation of marriage among the poor (Karney & Bradbury, 2005; Trail & Karney, 2012). Many couples, especially low-income couples, might struggle to invest additional resources in their marriage not because they lack the will but rather because they lack the resources. For such individuals, family-friendly public policy and business practices, such as on-site childcare and flexible work arrangements, might be the single most effective way of helping them invest in their marriage. Indeed, even

among middle-class, dual-earner couples, such practices appear to be effective at helping to foster marital well-being (Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziembra, & Lyness, 2006).

### Requiring Less Oxygen

Even if spouses are able to invest additional resources, many marriages will continue to exhibit an imbalance in which the amount of high-altitude need fulfillment spouses are asking of the marriage exceeds the level of investment they have made. Spouses can ask less of the marriage in one or both of two ways. First, they can descend Mount Maslow, asking the marriage to meet more lower than higher altitude needs than what one is currently asking. Second, they can shrink the marital dependence zone, continuing to ask the marriage to meet needs of the same altitude on average but reducing the number or intensity of those requests (i.e., reducing the area of the marital dependence zone).

We suggest that individuals begin by considering areas in which their marriage is not doing a particularly good job of fulfilling their higher altitude needs, or where one or both partners need to invest exorbitant effort to meet a given need (i.e., where the psychological return on investment is low). Next, individuals can consider whether they have access to another person or activity that can more effectively meet that need—or that could more effectively meet that need if they were to cultivate the outside relationship or activity. If a man notices that his wife becomes overwhelmed when he comes to her to deal with feelings of sadness or vulnerability, he may choose to revive his relationship with his old college roommate, who was always an excellent shoulder to cry on, and call him up when needing comfort. If the man's wife finds that his earthy practicality makes it difficult for him to appreciate her talent for imaginative thought, she might pursue opportunities at work to showcase the creativity that she considers an essential expression of her personality.

To the extent that this outsourcing process brings the demands that the spouses place on the marriage into better alignment with the available resources (and with the spouses' skills and proclivities), it has the clear potential to bolster personal well-being. Beyond such effects, it also, somewhat paradoxically, has the potential to bolster marital well-being. Once individuals have begun strategically defreighting their marriage in this manner, they may find that the energy that they are still investing in the marriage is directed toward those elements of the relationship that do function well—those that they experience as the most joyful or intimate or that they feel define them as a couple. Consciously seeking need fulfillment outside the marriage may also help to eliminate some common but unrealistic expectations that spouses may hold about marriage, such as

that the right spouse must be an ideal partner in all ways (Sprecher & Metts, 1999). Such unrealistic expectations tend to place strain on the spousal relationship and reduce marital satisfaction, especially among spouses with poor marital communication tendencies (Attridge & Berscheid, 1994; Kurdek, 1991; McNulty & Karney, 2004).

We encourage spouses to consider the possibility that their marriage might involve trade-offs in the extent to which the two partners can fulfill different functions—confidant, lover, coparent, breadwinner, activity partner, therapist, and so on—and to discuss and consciously prioritize the functions that they view as most essential. To be sure, many partners already discuss the expectations that they have of each other, and the needs of each partner that the other commits to help with meeting. Less conventionally, we propose that married couples, or those who plan to marry, should also clearly articulate the expectations that they are willing *not* to ask of each other, and the needs that they will *not* insist be met within the marriage.

The logic of this strategy rests in part on the observation that marital satisfaction stems not from the overall volume of needs that are met by the relationship but from the discrepancy between the need fulfillment one expects from the relationship and the need fulfillment one actually receives from it (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Individuals who strategically defreight the marriage vis-à-vis higher altitude needs can increase the extent to which the marriage plays to the spouses' strengths, and the discrepancy between expectations and reality will become much smaller, a trend that should bolster marital quality. To be sure, defreighting the marriage so severely that interdependence becomes negligible is likely to be counterproductive, but a modest and selective defreighting is likely to bolster both personal and marital well-being.

