

THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE IN THE UK. CURRENT CONCERNS

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is often perceived as one of the oldest and most sacred institutions undergoing a slow, but certain process of transformation. Some scholars argue that it all starts from an initial error of placing the label of permanence over an institution which relies on a fluctuating concept: the nature of human relationships. The modern world has impacted deeply the institution of ‘marriage’ and most of its components. From aspects related to women’s emancipation, people’s increasingly longer working hours, or technological development, AI and globalization, the institution of ‘marriage’ had to adapt itself to survive in the newly created ‘global village’. This paper aims to be an analysis of marriage in the UK, now and twenty years ago, as presented in two distinct media articles, written two decades apart, using a qualitative comparative thematic method. It will show that the predictions made on the direction marriage was going have fulfilled to a large extent. It will also stress that society has a specific manner in which to integrate change and adapt its core institutions to accommodate the sometimes inescapable wave of novelty.

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1. Introduction

Modern societies are changing on a daily basis, with technology adding an important contribution to the way our daily life has transformed over the past decades. Globalization is another very important factor: the constantly changing labour market is now one of the underlying causes of the most dramatic changes in our day-to-day life. The fact that we can change jobs more often and relocate more easily than we did a few decades earlier, as well as the work-from-anywhere type of jobs (made possible by the fast implementation of worldwide technology) are just a few reasons behind the adjustments of how we form and maintain our personal relationships. The once powerful, traditional, and even mandatory institution of marriage has gone through systematic and systemic change in the past few decades. The way people form relations, in the form of marriages, civil partnerships, or simple cohabitation is what essentially allows our species to maintain itself on the evolutionary charts, with procreation as the ultimate goal.

The way people organise their personal relationships, however, has drastically transformed over the past decades, worldwide as well as in the UK, due to a multitude of factors. The adaptation was slow, due to the cultural implications, but change has even reached the impenetrable spheres of the religious extremists, who have very strict rules when it comes to a woman's role in marital alliances and society. In this paper, these changes and the question of the future directions will be explored through the analysis of two separate media articles on marriage, which were written more than twenty years apart. The purpose of the paper is to analyse if and how much the predictions of the initial article have fulfilled twenty years later, through its reflection on the current realities and the subsequent predictions of the second article.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section reviews significant specialized literature on the topic of marriage in general, and in the UK in particular. The second section analyses two media articles which reveal the different characteristics and functions of the institution of marriage at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The first article belongs to Judith O'Reilly³, and it was published in *The Sun* tabloid in 1999. It was included in John Oakland's volume, published in 2001 and re-published in 2005, *Contemporary Britain – A Survey with Texts*. As he stated in the preface, Oakland believed that this collection of texts and commentaries pinpoint contemporary themes and subjects of major concern from the beginning of the twenty-first century Britain. The collection was intended to serve as textual support for students in English, with the main purpose of developing critical thinking, as well as sensitivity to observe, interpret and predict societal change. Oakland specifies in the introduction why this volume was published: the inevitable but mostly unpredictable occurrence of change and transformation, as the main catalysts of the twenty-first century: "change can occur rapidly, as well as slowly" (Oakland, 2005, p. xi). In the chapter about marital relationships and their transformation in the twenty-first century England, the editor wrote an accurate and comprehensive introduction to the topic, analysing the political, economic and social background of the time.

2. Methodology

The present work uses a qualitative comparative thematic analysis method, because it compares data, trends and themes about the institution of marriage over a period of twenty years, providing a unique, non-invasive way to track changes

³ O'Reilly, J. (1999, January 10). Pupils Taught Marriage Is 'Just One Option' for Family Life. *The Sunday Times*, abridged, in Oakland, J. (2005). *Contemporary Britain – A Survey with Texts*, Routledge, London & New York: Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 236-237.

in social norms and scholarly perspectives on a very important subject. It helps revealing attitudes, trends and how they can be predicted in the long run, through the analysis of data. It offers a longitudinal view of the development of the institution of marriage over a period of twenty years, as observable in the two proposed texts. The analysis helps with understanding the cultural, legal and behavioural shifts that have occurred over two decades in the UK's social landscape. This essentially helps with refining emerging themes and observing how the analysis of the institution of marriage and its societal trends have changed over the past twenty years. The comparison is systematic and serves in identifying subtle nuances, patterns, similarities and differences as well as prediction rates. It also identifies new concepts, which have emerged over the past decades. Specific statements and themes regarding marriage in the UK are thoroughly analysed and compared, so as to build an understanding of the evolving trends, over the period of twenty years. This serves to build a richer, more in-depth, and more recent theory on marriage in the UK.

