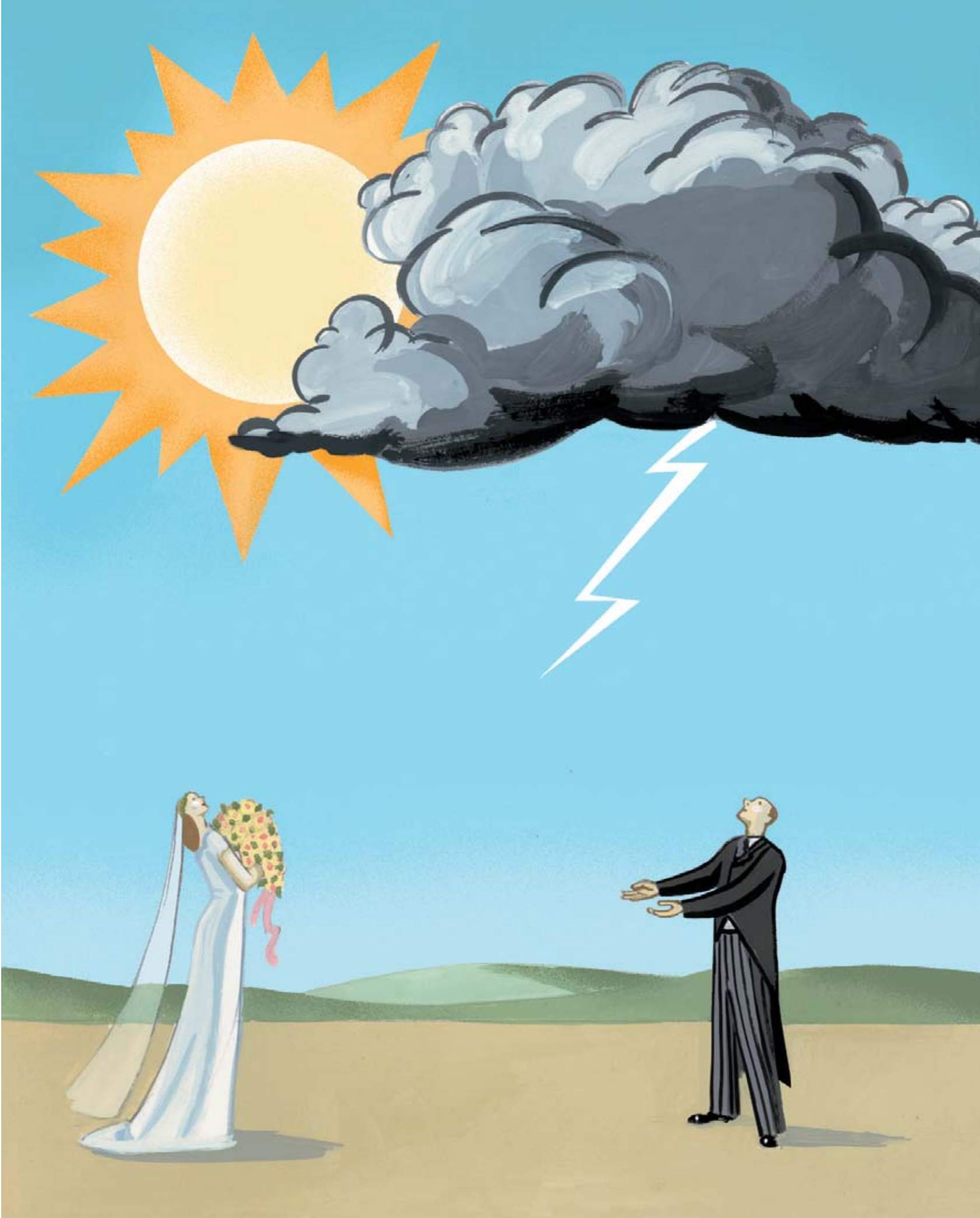


chances

True romantics would say that marriage is not something that can be modeled with equations or predicted from data. It is due more to pheromones than formulas, more to the alignment of the stars than the alignment of economic incentives. Social scientists need not tread here, for there is nothing they can explain.

