



## ***Congratulating Conscious Choice*** **Exploring Society and the Self through Marriage and Divorce**

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**Abstract:** The role society plays in influencing the various paths and decisions we make as individuals is unmistakable. The challenge lies in using our sociological imagination to recognize the impact society has on shaping the choices we make, no matter how personal those decisions appear to be. This paper explores the many ways in which sociological theory can be applied to what are typically considered to be very personal decisions: marriage and divorce. I explore my own journey in deciding to both get married and within the past year, to get divorced, through a sociological lens and investigate the ways in which society has influenced these very important life decisions.

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

I was nineteen years old when my boyfriend of over 4 years ('high school sweethearts' was the term we commonly used to describe ourselves) proposed to me. We had discussed getting engaged in the near future so I was not surprised at the question. We decided to marry when I graduated from college as he was a year ahead of me in school two states away. In 2007, a month after my undergraduate commencement, we were married in a little town in Maine overlooking the harbor. It was a beautiful day, and many happy people were there to support our decision. The wedding was not a surprise to any of

our friends or family, it was both accepted and expected.

Now, two and a half years later, we have filed papers and appeared in court on December 1<sup>st</sup> to finalize our divorce. Without getting into the specifics of what happened in my situation to conclude in a decision to divorce, I have been personally analyzing all the steps that culminated in getting to the point of saying "I do" and wondering why more time isn't spent on the "why" of getting married and instead the questions that are usually asked are: how, when, and of course, who.

We are told to marry our best friend and that is exactly what I did. In the stages before the engagement, I did think about

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the role of marriage in my future but it was never a question of whether I wanted to get married and be married, it was a decision of whom. And in thinking about my future, I did what many do and weighed what I thought I needed in life in a partner and decided that this person that I was with would fit the bill as we *were* best friends and he loved me for who I am. All the clichés seemed to fit. Once the “who” was decided, I never thought it was a question of whether we would get married, but of just when. I have no regrets as to the decisions I have made but with using a sociological imagination, I do find myself questioning why I and so many other people accept that marriage is a natural progression of life; and now, the overall acceptance of divorce as a likely end of marriage also makes me question some of the trends in the historical functions marriage has played in society.

Marriage has become institutionalized in our society and considered a goal that most attempt to reach with 94% expecting to marry an ideal partner or soul mate in their lifetime (Campbell and Wright 2010). When someone announces that he or she is engaged to marry, the common response is “congratulations!” It would be considered inappropriate in our society if the response was instead, “why?” Yet, with 50% of first marriages ending in divorce (Campbell and Wright 2010)—and that statistic being widely known—it begs the question why more Americans do not question whether or not they would like to get married. This paper aims to provide a sociological viewpoint on this matter to explore the role of marriage and divorce in American society today.

## II. MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The **sociological imagination** is a concept that C. Wright Mills (1959) devel-

oped to describe the ability to see one's own personal experience and problems within the larger social context. In other words, in using one's sociological imagination, you are able to see how individuals (including yourself) mold society but also how society molds the individual. In my own quest to understand the role of marriage in society, I must use my sociological imagination to explore why I personally made the decision to marry and what societal forces influenced that decision and also how my decision to marry helped to enforce the very social institution of marriage itself by participating in the general consensus. As UMass Boston student Joel Bartlett (2008) stated in his essay titled, “What Do I Want to Be?: A Sociological Exploration in Choosing a Career,” “the sociological imagination makes us go back and consciously study our past and our present in a broader social context, so we can better shape our future” (198).

We see this concept depicted in the film, *Girl in the Café* where the experience of an individual (Gina) is juxtaposed to the experience of global society in relation to the death of a child. We see how one person's experience is not isolated and that what may be thought of as a personal problem really exists on the larger scale as a global issue. In seeing one's own personal experience within the context of larger societal issues, we are actively using our sociological imagination. Similarly, seeing my own marriage and divorce as not an isolated personal event but instead a part of the larger social world, I can explore my own experience in relation to the social context of marriage and divorce in society.

Adopting a theoretical lens, we may begin by comparing the **collectivist** and the **individualist** viewpoints of the role of marriage in society (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). From a collectivist standpoint, the structural arrangement of marriage and its meaning has changed over time. We have redefined marriage from an economic

necessity to a personal decision based on love and fulfillment. Marriage has fulfilled the means of procreation and endorsed sexual fidelity. It has created a structure from which the family unit has arisen and that family unit is the basis for many other social constructs and institutions. From an individualist perspective, marriage can be considered the ultimate of interactions between two individuals. It is seen as an individual's choice based on the compatibility, love, and personal fulfillment of two people.

