

Marriage and Families

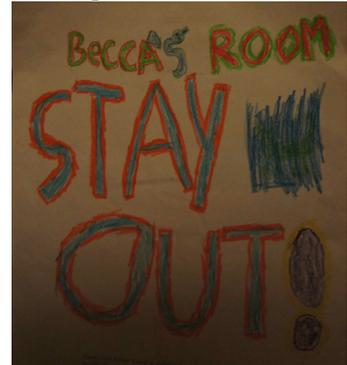
Two Libertarian Families

Some years ago I came across an [article](#) by Gertrude Fremling, an economist married to my friend and ex-student John Lott, on how they had brought up their children. It was much closer to the approach I favor in other contexts than the way we did it. Their kids had no allowance, lots of opportunities to earn money by doing chores within their ability. Interactions between kids were carried out largely on a market basis, with one child sometimes renting the use of a game he had bought with his own money to another. If too many kids wanted to do the same chore, the parents would auction it off to the one willing to do it at the lowest price; if no kid wanted to do it, the auction price might go up instead of down. Gertrude commented, whether with disappointment was not clear, on the "perhaps surprising..." failure of the kids to engage in bidding conspiracies against their parents.

We had almost none of that. Our kids had an allowance provided by a great-uncle fond of kids. We often but not always bought them things they wanted. Our daughter eventually offered to volunteer to do a regular chore, unloading the dishwasher, and her brother, much later, to take out the trash, but that was their choice and they were not paid. We had organized our tiny society like communists, John and Gertrude theirs like capitalists.

All of us were libertarians, but their system was at least mildly paternalistic, since it included limits on TV watching and "silly video/computer games." We had no television¹ — a more extreme version of their policy of having only a small screen one — but the kids had unlimited use of computers when available and could play any games they liked as much as they liked. The one exception was when our very young son, running short of disk space on the computer he shared with his older sister, solved the problem by throwing out various things, including parts of the operating system. For some time thereafter he was only allowed to use the computer with his sister monitoring, which she had no obligation to do.

We had strong rules of private property, largely enforced by our daughter, who was older than her brother and less dependent on his company for entertainment than he was on hers, giving her a substantial advantage in negotiations. She established early on that he was not permitted in her room without her permission. The sign to that effect is still on her door, although both of them are now adults, and he still respects it. As do we.



Were there any obvious reasons for the differences in our child-rearing strategies? One is that we had two children, they had five; the advantages of decentralized market decision making are typically greater the larger the number of people being coordinated. Another is that they had their children younger than we did and were under greater financial pressure as a result. Imposing market discipline on children is more convincing when money is tight; a policy of "I won't buy that for you even though you really want it; you have to earn the money yourself" feels artificial, to the parent and perhaps even to the child, when the cost of everything the child wants is insignificant in terms of the parents' income. That

¹ Aside from, early on, an old one kept in a closet to be brought out for use of the son of my first marriage when he visited. Our older child was five when we moved to California and left it behind.

is one respect in which *World of Warcraft* is a better way of teaching the same lessons to the children of well-off parents; the game is a fiction but the budget constraint is real.

When I discussed the difference between our approaches on my blog, one of Gertrude's children commented that "There were times when I wished my family operated more communally," and one of mine "cool as your system sounds (at least the part with no allowance and chores instead - seriously, I would have liked that) ..."²

Discussing it recently with my now adult son, he suggested that one reason for the difference was that John and Gertrude are more organized than we are. Running a miniature market system within the family would have been more trouble for us than it was worth.

Reminding me of Kipling on a different subject:

*"There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays,
And—every—single—one—of—them—is—right!"*³

Also of the central point of the article by Ronald Coase on which the modern theory of the firm is based:⁴ There are costs to coordination by central control, there are costs to coordination by exchange on the market, and neither approach is always superior.

The Best Form of Foreplay

Is an empty dishwasher.

