

*Dating, Mating,
and Marriage*

Martin King Whyte

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Martin King Whyte

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our shared experience. Other participants in the DAS “team” also deserve substantial credit for guiding this study through to its conclusion. In particular, Carol Crawford prepared countless versions of revised questionnaires and managed the DAS office with charm and competence. Several talented teaching assistants—Lynette Kono, Jason Lee, Paula Rust, and David Williams—played key roles in guiding the students and advising the investigator. And the two dozen students enrolled in the 1984 DAS training course and the like number of professional interviewers from the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan provided the manpower and skill at every step of the way, and particularly for the interviewing field season, which were essential for the success of this project. Last, but not least, the 459 respondents who willingly let us probe into their private lives and marital histories provided the basic fabric from which I attempt to answer a wide range of questions about dating, mating, and marriage in the pages ahead. This was truly a team effort, and I take pride in, but not full credit for, the results.

Martin King Whyte
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Chapter 1

THE WHY AND HOW OF RESEARCH ON MATE CHOICE

One can hardly open a newspaper or turn on the television these days without being plunged into an ongoing debate about whether the American marriage is “in trouble.” Since marriage is the central building block of family organization, sometimes the debate is escalated to a higher level. Perhaps the family itself is “on the way out.” It should be noted, of course, that such debates are hardly new in American society. Indeed, a penchant for nostalgia and a stubborn conviction that things are now “going to the dogs” seem to be ingrained parts of the American temperament, and repeatedly since colonial times doomsayers have been predicting the demise of marriage as an institution.¹ Earlier in this century some of the leading social scientists joined the chorus of pessimism. For example, John B. Watson, one of the founding figures of American psychology, opined in 1927:

Family standards have broken down and parents contribute little to the behavior of their children. The automobile and other things have taken the child out of control. The mystery and beauty of marriage and the rearing of children has pretty well broken down. In fifty years [i.e., in 1977], unless there is some change, the tribal custom of marriage will no longer exist (Watson 1927, p. 1).

A decade later Pitirim Sorokin, a Russian emigré who occupied a similar position of eminence within American sociology, chimed in with a similarly bleak view:

The family as a sacred union of husband and wife, of parents and children, will continue to disintegrate. Divorces and separations will increase until any profound difference between socially sanctioned marriages and illicit sex-relationships will disappear. . . . The main sociocultural functions of the family will further decrease until the family becomes a mere incidental cohabitation of male and female, while the home will become a mere overnight parking place mainly for sex relationship (Sorokin 1937, p. 776).²

Clearly these dire predictions have not been fulfilled in American society, and perhaps this fact should warn us to be skeptical of such prophecies in general. Still, recent trends in American society have convinced some critics that doomsayers such as Watson and Sorokin were not wrong, but simply a trifle hasty. Perhaps phenomena such as the sexual revolution, growing acceptance of co-

habitation and even unwed motherhood, renegotiation of gender roles, the increasing brittleness of marriages, and the rise of a service economy to supply needs that used to be met within the household, are finally bringing about the often and prematurely predicted doom of marriage as an institution. But, then again, perhaps not. Perhaps marriage is simply evolving, rather than declining. The “critics of the critics” in this debate, or in other words those who argue that American marriage is not in any general sense “in trouble,” contend that the doomsayers mistakenly equate any signs of change in family life with deterioration. They point out that marriage is still an extraordinarily popular institution in America, entered into at earlier ages and by higher percentages of the population than is the case in many other Western societies, and that marriages are in many ways healthier and happier today than in the past.³ We cannot be sure who to side with in this debate unless we examine the evidence about the state of marriage in American society.

At the most general level, the present study was motivated by this debate about the state of American marriage, and by a desire to collect and examine some concrete evidence that would throw light on the issue. However, as might be expected, in pursuing the topic I was forced to define what I was doing in a more narrow and concrete way, and I was also led to consider other kinds of questions that do not bear directly on the state of American marriage. So while at the end of this study I will offer some thoughts on the “big question” of what is happening to American marriage, I hope the reader will find the concrete detours and discussions of other topics interesting, even if it may not always be clear how these relate to that big question.

My first step in defining the present study was to observe that when people talk about marriage as an institution being “in trouble,” they are actually talking about two somewhat different things. These two different things arise because the term marriage refers both to the act of getting married, as well as to the state one is in after one weds. So the code phrase “marriage in trouble” can refer either to a claim that people are increasingly reluctant to marry in the first place, or that those who do take “the big step” are increasingly unlikely to “live happily ever after.” Most research to date, however, has focused overwhelmingly on marriage in the second sense and not the first—in other words, on the nature of relations within existing marriages, and on such matters as separation, divorce, and remarriage. The process by which people do (or do not) get married, however, has received surprisingly little scrutiny. When I began reading up on such matters as dating, mate choice, and weddings in America, I was surprised to find how little was systematically known on these topics.

To be sure, we have lots of research on trends in marriage ages, and there have been a number of studies over the years on dating behavior, but these tell us only part of the story. Even many of the existing studies of dating behavior tend to be conducted among small and unrepresentative samples (e.g., students on one college campus) or concern things that have dubious relevance for how marriage

partners are actually chosen (e.g., asking interview subjects to rank various criteria for selecting a mate).⁴ In reading this literature I was unable to find answers to what seemed to be fairly basic questions about the process of mate choice in America. For example, at what age do young people typically start dating? How many people end up marrying their “first sweetheart?” What is the average length of time that newly marrying couples were acquainted or dated prior to marriage? What percentage of couples get formally engaged? How many people are still virgins when they marry? What percentage of couples live together before they marry?⁵ How many people marry someone from the same religious background as themselves? What proportion of couples have a religious as opposed to a civil wedding?

As soon as these sorts of basic factual questions are raised, one immediately thinks of another set of questions concerning changes over time in the process of mate choice in America. Most of those questions find no ready answers in past research. Do people start dating earlier now than in the past? Do they date more people than their parents or grandparents did prior to marriage, or do they date fewer? How much has virginity at marriage actually declined? (In this case there is no reason to doubt the direction of the trend, only its magnitude.) Do people have more marital prospects that they can select from nowadays? Has parental influence on dating and mate choice declined in America? Do more people marry outside of their ethnic group, religion, or class level than in the past? Are weddings becoming simpler and more unconventional, or on the other hand are they becoming increasingly elaborate and costly? If we are going to examine the state of marriage in the first sense—i.e., entry into the wedded state—answers to questions such as these should be important.