Additionally, it is important to consider how marriage can be seen as both a **nonrational** and **rational** action depending on the viewpoint (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). From the perspective of the nonrational, marriage is a longstanding tradition with ties to religion and the law. There are so many values wrapped up in marriage, literally proclaimed in the vows people make on their wedding day: vows to be faithful, to take care of one another, to support each other, and to remain married until death do you part. People don't really question why we make these promises, or why people have the desire to get married, it is simply accepted that getting married is what everyone should do (unless of course you are in a same-sex relationship, then these rules supposedly do not apply but that discussion will come later). From a rational perspective, those that are married have a lower mortality rate, have overall better health, and partake in less risky behavior (Schwartz 2005). Additionally, of course, there is the factor of companionship and having someone there whose role is to love and care for you. A rational choice would be to enter into such a union and would be seen as an individual's choice as to who is their ideal lifelong partner with more commitment than possible in cohabitation.

### III. MICRO THEORETICAL INSIGHTS INTO MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

In addressing how Americans view marriage today, it is important to take a **phenomenological** look at marriage and the way in which people actively produce and sustain the meaning of marriage in today's society (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). Even though 50% of marriages end in divorce (Campbell and Wright 2010), people see marriage as a lifelong commitment, a decision made due to love and feelings. People attach personal meaning to marriage even though it is an institution perpetuated by society—essentially, many people sustaining the same meaning throughout society. There is voluntary participation in this institution, and the meaning that is created in “being married” can be carried through from one situation to the next.

Marriage does serve the function of providing a basis for **intersubjectivity** where there is a shared consciousness that allow people from different social and personal backgrounds to function and interact with a shared understanding of what it means to “be married” (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 539). Though some of the ceremonial and daily practices may differ between race, religion, or individuals, there is an understanding when someone says “my husband...” who that person is. That person is male, your cohabitor, someone you have committed to, and an important person in your personal life. All of this is included and assumed in the term “husband” without explicitly explaining all of those factors. It is accepted and even expected that women will change their name when they get married. One of the more difficult adjustments of getting married was changing my name and getting used to being referred to as someone's “wife.” There are so many connotations entangled to becoming a wife, of

changing your name—you are presenting a different self to the people around you than you ever had before you were married. However, not participating in these practices would have been perceived as odd, as if I were not committed to the idea of being married. It's as if being committed to someone means literally changing who you are, an idea that I was never comfortable with and especially for women. Presenting a different self and creating a different identity so that you can be accepted in society and fully participate in the social concept of marriage seems a bit backwards to me, yet I changed my name, I referred to my partner as "husband" and listened to him refer to me as his wife and knew that when I spoke to others with this language, there was a shared understanding of what that meant.

In further exploring identity and the definition of self, we can turn to the documentary film, *Multiple Personalities*, where people with what is now called Dissociative Identity Disorder were depicted in their struggle to deal with their multiple selves. What is interesting with some of those cases is, it appeared that some of the identities that people create to typically deal with some sort of childhood trauma were ways in which they may have perceived others seeing them. For instance, when a vulnerable and particularly submissive identity would emerge, usually in the form of a child, it could be considered as the way in which that person believes other people see them. If they believe that others see them as weak and fragile, especially around the time abuse occurred, then it could explain why this particular type of identity continually arose throughout all three cases in the film. Each individual had at least one child-identity that took on a particularly vulnerable personality. According to the concept "**looking glass self**," which was coined by the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley, our feelings of ourselves and perceptions of who we are

derived from how we imagine others view and judge us (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). In my struggle with adopting the identity of wife and a married woman, I did not want to be perceived as a dependent or subordinate woman and felt that was how I was being perceived by others when taking on the identity of wife.