But if it were really up to chance alone, it would be amazing if any couples ever met. Chance might explain which particular hydrogen and oxygen atoms are attracted to form water, but it's not enough to explain human chemistry. Indeed, the history of marriage is a history of the influence of social norms and economic conditions on people's behavior, not a history of chance encounters. Social and economic factors have always set the

aren't





stage for whom people marry, and for whether they marry at all. The pheromones take over from there.

THE HISTORY OF GETTING HITCHED

Every human society employs something recognizable as marriage to bond its members into families (though not always into monogamous ones) and to establish economic rights. Even in the earliest societies, the economic advantages of living in families were clear. Not only could two live more cheaply than one, but husbands and wives could specialize in different tasks, making household production more efficient. This made it more cost-effective to produce and rear children and helped perpetuate the species. But the social and family ties created by marriage were equally as important for early societies' survival. Because their environment was so perilous, the mutual obligations of kinship provided an advantage to help them survive. Marriage ensured that family members would be taken care of even when they could not provide for themselves, and it established the rules by which property would be inherited. Any role for love or chance in initiating relationships was subjugated to the needs of the group. Making a match that would help society survive was more important than whether the two individuals involved actually felt an emotional connection to one another.

Even after day-to-day survival became less precarious, traditions of brideprice (a payment from the groom's family to the bride's) and, more commonly, dowry (a payment from the bride's family to the groom's) existed for centuries to compensate families for the loss of a productive member of the household and to augment a potential mate's economic value in the

We once married for the economic advantages of family life, but today marriage is about more than money

marriage. Lower- and middle-class girls in early modern Europe would often start working as maids or cooks as adolescents and save for a decade or more to create a substantial-enough dowry for marriage. Marriages typically occurred when people reached their mid to late twenties and had established themselves well enough economically to help support a family. Similarly, marriages among royal families at that time were essentially business transactions, cementing political alliances and ensuring heirs.

As Western societies have moved from a group-oriented to an individual-oriented form of social organization, though, so too has our concept of marriage moved from a purely economic and social relationship to an increasingly personal and emotional one. Dowries have been extinct in the Western world since the mid-nineteenth century—brideprices much longer. Even the thought of a prenuptial agreement is distasteful to many. And while early marriages were often made solely on the basis of economic assets, health, and social background, today's matches usually consider love first, economics later. In a survey by the National Marriage Project, 94 percent of singles agreed that "when you marry, you want your spouse to be your soul mate first and foremost," and 82 percent felt that "it is unwise for a woman to rely on marriage for financial security."

WHAT'S THE ECONOMY GOT TO DO WITH IT?

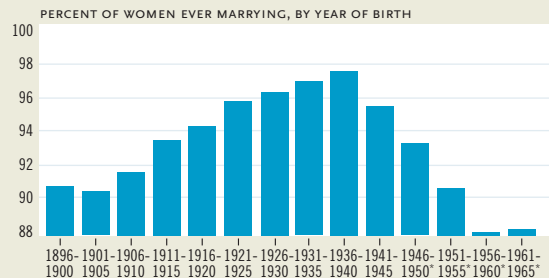
Though we may not talk about marriage as an explicitly economic arrangement any more, the economic underpinnings of the union still remain. Most obviously, marriage as a legal status provides numerous economic rights. In many states, married people co-own each other's property, even if it is listed in only one person's name. They can automatically inherit property from their spouses without paying inheritance taxes. They can sue for support after divorce and claim their deceased spouse's Social Security payments. And many employers offer benefits like health and life insurance to spouses in legally married couples, but not to their cohabiting counterparts.

The relationship between economics and marriage today, though, doesn't end at legal rights and responsibilities. No matter what the economic situation, the vast majority of us eventually marry. But feeling capable of the financial responsibility of maintaining a household, and especially of rearing any potential children, is an important reason we head to the altar. Likewise, diminishing economic opportunities prevent us from imagining ourselves as married or from aspiring to marriage. As a result, bad economic times can lead us to alter our expectations for our mates' characteristics, to forestall marriage, or to forego it entirely.

For instance, only 91 percent of women born at the turn of the twentieth century ever married, according to a recent study by sociologists Joshua Goldstein and Catherine T. Kenney (see

MAKE ME A MATCH

Though most people eventually get hitched, the marriage rate depends on the economy; the post-World War II economic boom yielded a bumper crop of marriages among those born in the 1930s.



