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Peer Marriage

How Love Between Equals Really Works

In 1983 Philip Blumstein and I published the results of a large study on the nature of American relationships; it was called *American Couples*. The study, which received an enormous amount of notice from the press and the public, was composed of over 12,000 questionnaires and 600 interviews from married, cohabiting, lesbian, and gay members of couples.¹ During the course of what turned out to be a decade-long effort, I noticed that there were many same-sex couples with an egalitarian relationship but very few such heterosexual couples. Because the homosexual couples did not have to surmount the traditions of sex differences, they more often worked out relationships that both partners felt were fair and supportive to each other. My curiosity about their success at this aspect of their relationship, plus my admiration for the few egalitarian heterosexual couples in the study, made me want to know more about how married couples could get past traditions of gender and construct a relationship built on equality. Previous sociological studies on marriage made chances for egalitarian marriage seem grim, but since my own marriage was successfully egalitarian, I had both scientific and personal motivation to see why some couples reconstructed gender roles and others did not. To that end, I reexamined some of the egalitarian marriages in the *American Couples* study, used them as an archetype, and then sought more of these couples to talk to and learn from.

The couples, I discovered, based their marriages on a mix of equity (each person gives in proportion to what he or she receives) and equality (each person has equal status and is equally responsible for emotional, economic, and household duties). But these couples were distinguished by more than their dedication to fairness and collaboration; the most happy and durable among them also had refocused their relationship on *intense companionship*. To be sure, they shared child raising, chores, and decision making more or less equally and almost always equitably, but for most of them, this was just part of a plan for a true companionship marriage. The point of the marriage was not to share everything fifty-fifty. Rather, the shared decisions, responsibility, and household labor were in the service of an intimate and deeply collaborative marriage. I call this kind of marriage peer marriage; it is a marriage of equal companions, a collaboration of love and labor in order to produce profound intimacy and mutual respect.

The people in peer marriage, for the most part, are not ideologues. They construct and maintain a peer marriage because they find it rewarding. If they are without the means to hire the services of a home-maker, they seek work that allows both spouses to share child care and housework. These couples do not strike acquaintances as odd; they look just like their friends and co-workers, except that they have vigilantly preserved their commitment to equality. Additionally, they see peer marriage as salvation from instability. Many of them have witnessed the deterioration of their own previous marriage, or that of friends, and they believe that the only way to maintain a lifetime together is to create an irreplaceable, and interdependent, union of equals. . . .

In general, four characteristics of peer couples emerged. First, the partners did not generally have more than a sixty-forty traditional split of household duties and child raising. (An exception was made for the early periods of infancy, and even then, there had to be significant paternal involvement.) Second, each partner believed that each person in the couple had equal influence over important and disputed decisions. Third, partners felt that they had equal control over the family economy and reasonably equal access to discretionary funds. Most research has indicated that money confers power and relative income influences decision making.² These couples either had to earn similar amounts, or share power over family resources (such as having similar ability to undertake nonmonitored private spending). Fourth, each person's work was given equal weight in the couple's life plans. The

person with the less glamorous and remunerative job could not always be the person with the most housework or child care. The requirement of sharing money, influence, decision making, child care and homemaking applied even for couples in which one person had a salaried job and the other stayed home. Among older couples, a history of traditional role division that no longer existed was allowable as long as it had not been true for the previous three years. The point was not to define these characteristics as the only way to reach a just, rewarding, and durable relationship but to use them to define the new, and spreading, phenomenon of marriages in which traditional roles were absent and there was no hidden hierarchy. . . .

My snowball sample (the term sociologists use for a sample whereby one person recommends the next) makes any statistical conclusions about peer couples seriously suspect. Nonetheless, certain attributes appeared again and again and are at least worth mentioning, if only as a guide for future research. These couples tended to be dual income; only three couples contained women who did not work at all. They were in their late twenties to mid-forties. There was only one much older couple (in their mid-sixties) and only a few in their mid-fifties. The age similarity was partially an artifact of the snowball sample but also probably a cohort effect. It was the baby boom generation who came of age at a time when feminist ideology was having its rebirth. This generation, born between 1945 and 1957, and its younger followers had to evaluate whether to embrace the new tenets and criticisms of marriage, or to opt for the traditional model. The baby boom and post-baby boom women who endorsed feminist philosophy—or at least wanted to shuck off old gender roles and constraints—have had to consider consciously the role of marriage in determining their life. Some had to think about *if* they wanted to be married, and all have examined *how* they wanted to be married. More of these women might be expected to want a relationship that gives them equal standing in marriage. Oddly, younger women among this group sometimes assumed a certain amount of equality and equity and thereby unconsciously settled for less.