Thus far, our discussion of the ways in which individuals can work to change their marriage has been general, and with good reason: Individuals can reorient their life in an infinite range of ways that can alter the domains in which they depend upon their spouse for need fulfillment. However, we illustrate our logic with a discussion of two potentially controversial avenues that individuals can consider as possible means of significantly reducing the amount of oxygen required for meeting the needs they ask their partner to help them fulfill. The first, *living apart together*, involves committed or even married couples living in separate residences. The second, *consensual nonmonogamy*, involves individuals maintaining the option of having romantic or sexual relationships beyond their primary partner, albeit with that partner's consent.

**Living apart together.** To many Americans, cohabitation is a defining feature of marriage, a necessary ingredient. However, a nontrivial number of

couples who are married or otherwise highly committed do maintain separate living spaces. In the 1996 and 1998 General Social Surveys, 7% of women and 6% of men indicated that they were steadily romantically involved with a person but did not live with them, and in 2006, 3% of American married couples lived apart (Strohm, Seltzer, Cochran, & Mays, 2009; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). Although living apart together is frequently a phase of courtship that prefaces a potential future decision to cohabit or marry (Milan & Peters 2003), it can also function as a deliberate means of maintaining autonomy and freedom while still enjoying the closeness of a serious relationship (Haskey & Lewis, 2006; Levin, 2004). In the words of *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni (2013), “Why not seize the intimacy without forfeiting the privacy?”

By living in separate residences, couples typically abdicate many lower altitude responsibilities for each other (Strohm et al., 2009). Each member is less likely to do housework at the other’s behest or to feel responsible for the other’s financial well-being. There is generally less need to coordinate lifestyle preferences and schedules. Such couples also tend to expect less emotional support than those who shared a home, although this discrepancy is smaller than the discrepancy for instrumental support. With regard to the emotional quality of living apart together relationships, however, it seems that couples in long-distance relationships (one common variant of living apart together) are as satisfied as couples who are geographically close (Jiang & Hancock, 2013), and they tend to have highly intimate, positive interactions (Stafford, 2010). Such findings suggest that living together is not required for sustaining closeness. Living apart may also mitigate the tendency to treat the spouse as the default interpersonal means for meeting higher altitude goals because the spouse will no longer be dramatically more accessible than others.

In addition, living apart together may be an effective way of preserving passion and excitement in a long-term union. Sexual and romantic passion frequently requires the bridging of a divide, and all-encompassing marriages run the risk of eliminating this divide (Perel, 2007). Indeed, physical or psychological interruptions in intimacy can bolster passion for one’s partner (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999; Berscheid, 1983), perhaps because the interruptions allow for temporary declines in relationship intimacy that can be reversed upon the reunion.

To be sure, maintaining two residences rather than one could substantially complicate childrearing, and, in any event, it is a luxury that many Americans cannot afford. However, those who can afford it might benefit from the diminished demands placed upon the marriage.

**Consensual nonmonogamy.** Monogamy is another essential ingredient of marriage for many Americans (Conley, Moors, Matsick, & Ziegler, in press; Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2012; Kipnis, 2003). However, recent years have witnessed a growing public dialogue surrounding consensually nonmonogamous relationships (Block, 2009; Williams, 2008). This conversation echoes a dialogue accompanying the “open marriage” movement of the 1970s, which was sparked by O’Neill and O’Neill’s (1972) book proposing that pursuing such relationships could make one’s “marriage a still deeper, richer, more vital experience” (p. 259).

The term *consensual nonmonogamy* encompasses both (a) *swinging* (or open marriage), in which spouses consent to the possibility that one or both of them will have relatively casual, nonintimate sex with an individual other than the primary partner, and (b) *polyamory*, in which spouses consent to the possibility that one or both of them will have a loving, bonded relationship with such an individual. In polyamorous relationships, openness and mutual consent are often considered defining components of the arrangement, such that all members of a relationship network are aware of and consent to their partners’ other attachments. This emphasis on openness and consent distinguishes these arrangements from the *cheating*, or “nonconsensual nonmonogamy,” that can occur in putatively monogamous relationships (Anapol, 2010). Research by psychologist Terri Conley and colleagues indicates that 4-5% of Americans are in consensually nonmonogamous relationships (Conley et al., in press; Conley et al., 2012; Moors, Edelstein, & Conley, 2012). Such partners object to the prevailing belief that monogamy is the natural form for a romantic relationship and that nonmonogamous relationships are inferior.