*Projected
SOURCE: Data from Goldstein and Kenney, "Marriage Delayed or Marriage Foregone? New Cohort Forecasts of First Marriage for U.S. Women." *American Sociological Review*, August 2001

chart). While there were plenty of men relative to women when this cohort came of age, the transformation from an agricultural to an industrial economy dampened marriage rates. Wives played a vital role in the economics of subsistence farm families, handling child-rearing and household tasks while husbands tended to crops. But in an industrial economy, they were an economic liability. Women's household labor did not bring cash into the household, and social norms against women working for pay kept more than 80 percent of them out of the labor market. Furthermore, as industrialization progressed and farmland turned over for development, there were fewer opportunities for young men to own their own farms. Those that worked in factories or as hands on others' farms were often expected to contribute some of their earnings to their parents' households. Young men thus had both less need of a farm wife and less sense that they could support a family on their own.

In comparison, the economic boom after World War II coincided with extremely high marriage rates. Of the women coming of age during this era of soaring economic growth and abundant job opportunities, 97 percent eventually married, a historic peak. People also married younger than ever before, at an average age of 21 for women and 24 for men. Marriage rates peaked partially because the supply of available men was roughly equivalent to the number of available women, making it easier for everyone to find a mate. But the economic bounty of this period also meant that for many families, a husband at work earned enough to support a wife at home, making the financial tradeoff of women staying out of paid work less costly. If ever there were a heyday for marriage in America, this was it.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, marriage rates are much the same as they were 100 years ago. Women born between 1961 and 1965 have an 89 percent chance of marrying at least once. The socioeconomic factors behind the downward trend in marriage rates since the 1950s are complex and multifaceted. Because of changes in immigration patterns, reductions in women's mortality, and other factors, the number of

available men relative to available women has declined substantially over the last century. Today, on average, there are 86 single men for every 100 single women aged 15 and over in the United States. These aren't great odds for single women, and they get worse as women age since women tend to live longer than men. Among those age 60 or older, there are less than half as many single men as single women. In addition, women's economic position has improved relative to men. More women than men have enrolled in college every year since the 1980s, and labor force participation rates for women in their mid-20s to mid-40s have skyrocketed from 30 percent in 1940 to 77 percent in 2000. At the same time, men's labor force participation rates have fallen and their wage growth has been slow, particularly for low-skill workers. (Low-skill jobs like machine operators and laborers have seen a 6 percent real decline in weekly wages since 1985, while managerial and professional wages have increased by 6.5 percent.) All these factors have combined not only to reduce the total number of marriages, but also to increase the age at first marriage. Today, on average, women marry at 25, men at 27—the oldest age in American history.

In addition to generational shifts in marriage patterns, differences in economic status exert a surprisingly large influence on people's marital choices even within the same generation. While highly educated and high-income people tend to delay their marriages, they are the most likely to eventually marry. Data compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics show that in any given year, there are three times as many marriages among col-

Bad economic conditions or an imbalance of men and women can delay or prevent marriages





lege graduates as among high school dropouts. Only 11 percent of the poor marry in any given year despite the fact that 14 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Blacks, who disproportionately fall at the low end of the economic distribution, have experienced particularly large drops in their marriage rates in the last several decades. While in 1980 just over half of all blacks had wed, by 2000 this had decreased to 42 percent—almost twice the rate of decline for whites. At age 40, 90 percent of whites have married at least once, but almost 30 percent of black men and 25 percent of black women still have never married.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Getting married requires more than just a healthy economy, a decent job, and an ample supply of potential mates. It also requires two individual people to meet, interact, get along, and ultimately determine that they want to spend their lives together. But the kinds of people we meet are defined in large part by our social environment and social norms and thus tend to be similar to ourselves. For example, though there are always a few May-December romances, most of us end up marrying someone within a few years of our own age. Among first marriages, wives are on average only 2.1 years younger than their husbands; among second marriages, 3.4 years. One reason is that a large age gap between spouses is considered unusual, even suspect, especially at younger ages. Another is that so many of us meet our spouses in school or in our first few years of working, when we tend to be surrounded by people about our same age.