As the reader can probably surmise, after pondering the matter to this point I decided to initiate a study to relieve our common ignorance about American mate choice by finding answers to questions such as these. As I began to formulate my research plan, however, my thoughts turned back to the other side of the term marriage, and I began to consider the question of how these two aspects were related. One might say that I was forced to face up to the “so what” question: So what if I discover all sorts of hidden secrets about the nature of mate choice and how this process has changed over time in America? Does how the couple got to the altar really tell us anything about what will happen after they get married? In other words, does premarital history and the nature of one’s experiences in mate choice have any impact on how durable or satisfying the resulting marriage will be?

As I considered this general question I was again left with a series of questions for which there were no answers in the existing literature. In this case there are lots of what social science jargon calls “hypotheses” floating around in the form of old wives’ tales and friendly advice from relatives, but very little systematic treatment in our academic journals. Is it good (in terms of having a lasting or happy marriage) to have had many dating partners or only a few? How important

is it (in the same terms) to marry someone from the same class, religious, and ethnic background as oneself? Do people who “marry up” (in social class or other terms) tend to be happier with their marriages than people who “marry down?” Is it better to remain a virgin until marriage? Does premarital cohabitation serve as a valuable preparation for marriage? How important is it to have a big and formal wedding? My grandmothers might have had firm answers to most of these questions, but I do not think my professional colleagues would be satisfied with them. Gradually, my general concern about the state of American marriage evolved into a decision to carry out research to fill large gaps in our knowledge about the nature of the mate choice process in American society, how that process has evolved, and whether it has any effect on the marital history and conjugal relationships that are produced by marriage.

Because of the way my thinking developed on these topics, the research to be reported here is less tightly focused than might otherwise be the case. I did not set out to test a particular pet theory, or to examine a narrow range of hypotheses or topics. Instead, my approach has been eclectic from the beginning. I wanted to discover as much as I could, within the constraints posed by time, energy, and financial resources, about the evolving nature of American mate choice, and its effect on marital relationships. As the reader will see as he/she proceeds onward, this approach gives the text a bit of an “everything you ever wanted to know about mate choice and marriage in America and a number of other things you wouldn’t have thought to ask” quality. However, in terms of trying eventually to speak to the debates about the nature of marriage in America, I think that my eclectic approach has clear advantages.

The Detroit Survey

Once I had selected the range of questions I was interested in, I had to decide how to go about studying them, and that decision in turn required me to narrow my sights further. It would have been nice, for example, to conduct interviews about mate choice and marriage all over the United States, but limited funds and the availability of an important survey research training facility in my own department, the Detroit Area Study (DAS), led me to design a survey that could be carried out in the greater Detroit metropolitan area.⁶ My proposal for a study of mate choice and marriage relations was selected and became the basis for the survey to be discussed here, which was carried out in 1984.⁷

Detroit is obviously not typical of all of America, or even of all of urban America. There are a number of distinctive features of Detroit as a city, and of the population of which it is composed. It will be obvious, for example, that Detroit’s development has been shaped in major ways by the dominance of the automobile industry. It is known as a “blue collar” town, with more people employed in heavy industry and fewer in light industry and services than in many

other cities. And due to the recent problems of the automobile industry, Detroit has experienced more unemployment and economic distress than other cities in the last few years. The ethnic composition of the city is somewhat different from other large American cities. As an urban area it has both more “old ethnics,” many of them Catholics, than some other cities, and unusually large concentrations of Arab-Americans. However, Hispanics and Asian-Americans are relatively under-represented compared to cities in America’s “sun belt.” The pattern of settlement in Detroit is somewhat distinctive, with the highest proportion of single family homes of any large American city, and a correspondingly smaller proportion of high rise apartment dwellings. These are only a few of the features that make Detroit somewhat different from other urban locales in America.

Since circumstances dictated that I conduct my research in Detroit, I obviously cannot claim that my results can be generalized to all of American society. However, I would argue that Detroit is not so atypical that my results say nothing about the experiences of other Americans. Instead, I will argue throughout (without, in some instances, firm evidence to support this argument) that developments in mate choice and marriage in the Detroit area, as revealed in the 1984 survey, probably differ in details, but not in general patterns, from what would be found in many other large urban areas in America.⁸ Several features of both Detroit and the survey provide the basis for this claim.

First, I stress that the sample was drawn not from Detroit city per se, but from the greater Detroit metropolitan area, defined as the area covered by Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland counties, and containing more than 4 million residents. People living in the city of Detroit proper constitute less than 30% of the total population of the tri-county area, according to the 1980 census (U.S. Census Bureau 1982, p. 90). Since the city and its suburbs are included, there is considerable variety within the sample—multiple ethnic groups, blacks and whites, a variety of religions, both the country club set and welfare mothers, and so forth. While I usually use the terms “Detroit” and the “Detroit area” in discussing the population studied, the reader should keep in mind that this is only for convenience, and that it is this larger and more diverse population that was actually surveyed.

Another thing to keep in mind is that Detroit shares with the rest of America a footloose quality. Many of the people who now live in the area did not grow up there, and they or their children may well move out after a few years. For example, about one-third of our survey respondents were living someplace else at the time that they first got married and moved to the Detroit area subsequently. In this sense respondents can be seen as a slice of a larger American society (in this case including rural as well as urban areas), rather than some sort of self-enclosed and unique urban community. Even if there are distinctive traits about the kinds of people who live in the Detroit area, by including questions in the survey about a wide variety of background characteristics it will be possible to take the influence of this distinctiveness into account—for example, by comparing the

marriage patterns of blacks and whites, of new ethnics and old ethnics, and of blue and white collar workers. Although on repeated occasions in the pages that follow I will point out such differences to the reader, still on balance I am impressed by the general patterns that emerge in the results, patterns that seem to occur across various subgroups.

Finally, the issue of “typicality” can be addressed by comparing the results of this study with earlier research carried out in other locales or nationally. One of the major contributions of the current study, as previously noted, is that it presents systematic information on many aspects of mate choice that have not been studied before. Yet this is not always the case, and in a number of instances the Detroit results can be compared with the findings of prior studies. Where possible, the reader will be presented with comparisons in the following pages. Where the current findings about general patterns and trends can be compared with such earlier studies, the agreement is usually quite close.⁹ This general agreement with earlier studies provides additional confidence that the findings reported here do not simply reflect peculiar features of the Detroit area. For these reasons, then, even though this is a study of the marriage behavior of people living in the Detroit area, I think that it has much to say about trends in urban America generally.¹⁰

There were other constraints on this study besides the limitation to the Detroit area. To study changes in mate choice patterns over time, one would ideally like to have a time machine readily available. With such a machine one could, for instance, go back in time to the Detroit area of the 1920s and 1930s and interview people about their dating and mate choice practices. Since this is obviously not practicable outside of Hollywood, I was forced to adopt a less desirable alternative. I could use people’s memories as my time machine, and ask interviewees of a variety of ages how they had experienced dating and how they had met and married their eventual spouses. Then, assuming that their memories were relatively accurate (an important assumption that will be discussed in subsequent chapters and in Appendix 1), by comparing people who married long ago with others who married more recently, I could derive some kind of measure of changes over time. I would thus use retrospective questions about premarital experiences to substitute for the unavailable time machine.¹¹