I am not sure where I came across the phrase, but it embodies an important point. Most talk about sex in our society is in the context of seduction, one-night stands, short term relationships of one sort or another. Much sex, I suspect most, occurs in long term relationships, marriage or the near equivalent.

what I cannot authentically reconjure is the ancient dream of brides, even with the Oprah fluffery of weekly "date nights," when gauzy candlelight obscures the messy house, child talk is nixed and silky lingerie donned, so the two of you can look into each other's eyes and feel that "spark" again.⁵

Advice on how to make a flagging marriage work often takes it for granted that the objective is to "rekindle the passion," get back to the intense feelings of courtship. I doubt it works; the success of a long-term relationship depends more on love than on lust.⁶ Doing something for your wife that she would otherwise have to do for herself, unloading the dishwasher, for example, is one way of expressing it. If a married couple wants to recapture the intense emotions of their courtship, they would be better advised to have children. The emotional focus on a small child has the same intensity, the same insane illusion that the object of love, this time parental rather than erotic, is the most important being in the universe.⁷

² My [blog post](#), with comments.

³ Rudyard Kipling, "[In the Neolithic Age](#)."

⁴ Ronald Coase, "The Nature of the Firm," *Economica*, New Series, Vol. 4, No. 16. (Nov., 1937), pp. 386-405.

⁵ (From a silly and self-indulgent article in the *Atlantic* whose author, having had an affair that ended a long-term marriage, was moved not to apologize to husband and children but to pontificate in satirical mode on the problems of modern marriage.)

⁶ Although the two are linked, causally, in both directions. "Making love" is more than a euphemism.

⁷ [Blog post and comments](#).

Seduction to Matrimony—from PUA to Red Pill

A good many years ago I came across a series of web pages that offered instructions to men on how to seduce women. Labelled PUA for "pickup-artist," they were more interesting than one might have expected, even for someone decades out of that particular market.

Part of what made them interesting was that there was a theory underlying them: Women are attracted to alpha men, so the way to attract women is to be, or at least pretend to be, an alpha male. Another was the frankly amoral approach. As best I could tell, the authors did not regard either honesty towards or the welfare of their would-be partners as matters of much importance. The objective was simply to bed as many desirable women as possible and the techniques for doing so were worked out in some detail.

More recently I came across a later incarnation, perhaps descendant, of PUA. This time the label was "red pill," a reference to the film *The Matrix*, where the red pill represents possibly painful reality as an alternative to pleasant illusion.⁸ The underlying theory, that women are attracted to dominant men, is still the same but the application has changed. The objective this time is successful marriage.

The tone has also changed. The idea, as best I can judge it, is that the husband's role should be that of a benevolent dictator. He should work hard, do all the husbandly duties, pay careful attention to the desires and welfare of his wife, listen when she talks. But he should also make it clear that he, in the last analysis, is the one who decides things. I do not know if any of the authors of red pill pages are familiar with Blackstone's famous explanation of the legal status of a married couple: "In law, husband and wife are one person, and that person is the husband." But I expect they would approve.

That reflects how conservative the terminus of their intellectual journey is. It starts with amoral hedonism aimed at as much casual sex as possible and ends up with a conventional, if somewhat old fashioned, version of traditional monogamous matrimony. Their one addition to the traditional account, carried over from where they started, is the objective: Since women are turned on by dominant men, following their marital formula is supposed to provide lots of matrimonial sex and a happy and satisfied wife.

I do not have the data to judge how successful either the original program or the later version is. My guess is that both work for some people some of the time in some situations but less universally than their proponents believe. The PUA tactics appear designed mostly for single bars where, as I understand the institution, the women present are there to be picked up, so the only question is which of the men present they leave with. I would not be surprised if, in that setting, the advice works pretty well. And I expect there are successful marriages that work in part along red pill lines, as well as others that would not. What I found most interesting was the way in which a mating philosophy designed for men in their early twenties with a single-minded focus on casual sex had morphed into a form suited to the same men older, a little more mature, and with a different set of objectives.

When I discussed the subject on my blog I got an extended series of comments, some endorsing and identifying parts of the PUA/Red Pill approach, some panning it. The most interesting were

⁸ Looking online still more recently, PUA seems to be mostly seen as a subset of Red Pill. Figuring out exactly how each term is used by those who support the idea is made more difficult by the fact that most of what I can find on the subject is written by people strongly out of sympathy with it.

ones that offered reasons why it could or could not work. The argument against was that there are rarely twenty-dollar bills lying on the sidewalk, the Efficient Markets Hypothesis applied to dating markets, that if there was an easy way of getting what many young men wanted, they would already be doing it. The rebuttal was that dating, unlike most forms of production, doesn't scale. Someone who figures out how to make a better car that costs less can make millions of them, forcing the competition to adopt his improved approach. A man who figures out a better way of seducing women has much less opportunity to apply it, hence the payoff is less and he is much less competition for other men.