Consensual nonmonogamy in general and polyamory in particular are relevant to the idea of meeting psychological needs through more than one individual, as couples with this arrangement maintain the option of developing multifaceted relationships (not just sexual liaisons) with multiple partners. Indeed, one of the central rationales for polyamory is the belief that it is difficult for one intimate partner to meet the whole gamut of a person’s emotional needs. Instead, polyamorists frequently believe that it is best to craft a small network of intimate relationships that—by varying the nature of the emotional bond of each coupling, the commonalities shared by the partners, the interdependence level of the partners, and so forth—much more comprehensively meet the needs of the individuals involved (Anapol, 2010).

Consensually nonmonogamous relationships hint at a possible resolution to the trade-off experienced in many relationships between passion and intimacy (de Botton, 2012; Perel, 2007). As noted previously,

the frequency with which a couple has sex declines markedly over time in most long-term relationships (Beck, 1999; Brewis & Meyer, 2005; Clement, 2002; Levine, 2003). Consensual nonmonogamy allows one or both spouses to seek passionate sexual experiences with new partners without jettisoning a marital relationship that may still be satisfying and successful in many other ways. Indeed, in some situations, romantic or sexual involvement with a new partner can serve to bolster passion within the marriage, perhaps especially insofar as both spouses become sexually involved with the same additional partner or partners.

Much of the research on consensual nonmonogamy has focused on gay men, who are more likely to be in consensually nonmonogamous relationships than heterosexuals or lesbian women (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005). These studies have generally found that gay men in consensually nonmonogamous relationships felt equal or greater closeness, love, and satisfaction in their primary partnership compared to those in monogamous relationships (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Kurdek, 1988; Wagner, Remien, & Dieguez, 2000). The limited research that has investigated consensual nonmonogamy beyond the gay community suggests that this arrangement frequently fosters satisfying relationships across diverse sexual orientations (Mitchell, Bartholomew, & Cobb, in press). In addition, satisfaction levels in primary and secondary relationships tend to be positively correlated, and need fulfillment in a secondary relationship generally does not undermine satisfaction with or commitment to the primary partner.

In considering consensual nonmonogamy, couples and family therapist Esther Perel (2007) reported on a conversation she had with one of her colleagues, who asserted, "Open marriage doesn't work. Thinking you can do it is totally naïve. We tried it in the seventies and it was a disaster." Perel responded,

That may be so, but the closed marriage is hardly a guarantee against disaster. . . . And the monogamous ideal, which a decent chunk of married folks don't live up to, may be no less naïve. If anything, it seems to invite transgressions that are excruciatingly painful. (p. 192)

This analysis that couples who have adopted a consensually nonmonogamous norm might experience relationship outcomes that are just as good, perhaps even a bit better, than couples who have adopted a monogamous norm is consistent with the conclusions afforded by the limited evidence available to date (Conley et al., in press; Conley et al., 2012).

**A caveat.** We have argued that one means of increasing personal and marital well-being is reducing the extent of higher altitude dependence upon the marriage. However, the validity of this assumption depends upon certain factors that are not yet known. In partic-

ular, it presupposes that the human psyche is built in a manner that allows for need satisfaction to be parceled out across relationship partners without the individual experiencing a fractured, unsatisfying emotional life.

Prevailing theories in relationship science frequently imply that a core set of needs must be fulfilled by the same person, who is frequently called the "attachment figure." To the extent that that is true, some strategies for defreighting the marriage, including living apart together and consensual nonmonogamy, would likely backfire, destroying the marriage and undermining personal well-being. Indeed, it seems likely that there are synergistic effects of having one's partner tend to multiple emotional needs—it may be easier, for example, to experience deep comfort with someone who also makes one laugh, and sexual passion may often be deeper between two people who also share a crackling intellectual repartee. There may even be a feeling of fulfillment resulting from the simple fact that a single partner can meet diverse needs.