However, this is not a perfect substitute, even if we ignore the problem of fallible memories. The main problem is the very fluidity of population mentioned earlier. Since many of the people who presently live in the Detroit area and are part of our sample did not live there when they were dating and planning to be married, and since many of those who did live in the area in earlier decades have since died or left, the results of these recollections cannot be taken to represent changes over time in Detroit dating and mate choice behavior. Instead of a “pure” picture of changes over time in that city, what we have is an examination of the contrasting experiences in dating and mate choice of present residents of the area who were born and who first married over a 60 year span of time (from

1925–84). So while at times I refer to changes in mate choice practices, the reader should keep in mind that what is involved is contrasting premarital experiences of younger and older respondents (or, even more indirectly, contrasting recollections about premarital experiences).

My interest in how dating and mate choice experiences affect the nature and fate of the subsequent marriage cannot be examined in the ideal way with the Detroit interview data. To properly deal with this question, one should conduct what in the jargon of the trade is called a *longitudinal* study. This means that one should interview young people prior to marriage about their dating experiences. Then one should follow them over the years, reinterviewing them periodically to find out about their mate choice process, their marital relationships, and their subsequent marital history. Longitudinal studies of that kind are infrequently carried out, and for obvious reasons. Such studies are very expensive and difficult to conduct, since you have to keep tracking down members of the original sample who don't oblige the researcher by staying in one place. But the main drawback of longitudinal research is that you have to wait a long time to get your final results, and the nature of both human curiosity and professional careers is such that few of us have the required patience.¹² So in this study I follow the well-worn but less desirable path of using a "cross-sectional" design. What this means is that in the summer of 1984 we interviewed a cross-section of the population, but only at that one point in time, rather than following them over the years.¹³

Why is this less desirable? For one thing, it means that there may be many things that differ between older and younger respondents other than when they were born or first married. If we find differences between newly married women and women who have been married longer, we can't be certain with a cross-sectional design whether these differences indicate a regular pattern in stages within marriage. We could only be certain of this if we switched to a longitudinal design and reinterviewed the younger women when they reached the later stage in life (or used the imaginary time machine again to go back to an earlier point in the lives of the older women). Therefore, we want to know things about changes over time, but we can only do this by comparing different women, and such comparisons may be misleading.

Another problem with cross-sectional surveys is the possibility that more recent events and experiences may bias the recollections people have about their earlier experiences, making it difficult or impossible to be certain about trends and causation. For example, one of the most basic questions we could ask concerning the influence of premarital history on the fate of the subsequent marriage is whether people who are more deeply in love when they marry are more likely to have happy marriages, as our culture says that they should. We can (and, in fact, in our questionnaire we did) ask people to recall how much in love they were when they married (see the discussion in Chapter 3). But how do we know that what they tell us now is what they would have told us back when they

were first preparing to marry? And isn't it likely that women whose first marriages ended in divorce will tell us now that they were not really deeply in love prior to their marriage? If this is the case might we not be led by such results to assume erroneously that being very much in love "causes" happy marriages, whereas in fact it might be the case that having an unhappy marriage leads one to understate now the degree of love one felt back then? In any case, throughout this study I will have to wrestle with the problems of trying to infer changes over time and causation from data that are not ideally designed for such purposes.

A third and final less than ideal feature of the Detroit study is that we ended up interviewing only women and not men. To be specific, our sampling target was defined as "ever-married" women between the ages of 18 and 75 living in the greater Detroit area. (In other words, respondents did not have to be married currently, but they had to have been married at least once in order to be interviewed.) I was unable to secure additional funds to augment the DAS budget in order to either interview the husbands of these women (if any) or a separate male sample. Therefore I am limited throughout this study in only being able to report how mate choice and marriage experiences looked to the women involved. Of course, it "takes two to tango," and female respondents provided us with a wealth of information about their spouses, so I can investigate some features of the husbands and how these relate to the nature and fate of the marriage. But I do not have direct reports from the husbands on such things as when they started dating, whether they were virgins at marriage, how they see the division of chores in the household, or how satisfied they are with their marriages. Therefore, strictly speaking, I can only present here an account of trends in mate choice and marriage relations as these are perceived by wives or former wives.

The strategic choice involved here was a difficult one. I was informed that the DAS budget was sufficient to interview 450–500 respondents under normal circumstances. To interview only couples might have resulted in only 200 couples being studied, since to interview both partners is complex and expensive.¹⁴ But ending up with only 200 couples would have placed very severe limits on what variations within the population I could examine in my research regarding race, religion, and social class. So it was decided that we should interview only one partner. At that juncture there was still the matter of deciding whether to interview wives or husbands. This was close to being a "coin toss," but with regard to some of the questions I intended to ask, such as those about the nature and scale of the wedding celebrations, I felt that wives would have clearer recollections than husbands. Therefore, on this basis I decided to make our target ever-married women.¹⁵ In the end we succeeded in interviewing 459 women.

After wading through this list of qualifications and caveats, the reader may well ask whether this study of mate choice and marriage will be able to produce results of general interest. Although the final answer to such a question must rest on the reader's own judgment, I would argue that in spite of such limitations, the study reported on here is both the most comprehensive and most definitive

examination of evolving mate choice and marriage relations in America yet attempted. Even though there are a variety of limitations in the design of this study that prevent me from being as conclusive on certain points as I would wish, still I have had a very rich and high quality set of data to work with, and these data have been able to provide answers to some basic questions about the American way of marriage answers I had found lacking when I started. Therefore, the limitations just described are cautionary notes that have to be taken into account in interpreting this study's findings, rather than indicators that the entire study is fatally flawed.

Outline of the Study

This volume represents a report on the results of a survey of mate choice and marriage experiences of women in the greater Detroit area. As previously noted, it is based on face-to-face interviews that were conducted with 459 ever-married women in the summer of 1984. Although in the pages that follow I will draw on my general reading of materials on social trends in American society, the core of this study, and the basis for any claims to novelty, are these interviews. The questionnaire asked each respondent to supply information on a wide range of topics—regarding her social background and the backgrounds of her parents, her early dating experiences, the background of the man who became her eventual (first) husband, the background of another male she had considered marrying (if any), the nature of the wedding celebrations held, her subsequent marital history (including characteristics of a subsequent or most recent husband, if relevant), and about a wide variety of aspects of her relationship with her first or most recent husband—marital communication, pattern of leisure activities, chore division, conjugal decision-making, marital conflict, spouse abuse, and so forth.¹⁶ The range of these topics allows me to reconstruct the dating and mate choice experiences of our respondents and also to examine whether these have been related to the outcomes of their marriages.

