## Chapter 5: Nuclear meltdown

How many of us are committed to the traditional Nuclear Family today, and how is this changing? We might begin by looking at its most traditional “output”: the number of children we’re having.[[1]](#footnote-21)

When we graph this as a function of age, we see an expected gradual rise from near zero as a young adult to a plateau around menopause for women, at age 45 or so. The solid line is the average, the dotted line is the median, and the four shaded regions enclose 38.3%, 68.2%, 95.4%, and 99.7% of the answers at every age (the 99.7% range goes off the chart, and is noisy, but plateaus somewhere between 8 and 12 children).[[2]](#footnote-22)

It’s helpful to break this down by the respondent’s sex assigned at birth, since the people actually *having* the children need to have uteruses; we’ll also stick to the inner 38.3% shaded region to make the graph easier to read.[[3]](#footnote-23)

Notice how women report having significantly more children than men, at *all* ages. On the face of it, this seems impossible, since every child must have a biological mother and father. Our lived reality, though, is that when a mother gives birth, she knows she’s had a child, and she can be certain that the baby is hers. That’s never been true for men; if anything, their answers to the question graphed, “How many children do you have?,” slightly *overcounts* the number they believe to be their biological children, while the question for potential mothers— “How many children have you personally given birth to?”— leaves no such room for ambiguity. Men may have one night stands with unexpected consequences, or split up with their partners soon after conception, or commit rape without using a condom. Or they may donate anonymously to a sperm bank, allowing a single mother somewhere to conceive. We know, from Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data,[[4]](#footnote-24) that about 40% of births in the US happen outside marriage, but this persistent gap tells us something more interesting: that a significant number of births don’t involve the biological father at all. And many men have kids they don’t know about! This might come as a surprise, but there’s no reason to believe it’s a new phenomenon. Nor is it specific to any one demographic.

Setting aside men’s undercounting of their offspring, 1.7 or so children per woman, today’s plateau at menopause, still amounts to a rapidly shrinking population. With a moment’s thought, you can see how, assuming equal numbers of females and males (and no childhood deaths), women would need to have two children on average for the next generation to be of the same size. A lower average means an exponential decline over time, a phenomenon we’ll explore in more detail in Part III.

So, children are in decline. What about marriage?

While it remains a mainstream institution, the historical notion[[5]](#footnote-26) that marriage is “normal,” and that unmarried middle aged adults are unusual, is belied by the data. “Peak marriage” for women— which is around age 42— is still just 60%. It only crosses 50% to become a majority in the mid-30s.

We can see that young men tend to marry just a few years later, reflecting the traditional small age gap between an older husband and younger wife (about 2.5 years on average, in the US[^6]). This age gap becomes larger for people marrying later in life, though, per the still oft-quoted rule of thumb holding that “a wife should be half the age of her husband with seven years added.”[[6]](#footnote-28) Combined with the fact that women tend to live longer, this results in a dramatic divergence in the rate of marriage among the older population; only about 20% of 80 year old women are married. That’s because, by age 80, nearly 40% of women are widows. Incidentally, although older surviving men are scarcer (hence the larger error bars), it may be that an increasing proportion are married precisely because being married increases their odds of survival to an advanced age![^8]

Why do women live longer than men? This still isn’t perfectly understood, but we have some ideas. Unlike the Y chromosome, which we can live without, the X chromosome has some critical stuff on it. Men generally have only one copy, while women have two; this redundancy may confer health benefits. There are significant differences between men’s and women’s immune systems too, which could play a role.[[7]](#footnote-29) You might also remember, from way back in Chapter 1, that men are more accident prone than women; this may be at least partly due to testosterone-induced risk-taking behavior.

