

The Suffocation Model: Why Marriage in America Is Becoming an All-or-Nothing Institution

Eli J. Finkel^{1,2}, Elaine O. Cheung¹, Lydia F. Emery¹,
Kathleen L. Carswell¹, and Grace M. Larson¹ [AQ: 1][AQ: 2][AQ: 3]

¹Department of Psychology and ²Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University

Abstract

Throughout American history, the fundamental purpose of marriage has shifted from (a) helping spouses meet their basic economic and political needs to (b) helping them meet their intimacy and passion needs to (c) helping them meet their autonomy and personal-growth needs. According to the *suffocation model* of marriage in America, these changes have had two major consequences for marital quality, one negative and one positive. The negative consequence is that, as Americans have increasingly looked to their marriage to help them meet idiosyncratic, self-expressive needs, the proportion of marriages that fall short of their expectations has grown, which has increased rates of marital dissatisfaction. The positive consequence is that those marriages that succeed in meeting these needs are particularly fulfilling, more so than the best marriages in earlier eras. In tandem, these two consequences have pushed marriage toward an all-or-nothing state.

Keywords

suffocation model, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, marriage, instrumentality, self-expression

Relationship science is a flourishing discipline, but it has not contended adequately with the major finding that the link between marital quality and psychological well-being has become stronger over time (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007). This finding suggests that the tendency for a struggling marriage to undermine people's happiness is stronger than in the past, as is the tendency for a flourishing marriage to bolster people's happiness.

The discipline's major theories largely neglect the sort of historical and cultural analysis required to explain temporal effects like these. Providing such analysis is one of the primary goals of the *suffocation model* of marriage in America, which was introduced in a pair of articles last year (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014; Finkel, Larson, Carswell, & Hui, 2014). These articles are comprehensive—long, sometimes technical, and targeted toward relationships researchers. The present article functions as a précis, a refined and accessible overview of the model.

According to the suffocation model, understanding why the link between marital quality and psychological well-being has become stronger over time requires that we first answer a more basic question: Why do people get married in the first place?¹ One answer is that people marry because marriage is an end in itself, but the deeper

answer is that marriage is a pathway through which people seek to meet certain needs and goals (to feel safe, to express love, etc.). The suffocation model builds on this idea to integrate (a) historical and sociological perspectives on how marriage in America has changed over time with (b) psychological perspectives on the nature of human motivation and the role that significant others play in one's goal pursuit. In particular, it suggests that historical changes in the institution of marriage in America have paralleled the bottom-to-top trajectory of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs), which has had major implications for marital quality.

Historical Changes in the Nature of Marriage in America

Throughout the nation's history, America has witnessed three major eras of marriage (Burgess & Locke, 1945;

Corresponding Author:

Eli J. Finkel, Department of Psychology, Swift Hall #102, 209
Sheridan Rd., Evanston, IL 60208
E-mail: finkel@northwestern.edu

Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005). In the *institutional era* (1776–1850), most Americans lived in agrarian communities. The household was the unit of economic production, and formal social institutions, like police forces, were absent or weak. The primary function of marriage, both directly and indirectly through familial ties, was to help spouses fulfill needs like food production, shelter, and protection from violence—the sorts of physiological and safety needs toward the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy.

In the *companionate era* (1850–1965), Americans increasingly lived in urban environments and became wage laborers outside the home. Meanwhile, the nation became wealthier, and social institutions, including a broad economic safety net, became increasingly robust. The industrialized economy typically separated spouses’ economic production along gender lines, with husbands entering the paid workforce and wives tending to the household. With the increased ease of meeting basic physiological and safety needs outside of marriage and the heightened role specialization along gender lines, the functions of marriage became increasingly sentimental. Its primary purpose was to help spouses fulfill needs like loving, being loved, and experiencing romantic passion—the sorts of belonging and love needs toward the middle of Maslow’s hierarchy.