This cohort explanation may also explain why almost half of these marriages contain a previously divorced partner. People in this age group have a higher divorce rate than the cohorts ahead of them. Also, the older women of the baby boom generation were more likely to have started marriage under one set of norms and reexamined it under a new, more feminist consciousness. Most of these women who

were previously divorced said they left their first marriage because of inequitable treatment. Peer men were far more likely to recite a great number of reasons for the breakup of their marriage but were also likely to say it was either the end of their marriage or the difficult period after the marriage was over, a devastating period of fighting over property and support, that made them seek a peer relationship. Accusations of betrayal or continued emotional and financial dependence of the ex-spouse made these men much more interested in a different kind of marriage the next time: an independent, working spouse who could hold her own in a partnership.

The last, and rather unexpected, commonality among the peer couples was that they tended to be more middle class than working or upper middle class. As we shall see, egalitarian couples seem more likely when male income is not so grand that it encourages a nonworking wife or makes the wife's income unimportant. When a peer marriage had a high-earning male, it was likely there was also a high-earning female (or, as in a couple of cases, a female with a prestigious job such as an elected politician or a successful artist). But generally, most male occupations were *not* of high pressure and high profile. It seems to be easier to create an egalitarian relationship if the man has a job (or creates one) that has some flexibility and controllable hours, and if both partners make similar amounts of money (for example, if both partners are teachers). Still, these kinds of background data do not provide the answers to the most intriguing commonalities of all: How did these people come to be in an egalitarian marriage? Why did they want to be peers? . . .

Why Peer Marriage?

To any woman who was or is part of the women's movement, the answer to this question is clear. Women in the recent history of the United States, Canada, and most of Western European have experienced a rise in personal freedom that can be expected to extend to their family and personal life. This is particularly true for the women of the baby boom generation who grew up indulged by a kind economy and relatively permissive parents and who, along with the males in their cohort, rebelled against traditional social expectations: what it meant to be a woman, a man, a partner, a spouse.

Their critique of traditional marriage included the perception that it was unacceptably anti-individualistic. Traditionally, marriage is a

corporate entity in which the self is supposed to be transformed to fulfill, depending on one's gender, the demands of supporter and provider, or father and mother. Both men and women, but especially a number of women, defied that loss of individuality and rigid description of duties. Women, for example, decided, either rationally or de facto, that virginity was no longer required in order to be a desirable spouse or a good wife. The institutionalization of premarital sex was just part of the questioning of gender requirements. Young people proclaimed that individual happiness was more important than familial duty. There was a general rejection of capitulation to traditional expectations. A number of women wrote about new ways to be female. Theories of male oppression and patriarchal culture flourished. And although the number of women who directly participated in these forums may have been statistically small, the reach of their thoughts and feelings was deep and broad. Women left marriage—or were left—in extraordinary numbers; the divorce rate has more than doubled since the early 1960s. Both women who stayed in marriages and women who left them learned a new language of anger and inequity. The appetite for equality and equity grew nationally and internationally, and even those who held onto traditional values about roles and relationships found themselves more aware and critical of some of the bargains of male and female relations. . . .

Of course, even if we wanted to, we could not erase all the differences between men and women that make them attracted and attached to each other, emotionally, erotically, and pragmatically. But now that we offer a real possibility of equality, many people get cold feet. They do not seek true equality because they are scared that all they will get is trouble for their effort. In some ways, the most dangerous impact of well-meaning books like *The Second Shift* is that they confirm readers' worst fears about the changing nature of male and female roles: that liberated women will only be liberated for more work, less love, less protection, and more exploitation. Men and women are worried about who they will have to be if they give up their traditional gender territories and remap their personal and family life. They are worried as well that the opening up of roles to personal choice rather than by sex will obliterate sexual differences and the interdependence of the sexes. Men and women know how to enjoy gender and marriage by the old ways, they feel lost when it comes to egalitarian marriage, have trouble believing the rewards of peer marriage would be worth the sacrifice it takes to get there, and they feel they are good enough

where they are, having made significant strides from their parents' marriages and moving as close to egalitarian as they will ever get. They don't believe they can take the next step, so they stop short of it. They have a false sense of how far they have come and how far it is possible to go; they do not realize that the path they are on is not actually leading them to the place they want to go.