We suggest, however, that having a diverse network of close others who help individuals meet distinct needs does not need to mean having sterile, one-dimensional relationships. Indeed, given that attachment—in the Bowlby (1969) and Hazan and Shaver (1987) sense of the term as a deep emotional connection—tends not to be a monogamous emotional system (Fisher, 1998), it is likely that a person would feel an important sense of attachment and intimacy with many of the people who fulfill any of his or her higher altitude psychological needs. However, to the extent that there is particular synergy in having certain clusters of needs met by one partner—for example, if comfort is especially meaningful coming from a partner who is also one of a person's most important sources of approval and respect—the process of defreighting should be tailored to ensure that these bundles of needs are parceled together.

### Reoxygenating: Conclusion

The suffocation model suggests that there are three general routes through which spouses can bolster the strength of their marriage: optimizing the use of their available resources, investing more resources in the marriage, and asking their spouse to shoulder less responsibility for helping them fulfill their higher altitude needs. Pursuing these three routes, either together or in isolation, holds promise for maximizing the likelihood that the marriage plays to the spouses' strengths and that they will make the most of the resources that are currently or potentially available.

### Discussion

In this article, we introduced and developed the suffocation model of marriage in America. According to this model, the needs that Americans ask their



marriage to help them fulfill have, since the nation's founding, systematically ascended Mount Maslow. Because the fulfillment of higher altitude needs fosters happiness and personal fulfillment much more than the fulfillment of lower altitude needs does—and because spouses have fewer close social outlets outside of marriage than in the past—variation in the extent to which the marriage fulfills the needs spouses ask it to fulfill predicts psychological well-being more strongly today than in the past.

However, the successful facilitation of higher altitude needs is especially likely to require a deep emotional connection and profound mutual insight. As such, marital success today, to a much greater extent than in the past, depends upon the psychological connection between the spouses. A deep connection typically requires that the spouses invest time and psychological resources in the relationship. Unfortunately, Americans are investing less, not more, in their marriage today than in the past. As a result, Americans are, on balance, suffering adverse psychological consequences and becoming less satisfied with their marriages. Fortunately, the logic of the suffocation model suggests promising avenues through which spouses can improve an imperfect marriage.

### **The Suffocation Model and the Social Psychology of Goal Pursuit**

At its core, the suffocation model is a model of goal pursuit. In particular, it is a model of the role that significant others play in helping individuals pursue their goals. From this perspective, the suffocation model derives from, and contributes to, the burgeoning social-psychological literature investigating the links between social processes and personal goal pursuit (e.g., Feeney, 2004, 2007; Finkel & Fitzsimons, 2011; Fitzsimons, Finkel, & vanDellen, 2014; Rusbult et al., 2009). This literature has shown, for example, that individuals look to their spouse to help them achieve their personal goals and that their perception that their spouse has been effective in this role predicts their level of satisfaction with him or her (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schultheiss, 1996; Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009; also see Finkel & Eastwick, in press; Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008).

A particularly sophisticated model of the links between social processes and self-regulation is the *transactive goal dynamics model* (Fitzsimons et al., 2014), which examines how two partners' goal qualities (the content, standard, value, and efficacy of the goal), goal pursuit (the means and effort of pursuit), and goal outcomes (progress toward the goal) affect one another in a complex web of regulatory interdependence, ultimately predicting the success of the dyadic system across all goals. The suffocation model has neglected

the mechanisms through which spouses can facilitate the fulfillment of each other's goals, but integrating the current analysis with the transactive goal dynamics model represents an important direction for future research. For example, the two spouses might differ in their skill at facilitating the fulfillment of distinct types of goals, in which case they might benefit from a division of labor in which each spouse takes on responsibility for *both spouses'* need fulfillment in a distinct domain. Perhaps the husband takes on responsibility for both partners' belonging and love needs by planning movie outings, whereas the wife takes on responsibility for both spouses' self-actualization needs by discovering pathways for spiritual engagement that both partners find fulfilling.

As another example, the two spouses might differ in the extent to which they are oriented toward the initiation versus the maintenance of high-altitude goal pursuit. Perhaps the husband's exuberant temperament causes him to become exhilarated by new intellectual pursuits but also easily bored, whereas the wife's more stable temperament deprives her of her husband's highs but also protects her from his fickleness. Both spouses can flourish to the extent that he locates exciting opportunities for the two of them to pursue and she reins in some of his exuberance to ensure that they actually devote themselves to a manageable number of these opportunities rather than being dilettantes in dozens of them. These two examples are illustrative of a broader point: The suffocation model would be substantially bolstered by a process-level analysis of *how* contemporary spouses work together to meet their higher altitude needs.