In the *self-expressive era* (1965–present), diverse forces—including the civil rights and feminist movements, the Vietnam War, and the rise of humanistic psychology—converged to generate the countercultural revolution, which fostered an increased emphasis on self-discovery, self-expression, and authenticity (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985). Americans continued to look to their marriage to fulfill their love and belonging needs, but they also increasingly looked to it to fulfill needs like self-esteem, self-expression, and personal growth—the sorts of esteem and self-actualization needs toward the top of Maslow’s hierarchy.

Scholars and social commentators frequently argue that Americans are expecting more from their marriage than in the past (e.g., de Botton, 2012; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). However, according to the suffocation model, the overall quantity of Americans’ marital expectations has not changed much, whereas the nature of these expectations has changed considerably: Contemporary Americans expect much less vis-à-vis physiological and safety needs but much more vis-à-vis esteem and self-actualization needs. These changing expectations have caused average marriages to become less satisfying, and the best marriages to become more satisfying, than in earlier eras.

Why Average Marriages Are Less Satisfying Than in Earlier Eras

Building a marriage that can help spouses meet their higher needs is more difficult than building a marriage

that can help them meet their lower needs. To be sure, it was no small feat, circa 1800, to produce food during a drought or to stay warm during the winter, but doing so did not require a loving bond or deep insight into one’s spouse’s psychological essence. In contrast, these factors are essential for contemporary spouses seeking to help each other achieve self-expression. After all, higher needs, which “vary greatly from person to person” (Maslow, 1943, p. 383), are much less tangible and more idiosyncratic than lower needs, and the ability to provide support that is tailored to partners’ unique needs and circumstances (rather than providing generic forms of support) is crucial for helping them achieve their self-expressive needs (Slotter & Gardner, 2014). This greater emphasis on relationship processes that require mutual insight means that investing time and energy in the relationship is much more important today than in the past. As a result, a level of investment in the relationship that would have been sufficient to meet spouses’ marital expectations in earlier eras is frequently insufficient today.

This problem is exacerbated by a cruel cultural twist: Just as Americans have increasingly looked to their marriage to help them fulfill higher rather than lower needs in Maslow’s hierarchy, they have decreasingly invested the time and energy required to help the marriage meet these expectations. The amount of time that childless Americans spent alone with their spouse declined from 35 to 26 hours per week from 1975 to 2003, with much of this decline resulting from an increase in time spent working; the parallel decline for Americans with children at home was from 13 to 9 hours per week, with much of this decline resulting from an increase in time-intensive parenting (Dew, 2009). Relative to spouses in 1980, spouses in 2000 were 15% less likely to report that they almost always ate their main meal of the day together (vs. separately), 29% less likely to report that they almost always went out for leisure together, and 36% less likely to report that they almost always visited friends together (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2009).

In principle, Americans could have offset this reduction in spousal time by making their limited time together particularly high quality. After all, the suffocation model suggests that the crucial factor in helping spouses meet each other’s higher needs may not be time investment per se, but something closer to the amount of *bandwidth*—the cognitive and psychological resources that help us focus on a given task (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013)—that people dedicate to their marriage. Unfortunately, the bandwidth available for marriage has also declined. Americans are more stressed today than in the past (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2012). They are also increasingly overloaded with information (Hilbert & López, 2011) and subject to large increases in the rate of multitasking and interruptions (Schulte, 2014).

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

Fig. 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (adapted from Maslow, 1943, 1954/1970) and the introduction of Mount Maslow. Adapted from "The Suffocation of Marriage: Climbing Mount Maslow Without Enough Oxygen," by E. J. Finkel, C. M. Hui, K. L. Carswell, and G. M. Larson, 2014, *Psychological Inquiry*, 25, p. 7. Copyright 2014 by Taylor & Francis. Adapted with permission.