The wide variety of predictions and hypotheses about mate choice and marriage relations that were examined in this project will not be discussed at this time. Instead, specific predictions are introduced and discussed in each substantive chapter, as they are about to be tested using the Detroit area survey data. The chapters follow the major topical areas covered in the questionnaire. Chapters 2 and 3 are linked and provide evidence on the extent to which changes in dating and mate choice customs are occurring. Chapter 2 covers a variety of aspects of dating experiences, including when each respondent first began dating, how many males she recalls dating, when she began to “go steady,” how many such steady boyfriends she had, attempts by parents to influence her dating pattern, and the timing of her first sexual experience.¹⁷ In examining such questions respondents are grouped not in terms of such customary divisions as age cohorts

(defined in terms of years of birth), but according to what I call “marriage generations,” i.e., by the years in which they first got married. The major question here is whether women who entered their (first) marriages in different periods had similar or contrasting experiences in the dating stage.

Chapter 3 follows up this inquiry with an examination of the actual mate choice experiences of respondents. In this case I am interested in such things as the age of each respondent when she first married, her personal situation at that time (e.g., whether she was living at home, was employed, was already pregnant), how certain she recalls being of her marital decision, and where the wedding was celebrated, and how elaborately. Again I am interested in whether women in different marriage generations had similar or contrasting experiences in the nature of their entry into marriage. Together these two chapters provide the primary evidence on the degree of constancy or change in dating and mating in urban America.

Chapter 4 looks at many of these same dating and mate choice experiences in a different way. In this case the issue is what kinds of women tended to start dating early vs. late, who was most likely to remain a virgin until marriage, what sorts of people experienced the largest and most elaborate weddings, and so forth. In other words, I want to know whether there are any underlying common principles that explain why some women had different sorts of premarital experiences from others—something other than simply the matter of what year they first got married (which is the focus of Chapters 2 and 3). Understanding the social origins of variations in dating and mate choice experiences will be an important first step before taking up the question of how variations in the subsequent marital history and marital relationships of respondents can be explained.¹⁸

Chapter 5 takes up one important remaining issue about the process of mate choice and how that process has changed over time: an examination of who married whom, in terms of things such as class origin, educational levels, race, religion, and national origin. In addition to simply documenting the extent to which Detroit women married within or outside of their own group or level, this chapter will address the same sort of social trend issue examined in Chapters 2 and 3. Has the degree of “status matching” of partners in marriage declined, remained much the same, or increased over time? Since similarity of backgrounds is often considered an important prerequisite for a successful marriage, the material introduced in Chapter 5 will again form the background for consideration, in the remaining chapters, of the outcome of the mate choice decisions of Detroit area respondents.

Chapter 6 begins to introduce material on the actual marriage experiences and marriage relationships of the women we interviewed. Much of the focus of this chapter is simply descriptive. Basic factual information about the marital histories of respondents is introduced there. How many women are still married to their first husbands? How many have been widowed or have divorced and have not remarried? How many have been married two, three, or even more times?

Chapter 6 also discusses the general patterning of intact marriages, as revealed by the items in the survey. For example, what are the general patterns of chore division between spouses? How often do couples spend their leisure time together or separately? What role does each partner play in managing income they or their spouse earns? How frequently have respondents experienced various forms of spouse abuse? How many of the women interviewed perceive that they share the same basic values as their husbands? In general how satisfied are respondents with their marriages, and with various specific aspects of their conjugal relationships?

While the major aim of Chapter 6 is descriptive, it will also focus on the general issues of variation considered in earlier chapters. In particular, is the patterning of marital relations of women who married at an earlier point in time different from those who have married more recently, and if so are the differences ones that can be interpreted as hopeful or pessimistic in terms of the prospects for marital relations now and in the future? And what are the social features that are associated with variations in the patterning of marriages? Are the marriage patterns of the poor, blacks, Catholics, or of other groups different in major ways from those of other groups? The answers to these and other questions should produce a fairly comprehensive picture of the pattern of marriages among women in the Detroit area.

Chapter 7 confronts the central issue toward which all of the preceding analysis has been building, in order to answer the “so what” question. That chapter examines the fates of all of the first marriages of women in the Detroit study. The analysis presented is concerned with whether those marriages lasted “till death us do part,” or ended in divorce or separation. For those first marriages that are still intact, I will be concerned with how successful or satisfying they are, or on the other hand with how conflict-prone and unsatisfying they are. I will be particularly concerned, given the origins of my interest in this research, with whether any of the variety of premarital experiences discussed in the first half of this book have an influence one way or the other on what could be called “marital success.” But in order to consider such premarital influences in context, it is also necessary to examine a wide range of other features that might also have an influence on the outcome of the marriage—income, race, religion, wife employment, social networks, and so forth. Thus in some sense even though my initial interest was in the impact of premarital experiences, what will be presented in Chapter 7 is more in the nature of a general survey of what sorts of things do or do not make a difference in marital success. As the reader will see, the findings of this research raise serious questions about much received wisdom on what makes for good versus bad marriages.

The final substantive chapter of this study considers the nature of remarriages, as opposed to first marriages. The majority of all respondents have been married only once, but for those who have been to the altar at least twice, we collected information on various aspects of their “second time around”: the background of

the subsequent husband, how the wedding was celebrated, and the nature of the patterning of relations in their new marriages. The underlying general question addressed in Chapter 8 is how similar or different are remarriages in comparison with first marriages, and insofar as there are differences visible, to what extent do these indicate more or less problems in remarriages, in comparison with first marriages.

Chapter 9 reports overall conclusions. In the final chapter, I will draw together what has been learned from this project about the nature and evolution of mate choice and marriage relations, and how my findings differ from both conventional wisdom and previous research findings. With those general statements as a background, I will proceed to offer my thoughts on the “big question” which inspired this research in the first place—is American marriage as an institution “in trouble,” or are the doomsayers exaggerating and misreading the evidence? I do not propose to offer specific advice to individuals contemplating trips to the altar, although some of the specific findings of this project could be read as providing helpful clues about what makes for marital success. Rather, I will be concerned in general with the state of health of American marriage.

The nine substantive chapters are followed by two appendixes. Appendix 1 is devoted to a general discussion of the methods used in collecting and analyzing the Detroit Area Study survey data. How various problems and potential biases were examined and treated is discussed in some detail. Finally, Appendix 2 describes all of the questions from the survey that ended up being used in the current volume. That appendix also discusses how the responses to these questions were reorganized and collapsed into scales prior to analysis.