Then why peer marriage? Why have some couples moved through this considerable gauntlet to create an egalitarian partnership? Most simply, it is because they want to love each other as much as possible. They want a marriage that has intensity and partnership and does not create the distance between men and women that is inevitable between people of unequal status and power. These men and women looked at the lack of intimacy, and even at the anger and resentment between their parents or in previous relationships of their own, and wanted to avoid replication. Women who were consciously feminist did not want to be angry about inequity; men in love did not want to have an accusatory and resentful partner. Men and women who began as friends became deeply committed to maintaining that friendship, and took steps to preserve the relationship from the impact of traditional marriage. The common theme among these peer couples is the preservation of intimacy, the desire to be neither oppressor nor oppressed, the commitment to a relationship that creates a shared universe rather than parallel lives. When they designed their relationship to ensure those goals, the rewards of peer marriage became self-reinforcing.

But Who Would Be a Peer Man?

The common perception is that men do not want a peer marriage. Why should they give up all the privileges conferred by traditional marriage? And even if we can imagine that a man would like to share the burden of supporting a family or would like a career woman with whom to share his life, we know that most men have been loath to take on the burdens that women carry. It is hard to imagine as well that men who have the opportunity for high earnings and a prestigious job would sacrifice either for a more participatory family life. Because of these and similar observations, many women feel that peer men are born, not made, and so few of them exist that they are not worth looking for.

That is a misconception. Peer men often *are* made, *not* born. Many men came to peer values after they tried a fairly traditional relationship and found it didn't work for them. They enjoyed having service, support and household management from a traditional wife or a girlfriend—up to a point. Then they reported being either bored or overwhelmed with responsibility. Some fell in love with a “new woman”—an independent peer who was exactly the sort of woman they avoided or felt insecure around when they were younger. Many of the first wives of these men were furious at losing husbands after they had fulfilled the contract they both had signed. And when these women dated or remarried, they no longer presented themselves as they had as younger, more traditional women.

Others of these men had had traditional relationships that they liked just the way they were, until they went sour for a variety of reasons. It was the aftermath of the separation, divorce, custody, and alimony battles that changed their mind about what they wanted in their next relationship. Many of these men were very attached to their children and vowed never again to be the minor parent. Others had ex-wives who were lost without them, and the responsibility and guilt of that situation made them look for someone stronger.

Nevertheless, some of these men *were* “born peer.” They came from homes where they got along with and respected an impressive mother or sister. Some had grown up doing their fair share of chores and babysitting. Quite a few of them were men who never felt comfortable with macho standards of masculinity. They liked female company; they liked to talk; they liked being in a family environment. One common distinguishing factor is that they liked children, looked forward to having their own, and wanted to be involved in the day-to-day upbringing of their family.

Some of these men were ambitious in their work; others were clear from the beginning that their work would come second to their marriage and family. But what they usually shared in common was the idea that they wanted an in-depth personal relationship that would not be sacrificed to work. They wanted a best friend.

It was this goal of deeper friendship that helped to “make” peer men. Much of what evolved between these men and women happened because of their strong desire to stay emotionally connected to one another. They saw each other as individuals rather than as roles and wanted the same things for each other that they sought for themselves. More often than not, the women in these relationships were good communicators

and were clear about how they wanted and needed to be treated; they had a strong sense of what was a fair deal. The men had the ability to understand and support their partner's wishes. Most of these couples had to negotiate early in the relationship—and keep negotiating throughout it—to keep it a partnership rather than watching it slip into more traditional roles. One of the interesting things about peer men, is that they too had an investment in keeping that from happening. They were looking for an equal, a partner and a friend. They didn't want to lose that person to pressures to live in a more conventional relationship. . . .

Rewards of Peer Marriage

Primacy of the Relationship

Egalitarian couples give priority to their relationship over their work and over all other relationships—with friends, extended family, even their children. Their mutual friendship is the most satisfying part of their lives. The point of equality and equity in these relationships is to create a marriage that makes each partner feel secure in the other person's regard and support.

Intimacy

Peer couples experience much more of each other's lives than do traditional or near peers. Because they share housework, children, and economic responsibility, they empathize as well as sympathize. They experience the world in a more similar way, understand the other partner's personality more accurately, and communicate better because they know each other and each other's world better and because equal power in the relationship changes interaction style. They negotiate more than other couples, they share conversational time, and they are less often high-handed, dismissive, or disrespectful than other couples. They choose to spend a lot of time together.

Commitment

These couples are more likely, than traditional couples, to find each other irreplaceable. They are likely to describe their relationship as “unique.” Their interdependence becomes so deep (unlike near-peer, dual-career couples) and so utterly customized that the costs of splitting up become prohibitive.

Costs of Peer Marriage

So if the rewards are so great, how come there are near peers? Why would anyone who believed in equality back off? . . .

Treason Against Tradition

One of the costs of defining gender and marriage differently is that many people feel that the nature and purpose of marriage and sex roles have been betrayed. Far from enabling a man to stay home with his children or a woman to take her role as equally responsible breadwinner seriously, co-workers and managers and friends will often question the couple's philosophy and deny modifications of work or schedules that could help the couple share family life more easily. Parents of the man may feel he has been emasculated; parents of the woman may feel she is setting herself up for a fall. Validation and support are rare and have to be consciously sought.