In short, as Americans have increasingly looked to marriage to help them fulfill higher needs, a process that requires a strongly nurtured relationship, they have increasingly deprived their relationship of that nurturance. The squeeze emerging from these two processes—insufficient fuel to meet the demands contemporary Americans are placing on their marriage—gives the suffocation model its name. To drive home this metaphor, the model reconceptualizes Maslow's hierarchy as a mountain rather than as a pyramid (Fig. 1). Just as each breath provides less oxygen at higher than at lower altitudes when mountain climbing, each unit of time or energy invested in the marriage provides less *oxygenation* (less bandwidth) for need fulfillment at higher altitudes on "Mount Maslow." For example, it requires a much larger investment in the relationship—both in terms of the total investment over the course of the relationship and in terms of resources invested in the moment—for spouses to help each other fulfill their personal-growth goals than their physical-safety goals.

Indeed, consistent with this idea that the average marriage is becoming increasingly *suffocated* (insufficiently oxygenated to meet spouses' expectations), the satisfaction level of the average American marriage has declined over time (Marquardt, Blankenhorn, Lerman, Malone-Colón, & Wilcox, 2012).

Why the Best Marriages Are More Satisfying Than in Earlier Eras

Fortunately, the news is not all bad. Indeed, even as average marriages have become less satisfying, the best marriages have become more satisfying. After all, relative to lower need gratifications, "higher need gratifications produce more desirable subjective results, i.e., more profound happiness, serenity, and richness of the inner life" (Maslow, 1954/1970, p. 99). Whereas lower-altitude gratifications "produce at best a feeling of relief and relaxation," higher-altitude gratifications produce "ecstasy, peak experiences, and happy delirium." Consistent with

this theorizing, among wealthy nations that prize self-expression (as America does), factors associated with satisfying lower-altitude needs are weakly linked to psychological well-being, whereas factors associated with satisfying higher-altitude needs are strongly linked to psychological well-being (Howell & Howell, 2008; Oishi, Diener, Lucas, & Suh, 1999; Tay & Diener, 2011).

The suffocation model suggests that parallel effects emerge when individuals seek to meet their needs through their marriage. All else being equal, the positive association of marriage-linked need fulfillment with marital quality is stronger for higher- than for lower-altitude needs. That is, as Americans' marital expectations have increasingly shifted from lower- to higher-altitude needs, the extent to which their marriage meets the relevant needs has become a stronger predictor of marital quality. This trend helps to explain why the association of marital quality with personal well-being is getting stronger over time (Proulx et al., 2007).

Implications and Discussion

Clinicians, policymakers, and laypersons can capitalize upon the suffocation model's logic to strengthen contemporary marriages that are not flourishing. In particular, the model's supply-and-demand analysis—ensuring that oxygenation (supply) is sufficient to meet spouses' expectations (demand)—implies three potential avenues for bolstering marital quality. The first avenue can help marriages flourish at the summit, whereas the other two are particularly useful for spouses who currently lack sufficient resources to achieve that level of success.

First, spouses can increase their level of investment, strategically reallocating time and bandwidth toward the marriage. For example, they can, where possible, schedule regular date nights (Wilcox & Dew, 2012). Doing so can help to provide the relationship with the oxygen required to meet high-altitude needs and has the potential to make the marriage deeply fulfilling. Second, spouses can pursue low-effort strategies designed to optimize the use of their existing resources. For example, they can spend 21 minutes a year on a brief writing intervention that will help them reappraise marital conflict from the perspective of a benevolent third party (Finkel, Slotter, Luchies, Walton, & Gross, 2013). Although doing so is unlikely to be sufficient to turn a dissatisfying marriage into a satisfying one, it can at least modestly strengthen the marriage without a major infusion of additional resources. Third, spouses can ask their marriage to shoulder less responsibility for helping them fulfill high-altitude needs. For example, they can maintain a diverse portfolio of friends and family members with whom they can share distinct emotional experiences (Cheung, Gardner, & Anderson, 2014). Doing so can bring the

demands on the marriage into closer alignment with the available resources, thereby reducing dissatisfaction from unmet expectations.

