

# The Silver Lining for Marriage in a Post-COVID World

How will the coronavirus pandemic affect marriages? This has been a matter for [speculation](#) in the media since lockdowns began. Looking out my window or taking walks to the local park during the past few weeks (as Kiwis have been able to do all along) and seeing many couples happily walking or cycling with their children, I would say it is doing some marriages good. Some have said openly on television that they have enjoyed the family time bonus.

It is plausible, however, that where there is friction or staleness in a marriage, confinement may make things worse. But then again, the economic fallout of lockdowns, including mass unemployment, may be an incentive to stick together – for security, at least.

More predictable, says W. Bradford Wilcox, a professor of sociology and director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, is that economic insecurity will discourage even more people from marrying in the first place. Marriage rates have been steadily falling across the developed world since 1970. In the U.S. the rate ticked up a little between 2014 and 2016, but new census figures show an all-time low in 2018.

Wilcox estimates that around a third of American adults today will never marry. This is “a new kind of milestone in American life, and it’s unfortunate because marriage obviously gives meaning purpose happiness and solidarity to most of the men and women who marry in America.”

And yet there could be a silver lining to the COVID cloud, he suggested in a great webinar (see video below) last week with

Eli Finkel, a professor of psychology and of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and director the Relationships and Motivation Lab.

Coronavirus, says Wilcox, could kill off or severely weaken the hold of the “soulmate myth” of marriage that took hold from the 1970s onwards. This is “the idea that marriage is primarily about an intense emotional connection between two people that should last only so long as that connection remains happy, fulfilling and life-giving to the self.”

It is an idea that has opened up an ominous marriage gap in America and elsewhere, on the upside of which is the educated elite who still marry and stay married, and on the downside, increasing numbers of ordinary people who aspire to a soulmate marriage but for whom the model doesn't work, at the expense of their own happiness and that of their children. Wilcox would like to see it laid to rest, and a return to a more family-centered idea of marriage.

In that way, he argues, married couples would emerge from the COVID era in a better financial and emotional state, and marriage is likely to be a more secure harbor for their children.

Coming from a liberal position on social issues, Finkel nevertheless agrees that the soulmate model does not work for a lot of people, in particular those who do not have the educational, financial and other “resources” to achieve the desired personal fulfillment in marriage.

Those who do have the resources to meet that expectation have “the best marriages the world has ever seen”. Their achievements correlate with high levels of personal happiness – an effect that is twice as strong today as in 1980. Finkel has written about his research on this topic in [The All or Nothing Marriage: How the Best Marriages Work](#) (2018) which

explores contemporary marriage in relation to [Maslow's hierarchy of needs](#) – usually represented as a pyramid, with the most basic needs at the bottom and self-realization at the top.

But even those at the summit of “Maslow's Mountain” could be asking too much of marriage, says Finkel. People at every level need strategies – usually quite simple – and other people who can meet some of the expectations.

Wilcox agrees that married couples need others – extended family, close friends, church community and so on; but his conversation with Finkel reveals some fundamental differences.

The psychologist's view of marriage seems to be, in the end, individualistic: the happiness and stability of family life depends on the spouses being able to satisfy their own high expectations – although a focus on meaning and purpose will allow some couples to transcend the self. He is unwilling to say, therefore, that marriage is the only, or even the best path for family life.

The family scholar, on the other hand, comes from the perspective of virtue – self-giving, generosity, service of the spouse and children – as a path to communion and “peak happiness”. A path, by the way, achievable by people even with fewer resources.

Wilcox also bases his view on the intuition and the evidence that marriage is the best environment for children (except where there is high conflict) and that society should let the younger generation know this. At present, he points out, the educated elite base their own family life on marriage, while allowing public schools, universities, the media and pop culture to tell stories that undermine it, that are not truthful.

Unless society starts telling the truth about marriage, the marriage gap will continue to widen, depriving couples and

children of the emotional and financial benefits.

This is an important dialogue that needs to continue.

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