Career Costs

Peer couples need jobs that allow them to coparent. Sometimes they wait long enough to get enough clout in their careers to be able to modify their schedules so that they can share parenting. But more often they have to be lucky enough to be in jobs that naturally support child raising (for example, both working at home work stations), or they have to modify their career ambitions in favor of their family aspirations. This means avoiding or changing jobs that require extensive travel, changing venues in quick succession, and jobs that are all consuming (for example, a high-powered litigator in lengthy trials). Many couples have experienced one or both partners having to forgo career opportunities. Sometimes it is painful to watch others who have dedicated themselves more singlemindedly to careers do financially better or achieve more prestigious positions.

Identity Costs

By downplaying work and emphasizing family, peer couples go against the prevailing standards of male and female role success. Marriages have traditionally defined themselves as a success if the man made money and created a good life-style for the family and the wife created good children and a satisfied husband. Peer couples have to define success differently. Except for "power couples" who can afford the help that allows them to have high-voltage careers and family

time, economic success may have to be modified. Neither sex can assess their success according to traditional roles. It is hard to know how to evaluate oneself.

Sexual Dynamism

Peer partners get so close that some complain that an "incest taboo" sets in. They are each other's best friends, and if they aren't careful, that is exactly what they will start acting like in bed. Many find ways to get around this overfamiliarization problem, but the fact is that their absolute integration in each other's lives has to be leavened with some artifice to put romance back into the relationship.

Exclusion of Others

These couples become each other's best friend, and that can make everyone else feel a bit excluded. Kin and close friends stop getting the kind of attention they used to have and may be resentful. Although these couples tend to be child centered and have in fact organized their lives so that they can parent better, they are also dedicated to their adult relationship. This means they have to be careful not to make their own children feel excluded.

Calibrating the Right Mix of Equity and Equality

It is not always clear how to maintain a peer relationship. Sometimes it requires *equality*, with both partners supporting each other in the home and with the children. This prevents the relationship from being divided into low and high prestige worlds, and undermining deep friendship. But other times the best answer is *equity*. Each partner can and should give in different coin, and that is the best way to be loving and collaborative and supportive to the marriage. Figuring out the right thing to do all the time is tiring and inexact. Sometimes couples just want to retreat to doing the "boy thing" and the "girl thing"—not because it works—but because it is much clearer what each person should do to do his or her part for the relationship.

The Balance of Costs and Rewards

In spite of the costs, the peer couples described in this book believe that they have created an extremely rewarding marriage and family. Many of the costs I have outlined are not costs they feel they have

suffered—or if they have, they feel those costs are a manageable part of an otherwise terrific arrangement. Many of them have varied and effective coping strategies that they believe solve or minimize these issues in their relationship.

NOTES

1. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples* (New York: William Morrow, 1983).
2. Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples*. See also Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, "Money and Ideology: Their Impact on Power and the Division of Household Labor," and Judith Treas, "The Common Pot or Separate Purses? A Transactional Analysis," both in Rae Lesser Blumber, Ed., *Gender, Family and Economy* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1991).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the positive and negative attributes of peer marriages? Would you ever want to be in this sort of marriage? Why or why not?
2. Answer the question raised in the article: "But who would be a peer man?" If a man becomes a "peer," what does he give up?

Education and Religion

ALONG WITH THE FAMILY, TWO OF THE MOST IMPORTANT institutions in society are education and religion. For many, formal education in schools is a focal point of early life, and the formal and informal aspects of education continue for many years into adulthood. Often we are educated and trained on the job. Clearly, much of our life is encompassed by the educational institution. Religion is a central part of American life, and often a significant part of individual and family life. America is a very religious country as measured by the proportion of believers and attendees. Who can doubt the impact of religion in the unfolding of American history—from the Puritans to the followers of Sun Yung Moon or Krishna Consciousness? Even the politics of American life is laced with religious reference, often to the point that sociologists talk of a "civil religion." Education and religion reach into everyone's life, sometimes personally and sometimes in more distant ways. As social institutions, education and religion house much of our lives, and create focal points that may last a lifetime.

The educational institution in society is seen as being coercive. Just like prisons, schools often control and indoctrinate and they do so in bell-ringing, punctual ways. As young persons, we are often forced by law to be there until the age of 16, and too many absences may result in referral to juvenile court. Some sociologists question whether schools are the optimal way to educate the populace, but schools are a critical part of learning, credentialing, and success in society. Who among us will forget the social cultures in middle and high schools? Remember the intense