The counter for that was an evolutionary argument. We are designed for reproductive success by a process of trial and error iterated through thousands of generations. The ability to get a woman to have sex with you is a key input to male reproductive success. If acting macho is the way to do it evolution should have already programmed us to act macho when interacting with potential mates. A similar argument implies that women should be programmed to choose their mates on some basis better than the ability to pretend to be macho.

Nobody offered the next stage of the argument. In this case as in many others, we are optimized for reproductive success in an environment very different from the current one. In past environments famine was a serious risk, so it made sense to put on weight practically whenever you could. In our current environment, obesity is a threat to both survival and reproductive success. In past environments, sexual intercourse risked pregnancy, hence women had reason to be very selective in what men they slept with. In our current environment the risk of unwanted pregnancy is low, a fact reflected in changes in female behavior. The mate-search strategies programmed into men by evolution might no longer be optimal, at least if the male objective is sex rather than reproductive success.⁹

What Might Modern Polygamy Look Like? ¹⁰

The most common human mating pattern is monogamy, the next most common polygyny (one husband, two or more wives), then polyandry (one wife, two or more husbands). Tibet had both polyandry and polygyny. I know of no society where group marriages (two or more of each) were common but examples have occasionally existed, such as the Oneida commune in 19th century New York and smaller groups in the 1960's and thereafter.

Although monogamy is the only form of marriage recognized by U.S. law, there are no serious legal bars to *de facto* polygamy. All three forms of plural marriage exist, although none is common. What forms might polygamy take in the future under the influence of technological change?

That maternity is a fact, paternity a conjecture, is a feature of human reproduction that has shaped the mating institutions of many, perhaps most, human societies. Men want to know which children are theirs. Through almost the entire history of our species, the only way to do so with confidence was for a man to have exclusive sexual access to a woman. That is no longer true. It no longer requires a wise child to know its father, a well-equipped lab will do. Paternity testing is the stealth

⁹ The [blog post and comment thread](#).

¹⁰ Our evidence from other societies is mostly limited to monogamy and polygyny, the only two that have been at all common. A recent [article](#) based on the work of two anthropologists, Starkweather and Holmes, argues that polyandry is more common than usually thought, but most of the societies they are describing are ones where polyandry is permitted but uncommon.

biotech, a technology that, unlike more newsworthy competitors such as human cloning, is now well established, reliable, and in common use.

The most notable consequence so far has been to sharpen the three-way conflict between women with babies, men who don't want to support them, and welfare departments that want someone other than them to pay the bill. In the old days, the mother and the welfare department could convincingly argue that the husband or lover was the father and so owed duties of paternal support. They are now in the uncomfortable position of trying to claim that a husband who is provably not the father of his wife's child, who is most naturally described as the victim of his wife's marital fraud, is still obliged to provide child support, and similarly in cases where the relationship is less formal than marriage.

The longer run implications are more interesting. From a technical standpoint, it is now possible to combine any mating pattern from strict monogamy to complete promiscuity with assured paternity. How many of those options actually go into common use will depend, among other things, on how much of our sexual behavior is hardwired and at what level.

If male sexual jealousy is hardwired by evolution as a mechanism to make sure that men don't waste their scarce resources supporting other men's children, nothing much can be expected to change. Men will still have a strong preference for sleeping with, and having children by, women who are their exclusive mates. The likely result will be something close to conventional monogamy. If, on the other hand, evolution has simultaneously provided men with a desire for assured paternity and a taste for promiscuity, both of which make sense from an evolutionary point of view, we may end up with some form or forms of polygamy, perhaps group marriage, becoming common. The technology makes possible a family of several husbands sharing one or more wives who bear children by all of them, with each husband taking a special interest in, and responsibility for, his own.

To some extent this has already happened, driven by a slightly older technology — reliable contraception. A level of female pre-marital sexual activity that would have been considered scandalous in most past societies is widely accepted and widely practiced in ours because it rarely leads to unwanted children. The implication of paternity testing is that a similar pattern is now possible for reproductive as well as non-reproductive sex. Readers interested in what might—or might not—be the cutting edge of such developments may find the [alt.polyamory](#) web site of interest.