However, the best explanation may not be mechanistic, but evolutionary: grandmothers are simply more useful than grandfathers, as far as Darwinian selection is concerned. This may seem counterintuitive, given that women stop being fertile in middle age, while men can continue to have offspring until late in life, though their fertility also declines. However, as we discussed in Chapter 4, humans alloparent; it takes a village to raise a baby. It turns out that in most traditional societies, grandmothers, far more than grandfathers, play a key role in raising their grandchildren— so much so that the presence of a grandmother raises a child’s odds of survival appreciably.[[8]](#footnote-30) Menopause may even be an evolutionary “innovation” to avoid resource competition between the offspring of successive generations; once she’s done having her own babies, grandma can dedicate her undivided effort to the grandkids. So, since grandchildren also carry the grandmother’s genes, evolutionary selection will keep pressure on genes that bestow long life on women. Because older men are less helpful, evolutionarily speaking, they don’t benefit from the same degree of selection pressure, so over many generations, mutations leading to earlier death specifically in men will pile up unchecked.[[9]](#footnote-31) The proximal cause may be anything— heart failure, stroke, cancer, poor judgment, even suicide. The underlying cause is nature’s relative indifference to men’s lifespan beyond their most reproductive years. In fact, it’s conceivable that the same evolutionary force that has prolonged women’s lifespans has actively worked to shorten men’s— since grandma will have more time to devote to the grandkids if she doesn’t also have to take care of grandpa.

But let’s return to marriage.

When we break down marriage data based the responses to other survey questions, we find that many minority identities and behaviors— such as not being heterosexual, being non-monogamous, or using “they” pronouns— decrease the odds of marriage significantly, across all ages. Marriage, in other words, is a traditional practice, and often goes along with being traditional in other ways too. And as those traditions are upended, fewer people are getting married.

So was Morning Glory right about the looming breakdown of the Nuclear Family, and the rise of polyamory? There are three questions on the survey that bear on this directly: “Are you monogamous?,” “Are you non-monogamous?,” and “Are you polyamorous?.” These terms weren’t always familiar to every respondent, especially “polyamorous,” which should be unsurprising, since it had so recently been coined by a Neopagan witch to describe a practice that was, at the time, far outside the mainstream.

This makes it all the more remarkable that three decades later, polyamory is a term embraced by around 5% of American respondents, or 1 in 20, across a wide range of ages.[^12] That’s about as common as naturally blond hair!

The need for a term to acknowledge loving and honest sexual relationships among more than two people clearly predated 1990; Thomas and Mary Nichols were writing about them in 1854, and they could point to far older precedents. On the other hand, the idea’s recent rapid rise in popularity has clearly been facilitated by now having language for it. This has also triggered some of the same kind of conservative backlash that has accompanied rising acceptance of other sexual minorities; a frustrated 32 year old man from Boise, Idaho wrote, “If i went with the gays and polynomous and the non-monagoumas, and homosexual route, I’d might be more accepted into society.”

The association between non-monogamy and homosexuality is not entirely off-base, as a number of relationship models and practices that are now becoming increasingly mainstream were either pioneered by or accepted earlier in gay communities. A 25 year old from Elizabeth, Colorado wrote about this at some length:

I think a lot of times sexual behavior depends in part on the “culture” of the group of individuals that you fit into, if that makes sense. For example, I find it extremely common among heterosexual individuals [to] just end up having monogamous relationships with the expectation to be together for the rest of their lives (it may be that they both feel that way, or just one feels that way and the other ends up either accepting it and living monogamously or if not then engaging in sexual activities with others without their “partner’s” knowledge). I have found that, at least in the gay male culture, it is much, much more common for individuals to have non-monogamous relationship[s] and to speak freely about all of those relationships with all their partners.

The same observation applies to large age differences, kink, friends with benefits, sex parties, roleplay, safewords, pride parades, and many other practices that are no longer exclusively associated with gay culture. While there’s certainly still stigma associated with being gay in many settings, this feeling that gay people were the original cool kids may help explain the recent strain of self-pitying straight resentment, the sense of being left behind— or of digging in heels and refusing to budge.

Quite a few more people answer “yes” to “non-monogamous” than to “polyamorous,” which makes sense, since that’s generally construed to be a broader category than polyamory— including, for instance, simultaneous but compartmentalized relationships, swinging, cheating, and “don’t ask, don’t tell” arrangements. In this vein, a cheerful 38 year old woman from Wisconsin wrote, “I live in a rural area, I am not polyamorous but my husband and I have threesomes together with other women because I enjoy women as well sexually. It is a perk for both of us!”