### **Implications for Dating and Courtship**

Although the suffocation model is a model of marriage, it has implications for dating and courtship. For example, even before individuals become involved in a relationship, they might benefit from considering Mount Maslow to help them determine what sort of marriage they are seeking. We have largely focused on historical changes in the normative structure of marriage, but there is substantial interindividual variation within any era in what people seek from their marriage (Amato, 2012), and there is no reason why a contemporary American is required to seek a self-expressive marriage. For example, a professor who finds immense fulfillment and self-expression in her career might decide that she wishes to prioritize the fulfillment of companionship rather than self-actualization needs in her marriage. Having those priorities in mind is likely to increase the efficiency and the ultimate success of the courtship process.

In addition, individuals can capitalize upon their dating and courtship experiences to develop the skill set that is likely to help them to build a flourishing

relationship once they are married. If they aspire to a marriage that facilitates the fulfillment of both partners' higher altitude goals, then they can use the courtship process to determine which partner qualities are especially compatible with them and to develop the sorts of psychological and interpersonal skills that are likely to help them achieve a deep emotional connection and profound mutual insight with their future spouse.

If individuals hope to build a marriage that is sexually fulfilling for the long run, they should be sober about the challenges of sustaining sexual passion in long-term marriage, and they can use the dating and courtship period to hone their sexual skills. Along these lines, we encourage individuals to consider the advice of sex advice columnist Dan Savage (2007) that they strive to be *good, giving, and game*—that is, sexually skilled, oriented toward satisfying their partner's sexual desires, and open-minded to a broad range of different sexual activities. From a psychological perspective (we sidestep the moral perspective here), even people who wish to develop a relatively traditional marriage are likely to experience a better sexual relationship with their spouse—and, consequently, a more fulfilling and stable marriage—if they develop strong sexual skills. Such skills, which encompass not only the physical acts themselves but also the psychological dynamics spouses bring to those acts, can help spouses sustain sexual desire even when the level of security and dependability in the marriage would threaten to undermine such desire among less sexually skilled spouses.

Once individuals have started dating somebody whom they would seriously consider marrying, the emphasis shifts from a general orientation toward self-discovery and skill development to a targeted assessment of romantic compatibility and an orientation toward the development and growth of the relationship. Can this partner help them achieve the sort of marriage they seek? If not, do they wish to revise what they seek from a marriage to align more closely with the bond they can form with this particular partner? Do they believe that both partners can achieve long-term fulfillment if they were to marry, and can they agree on the specific goals and needs they will and will not look to each other to fulfill? Getting onto the same page regarding this last question should probably function as a prerequisite for the decision to marry.

### **Sociodemographic Variation in the Suffocation of Marriage**

In this article, we have largely sidestepped questions related to whether, and the extent to which, the suffocation model differentially characterizes marriages across distinct sociodemographic groups. Based on the evidence available to date, our intuition is that the model's key tenets apply to the vast majority of Americans and within the vast majority of (perhaps even

all) sociodemographic groups. That said, the *extent to which* various tenets are true surely varies across sociodemographic groups. For example, although even highly religious groups such as the Amish, Evangelical Christians, and Orthodox Jews almost certainly prioritize higher relative to lower altitude needs more today than in the past, the magnitude of this temporal shift has presumably been smaller in such groups than in the American population as a whole. Consequently, the extent to which the sorts of deep emotional connection and profound psychological insight are required to achieve successful marriages is presumably lower among such groups than in the general population.

A separate issue is that sociodemographic groups vary in the extent to which their life circumstances make it easy versus difficult to find time and psychological resources for reoxygenating their marriage. As discussed previously, those sociodemographic groups that are experiencing the greatest difficulties with marriage are not necessarily the ones that value marriage the least. For example, although divorce rates tend to be much higher among Black than among White Americans, Black Americans are 30% more likely to answer "very important" to this prompt (57% vs. 44%): "When a man and woman plan to spend the rest of their lives together as a couple, how important is it to you that they legally marry?" (Taylor et al., 2007).

