Educated Americans Paved the Way for Divorce—Then Embraced Marriage

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The countercultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s threw the American family into chaos. Young adults—educated liberals especially—revolted against the constraints of 1950s family life, engaging seriously with formerly fringe ideas like open marriage and full-time employment for mothers. The old rules were in tatters, and nobody really knew what the new rules were. The likelihood that a given marriage would end in divorce doubled, to 50 percent, between 1965 and 1980.

Academics and pundits of the era generally assumed that the retreat from marriage would continue apace. Some of these analysts focused on culture, arguing that the pursuit of individualism, personal growth, and liberation from traditional constraints would reduce marriage rates and increase divorce rates. Others focused on economics, arguing that the breakdown of traditional gender roles would undermine the division-of-labor benefits of marriage, rendering the arrangement less sensible and less appealing. Cultural and economic analysts often clashed, but they tended to agree that educated liberals would pave the path away from marriage.

Almost nobody anticipated what happened next. After 1980, the likelihood of divorce among college-educated Americans plummeted. Despite their loosened romantic and sexual values, educated liberals became more dedicated to family stability and intensive parenting. They did adopt the beliefs that marriage is optional and divorce is acceptable, but in their personal lives, they also sought to build and sustain an egalitarian, mutually fulfilling marriage. Today, educated liberals certainly value individuality and self-expression, but they tend to pursue family stability as a primary means of realizing those values.