Conclusions

My aim, then, in the pages that follow, is to present a systematic analysis both of the ways in which the process of dating and mate choice has or has not changed in urban America, and of what makes for a successful or unsuccessful marriage in the contemporary era. The number of specific issues investigated along the road to dealing with these two major topics is too diverse to make a preview of the main findings here possible. However, one underlying theme that emerged from many of the separate analyses reported in this study deserves to be highlighted in advance. It is by no means an easy manner to preview this theme, since the available terminology fails to capture its essence fully. Words such as “tolerance” and “options” suggest themselves, or perhaps in a more negative vein, “normlessness” or “anomie.” But the phrase that seems to me to capture this underlying theme most accurately is the “decline in conventions.” Oversimplifying a great deal, the reader will see evidence in the pages that follow that suggests we have gone from a situation in which there was a “right way” and a “wrong way” to conduct premarital relations, or to pattern one’s marital rela-

tionship to a situation in which alternative ways of behavior lack such clear moral meanings. Whether the issue concerns retaining virginity until marriage, marrying someone of the same faith, or dividing the chores within a marriage, there is declining consensus about what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Perhaps because of this decline in conventions and reduced clarity about moral standards, behaving in conventionally proper versus improper ways no longer makes the difference it once did for marital success.

Another implication of this trend is that social background traits such as class, educational attainment, ethnic background, and religion, which used to distinguish fairly clearly between those who followed the conventionally proper modes of premarital and marital relations and improper ones, no longer seem to have so much predictive power.¹⁹ The “bread and butter” social background measures that have been used by most social scientists in the past in explaining mate choice and marital variations are not much help in interpreting the results of the present study. Therefore, it is not simply the case that conventional norms about premarital and marital relations have weakened. In addition, a picture of America as a social hierarchy composed at the top by a prosperous, white, largely Protestant upper and middle class that conforms to “proper” ways of acting prior to, and after marriage, and at the bottom by lower status ethnic groups and classes who are more likely to engage in “deviant” practices, no longer seems very accurate.

What the implications of this decline in conventions is for marriage as an institution can be debated. Should we interpret these changes as indicating the traumatic impact of rapid social change in the twentieth century, growing moral decay and decadence, or simply general confusion about how to behave? And does this trend therefore provide support for the view that marriage is in trouble, since the moral underpinnings regarding what kinds of behavior are acceptable and unacceptable in marriage have weakened? Or should this trend be interpreted more positively? Perhaps what this change provides evidence for is the breakdown of rigid moral preconceptions about how people should live and the emergence of an increased ability of individuals to suit their premarital and marital lives to their own needs and preferences, without much regard for social conventions. Perhaps by being able to break away from the grasp of traditional conventions and the social status concerns these reflect, individuals may be able to construct more satisfying marriages. Rather than being part and parcel of a decay of marriage in America, the trend toward greater tolerance and options represented by the decline in conventions may indicate escape from rigid and stultifying marriages. If the latter speculation is correct, then a more upbeat conclusion about the meaning of this trend for American marriage as an institution would be warranted.

These are large and amorphous issues, and it is unlikely that I will be able to fully resolve them using data from the Detroit area survey. My purpose in introducing this theme is simply to alert the reader to its importance. In the

specific chapters that follow I will point to the various pieces of evidence that lead me to stress this underlying theme of a decline in conventions. At the end of the study further thoughts will be offered about what this general trend means for the future of American marriage.

Notes

1. It could be argued that this tendency of Americans toward self-criticism is rooted in the belief among the original colonists that they were establishing a new and more perfect society, the "new Jerusalem," and perhaps even preparing for the second coming of Christ. Given such a lofty aspiration, the mundane facts of human behavior and social arrangements at any particular point in time are bound to be considered disappointing, and perhaps indicative of moral decay and social decline. These same impulses have fueled the long-standing American penchant for erecting separate, utopian communities where, since colonial times, some Americans have tried to establish better and more satisfying marriage and family forms. See, for example, the examples discussed in Kephart 1982.

2. For related predictions by other eminent thinkers, see Russell (1929) Moore (1958).

3. The argument about evolution rather than deterioration in American marriage is perhaps most closely identified with the work of sociologist Talcott Parsons, but his views have been echoed by many others. For recent examples, see Bane (1976); Levitan and Belous (1981); Berger and Berger (1983). For a caustic review of this debate in earlier decades of this century, see Lasch (1977). For an examination of trends from a demographic point of view, see Davis (1985).

4. Literally dozens of studies have been conducted in which respondents are asked to rank the importance of a variety of criteria—e.g., honesty, good looks, good income, sense of humor, etc.—in selecting someone to marry. For one review of this research, see Powers (1971). However, in such research there is almost never an attempt to examine whether such criteria have anything to do with the actual selection of a mate, and the few studies that do examine this question generally come up with a negative response (see, Udry 1965).

5. These questions illustrate issues on which there is a fair amount of research, but unfortunately not research that provides direct answers to such basic questions. For example, there have been many studies over the years of premarital sexuality, but few since the Kinsey surveys that provide answers to what percentage of newly marrying couples in different eras were still virgins when they married. Similarly, the U.S. Census bureau has provided estimates on the growing number of cohabiting couples in American in recent years, but since such couples can arise through a variety of circumstances—from couples who do not later marry, among divorced individuals, among the widowed elderly, and so forth—such figures do not allow me to estimate what percentage of couples cohabited before they married.

6. The Detroit Area Study (DAS) is designed to provide intensive, "hands on," training in all stages of survey research for students at the University of Michigan, and particularly for graduate students in sociology. As part of that training, the students participate in preparation and interviewing for a metropolitan area survey, and these surveys have been conducted annually since 1951. The topic for the survey changes each year, and individual faculty members compete by submitting proposals, with the proposal and faculty member selected determining the topic for the ensuing year. Well known studies carried out through the DAS include Blood and Wolfe (1960) and Lenski (1961) (see also Duncan, Schuman, and Duncan 1973). For an overview and bibliography of the more than 400 publications that have resulted from this unique resource, see Converse and Meyer (1988).

7. Details on how the study was organized and carried out will be found in Appendix 1.

8. In other words, the frame of reference is urban or metropolitan America, and I have less confidence that my findings can be generalized to the America of small towns and rural areas.

9. A distinction must be made here between reports about average tendencies and time trends, on the one hand, and about the interrelationship between presumed causes and predicted outcomes. While the average tendencies and time trends reported in the pages that follow generally correspond closely to the findings of earlier studies, in a fair number of instances the observed patterns of association among variables stand in contrast to earlier reports. The contrasts in findings of the latter type do not necessarily indicate that Detroit area marriages are unusual, and they may provide clues to important new developments in marriage relations.