When continuing to explore the phenomenology of marriage, we can turn to the concept of **lifeworld** which refers to the "world of existing assumptions as they are experienced and made meaningful in consciousness" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 539) as it pertains to the existing assumptions about marriage and how they are actively made meaningful. It is assumed that marriage is a goal to be achieved and the fairy tales exist to tell us that. It is also assumed that marriage is self-fulfilling. When people are married today, it becomes a part of their identity, an individual becomes a wife or a husband. Situational definitions are redefined as activities are assumed to be done as a couple. Christmas cards are signed by both parties; many conversations begin with "we" and not "I." Social groups change as you start to socialize with other married couples. If a couple is dating for a substantial amount of time, there is an assumption that marriage is in the future and the couple is usually asked as such. If one or both individuals express not having an interest in getting married, they are usually faced with negative attitudes because it is believed that we should always be looking for someone we'd like to "settle down with" especially if two people have been dating for years. This attitude stems from the assumption that we should all be in search of our soul mate, that one person who will complete us so that we can work on settling down with them for a lifetime. What if, instead, the common assumption was that we would have many meaningful partners in a lifetime depending on our needs and situations at the time, and that relationships should last for as

long as is beneficial to both parties?

Practices that once required marriage to be socially acceptable such as sex, cohabitation, and raising children, are now seen as acceptable outside of marriage (Cherlin 2004). Despite this social fact, studies show that even though cohabitation is widely accepted and many adolescents plan on cohabiting in their lives; rarely do they see it as a substitution to marriage and the expectation to marry remains much stronger than the expectation to simply cohabit (Manning, Longmore, and Giordano 2007). The changing societal norms and acceptance of different rules can be seen in UMass Boston student Guadalupe Paz's (2003) description of what marriage and family meant in her grandmother's time:

My great grandparents were also going through a difficult time with their business and both had to work. It didn't matter that my grandmother was just a teenage girl; she had to assume the responsibility of taking care of her siblings even if that meant giving up school. A couple of years later she got married and wanted to go back to school and later find a job but her husband told her that as long as he was alive she would never have to work, therefore, school was not a priority. For him her most important job was at home taking care of their children. My grandfather was not a mean, controlling man; he was very gentle and loving towards my grandmother and their children. He just expressed and followed the **social norms** that he had learned while growing up. It was customary that women stayed home taking care of their children. Sometimes we forget that society is all around us, influencing and shaping who we are. (25-26)

Phenomenology also identifies **stocks of knowledge** as the rules used for interpreting interactions, social relationships, organizations, institutions and the physical world, examples of which are illustrated in the story shared above by Paz in terms of internalized norms and customs. People have rules about interacting with married couples such as when extending an invitation to an outing; it should include both parties. Also, as discussed with intersubjectivity, someone does not need to ask about the importance of an individual in someone's life if they are married. The fact that a spouse is a very important, if not the most important, person is assumed, thus allowing interactions to cover other topics such as "what does your husband do for a living?" or "where is your wife from?" It is generally accepted that flirting with someone who is married is unacceptable and also that someone who is married should not be seen flirting.

To describe marriage as an institution seems natural as it has been quite widely referred to as such so the actual **institutionalization** of marriage may seem obvious (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). It is so ingrained in so many aspects of our society; however, it is woven into a variety of religions and laws. Privileges are associated with being a part of this institution. In religion, marriage allows two people to have sex, it allows them to live together, and to start a family. In law, marriage allows certain legal rights such as financial benefits and the right to join assets, funds, and liabilities. It allows health rights such as visitation in hospitals and even next-of-kin considerations when someone is unable to make decisions on their own. It is these established rules with the institutionalization of marriage that make the same-sex marriage debate so heated. The process of including a social group not previously allowed to be a part of this institution is forcing people to define marriage, something that has been so taken for granted.

Personally, I find myself caught in the processes of what sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann called **objectivation** and **reification** as I begin to see myself and my marriage as a product of society, an acceptance of norms never questioned (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). There is such a push within society to get married that I could conceivably say that I had no choice but to try and achieve that goal. I remember prior to getting married, I would think to myself that I will not find a better person to marry to take care of me, to love and be loved without questioning the act of getting married. If the assumption of getting married as a given were removed from the equation, there is a possibility I would have made different decisions. Taking part in the objectivation process, I must recognize that the social world and its influences exist outside of my individual being; however, in taking this mindset, it would also be irresponsible to not take ownership of my life, since, according to Berger and Luckmann, we humans are also the ones who **externalize** the ideas and rules that later become new objectivations of the social world. Therefore, I also have a choice to create my social reality and remove myself from the collective thought and make decisions concerning marriage in the future, hopefully more aware of the influence society has on such decisions.