According to the suffocation model, these divergent associations of sociodemographic factors with marital success versus marital valuation may be due to the differential investment in the marriage across sociodemographic groups. In particular, income and wealth inequality across sociodemographic groups has soared since around 1980, and many poor individuals today are experiencing particularly high levels of stress and particularly low levels of spousal time. For example, between 1983 and 2007, the ownership of U.S. wealth increased from 68.2% to 73.1% among the wealthiest 10% of American households, whereas it decreased from 6.1% to 4.2% among the poorest 60% of American households (Wolff, 2010). To the extent that poverty exacerbates stress and reduces couples' flexibility in planning couple time, shifts in the distribution of wealth have likely taken a toll on lower income Americans. After all, spousal time is a strong predictor of marital quality, but economic changes likely have made it harder for poor people to find such time.

If it is true that a major reason why poorer sociodemographic groups are experiencing worse marital outcomes is that they lack the time and psychological resources required to cultivate a contemporary, high-altitude marriage, then we should see a stark discrepancy in the temporal trajectories of marital quality across these groups. In particular, we should see that, as income inequality has provided more resources to wealthier sociodemographic groups and fewer resources to poorer sociodemographic groups

## SUFFOCATION OF MARRIAGE

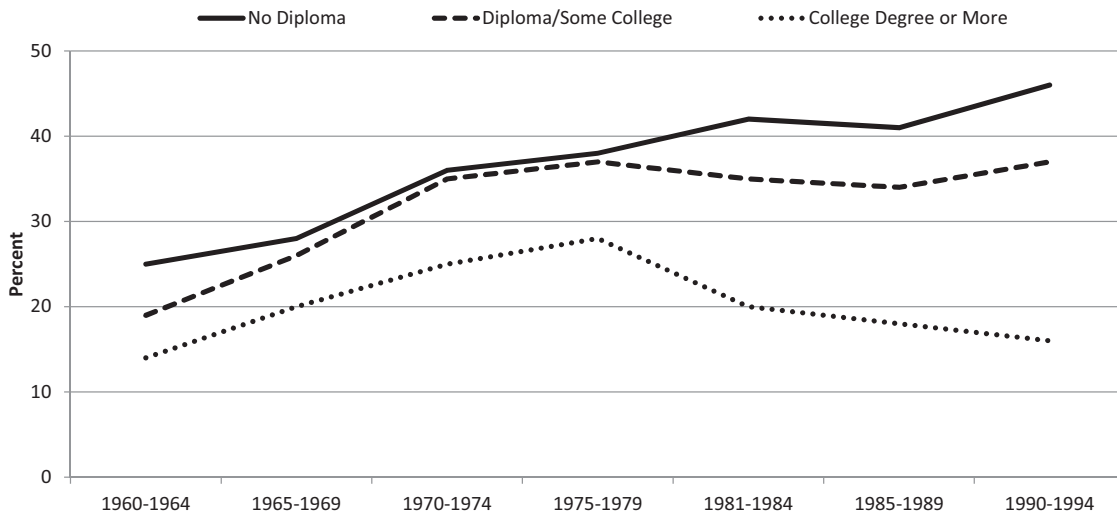


Figure 18. Ten-year divorce rates as a function of educational attainment for marriages starting between 1960 and 1994 (adapted from Martin, 2006). © Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. Reproduced by permission of Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. Permission to reuse must be obtained from the rightsholder.

since 1980, the discrepancy in marital outcomes between the two groups has increased.

Figure 18 illustrates the 10-year divorce rates for marriages that began between 1960 and 1994, separately for groups with low (no high school diploma), medium (high school diploma or some college), and high (college degree or more) sociodemographic status (Martin, 2006). The results are consistent with the suffocation model analysis. The main effect of socioeconomic status is strongly moderated by time. In the 1960s and 1970s, an era in which divorce rates were generally increasing but income inequality was moderate, the temporal divorce trajectories (slopes over time) were comparable across the three groups. Starting around 1980, however, when income inequality began to soar, these trajectories diverged sharply. Although the divorce rate continues to climb in the least educated group, it has actually declined sharply in the most educated group.