The prevalent narrative in the first article from 1999 is dominated by the speculation about the downfall of the institution of marriage and the debate about whether schools should acknowledge and include in the curriculum information about non-traditional relationship types. The number of couples living in cohabitation was predicted to rise, but not at the same level with married couples decreasing – the difference being people who will never get married, or re-married. O'Reilly's article also analyses whether the school curriculum was to integrate those changes or not: a new moral code piloted in 150 schools, at that time, instructed teachers to prepare the pupils for a much wider range of relationships, which were to be expected in their adult life. The proposal considered the imminent growth of cohabiting couples (expected to double by 2030), as well as the growing number of single men (about half being estimated to remain single).

The second text⁴ confirms the decline and materializes the prediction in the form of statistical reality. The political representation changes from a topic of active public debate to one of political taboo, or a topic of denial among policy makers.

3. Literature Review

Edgar W. Butler identified, as early as 1979, four possible functions of marriage: the legitimisation of sexual union, the public declaration of the sexual union, the declaration of the permanence of the relationship and, finally, the prescription of the obligations in the areas of family economy, parenthood and place of residence (Brown et. al., 1985, p. 109 apud Butler, 1979, p. 38).

A team of researchers led by Jennifer Brown published in 1985 a paper which identifies the threats on the institution of marriage as mere 'myths' (Brown et al., 1985, pp. 110-113). They argued that marriage is surrounded by many such myths: the 'equality in marriage' myth, or the fact that the younger generations seem to be "rejecting marriage" (idem) belong to the same category of generally accepted incomplete 'truths'. Other studies underline the importance of the initial perception of the individual regarding marriage (adopted from parents, in childhood), which influences their decision in adult life, and argue that children are adopting the inevitability of marriage, without any effort of their own, but simply imposed by their parents (Scott, 2006, p. 1472).

Marriage has always attracted sociologists and researchers because of its ideological and also legal implications. Another relevant paper was published in 2012, and revises literature from the beginning of the twenty first century,

⁴ Available from: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/marriage-is-disappearing-from-britain> [Accessed 10th September 2025]

highlighting the fact that the recent predilection of British people for cohabitation (instead of legal union in marriage) may as well be a sign of “irrational behaviour” (since the law solely acknowledged and protected such marital unions at that time) and whatever is left out does not benefit from any legal safeguard (Duncan, Barlow and James, 2012, p. 384).

Roy F. Baumeister interprets the concept of marriage as something which is “accepted, idealized, and institutionalized in our culture as one of stability and permanence” (1991, p. 68). While marriage is interpreted by the society as something which is official, unchangeable and permanent (should last a lifetime), any transformation in the universal perception of the concept may be generally and unconsciously understood as a threat to the notion of social permanence and stability itself. The same scholar argues that we are only speaking about a false permanence of the institution of marriage, because it involves “the imposition of a stable idea onto a changing relationship” (Baumeister, 1991, p. 68).

While people add meaning to their actions to make perfect sense of their world, their actions connote symbolism and intention, connecting things over time (Baumeister, 1991, p. 15). Therefore, some studies have found that marriage offers benefits (Perelli-Harris, 2019, p. 1220) and shares many advantages with cohabitation: “intimacy, emotional and social support, and joint residence” (idem), with the latter increasingly becoming an “alternative partnership type and an accepted setting for parenthood” (idem). The same study argues that there is a “happiness gap between cohabitation and marriage in most countries, but the size of the gap appears to vary and may be linked to the acceptance and prevalence of cohabitation in a society or gender context and religious norms” (ibid., p. 1221).

The benefits of marriage have been highlighted by other researchers, too: the beneficial “sexual and emotional intimacy, companionship and daily

interaction” (Kamp Dush and Amato, 2005, p. 608; Umberson et al., 2008 apud Perelli-Harris, 2019, p. 1221), spouses offering emotional support to each other, reducing the stress of everyday life, private and public acceptance and recognition from a spouse, which raises the level of well-being and helps finding deeper meaning in life (Perelli-Harris, 2019, p. 1221). The same study argues, however, that the social change brought about by the twenty first century indicates an important decline in the benefits of marriage (Liu and Umberson, 2008 apud Perelli-Harris, 2019, p. 1221), suggesting that marriage has become less advantageous (Mikucka, 2016 apud Perelli-Harris, 2019, p. 1221). However, just like “married couples, cohabiting couples share a household and may benefit from similar intimacy, support, care, and family networks” (Perelli-Harris, 2019, p. 1222). Qualitative research from Europe and Australia has argued that many still think of cohabitation as a less-committed type of union than marriage and that it is oriented toward freedom and independence instead of commitment and stability (idem).