In everyday life, we come into contact with so many situations that it would be absolutely overwhelming if we did not have the means to categorize actions and apply meanings to those different situations. William Thomas theorizes that we use **definitions of situations** where we assign meaning to various circumstances from predetermined definitions (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). In the definition of the situation of marriage, reactions are not automatic but constructed on meanings. Reactions to “I just got married” are typically favorable; congratulations are offered. This is quite different from “I just got

divorced” which usually elicits responses of “I’m sorry to hear that.” The social construction of marriage as a benchmark in the course of life warrants the response of congrats, whereas divorce, as the social construct of a failure to that benchmark, is seen as socially devastating. The way in which these situations are defined by society and the meaning behind each circumstance allow people to follow the rules of engagement and give what is accepted as the proper response to these scenarios. I have given a lot of attention to the theory of **Symbolic Interactionism** and the ways in which symbols contribute to the role of marriage in society (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). First, marriage itself can be considered a symbol: a symbol representing security, comfort, and assurance of the future. Does regarding marriage as a symbol of success make divorce a symbol of failure? Divorce has been considered a symbol of being wrong, or being wronged. Can there be a symbol for changing your mind? In a marriage there are many symbols; for example, an engagement ring and the wedding rings signify unity and commitment. For someone to take off their ring has grave connotations of being unfaithful or that of misleading others to think that the individual is not married. If the symbol of the ring was not as widely known as it is, the stigma of removing the ring would not be so great. The act of changing your name, as discussed before, can also be seen as a symbol. If one does not change their name, they can be seen as having a lack of commitment and not being serious about the marriage. This brings me to **impression management** where the very act of getting married transforms the self into a part of a partnership (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). When you change your name as I did, you are participating in the practices of this institution and attempting to have other people “buy it,” to demonstrate your commitment to this important societal ritual to others in society.

Even the act of “being in a relationship” has rigid rules and symbols everywhere, guiding how we act. The main idea of a couple, of a relationship, of being married conjures thoughts of a man and a woman being in love. The exclusion of love between two women or two men from this scenario is not the result of something being innately wrong with that scenario but that we are not socialized to think of a relationship or marriage in those terms. In the debate about same-sex marriage, the argument that the definition of marriage is a union between a man and a woman is only true because that is the way in which we as a society have chosen to define it. It is how we are *preconditioned* to define the situation. An example of this symbolic interaction is offered in UMass Boston student Chris Daponte's (2003) essay, titled “Will I Marry Her?”:

A Barbie and a Ken doll—complete with their two babies and a dog from my favorite aunt when I was seven years old—are the Christmas presents I most vividly remember from my childhood. This image of family influenced my vision of the future for many years to come. I believed that by the time I was twenty-five, I would look like Barbie and have her “two- kids-and-a dog” life. This is hardly a paper about a ruined life and image because of a plastic, yet beautiful, doll; rather, it is a look at how the image of family, even Barbie's family, has shaped my reality. Even as late as this year, I bought a dog shortly after my twenty-fifth birthday. Something is still missing, and although I am glad that I finally know that it is not Ken I long for, I struggle with the issue of how to realize my image of family. (18)

Here, Chris describes her image of

family and the way in which the Barbie and Ken dolls served as symbols in perpetuating this definition.

Another theory that should be considered when discussing the role of marriage in society is **Exchange Theory** (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). As discussed before, the act of getting married can be seen as a rational choice. You combine income, receive companionship, and befriend someone who agrees to be there unconditionally in exchange for giving the same in return. If it is someone you want to do that for, and enjoy receiving that from, then the benefit outweighs the cost. If not, if the cost is greater, and you do not get enjoyment from that person caring about you or you do not have interest in caring for that person, then the relationship usually ends, either before marriage, or when you get a divorce. Nakonezny and Denton (2008) explore marriage within the contexts of Social Exchange theory here:

Marital partners yield goodness of outcomes based on rewards and costs, but each partner must value the mutual activity above a comparison level in order for relational solidarity to be sustained. The experiences weighted by its salience (i.e., past-salient central memory) and reward/cost comparisons. Thus, the outcome of marital exchange is evaluated on the basis of past experience, which in turn leads to a partner's perception of his or her goodness of outcome—a cognitive evaluation of costs and rewards. (404)

In my situation, I was the initiator of our divorce and there came a lot of guilt being in that role—guilt that stemmed from feeling like I was going back on a contract, that I promised to be that significant person for someone who was that significant person for me; it felt like I was backing out

of a deal. Turning to Exchange Theory, some of that guilt makes sense since I feel responsible as my husband counted on me to be that person, I agreed and got married, and changing my mind means that he needs to start all over, trying to find someone else who is worth the exchange of benefits and costs. I think that those who decide to divorce must also go through some of the same process of weighing the costs and benefits of being together, especially when there are kids involved. For me, the cost of getting a divorce and even hurting someone I cared about was not greater than the benefits of being together and staying married. I know that part of the healing process for me will include recognizing that being married was beneficial at the time and when I did make the decision to marry, the benefits did outweigh the costs.