The age patterns are revealing here. At age 18, non-monogamy begins only a bit above polyamory, at around 6%, but rises steadily with age to nearly 10%, more than double the rate of polyamory, which declines slightly to just below 4%. An obvious interpretation is that, first, a fair number of initially monogamous people become non-monogamous over time, as it becomes clear to them that their needs or wants can’t be met by a single partner. Around half of marriages in the US end in divorce,[^13] and marriages often represent the more committed end of monogamy, suggesting that a great many people realize at some point that their needs can’t be met by their *current* partner. Esther Perel, Dan Savage, and a number of other relationship experts whose work has brought them into contact with large numbers of struggling couples have pointed out the obvious but often unacknowledged conflict between societal expectations of monogamy and the lived realities of many (maybe even most) people’s needs and desires.[^14] As Michael Ryan pointed out in 1837, “polygamy is interdicted by our laws, [but] it does not exist the less in the hearts of most men who profess to be monogamous, but who are no less polygamous by their actions.” Contrary to Ryan’s belief, this is also true of women. Speaking for everyone, a 27 year old from Canoga Park, California put it more succinctly: “Hard to remain monogamous.”

Although non-monogamy is a bit less frequent among the unjaded youth, a far greater proportion of those who *are* non-monogamous appear to identify with the honest, consensual, and emotionally committed polyamorous approach. As a 26 year old woman from New Orleans, Louisiana put it, “I considered “non-monogamous” and “polyamorous” to be so close they were interchangeable so I gave the same answer.” (In her case, that answer was “yes.”)

This becomes less true of older people, though. Hence, while 70-80% of polyamorous people of all ages report being non-monogamous, the fraction of non-monogamous people who are polyamorous goes from around 50% among young people down to about 30% among 65 year olds.

Given that the stigma associated with non-monogamy appears to be higher among older people, one likely factor in play is the unwillingness or inability of many older couples to be transparent with each other about their needs. Of course this can lead to non-consensual non-monogamy (read: affairs), but also to potential or desire on the part of one partner that the other will never know, as for the 31 year old woman from Jacksonville, North Carolina who wrote, “While I am married, and we are monogamous, I am open to being in a triad, but only with another man. I wouldn’t admit this to my husband though.” Obviously an admission like this can be frightening, and can have very real negative consequences. On the other hand, it’s hard not to wonder how many couples could be having a better time (“It is a perk for both of us!”) if they overcame their reticence to communicate.

Regardless of what they’re actually doing, older people may also be less eager to *identify* as polyamorous. It’s likely that a greater number of older people whose approach to non-monogamy is *de facto* polyamorous just don’t relate to what they may, with some historical justification, consider unrelatable New-Agey jargon. Regardless of how they go about it, it’s certainly the case that older people tend to be more closeted about their non-monogamy, making it a hidden (thus underestimated) minority. Their non-monogamous behavior may be opaque not only to colleagues and friends, but even to their own partners. Polyamory, on the other hand, is for many not just a practice, but a community, a language, and a culture acknowledging the practice openly.

This is also apparent in another statistic: the 20-30% or so of people of all ages who report being polyamorous but *not* non-monogamous often appear to be identifying with this community, even if that’s not reflected in their current behavior. As a 31 year old from Woburn, Massachusetts put it,

My partner and I are both exploring the idea of polyamory but have been thus far monogamous in our relationship. I Identify as poly in that I do not experience jealousy and am interested in having multiple romantic and sexual partners, but have not yet had a “polyamorous relationship.”

This can all be quite confusing. If we naïvely followed the logic of double negatives, then based on the finding that about 6% of young people are *non*-monogamous, we’d conclude that 94% are *monogamous*, but we’d be wrong. Only about 70% of 19 year olds report being monogamous. This number rises above 85% by age 65. It’s useful to explore the counterintuitive difference between “being non-monogamous” and “not being monogamous.” Consider all four possibilities: (A) those who answer “no” to both “monogamous” and “non-monogamous,” (B) those who answer “yes” to “monogamous” but “no” to “non-monogamous,” (C) those who answer “no” to “monogamous” but “yes” to “non-monogamous,” and (D) those who answer “yes” to both.