We find divergent points of view in John Haskey’s study, which argues that there is an obvious “decline in disapproval of pre-marital cohabitation and an increase in support for living together before marriage” (Husky, 2001, p. 6). Cohabitation becomes a significant part of a “de-standardized life course”, which replaces the old “traditional sequence of family events” (Berrington et al., 2015, p. 327). The amount of personal implication or commitment does not differ much in cohabitation from the one recorded within legally established marriages but, in some cases, male partners use non-marital bonds “to gain all the benefits of a relationship with a female partner, without the legal disadvantages if things went wrong” (Duncan, Barlow and James, 2012, p. 342). The same research emphasizes that “the short-term cost of marrying might outweigh the longer-term benefits” (ibid., p. 343). Studies which look at different countries have observed that essentially it is the “welfare state context, family policies, and cultural attitudes (that) shape partnership formation” because it is the concept of “subjective well-

being” that weighs the most when people consider entering committed relationships (Perelli-Harris et al., 2019, p. 1225). Other scholars, such as Brian Heaphy, also reflect on the recreation of the concept of “commitment in cohabitation” (Heaphy, 2015, p. 328).

The other very important perspective on the institution of marriage is linked in the research field to the “sociological view of the self” (Kamp Dush and Amato, 2005, p. 609), which ultimately refers to the various roles a person plays in his social context: from spouse to sibling, parent, friend, colleague, child, employee etc. Each of these roles which the individuals embrace in their adult life involves a hierarchy based on values, principles, beliefs, which usually dictate the existing level of commitment.

Another key-factor speaking of the importance of committed relationships such as marriage is that most individuals’ sense of self and self-esteem is based on the extent to which others believe that they are “valuable relational partners” (Leary, 1990 apud Kamp Dush and Amato, 2005, p. 609-10).

4. Marriage at the turn of the century

The first text proposed for analysis in this study belongs to journalist Judith O’Reilly, and follows an introduction in the ‘matter of marriage’ in England, belonging to Professor John Oakland. The editor of the volume argues that “social attitudes” were reflected in “new relationship patterns” (Oakland, 2005, p. 235) in the 1990s, in Britain. The introductory text underlines the two distinct directions, which the two main political parties had considered to be acceptable. Each of the parties still sees the traditional family as the way forward, with Labours being more inclusive than Conservatives, reflecting two antagonist influences in the

English society (Oakland, 2005, p. 236). Oakland brings statistical data as arguments, which predicted that married couples will be outnumbered by the unmarried ones, due to divorce rates and to options of choosing to stay single forever or alternatively entering non-marital relationships. On the other hand, the predictions were that married couple's percentages will fall from 55% in 2005, to 48% in 2011, and 41% in 2021, paralleled by falls in the number of married adults.

Statistics in the present confirm most of the predictions from the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, around 40% to 42% of marriages in the UK ended in divorce⁵ in 2023, as shown by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) bulletins on divorce and marriage in England and Wales. It is true that not all predictions have materialized. Such is the case of the world-renowned syntagm "half of all marriages" myth: a misinterpretation of the highest divorce rates in the 1970s and 1980s in the USA, believed to reach the 50% rate, but which was much lower in reality.⁶

Judith O'Reilly touches base on another fervent debate about whether schools should prepare the young generations for the future, teaching them these new alternative "family groupings and other lifestyles" (in Oakland, 2005, p. 236). As expected, such initiatives had plenty of opponents, however, in the long run, unmarried couples gained ground since it was estimated that sooner rather than later, unmarried couples will outnumber the married ones. The text also emphasizes the downfall of the institution of marriage, in England, very often replaced by non-traditional relationship patterns, such as: cohabitation, single people living alone, lone parent families and same-gender relationships etc. The article also proposed two different and separate directions in relation to educating

⁵Available from:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2023> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

⁶Available from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/16/8-facts-about-divorce-in-the-united-states/> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

young children: on whether pupils should be taught about the current non-traditional realities of marriage, in schools, or the old traditional values should still be reinforced.