#### IV. MACRO THEORETICAL INSIGHTS INTO MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Moving into more macro theoretical frameworks, Emile Durkheim would consider marriage one of the many **social facts** which he considers to be external to the individual and determining one's course of action (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 88). The social fact that people get married is shown in the statistic that 94% of Americans believe that they will marry (and marry an ideal partner for a lifetime) and that 85% of Americans do in fact marry (Campbell and Wright 2010). We are conditioned to see marriage as an absolute, as something that exists, and one that should be strived for without really questioning why. One way in which this mindset is accomplished is the fact that marriage is a very important **ritual** in American society, both historically and today (though one could argue that the actual definition of marriage and even function of marriage has changed over time) so much so that it

has been highly routinized (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). The shared understanding about marriage, the extravagance of the wedding, the importance of wedding rings, and the language that emerges from this common experience contribute to the **collective conscience** which is presumed to exist separate from and external to the individuals themselves (Appelrouth and Edles 2008).

In continuing to explore the idea of marriage and divorce in today's society, I turn to the foundations of **Structural Functionalism** which emphasize the importance of viewing society as a working organism or body with interrelated parts that work together to help the body (society) function (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 349). I intend to investigate the ways in which marriage is conceptualized and the functions it serves in the **social system**. A social system is described as "the level of integrated interaction between two or more actors" (Appelrouth and Edles 2008:352). In theory, marriage has been the pillar of monogamy and stability to provide an optimal environment for raising children. As a result of this idealized perspective of the role of marriage, divorce is seen as detrimental not only to individuals but also society as a whole and the negative effects of divorce are often discussed as the cause for the decline of the family (Amato 2000).

Within the Structural Functionist perspective, the idea of **roles** comes into play in which for each social status, we all have a variety of roles that are pivotal in maintaining the social system. As the social system encompasses interactions between two or more people and delineates the roles that each individual has, we can see how the role of a husband or a wife, as a father or a mother, as a coworker, as a friend, as a sibling or son or daughter influence our daily actions. When marriage is brought into the picture, meaning is attached to a new role, the role of being a spouse and with that role, as with all other roles, comes

a set of distinct responsibilities and assumptions in fulfilling those expectations.

**Socialization** is the process of regarding specific norms as binding (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). When we are young, we learn that growing up and getting married is the norm. We are taught this by the examples of the adults around us, and through fairytales which end as the princess marries the prince. Even at a young age, the childhood melody of “first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage” contributes to the process of socializing us to see marriage as a permanent fixture and one that we should aim at achieving from the time we start forming these very important constructs. We are socialized to follow the many rules set forth by society much like the stocks of knowledge discussed earlier in the paper. We have those stocks of knowledge to refer to because of the socialization that starts early on in life.

As a result of these external socializing factors, individuals (throughout their lifetime) undergo the process of **internalization** where we internalize this need to get married and as the song heard on the playground predicts, to start a family and have that baby in a baby carriage. The messages are constant and it would be difficult to not internalize this accepted norm in some form. So the question arises then, if we are socialized as such to believe in marriage as an all-important objective, how then is divorce portrayed and in turn internalized? You certainly do not see Cinderella requesting a no-fault divorce and although as we get older more exposure to the constructs of society bring the word “divorce” into our vocabulary, we constantly see negative associations with divorce and equate it with failing at that idealized childhood fantasy of “happily ever after.”