Another effect of modern technology is to make it possible to change the odds of having a son or daughter. The result in some societies has been a substantial excess of males;¹¹ polyandry would make it possible for the excess men to have wives and families.¹² Polygyny provides a solution to the mirror image case, a shortage of men, but also to a different and probably more common problem, a shortage of men willing to support children. As I argued in an earlier chapter, the shift to legal abortion and readily available contraception, by making non-marital sex more available to men, reduced the incentive for men to commit themselves to marriage.

I have been considering marriage in terms of sex and children, but it is also an institution for the production of household services and the sharing of income. How might that change in the future?

¹¹ One way of doing so is selective abortion, a less costly version of the ancient practice of exposing unwanted infants, but there are now also ways of selecting, imperfectly, for sperm that will produce sons or daughters.

India was estimated to have, in 2011, 94 women for every hundred men. [Gender Composition of the Population](#).

¹² Alice Dreger, [When Taking Multiple Husbands Makes Sense](#), *The Atlantic*, 2/1/21.

A common pattern in the past was for the wife to take the principal role in household production and child care, the husband to work outside the household. That made sense when household production and child care added up to a fulltime, sometimes more than fulltime, job, but for most couples it no longer does. With modern medicine, a family that wants to end up with two children need only produce two. Washers and dryers, dishwashers, microwave ovens, food bought already prepared, sharply reduce the time required to run a household. A common modern response is for both partners to earn income outside of the household, possibly with one, usually the wife, taking some years off for child rearing. An alternative might be a family of three or more, one of whom runs the household and cares for the children. A new reason for polygamy.

All of this is mostly speculation. I have occasionally encountered people who were part of polygamous families but have done no research into how or why they were organized. The literature on polyamory deals more with structuring emotional relationships than with organizing production, child rearing, and associated activities.

An argument I have seen offered against legalizing polygamy is that the poor condition of modern Islamic societies is due to polygyny; high status men marry multiple wives, leaving low status men wifeless, frustrated, and violent. One problem with that argument is that while polygamy is permitted in Islamic law, in most Muslim societies it is rare. About 1% of people in Pakistan live in polygamous families, less than half a percent in Indonesia and Iran.¹³ The only part of the world where polygamy is common is sub-Saharan Africa, the only large country Nigeria.¹⁴ Another problem is that polygamy has been legal in Islam throughout its history, for much of which Islam was no more violent a society than Christian Europe. Similarly for China through most of its history.

So much for the future effect on marriage of technologies we already have. For possible effects of future technology ...

Love Drugs and the Future of Marriage

There is evidence that both falling in love and long-term attachment are associated with the levels of various chemicals in the brain. Suppose we learn enough about the process to be able to control it artificially. What might the results be?

A couple fall in love and get married. To properly regulate their emotions thereafter, they get a prescription for a few months of love drugs, use them to enjoy their honeymoon and the early months of their marriage. Being in love is too intense an emotion for the long term, so they then switch to the long-term attachment prescription. Later, as schedules permit, they can briefly switch back, experience a second, third, fourth honeymoon. If either partner notices the other paying too much attention to a potential rival, there are probably a few pills left to spike his or her Saturday morning cocoa with.

Falling in love is usually part of the process that leads to marriage, but should it be? The first person you fall in love with may not be the best candidate for a long-term relationship — nor the second or third. The new drugs could make possible choice of mate by cold-blooded reason, something scarce in men or women in love. You find a woman well suited to be your wife and

¹³ This may have been true in the past as well. The author of *The Modern Egyptians*, an Englishman who spent some time living in Cairo in the 19th century, reported that of families he knew fewer than one in a hundred was polygamous.

¹⁴ The data are from the Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/12/07/polygamy-is-rare-around-the-world-and-mostly-confined-to-a-few-regions/ft_2020-12-07_polygamy_01/.

willing to have you for her husband. Once the marriage contract is signed, the final step in the ceremony is for both of you to take your love drugs. You look deep into her eyes

A Possibly Relevant Story

Many years ago, waiting for a flight from Bombay to Sydney, I got into a conversation with a woman waiting for the same flight. We ended up sitting next to each other and spent a good deal of time during the flight talking. It was one of the more interesting conversations I have ever had.

She was from a traditional south Indian family, flying out to Sydney to join her husband, a physician. Her marriage had been arranged for her by her parents, although she had been permitted to meet her prospective husband in advance and could have vetoed their choice. She was as intrigued by the odd marital institutions of my society as I was by those of hers.