Of course, social groups vary on many dimensions beyond race, education, and wealth, and investigating how the suffocation model varies in accord with these additional sources of variation represents an important direction for future research. For example, according to socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), older individuals tend to prioritize emotion regulation over knowledge acquisition, whereas younger individuals exhibit the opposite pattern, and future research could fruitfully investigate whether such differences alter which needs people ask their marriage to fulfill (e.g., self-actualization vs. love and belongingness), the extent to which they invest time and psychological resources in the marriage, and so forth. Along similar lines, future research could also explore how a given marriage changes over time. Do

the spouses' expectations of the marriage change over time, do they change their level of investment in the marriage, and do they become better at optimizing their resource investment?

### Marriage Beyond America's Borders

We have not conducted a systematic analysis of the extent to which the suffocation model varies across cultures. In general, though, our best guess is that the historical trends characterizing marriage in America have unfolded similarly across the Western world, albeit with some differences in the timing (but probably not the ordering) of these trends from one nation to the next. Indeed, even much of the non-Western world has exhibited similar trends, although they have tended to occur much more recently, and some cultures, such as China, may be in the midst of the transition from relatively pragmatic to relatively companionate models of marriage (e.g., Chan, Ng, & Hui, 2010). Hong Kong provides an interesting test case because it has strong Chinese roots but robust Western influence over the past century. According to a recent survey of women in Hong Kong, more than 70% believe that sharing one's life with a loved one (a quality of companionate marriages) is one of the top three meanings of marriage, whereas fewer than 20% believe that meeting family responsibilities or achieving financial security (a quality of institutional marriages) is one of the top three meanings (Wong, 2003). It seems plausible that marriage in Eastern cultures might eventually ascend to the highest altitudes on Mount Maslow, although it is also possible that cultures vary sufficiently in their motivational hierarchies (see, e.g., Gambrel & Cianci, 2003; Hofstede, 1984) that cultural development will

lead to an ascent of a mountain that looks somewhat different from Mount Maslow. Cross-cultural research investigating these possibilities represents an exciting direction for future research.

Beyond these general comments, we also note one more specific trend, which is that marriage in America has, in one important respect, increasingly diverged from marriage in other Western nations (Cherlin, 2009). On one hand, Americans hold more fiercely than people in these other nations to the view that marriage is an essential cultural ideal. In the words of sociologist Andrew Cherlin (2009),

Nowhere else is the government spending money to promote marriage. In no other Western country would a person walking down the street see the advertisement I have seen on the sides of buses in Baltimore: a smiling couple proclaiming, "Marriage works." (p. 3).

On the other hand, Americans divorce (and remarry, and divorce again) at much greater rates than do people in these other nations. In the words of Cherlin (2009), "I know that in no other Western country is the waiting period for a no-fault divorce so short" (p. 3).

Cherlin explains that marriage in America is unique insofar as it is buffeted by competing cultural models. Americans have exceptionally high respect and admiration for marriage, but they simultaneously have exceptionally high respect and admiration for self-expression and personal growth. "Consequently, Americans are conflicted about lifelong marriage: they value the stability and security of marriage, but they tend to believe that individuals who are unhappy with their marriages should be allowed to end them" (Cherlin, 2009, p. 4). Cherlin's analysis suggests that although people throughout the Western world are presumably susceptible to adverse effects of the suffocation of marriage, Americans might be more susceptible than most.

## Conclusion

Marriage in America has changed radically since the late 1700s. It is much less oriented toward helping spouses meet their physiological and safety needs and much more oriented toward helping them meet their esteem and self-actualization needs. Although the latter set of needs requires a much deeper relational bond and a stronger psychological connection than the former set does, Americans appear to be spending less time cultivating these relational attributes than they did in previous eras. In conjunction, Americans' increasing tendency to look to their marriage to facilitate the achievement of their high-level needs, along with their decreasing investment in the quality of their marriage, is linked to reductions in personal well-being and marital quality over time.

The good news, however, is that marriage has greater potential today than ever before, and marital quality is a stronger predictor of personal well-being than in the past. Meeting higher altitude needs is enormously gratifying, and doing so through one's marriage can help people achieve exceptionally high levels of relationship well-being, happiness, and personal fulfillment.

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## Note

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