Likewise, spouses today also tend to have similar levels of education, although this has not always been the case. In the

The more education we have and the more money we earn, the more likely we are to eventually marry

1930s, most people married others of the same schooling level, mainly because so few people had more than an eighth or ninth grade education. But by the 1960s, it was common for a husband to have significantly more education than his wife, since men's educational opportunities had outpaced women's for several decades. More recently, women's school attendance has surpassed men's, especially for post-secondary education, and less time tends to elapse between the end of school and the decision to marry. As a result, finding a partner of the same education level is easier and more common than it used to be. Over half of existing marriages involve spouses with identical educational backgrounds, as compared to 44 percent in the 1960s.

Historically race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation were extremely important factors for establishing who could marry whom. Indeed, racial intermarriage was still illegal in 16 states until 1967, when a unanimous Supreme Court decision declared such laws unconstitutional. Even today many people still hold strong sentiments against interracial marriage. Though more and more couples intermarry each year, still less than 3 percent of marriages in 2000 were interracial. Among minority groups,

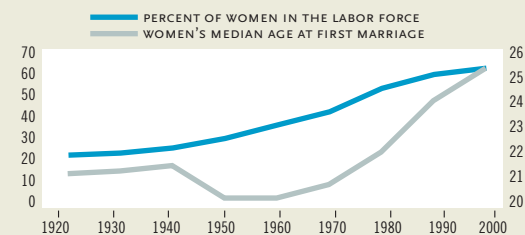
blacks are by far the most likely to marry within their racial group—95 percent of blacks marry other blacks, as compared to 65 percent of Hispanics and 75 percent of Asians. Similarly, 68 percent of Jews and 70 percent of Catholics are currently married to others of the same faith, although these rates are likely to decline since only 42 percent of today's singles feel it is im-

portant that their spouse is of the same religious faith.

The definition of an "appropriate" mate is slippery, however. When there are comparatively few people of our own age, race, or education available in the marriage market, we are more inclined to select mates dissimilar to ourselves. A recent study found that a woman was 20 percent more likely to marry a man with a different educational background from herself in marriage markets where there were relatively few similarly educated men. Another reported that blacks were more likely to marry other blacks when they lived in states with larger black populations (and hence more potential same-race spouses).

WAITING GAME

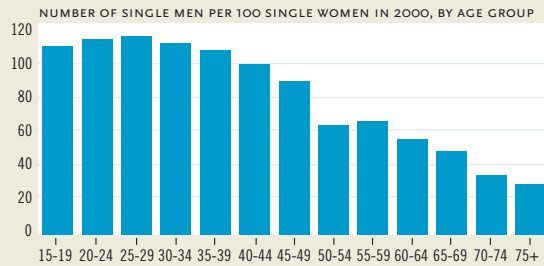
As women have increasingly joined the labor force, they have also delayed marriage until establishing their careers.



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

OUTNUMBERED

Because men tend to die younger than women, the number of available men relative to women starts to diminish around age 25. By the golden years, there are almost twice as many women as men.



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

THE MEET MARKET

The single readers out there may now be wondering where exactly we meet these demographically determined mates. As their mothers probably told them, one of the best bets has always been through social organizations like school, work, church, community groups, or family and friends. Institutions like these facilitate our desire to marry someone like ourselves: schoolmates are by definition people of roughly the same educational level, church members share the same faith, and so on. Our neighborhoods are also ripe with opportunity, since our neighbors tend to be economically and socially similar as well.

But many singles have come to feel that the traditional methods are less viable these days. On the one hand, work and school are still major pieces of our social fabric. School attendance rates are at an all-time high, and those not in school spend more time at work than ever before. But these institutions also demand a lot of us. The more hours we work or study, the less time we have for socializing and getting to know potential mates outside of these settings. And other social institutions seem to be on the decline. We join fewer social groups, participate less in community activities, and socialize with our neighbors less frequently than we used to. The proportion of people attending church less than once per year has increased from 21 percent in the 1970s to 30 percent today, according to the General Social Survey. And 28 percent of us report never spending a social evening with a neighbor. Our desire to get married is no weaker, but with fewer traditional institutions to facilitate a match, it's no wonder so many feel that finding a spouse has become harder than it ever was.