It is natural to assume that societies very different from ours, especially ones whose institutions look more like those of our past, are backward places whose inhabitants have not quite caught up. But the woman I was talking with was intelligent and well educated, not a stick figure in a book or my imagination, and prepared to defend the system she was a part of. It rapidly became clear that I had no conclusive arguments to show that romantic love worked better than arranged marriages. She was happily married, my marriage had recently broken up, so the evidence from our very small sample of alternative approaches favored hers.

I ended the conversation a good deal less certain that I was right and she was wrong.

The Scary Thing About Having Kids

For many couples considering parenthood, the risk they find most frightening is the possibility of a child with a serious birth defect. While scary that is also unlikely, especially for couples willing to use amniocentesis to check for serious problems and if necessary abort. The risk that is both frightening and much more likely is a child who does not like you.

I got along better with my parents than with most people I knew, my wife got along well with her parents, our children got along well with us and still do as adults, which made self-quarantine of the four of us together during the Covid pandemic much pleasanter than it could have been. I gather however, largely from our children's accounts of people they know, that many teenagers and young adults, perhaps a majority, do not get along with their parents, a conclusion supported by such limited data as I could find.¹⁵ That would make child-rearing harder and less pleasant. It would also eliminate one of its major long-term benefits, ending up with adults whom you love and trust and who love and trust you.

We may have just been lucky or my parents, my wife's parents, my wife and I may have done something right. If so, what?

Judith Harris, in *The Nurture Assumption*, offers evidence that adult personality depends mostly on the peer group, typically friends and classmates. For some children, although not most, the family is the peer group. I think that describes my situation, my wife's, and our children's. In each case, the child saw his family as "us," his age mates as "them," and continued to do so as an adult.

¹⁵ "A survey of mothers from 65 to 75 years old with at least two living adult children found that about 11 percent were estranged from a child and 62 percent reported contact less than once a month with at least one child." "[A Shift in American Family Values is Fueling Estrangement](#)," Julia Coleman in the Atlantic.

That pattern may have been more common in the more dispersed populations of the past, where a much larger fraction of interactions happened inside the family, a family often involved in the joint enterprise of running a farm or small business. For an extreme version, consider the (fictional) Swiss Family Robinson, isolated by shipwreck on their island. For a less extreme case, consider a family committed to a different view of the world than the surrounding culture — conservative Christians in a secular environment, atheists in a religious one, immigrants in a foreign land.¹⁶ There are families in the modern world with a multi-generational business, where the children grow up spending time working in the firm that one or more will eventually run; we know one such. It would be interesting to know whether that pattern results in significantly less parent/child conflict.

On the other hand, personality appears to be to in part genetic. There might be personality types that do not get along with each other, even types that do not get along with anyone. If that is the fundamental problem, we have been very lucky.

A different answer, suggested by several commenters on my blog,¹⁷ was that the key element is how parents think of their children. Some see them as pets who can talk, others as small people who do not yet know much. The latter approach provides a smoother transition to an adult relationship between parent and child.

How to Play Games with Your Children

Our house had a basement with a ping-pong table where I spent a good deal of time playing ping-pong with my father. The rules were simple. I started with some number of points; whoever got to 21 points first won. Every time I won, my starting number went down by one, making the next win harder. Every time I lost, my starting number went up by one, making the next win easier. The result was that the typical game was close, decided by how well each of us played, and more fun for both of us than if we had played without a handicap and my father, who for most of the relevant period was the better player, had won almost all the games or deliberately thrown some in order to make me feel better. The sliding handicap also provided a longer run metagame in which my objective was to push the handicap down as far as possible, eventually past zero.

That works well with ping-pong, since you can adjust the handicap one point at a time. It can be applied a little less smoothly to a wide variety of other games, as when the better chess player spots his opponent a piece by removing it at the beginning of the game. If your child beats you when you spot him a queen, next game you spot him a castle. If he still beats you ...

Playing badly in order that your child can sometimes win may work for a while, at least with a small child. But it teaches the wrong lesson.

Which may get us back to the question of why children do or don't end up liking their parents.

¹⁶ For a portrait of families in one such society, the one my parents (but not my wife's) grew up in, see *The Joys of Yiddish* by Leo Rosten.

¹⁷ <http://davidfriedman.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-scary-thing-about-having-kids.html>