10. On a related note, readers may be surprised to find relatively few sections of this work that refer to distinctive customs and histories of Detroit and its various neighborhoods. While in part this absence of local color is due to my conviction that what I am illuminating in this study is American mate choice and marriage generally, and not the peculiar versions practiced in Detroit, it is even more due to the fact that the kinds of statistical data that are produced by a questionnaire study such as this one do not readily yield local anecdotes and color.

11. One implication of this approach, however, is that the project ended up interviewing only individuals who had been married at least once. Therefore the data we collected are not an ideal means to examine attitudes toward marriage of single persons who have never made the trip to the altar. As a consequence, this survey cannot tell us what is distinctive about those who never marry, whether the reasons for never marrying have changed, and whether there is a growing group of confirmed non-marriers in American society.

12. In fact, many important longitudinal studies have involved new researchers going back, often after a generation or more, to restudy the original communities or respondents that were surveyed by earlier investigators. For example, see Elder (1974); Thornton, Freedman, and Camburn (1982) Caplow et al. (1982). A major exception to this pattern is the ongoing "5000 families" or "panel study on income dynamics" research being conducted by colleagues at the University of Michigan (see Morgan et al. 1974).

13. It may be possible to reinterview the 1984 respondents again in the future to see what has happened to them and their marriages, but no such research is presently contemplated.

14. The main concern is that one partner not influence the answers of the other, such as by suggesting how certain questions should be answered. The solution to this problem of "contamination" is to arrange to interview the husband and wife separately and simultaneously, but this is often difficult to arrange and expensive, in terms of interviewing costs. Thus the same budget will result in fewer total interviews, in comparison with a design that calls for interviewing only a single partner.

15. The age limitations of 18 and 75 evolved out of a desire to avoid highly atypical early teenage brides on the one hand, and severe problems of memory loss among older women on the other. We also restricted our sampling to noninstitutionalized women—those residing in ordinary residential households. The selection of married women has some benefits. In particular, some earlier DAS studies, and particularly the Blood and Wolfe study (1960), involved interviews with wives only, so I can make some comparisons that would have been impossible had we interviewed only husbands. However, a number of cogent criticisms have been made of the tendency of family sociologists to interview wives but not husbands (see, in particular, Safilios-Rothschild 1969). For more details on the sample and methods used here, see Appendix 1.

16. The wording of those survey questions used in this report is given in Appendix 2.

17. Some question may be raised about use of the term "dating," here and throughout this study. Some would argue that the term is out of date and bears an antiquated ring, just as the term "courting" came to be in earlier years, and that terms such as "going out with" or simply "seeing" are in more common use among today's young. Others would argue that the very act of dating, in the sense of a young male and female pairing off to engage in a particular recreational or romantic activity, is going out of style, and is being replaced by more informal and group-based forms of youth activity (see Murstein 1980). However, there is no single alternative term that is suitable for replacing the term dating here. And our respondents had no trouble in responding to the term where it was used in our questionnaire (see the specific wording of the relevant questions in Appendix 2). None of them

seemed puzzled by the term or claimed that it did not apply to the activities they were describing. Thus for want of a better term, and because I am skeptical of the argument that dating has gone out of style (even if the term is less often used by young people, or by particular segments of the young, such as high school students), I will stick with this term in the current study.

18. The reason this understanding is important is somewhat technical. If in later chapters we find that marital success or failure is related to some of the premarital experiences described in Chapters 2 and 3, it will still be necessary to ask whether those premarital experiences “really” have that effect, or whether the effect is attributable to the underlying social sources of variations in those premarital experiences. To disentangle the issue it will be necessary to control for the underlying social background factors involved to see whether the premarital experiences in question still have some influence on marital outcomes even after this control is imposed, and in order to do that we need to discover what the underlying social background factors are. To give a concrete example that will come up later, if we discover that having an elaborate wedding is related to having an enduring and satisfying marriage, and if we have learned from Chapter 4 that more prosperous families tend to have more elaborate weddings than poorer families, one may wonder whether the true explanation of the former finding is not that large weddings produce successful marriages, but that higher class standing and prosperity make it easier to have a successful marriage (or produce more pressure on couples to do so). By controlling for social class origin and related factors statistically, we can examine whether elaborate weddings have an independent influence, net of such class factors, on the outcome of the marriage. See Chapter 7 for the results of this examination.

19. However, race still appears to make a substantial difference in most of the realms that will be investigated in the current study. The impact of race will be addressed systematically throughout the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2

DATING

One of the most intriguing questions about mate choice in America is how the nature of dating has changed over time. We know surprisingly little about this question. Our American “dating culture” gives popular approval to young people pairing off with various romantic partners, without adult supervision and without defining those partners necessarily as potential mates. We think this dating culture evolved gradually during the latter part of the 19th century and early in the 20th century. Prior to that time, pairing off was more subject to direct adult supervision and was interpreted more in terms of the immediate goal of choosing a mate. The venues available for such pairing off were relatively limited compared to present times, and for middle-class couples, at least, the dominant practice was for the male to visit the female in her home. Terms such as “courting” and “keeping company” were used for such activity, and the archaic tone of such terms today conveys how much change has occurred in premarital relations.

The exact reasons for the emergence of a dating culture are still being debated. Some scholars place major emphasis on factors such as growing affluence and a proliferation of recreational venues aimed at the young, longer periods of schooling in predominantly coeducational schools, and the growth of forms of employment which took adults away from the home and therefore made it more difficult for parents to supervise the leisure time activities of their adolescent children. Others stress the rise of individualistic and consumption- and market-oriented philosophies, which provided subtle underpinnings for new modes of recreational romance and “playing the field.” Some writers have even placed major stress on technological innovations—on the development of the automobile in the 20th century (and of the bicycle in the 19th), and of accompanying innovations such as drive-in movies, which helped to free young daters from the scrutiny of their parents. But so little research has been done on the topic of the emergence of the dating culture in America that it is difficult to be specific about how and when it evolved in different segments of our society (see Burgess and Wallin 1953, Chap. 3; Fass 1977; Rothman 1984; Modell 1983).

It is clear at least that major parts of what we associate with the process of dating were already widely accepted in the period after World War I. The more recent evolution of dating in America is almost as much *terra incognita* as the earlier origins of this practice, however (but see Ehrmann 1959; Burchinal 1964;

Gagnon and Greenblat 1978). While conducting this research, I occasionally asked friends and acquaintances how they thought dating had changed, and I usually got only the vaguest of replies. Most people felt that dating today was very different from the days when their parents were young, but they were unable to state precisely what had changed, with one or two exceptions. The major change people are aware of is that sexual intercourse is a more common part of dating activities than in the past. In addition premarital cohabitation is becoming more and more widespread. From these changes some people generalize that a process of liberalization (or moral decay, depending on your point of view) must characterize the evolution of dating in America. According to this viewpoint, over the years parents have lost control, and young people have started dating earlier, have begun sexual activities at younger ages, have more casually tried and discarded large numbers of dating partners, and in general have experienced a variety of romantic and sexual experiences, so that marriage itself is viewed as less special than it once was. But these are hunches, rather than conclusions based on concrete evidence.