O'Reilly's article also presents the new moral code piloted in 150 schools in the UK at that time, which was to be introduced nationwide, for children to be taught in schools that "cohabitation and single parenthood can be equally valid" (in Oakland, 2005, p. 236). O'Reilly speaks about the intention to prepare the children for the adult life, and "not only for marriage, but also for the potentially much wider range of relationships that exist nowadays" (idem). The article presents government statistics predicting that more than 50% of the adult British population would choose to remain unmarried, within the next twelve years. That was supposed to be the first time since 1801 that unmarried people outnumbered the legally married ones. The tendency was for the percentage of "non-traditional families" to grow even more, and it is the same tendency in 2025, at the time of writing this article.

Therefore, it was thought that children should be taught in schools that the level of commitment and love between two people is not necessarily connected to the type of relationship they have. The multiple type of relationships was already a reality in 1999. O'Reilly invites schools and society to embrace this new reality, as opposed to ignoring it, rejecting it or vilifying it. If taught in schools, by specialists, within the framework of a well-designed curriculum, the children can understand that it is nothing wrong with them originating from such an environment. At least in theory, this should also release the stigma attached to non-traditional relationships, as well as reinforcing the idealistic feature of values, which we sometimes may fail to live up to. The project O'Reilly analyses proposed a percentage of 5% of school week classes for preparation for life activities. However, the measure was criticized due to the imminent reduction of

time allocated to literacy and numeracy, as well as the imminent disapproval coming from traditional family supporters.

Such measures were indeed introduced in the UK School Curriculum, as late as 2020⁷, and the delay proves that such measures were received with less openness than it was initially hoped for. Parents can withdraw pupils from Sex-Education classes, but they cannot withdraw them from Relationship Education or Health Education classes.⁸ The aim of these classes is to inform and teach children the characteristics of positive relationships such as friendships, family relationships and relationships with other children and adults.⁹

Whether the late introduction of the proposed measures had anything to do with the fact that most of the predicted human relationships transformations in the UK fulfilled in the first decades of the twenty first century, can potentially be the subject of a different study altogether.

5. Marriage in the first decades of the 21st century

The tendency expressed by the initially presented text can also be observed in another article written by Frank Young, the editorial director at Civitas UK¹⁰, in 2023¹¹, on the same subject, with predictions made about the future. The article

⁷Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

⁸ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06103/> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

⁹<https://www.fpa.org.uk/rshe-for-teachers/relationships-sex-and-health-education-uk-curriculum-by-country/> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

¹⁰ Civitas: The Institute for the Study of Civil Society is a British think tank working on issues related to democracy and social policy. It was founded by David George Green.

¹¹ Available from: <https://ifstudies.org/blog/marriage-is-disappearing-from-britain> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

was published on the IFS¹² website. The decreasing popularity of marriage is, however, not linked to an increase in the number of civil-partnerships which, in 2023, accounted for less than 1% of all official relationships in the UK. It is important to underline that 2021 was the first year when more babies were born to cohabiting couples than to married ones. It is further predicted that marriage will disappear by 2062, when it is estimated that, in the UK, only one couple will get married within 400 adults¹³. In present times, the percentage is one couple to 100 adults, therefore, the estimated decrease is about 70% in only two generations. In addition to this, 44% more adults were likely to never get married in 2021, compared to 1991. In 10 years (2011-2021) a decrease of 3% in the number of individuals tying the knot was recorded. The percentage of 37% women aged 20-39 who never got married (in 1991), rose to a staggering 58.6% in 2011, and to 65.7% in 2021.

The article underlines another important aspect: the differences imposed by ethnicity and religion. People actively religious are 24% more likely to be married and 21% less likely to be divorced than those who say they have no religion, or they do not practice it. Nevertheless, while Britain as a whole is turning away from marriage, the decline is not evenly spread. The article argues that Bangladeshis are 45% more likely to be married than are white British, and 71% more likely to be married than those who are black Caribbean. The decline in marriage in England is a phenomenon recorded yearly, and the author of the article underlines that the policy makers are not at all doing efforts to support marriage, which resumes to a “political taboo in Westminster”. Marriage was thought to be in a desperate need for a ‘rescue plan’. The article also points out that in spite of marriage still remaining popular at that moment, the tendency to remain together

¹² The Institute for Family Studies (IFS) aims to strengthen marriage and family life and advance the welfare of children through research and public education. It is well known for its objective and incisive studies (as declared in their organisational mission). The Institute's programs and platforms focus on marriage, child well-being, family formation, parenting, and the role of technology in family life.