So the question is then begged: If we have been socialized to internalize these concepts of marriage, why are divorce rates

so high? What has contributed to the changing conceptualizations of marriage and the functions marriage serves in society? Campbell and Wright (2010) researched the incongruence of beliefs about marriage and the actions of Americans regarding marriage. What marriage means to individuals is changing and it is interesting to explore the way in which people may change their perceptions of marriage which will in turn change the way in which we internalize marriage:

Finally, at the contextual level, social definitions of marriage could become more flexible to include non-monogamous and long-term (but not necessarily lifelong) commitments. As mentioned earlier, marriage might be conceptualized as enduring as long as it promotes the happiness of both partners, rather than “till death do us part”... [T]he nature of marriage is changing, but our hope is that these changes will be embraced, not feared. As long as we adapt to, rather than resist, change the health and happiness of individuals will be supported. (Campbell & Wright 2010: 341)

Additionally, marriage is often described as an institution, one of great importance in society today—it is important enough that those who are left out of its parameters are fighting to be included. It is important enough that those who are not citizens of this country/society can immediately be granted citizenship if they are married to a current citizen. The very fact that to marry is a legal action demonstrates the **institutionalization** of marriage. Institutionalization was also discussed in the earlier micro exploration of this paper and should be seen as a concept to be applied at both the micro and macro levels. Institutionalizing marriage and other constructs

bind actors to a particular meaning which helps to curtail resistance to social norms (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 354). Society has effectively institutionalized marriage to the degree that 94% expect to marry an ideal partner and see marriage as a lifetime commitment despite the fact that 50% of marriages end in divorce (Campbell & Wright 2010).

Marriage thus far has been described as having functions within society. Though some of those functions are more apparent than others, there exist many functions that marriage serves to individuals and society. Renowned as a functionalist in Sociology, Robert Merton developed two of the most widespread terms in Functionalism: manifest and latent functions. A *manifest function* refers to the intended purpose of an action whereas the *latent function* describes an implicit or unintentional purpose of a given action (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 383). In the construct of marriage, the manifest function could be described at the individual level as the means used to start a family and to have a lifetime partner. From a collectivist point of view, marriage serves as a regulating force which encourages people to settle down in one place and “contribute” to the greater society by finding a reliable career path and maintain the capitalist system. There also exist latent functions; for example, on the individual level, being married provides financial security, someone to help monitor your health, and a partner to help in daily chores and routines. From a societal viewpoint a latent function of marriage could be perpetuating the norm of heterosexuality. As it currently stands, most states still do not allow same-sex marriage. By preventing that social group from entering this institution, marriage serves the function of creating a barrier and putting homosexuals in an “others” group unable to participate in the action of “getting married.”

The functions of marriage have certainly changed over time. It is widely

accepted that the changing definitions and reasons for marriage have contributed to the dramatic increase of divorce rates. As people start marrying for love instead of economic necessity, marriages have become more unstable. Campbell and Wright (2010) explain here:

Analysis of historical data suggests that prior to the mid 1800s, a majority of people married for social, economic, or political reasons. Marriage partners were generally chosen by family members, not the individuals getting married. After the Industrial Revolution, the basis of marriage began shifting toward love and personal fulfillment, and social and political leaders feared that the institution of marriage was in jeopardy. Indeed, marriages based on love and personal choice are more fragile and unstable than marriages based on social, economic, or political motives (329).

This point highlights the importance of functionalism as it pertains to social constructs. As the reasons and functions of marriage have changed, so have the actions of people entering into the institution. Both the manifest and latent functions of marriage have changed which begs the question, what does this mean for the existence of this social institution in the future?

One of the most renowned theorists in the field of sociology, Karl Marx, focused much of his writing on critically analyzing the *capitalist* society that we live in and the way in which everything in society is structured around further benefiting capitalism. When it comes right down to it, marriage is a business. Weddings are a multi-billion dollar industry alone and there is a lot of interest in a capitalist-driven society to keep the profits coming in and to keep the people in society continually tying the knot. Individuals spend thousands of

dollars on orchestrating this one day and the idea of “bigger is better” as people pour their life savings into creating that perfect day only further perpetuates the capitalistic side of marriage. If people started losing interest in getting married, the industry would take a severe fall. Thus, the drive of continuing this social construct is certainly in the best interest of those that control the capitalist society and continue to make a substantial profit from this institution.

When analyzing some of the critical theorists, Max Weber’s contributions to the field in describing the restraints of the bureaucracy that we live in is key to understanding the oppressive nature of our society. *Bureaucracy* is described as “administrative functions and rules that account for the efficiency and impersonality that mark this organizational form” (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 150). That is, the very structure of our society and the way in which we all play by the rules it dictates lends to an inherently oppressive and skewed manner of functioning as a society. Weber further describes bureaucracy as an *iron cage* in which it continually saps individual freedom (Appelrouth and Edles 2008). Marriage could be considered a functioning part of this stifling bureaucracy where we are so overly routinized that we do not think about why we want to get married or even if marriage is the best individual choice for us; we just accept that it is a natural progression of life and of this society and focus so much of our individual time and attention towards reaching that goal. The best way to fight against this is to use our sociological imagination discussed above, to see how our concepts about marriage are influenced substantially if not wholly by society.