This discussion of available resources begs for a consideration of socioeconomic variation, especially in this era of skyrocketing income and wealth inequality (Congressional Budget Office, 2011). Relative to their wealthier counterparts, poorer Americans are less likely to marry and, if they do wed, tend to be less satisfied and more likely to divorce (Karney & Bradbury, 2005). Given these disparities, U.S. policymakers have launched funding initiatives, such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative, that target low-income couples. However, these initiatives have proven unsuccessful at improving marital quality in these samples (Johnson, 2012).

Adopting the logic of the suffocation model can potentially foster more efficacious initiatives for bolstering the marriages of low-income couples. The model suggests that two broad processes have led to socioeconomic disparities in marital outcomes, which are getting larger over time (Martin, 2006). First, although Trail and Karney's (2012) definitive study demonstrates that Americans across the socioeconomic spectrum have extremely similar views about which factors are important for a successful marriage (Fig. 2), the acute pressures of daily life can sometimes force people to prioritize factors other than the ones they would like to prioritize. Poorer Americans view communication, social support, and self-expression to be just as important for marriage as wealthier Americans do; however, poorer Americans are more susceptible to financial strain (Edin & Kefalas, 2005), which can cause them to fixate on the safety level on Mount Maslow and, consequently, to struggle to prioritize higher-altitude needs (Maslow, 1943). Second, it is much more challenging for poorer than for wealthier Americans to allocate sufficient bandwidth to the marriage. Whereas wealthier Americans can hire a weekly babysitter so that they can view an intellectually engaging matinee and then discuss it over a romantic dinner, poorer Americans frequently lack the kind of time and financial wherewithal to make such endeavors realistic (Kantor, 2014). In short, Americans across the socioeconomic spectrum share a cultural worldview of what makes marriage successful, but poorer Americans are increasingly finding their higher-altitude aspirations out of reach.

Conclusion

Carl Rogers, a major intellectual progenitor of humanistic psychology, had a deeply fulfilling marriage, one for the ages. He attributed this success to the fact that he and his wife were always "willing and eager for the other to *grow*. We have *grown* as individuals and in the process we have grown together" (Rogers, 1972, pp. 28–29, italics in

