

INTAMS Lecture in 2007

Motives for or Against Marriage: Framing the Empirical Evidence

9 March 2007

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Abstract of the Lecture

Since decades in most European countries the marriage rate is declining and the average age of the first marriage is increasing. Simultaneously, non-traditional living arrangements like cohabitation, single parenthood or living-apart-together are spreading. These developments are interpreted by theorists of societal individualisation (e.g. Ulrich Beck) as “diversification of living arrangements” and construed as an increasing renunciation from the institution of marriage. Utility theorists also assume that marriage is losing relevance because its utility compared to other alternatives is diminishing in times of social change. Especially to well-educated young women the opportunity costs of a marriage seem high because of the expected loss of autonomy and flexibility.

Despite the evidence that speaks for these interpretations, it remains to state that almost four out of five persons of the birth cohort 1960-1965 will marry at least once in their life. Therefore the questions are: “Why do these persons marry?” and “What do they expect from marriage?”

Answers to these questions come from a broader survey, called “Value of Marriage”. In this survey 754 persons, who married between 1999 and 2005, were interviewed in Germany in the spring of 2005.

The outcomes show several behavioral and interpretive patterns. As a consequence of these findings some “classical” sociological explanations for marriage have to be revised.