In this chapter data are presented to check a variety of hunches about our contemporary American mate choice process. There are two primary reasons why such data are of interest. First, the topic of continuity and change in premarital relations is a "blank spot" in the study of social change in America. We know something about recent trends in such aspects of family life as marriage ages, divorce rates, and fertility levels, but, as discussed in Chapter 1, we don't know much about what has happened to dating behavior. So there is some intrinsic interest in finding out how aspects of dating have or have not changed, and how any trends detected in this realm relate to broader social changes occurring in American society. The second reason for interest in dating trends concerns this study's focus on the link between premarital relations and marital success. Dating is an activity with a variety of purposes. For young people just beginning to participate in this activity, dating may be seen primarily or exclusively in recreational terms, devoted simply to testing one's attractiveness to the opposite sex and having fun, as the term "dating game" implies. However, eventually dating relationships tend to become more sustained and serious, and at some point dating begins to be seen more directly in terms of the goal of selecting a mate. In other words, the progression begins that is implied in our title, *Dating, Mating, and Marriage*. For this reason a central question of interest in the current study is whether some kinds of experiences in the dating stage are more conducive to a "wise" choice of a mate and subsequent marital success than others. If we can detect consistent trends over time in dating experiences, and if we find that the trends discovered are potentially threatening to marital success (or for that matter, are potentially conducive to marital success), we will have built a logical link between such dating trends and our "big question," the health of American marriage as an institution. Although the final testing of ideas about the impact of dating experiences on marital outcomes will not occur until later, in

Chapter 7, I want to consider here a variety of arguments about how these earlier experiences might be expected to have an important impact one way or the other.

How might variations in the timing and intimacy of dating be important? Quite contrary claims have been made in previous writing on this topic. On the one hand, there is what might be called the “educational” or, perhaps more appropriately, “marketplace learning” conception of dating. According to this conception, which might be considered the “orthodox” rationale for our dating culture, making a “wise” selection of a mate requires a considerable amount of knowledge and experience. Even though at one level Americans believe that marriage should be based upon love, and that in the best of circumstances, “love conquers all,” still at another level we recognize that it doesn’t make sense to rush to the altar with the first person who makes your heart beat faster. Rather, through dating, which provides an opportunity for explorations into romantic intimacy without requiring rapid escalation toward marriage, you can acquire knowledge of what sort of person you are attracted to and what sort of person you might be suited to when it comes time to eventually choose a marital partner. Through experience with a series of dates and steadies, you can gain awareness that will help you make a better choice of someone you might be able to live with “happily ever after”.

While this conception might suggest a highly rational process, in which individuals gradually develop a detailed mental “check list” that they will use to screen dating partners to see if they might be suitable marriage targets, this need not be the case. Rather, it might be assumed that this sort of “comparison shopping” experience penetrates to a subconscious level, so that when one meets “Mr. Right” or “Ms. Right” the appropriate strong romantic attraction will be triggered spontaneously, leaving no need to consult a trait check-list.¹ The implication of these ideas, in terms of marriage, is that the emergence and elaboration of our dating culture was a “good thing.” In general, according to this conception, individuals who have gained more experience in the dating stage, by having dated more individuals and by having the opportunity to consider a wider range of potential marriage partners, should be able to make a better choice when it comes time to select someone to wed.

But numbers of dates, steadies or marital prospects, are not the only consideration, according to this scenario. Another logical implication is that the better you get to know any one dating partner, and indeed the more the level of intimacy with that partner approaches what would occur once you marry, the better able you will be to judge whether that partner would be suitable as a spouse. So not only experience with a variety of dating partners, but also development of a high level of premarital intimacy with at least some of them, is seen as part of the useful learning process made possible by our dating culture. This sort of argument may be recognized as one that sexually active or even cohabiting young people use to try to calm their anxious parents: “After all, Mom and Dad, it wouldn’t make sense to marry without knowing how sexually compatible we are

and how we could get along on an intimate, day-to-day basis, would it?" So according to this justifying rationale, tendencies toward more prolonged dating with more partners, and toward intimacy with the most serious partners, should be conducive to "good" mate choice decisions. In contrast, individuals who start dating late, who only date one or a few individuals, and who head for the altar without getting to know their eventual spouses quite intimately should be more likely to make "bad" decisions and end up unhappily married.

This view on the positive functions of dating variety and premarital intimacy has not gone unchallenged. In addition to objections based on moral and religious grounds, there are a number of criticisms from a more pragmatic viewpoint. Critics pose a number of reasons for doubting that dating variety and intimacy help individuals to make a wise choice of an eventual spouse, as assumed by the "marketplace learning" scenario. One of the major criticisms attacks the assumption that through dating and progressively higher levels of intimacy you become better prepared for an eventual choice of a mate. In part the objection to this view concerns the idea that having had alternative romantic partners, including very intimate ones, does not, in fact, prepare you very well to make the exclusive and life-long commitment to a spouse that marriage is supposed to entail. In other words, rather than preparing you to feel that you have selected Mr. Right, extensive dating experiences may lead to a painful awareness of alternatives foregone, with a "grass is greener on the other side of the fence" sentiment always present in the back of your mind. As one prominent study of American high schools in the 1950s stated the matter:

It seems unfortunate that so much of adolescents' energies must be spent in cultivating skills that serve them only at one point in life—in playing the courtship game. These skills and habits may be impediments to happiness in later life. The 'love of the chase' may linger after marriage for both male and female, making married life less content (Coleman 1961, p. 123).

If this alternative view is correct, then individuals who have had more limited dating experiences, and perhaps those who married their first sweethearts, should end up with the most satisfactory marriages, exactly the opposite of the prediction one is led to by the marketplace learning scenario.

There are additional criticisms of our dating culture that approach the matter from other angles. One version argues that the problem with the marketplace learning conception is that it makes false assumptions about what really motivates people in the dating stage. Critics question whether dating as it is normally practiced really provides for the kind of useful learning that the conventional rationale assumes. An alternative view is captured by the term, the "dating game." In this view other elements besides trying to find out who one would be suited to tend to dominate dating in America. In particular, concern to display popularity or to gain certain romantic and possibly sexual favors from partners leads young people to put on false fronts [what Douvan and Adelson (1966) call

“dating personalities”] in order to impress dates and potential dates. With each individual manufacturing artificiality in order to impress their date, neither is in a very good position to learn what their partner is really like or whether they might be a suitable choice for a longer-term relationship.