Since these are the only four possible responses to two yes/no questions, they’ll add up to 100%, so in this graph, we show only the three minority combinations, (A), (C), and (D). The majority at all ages, despite the moral panic of our frustrated “monagoumas” respondent from Boise, is still the conventional (B) “yes” to “monogamous” and “no” to “non-monogamous”; for the most part, these are people in monogamous, pair-bonded relationships. The next most frequent response is (A) “no” to “monogamous” and “no” to “non-monogamous,” as typified by a 41 year old respondent from Elk Grove Village, Illinois: “I’m faithful to who I’m with at the time, but I’m not with anyone now. So I answered no to both.” As one might expect, this number declines with age, from near 25% at 19 to only about 7% by age 65, as more people end up partnered over time. Over the same period, the number of (C) “not monogamous” *and* “non-monogamous” people rises from 5% to 7%, in keeping with what we’ve already seen. Notice that the largely unpartnered group (A) and the multiply partnered group (C) end up tied by age 65, despite (A) being five times likelier at age 19.

The lowest likelihood combination— (D) “yes” to both questions— is the most counterintuitive. It can arise from varying interpretations of the two terms, as in the case of a 26 year old woman from Ormond Beach, Florida: “I am currently monogamous, but there have been times I have been with women that my husband is aware of. If it were to present itself, I would be sexual with another woman and or have a love triangle poly relationship.” In other words, this is a situation in which one of the terms— “monogamous”— is being interpreted as a behavior that applies in the moment, while “non-monogamous” is being interpreted as an identity or orientation, which may not be reflected in one’s current behavior.

This is similar to the way many (especially younger) bisexual people don’t stop identifying as bisexual even if they’re in an exclusive long-term relationship with a man or woman. Here and elsewhere, we find that identity is more typically associated with a minority behavior than with the majority; this makes sense, since the majority, being a default, doesn’t need any separate community, language, or culture. It also offers us a foretaste of a phenomenon that will continue to crop up in later chapters: the increasing role of personal identity, as something distinct from behavior. This opens the door to many combinations of responses that can appear contradictory by a narrower, strictly behavioral standard.

Do minority labels, cultures, and identities even matter, if they aren’t reflected in people’s actual behaviors? Why would anyone feel the need to signal that they’re a card-carrying member of a club they may never intend to set foot in? Some critics find this performative and annoying. The harshest critique tends to come from people *within* those communities, who may feel that “non-practicing members” are posers, talking the talk but not walking the walk— and, perhaps, not paying the price of admission. The “gatekeeping” can feel painful, as for this 31 year old from Woodridge, New York: “Because I’m in a heterosexual marriage people assume that my queerness is not real or genuine and this makes me feel invalid and lost in the queer community. Almost erased.”

Beyond individual feelings of erasure (by the excluded) or dilution (by “practicing members”), one consequence of this invisibility is that it can make the real prevalence of an identity trait hard to assess. How many queer or bisexual people are there, really? The answer will vary dramatically, as we’ll see, depending on whether we count only those who are “practicing” or include everyone who identifies this way. This matters because it can change our perspective on a phenomenon dramatically. It can even make the difference between a minority and a majority.

1. Some of these data are from a parallel population survey I ran in 2020 asking [[XXXX]] respondents, among other things, how many children and siblings they had. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. If you’re a data nerd, you may recognize these numbers as a half, one, two, and three standard deviations or “sigmas.” There’s no assumption here, though, that the data are “normally distributed” or follow a bell curve (in fact they can’t, since it’s not possible to have fewer than zero children). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
3. I was careful to frame the questions being graphed here as precisely as possible. As we’ll see in Chapter 11, being assigned female at birth isn’t a guarantee of having a uterus, let along of being fertile, but for these purposes it’s a reasonable proxy. The “Born to those assigned female at birth” curve plots responses to “How many children have you personally given birth to?” for those unambiguously assigned female at birth. “Claimed by those assigned male at birth” plots responses to “How many children do you have?” for those unambiguously assigned male at birth. Using only “How many children do you have?” for both sexes, and relying on “Are you female?” and “Are you male?,” produces nearly identical curves, though. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
4. [National Vital Statistics Reports Volume 70, Number 17, February 7, 2022](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr70/nvsr70-17.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
5. [Marriage: More than a Century of Change, 1900-2018](https://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/schweizer-marriage-century-change-1900-2018-fp-20-21.pdf), Allred, Colette A. “Marriage: More than a century of change, 1900-2016.” Family Profiles (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
6. This formulation is from Frederick Locker-Lampson, *Patchwork*, 1879, though there are many other 19th and 20th century sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
7. [[REF]] Daphna Joel? [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
8. [[REF]] Hrdy. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
9. [[REF]] William Hamilton. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)