¹³ Available from: <https://www.civitas.org.uk/2023/05/10/who-gets-married-and-who-doesnt-evidence-from-the-2021-census/> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

as a couple is still very much linked to the decision of getting or not getting married.

6. Comparison of Findings

What appeared to be a simple tendency in 2005 became the new reality a few years later, in 2023. The recent times' situation is the result of a more complex change regarding modern society's core establishments. One of the main contributing factors is thought to be the emancipation of women, who stay home less than they used to, while their proactive attitude towards work has thoroughly transformed their role within the family (although it was argued that marriage may benefit more men, than women¹⁴). On the other hand, people have less free time than they had 20 years ago, respectively less time to socialize and get to know each other and often enter relationships which, later in life, do not define them. Therefore, people's needs can fluctuate and the constant need for self-discovery accounts for another aspect which lowers their trust in lifelong relationships.

The findings of this study may also be linked to Alan Brown's argument that "marriage remains the idealised image of adult relationship within law" (2024, p. 21). Once people feel they have failed in their first marriage, for example, the chances to embark on a second marriage decrease considerably. As a result, they may choose cohabitation or civil partnerships, to avoid the possible heartache brought by the legal separation, especially since statistics say that 34% of marriages in the UK involve someone who was married before¹⁵.

Conclusions

The comparison of the two media articles reveals what was expected – the marriage institution in the UK no longer possesses the same position as it had at

¹⁴ Bernard et al., 1982; Gove et al., 1983 apud Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005, p. 611.

¹⁵ Available from: <https://www.thomasduntonsolicitors.co.uk/wills-probate-powers-of-attorney/second-marriages-and-common-family-problems/> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

the end of the twentieth century, and it was no secret that things were moving in this direction. Predictions were made about the future of marriage and initiatives to attenuate negative consequences were actively brought forward and implemented in the UK (Brown, 2024, p. 8), such as the legal reforms of the Marriage Act 2013¹⁶.

In addition, the new realities marriage is facing in the UK are predominantly of cultural, religious and moral nature. The relationship between ‘marriage’ and the values propagated by the dominant religion are also a key factor (Brown, 2024, p. 10). However, religious minority entities prove to have stronger marital bonds than the dominant Anglican faith, since spouses form the largest single category of migrant settlement in the UK (Charlsey et al., 2018, p. 861). This is an aspect of novelty, which the second article strongly emphasizes. Authors such as Roy Baumeister, who wrote about meaningful ways to live, argue that, in England, the church had to revise their position on the “desirability of marriage”, in order to fit the “changing needs of the population” (1991, p. 26).

Therefore, slightly different standpoints are needed, more aligned with the contemporary values, reflecting the constant need to line up the present with the traditional past and accommodate the “modern circumstances” which brought on systematic change (Brown, 2024, p. 13). The evolving trend is constant, and predictions seem to materialize sooner rather than later, which is enough of a reason to think about ways of understanding marriage or any other type of similar cohabitation (which lacks the legal bond) according to the needs of the individuals involved in the union. Legal studies underline the importance of a “continued dialogue between traditional and contemporary judicial understandings of marriage” (Brown, 2024, p. 15). What policymakers in the UK consider is a “useful social function” nevertheless raises questions regarding its usefulness (Brown, 2024, p. 19).

¹⁶ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2013/30/contents> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

The limitations of this work are very much linked to the ones of the two articles proposed for analysis. The data is very general and subjective because it is related to the specific opinions of the writers/journalists. It is difficult to see a perfectly accurate causal link between the observed trends: the analysis focuses primarily on describing the changes in representation, over time, detailing the nature of the changes.

Further research can be done using previous forecasts, which have been confirmed in the present, with quantitative data analysis to support the findings and extend over related domains such as family breakdown (children not living with both natural parents). Identifiable trends can also be explored, along with the central factors which favour these trends. The initial as well as the current predictions outline the continuing decline of marriage, with high percentages (close to 30%) forecasted to take place over the next 30 years¹⁷.

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¹⁷ Available from: <https://www.russell-cooke.co.uk/news-and-insights/news/uk-marriages-predicted-to-decline-to-historic-lows-by-2050> [Accessed 11th September 2025].

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