The best known version of this criticism comes from the work of Willard Waller, who coined the term, “rating and dating,” to convey the idea that competition among students for popularity dominates dating behavior and completely negates the kind of learning process that the orthodox scenario assumes takes place. (See Waller 1937 and the discussion in Lasch 1977, Chapter 3. For a critique of Waller’s ideas, see Gordon 1981.) According to Waller, individuals are not motivated to date those who might be most suited to them, but those who are most likely to be defined as a “good date” or a “good catch” by peers. In such an environment, even if you could accurately assess the characteristics of your romantic partner by piercing through the superficiality of that partner’s “dating personality,” you would still end up dating the wrong person for the wrong reasons. When it comes time to pick a marriage partner, it will be very difficult to “switch gears” and select someone who is uniquely suited to your own needs and personality. In this version of the criticism of the marketplace learning scenario, extensive dating is at least not very conducive to a wise marital decision, if not actually being counterproductive.

Still other criticisms of our dating culture raise additional and somewhat related points—that early dating and early intimacy may lead to a younger age at marriage or may produce powerful emotions and urges that completely close out any sort of rational consideration of suitability. In either case the result is not likely to be a level-headed choice of a mate and a wise decision about when to marry. The resulting marriage is not likely to be as successful as one based upon a more gradual and constrained entry into premarital intimacy. High levels of absorption into dating and romantic concerns may also interfere with school learning and occupational training, resulting in poorer job placement and lower income, outcomes that will create considerable stress on a marriage relationship.²

Here, additional views on both sides of the issue could be discussed, but the general situation should be clear by now. There exist two conflicting arguments about whether various features of dating and premarital intimacy are conducive to marital success or not. The conventional rationale for our dating culture assumes that length of dating experience, variety in dating partners, and extensiveness of premarital intimacy are all useful preparations for a successful marriage. In the various criticisms of this scenario, it is argued that the opposite may more often be the case—that extensive dating and premarital intimacy may interfere with making a suitable choice of a marital partner. As noted earlier, these alternative points of view will not be tested until Chapter 7, but they form the background within which to consider what changes are visible in the dating experiences of women in our Detroit sample.

In the pages that follow, concrete evidence is offered to replace the speculations described earlier on whether the timing and nature of dating have changed. Our survey allows us to investigate whether various guesses about the evolution of dating in America over the last half century or so are accurate. Has everything become more free-wheeling in American dating, or are such claims incorrect? Since we interviewed women retrospectively about their dating experiences spanning a period of more than 60 years, we can begin to shed some light on what the actual changes in dating have been.³

In examining changes in dating patterns in the Detroit sample, I categorize the women we interviewed in terms of their years of marriage, as indicated in Chapter 1, rather than by age. By categorizing women by the year in which they first married I am, of course, ignoring the fact that the dating history these women are describing took place prior to their wedding, and that some women spent longer times in the dating stage than others. I simply want to establish whether women who married at successive points in time had similar or different experiences in their prior dating stage. In much of this analysis, it will be sufficient to divide respondents into three large groups, each representing a twenty-year time span of entry into marriage. These will be referred to as three major "marriage generations": those who were prewar brides, marrying in the years 1925–44 ($N = 66$); those who entered marriage during the "baby boom" years of 1945–1964 ($N = 180$); and those recent marriage cases who first wed during the years 1965–84 ($N = 209$).⁴

These categories, while nicely dividing the years of first marriage of the sample into three even slices, have the virtue of corresponding roughly to three different historical environments that are recognized in much previous writing on the American family. The first generation encompasses major disruptions brought on by the Great Depression and by World War II, which produced trials of strength for most American families (see Elder 1974). The second generation produced not only an unexpected baby boom, but also a high tide of general "familism" in American social life, with earlier and more universal marriage than before, a declining and then relatively stable divorce rate, the zenith of the "housewife syndrome" in America, and the explosion of life in suburbia—themes conveyed in the popular media of the time and in such popular television programs as "Father Knows Best." The third marriage generation encompasses a retreat from this familistic ethos, with declining birth rates, increasing divorce rates, and the rise of the feminist and sexual liberation movements. So the divisions in terms of which most comparisons will be made are not totally arbitrary.

At times I will want to use a finer time breakdown. Occasionally categories that divide women by their year of marriage into twelve groups, each of them five years in length, will be used, and I will refer to these groups as "marriage cohorts," (those who first married before 1929, in 1930–34, 1935–39, etc.). In places I will use the actual year of marriage to get the most detailed picture of

trends. This chapter is concerned simply with determining trends in behavior in the dating stage. Questions about what sort of background characteristics are associated with early or late dating, premarital virginity, or other indicators of the American “dating regime” are deferred until Chapter 4.

Dating and Going Steady

The first question of interest is at what age women started dating in various periods. A direct question in a written supplement to our questionnaire asked women to report their age at the time they went on their first date, and it turns out, based on their replies, that there has not been any clear trend over time in the age of starting dating.⁵ There is no clear correlation between marriage year and the age of first date, and in all three generations the median age at the time of the first date was 16. So in this respect, at least, in recent years women do not seem to be starting the dating process earlier.⁶

At this point it should be noted that the age at which women in our sample first married did change over time, but not in a simple fashion. As we know from many other studies of American marriage, ages of marriage dropped gradually during the 20th century until the mid-1950s, and since then they have been going up again (see, for example, the discussion in Cherlin 1981). In the Detroit sample this curvilinear pattern is also visible. In the prewar generation, the median age at first marriage was 21, then it dropped among baby-boom era brides to 20, and among recent cases it has risen again to 21.⁷ The crude generational breakdown used here hides some of the recent increase; in the two final marriage cohorts (involving women who married after 1975) the mean age at marriage was over 23 years, matching national trends. The curvilinear trend in marriage ages, combined with the stable estimated age of beginning dating, means that the average number of years of potential dating—between the time of the first date and getting married—was about 5 years for women in the prewar cohorts, decreased to about 4 years during the baby-boom years, and is now back to 5 years or more. This changing length of time spent in the dating stage should be kept in mind when we consider other trends in dating behavior.

One other feature of the marriage ages in the Detroit sample should be noted. The ages of first marriages of the women we interviewed covered a very wide range, from 14 to 60! Even though there has been substantial publicity given to recent research claiming that women who pass the “prime marriage ages” may never succeed in marrying (see Bennett and Bloom 1986),⁸ our data provide some support for the old saying that “it’s never too late.” Overall, 5% of the women in our sample first married at age 30 or later, and in addition to our champion who first married at age 60, there was another woman who finally made it to the altar at age 50. Both of these examples of the “never too late” phenomenon were wed in the late 1970s, indicating continued hope recently for