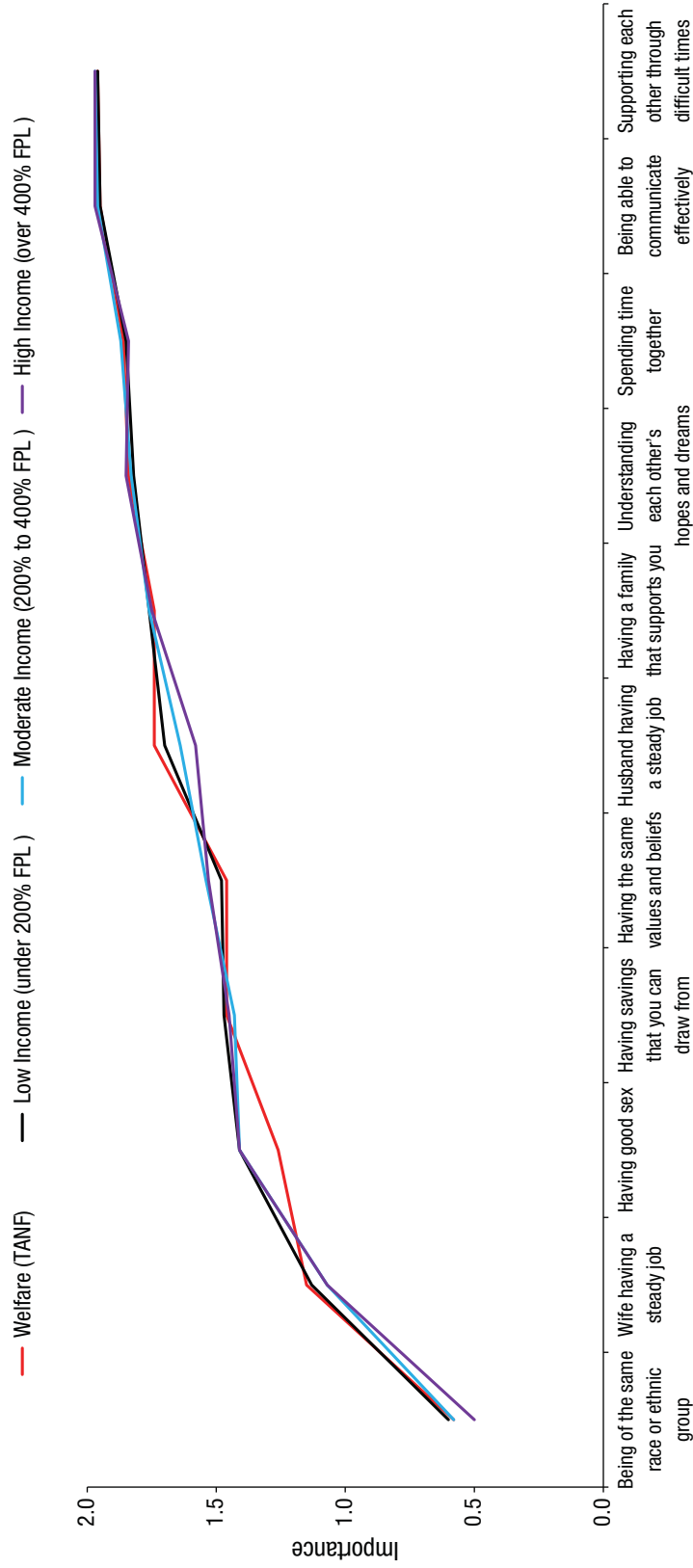


Fig. 2. Results from Trail and Karney (2012) showing remarkable consistency across socioeconomic groups in what characteristics are important for a successful marriage. All six of the correlations (r s) that can be calculated by comparing any pair of lines in the figure exceed .98, and the average correlation (r) exceeds .99. The scale used to rate importance ranged from 0 to 2 (0 = *not important*; 1 = *somewhat important*; 2 = *very important*). Even when different colors are used for the lines for each income group, it is difficult to distinguish among them because the four income groups are virtually identical in what they view as important for a successful marriage. TANF = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. FPL = federal poverty level. Adapted from "The Suffocation of Marriage: Climbing Mount Maslow Without Enough Oxygen," by E. J. Finkel, G. M. Larson, K. L. Carswell, and C. M. Hui, 2014, *Psychological Inquiry*, 25, p. 130. Copyright 2014 by Taylor & Francis. Adapted with permission.

original). This emphasis on growth through marriage was rare throughout American history, but it is a defining feature of today's self-expressive era. Building a marriage that facilitates both partners' growth is difficult, but the payoffs are immense. With the suffocation model in hand, individuals are in a stronger position than ever before to establish and maintain profoundly satisfying marriages.

Recommended Reading

- Cherlin, A. J. (2009). (See References). A trade book about the state of marriage in America, written by a leading sociologist and demographer.
- Coontz, S. (2005). (See References). A trade book about "how love conquered marriage," written by a leading historian.
- Finkel, E. J., Hui, C. M., Carswell, K. L., & Larson, G. M. (2014). (See References). The *Psychological Inquiry* target article that introduced the suffocation model.
- Finkel, E. J., Larson, G. M., Carswell, K. L., & Hui, C. M. (2014). (See References). The *Psychological Inquiry* reply that refined the suffocation model in response to 13 expert commentaries on the target article.
- Fitzsimons, G. M., & Shah, J. Y. (2008). How goal instrumentality shapes relationship evaluations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95*, 319-337. The seminal article illustrating how relationship well-being is influenced by the extent to which one's partner helps to facilitate one's goal pursuits.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Note

1. Although many of the ideas in this article apply to other long-term committed relationships, the primary focus is on marriage, an institution characterized by unique expectations.

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