But things are starting to change. Old institutions are adapting to our new social environment, and we are creating new connections to other people every day—just not in the places we used to look for them. For instance, one rabbi in-

vented the idea of speed dating when he noticed the dating difficulties of the singles in his congregation. A group of equal numbers of men and women participate, with each person going on a series of seven-minute “dates” with the others in the group. Afterwards, everyone rates their preferences, and those participants who express mutual interest are put in contact with one another. Not only is this a quick way to meet lots of potential dates—in seven minutes we can get a pretty good sense of whether we’d like to get to know someone better—but it also helps break down social barriers between people where just attending services together (or, for that matter, seeing each other in the grocery store) might not. No wonder speed dating has spread into other churches and social organizations, and even adult education centers.

Internet technology has also proven to be a boon to singles looking for mates. Many Internet service providers include “chat rooms,” in which people can interactively discuss their shared interest in dog shows, sushi, or James Bond movies; email distribution lists serve much the same purpose. There are

Cohabitation: The New Marriage?

Emily Post might be startled to hear it, but over half of American marriages today start with cohabitation. Furthermore, according to a recent study by Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, about 25 percent of the population aged 25 to 39 is currently living with an unmarried partner, and half of women in their 30s have cohabited at least once in their lifetimes. Forty percent of children will live in a household with cohabiting adults before the age of 16. It seems that what a generation ago caused titters and scorn, today few blink an eye at.

The increase in cohabitation also explains much of the recent decline in marriage rates. Bumpass and Lu find that among the group of women born between 1950 and 1954, 71 percent were married by age 25, as compared to only 52 percent of women born between 1965 and 1969. But for the formation of joint households (either married or cohabiting), the rates are more similar. Among the women born in the late 1960s, 70 percent had formed a joint household by age 25, versus 78 percent of those born 15 years earlier. Most women still start joint households in their early 20s; the relationships behind them are just less likely to be marriages.

Some view cohabitation as a substitute for marriage, obviating the need for a more formalized relationship. Others view it as a convenient living situation, saving on rent and household expenses and not indicating anything about a long-term partnership. But for many, cohabitation serves as a kind of marriage trial, an extended engagement in which the couple tests how well they get along living under the same roof. This may be why over half of cohabiting couples marry within five years; about 10 percent continue living together, and the rest part ways.

It's possible that those cohabitators who go on to marry create a stronger marital relationship because of living together first. The fact that they can obtain most of the efficiency advantages of marriage simply by living together may indicate that love and commitment are a greater part of the reason these couples marry. And spending those early years working out which way the toilet paper hangs off the roll and who gets what part of the closet helps create the building blocks necessary for the relationship to hang together for the long haul.

also more formal matchmaking sites specifically designed to bring singles together. Though they are the Internet Age equivalents of newspaper personal ads, web-based matchmakers offer much more information than a few cryptic, haiku-like words of description about potential mates. Members of Match.com, one of the largest and most popular sites, complete a 50-item questionnaire about their characteristics and their preferences in a match, as well as composing essays describing themselves and their ideal mate. They can search for potential mates by specifying criteria, such as religious preference or smoking tolerance, and by reading member profiles. Other sites match people by zeroing in on those who share interests or experiences, such as animal lovers (www.animalpeople.com), sports fans (sportmatesearch.com), or senior citizens (www.seniormatch.com).

While in the past taking out a personal ad was heavily stigmatized, today's singles don't appear to be similarly dissuaded from joining online dating services. Indeed, Match.com's revenues increased by almost 200 percent last year, spurred by exponential growth in new memberships. The more specialized dating sites have also proliferated, numbering in the hundreds, if not thousands. The Internet may yet prove to be the ultimate singles meeting grounds, offering much more information about potential mates in the early stages of a relationship than we typically can obtain in other settings.

What none of these new institutions do not do, however, is increase the role of chance in meeting our mates. While we might meet different people over the Internet or in a speed dating session than we otherwise would have, a marriage is based on much more than a date, and the regularities of social behavior will still influence this important decision. We will still want to get married when it seems financially feasible to support a family, and we will still want to marry someone we feel compatible with, who will likely be someone like ourselves. Indeed, it would be surprising if the world didn't work that way—how else could we sort through all the potential mates out there? In the marriage market, demography may not be destiny, but it gets you a long way towards the altar.*

letter from Brockton, Massachusetts



The Rox play their home games at Campanelli Stadium, where comfortable seats, good sight lines, and a sense of intimacy let fans feel like they are part of the action.