When a lot of younger people conceptualize marriage, they don’t tend to think so much about the day-to-day living with one person; their focus narrows to the wedding itself and all the planning/worrying that goes along with that (for both men

and women). Though I did do a lot of thinking about being married before I married, I admit that I was easily sucked into the excitement of planning a wedding. That wasn’t my primary focus and I was truly excited for the prospect of that “forever-partner” and living every day with your best friend. I do think many people get pulled into the anticipation of planning a wedding without giving as much thought as they should to the marriage itself. This is an example of *subjective reasoning* where people are concerned with means and ends—planning a wedding which leads to being married without truly thinking about the value of the ends (being married). If people took a more *objective reasoning* approach where they focused on the value of the ends of an action—which in the case of marriage would be commitment and the fulfillment that marriage is intended to bring—it may even be considered that marriage is not needed to satisfy those needs. Two people can be committed and fill all of the emotional needs that are associated with marriage without actually entering into the institution of marriage.

In my own experience growing up, as my parents divorced when I was young, I did not see marriage as the only option. In fact, in the case of my father, when he and my mother divorced, she became his third ex-wife. My parents had joint custody (time split equally between both parents) and in my view, both of my parents did an admirable job raising me and my two sisters. When my parents divorced, my father became involved with another woman—they never married but have been together in a committed, monogamous relationship for about twenty years now which is longer than any of my father’s marriages combined. In this example of my dad, I was able to see that marriage doesn’t necessarily mean commitment and being committed doesn’t necessarily mean that you need to be married. And you certainly do not

need to be married in order to raise children. In society, however, we equate marriage and commitment and have a tendency to use subjective reasoning (thinking about the means and the ends) instead of objective reasoning (thinking about the value of the ends).

Weber broke down actions in society into three categories. In general, I believe marriage can be considered a **Traditional Social Action**. Based on “habit and long-standing tradition” (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 143) families for generations have pursued marriage. Across individual families, religions, and cultures, people have their own traditions regarding marriage. The very act of getting married, however, is a traditional action and with most traditions, the question of “why” isn’t necessarily asked—only “when.” These ideas have not changed over time as Thornton & Young-DeMarco (2001) describe in their study about attitudes about family over a period of four decades: In conceptualizing marriage and commitment in this way, I find myself stepping outside of the iron cage and allow myself to transcend the status quo and not fall into the mindset that marriage is an absolute. This is the process of **individualistic rationality** and allows my own rational self-interest to not equate marriage and commitment. I can be committed without being married and being married is not an automatic commitment. Having individualistic rationality dictate the decisions I make regarding relationships instead of feeling like I need to follow the predetermined bureaucratic structure is a liberating feeling. Obviously the bureaucracy we live in still rules so much of what I do, but it is an awareness of that oppressiveness that allows objective reasoning to filter through in decision-making.

The great majority of young people are both planning and expecting marriage. Americans overwhelm-

ingly believe that marriage is a lifetime relationship that should not be terminated except under extreme circumstances. Young people today are also approaching the marriage decision with the expectation that they will stay married to the same person until death intervenes. (Thornton & Young-DeMarco: 1030)

Recently, however, you see an increase in **Affective Social Action** in which decisions are made on impulse (Appelrouth and Edles 2008: 143) with “Las Vegas weddings” or eloping, where people will decide more on impulse than anything to get married. This new method of getting married can be seen as a reflection of some of the changing ideas about marriage. With no-fault divorce being so easily accessible and less stigma associated with being divorced, some of the previous hesitations of getting married, or really who we marry, are lessened as there is an escape plan—an easy way out if things go wrong. Though this hasn’t altered the drive to get married, it has changed attitudes toward getting divorced. Despite young people’s plans to be married until death, trends show that this is not in fact the case:

When they marry, many people vow that they will stay together “till death us do part.” But the reality today is that divorce, not death, ends many marriages. In the United States, about three in ten of today’s marriages will end in divorce (among African Americans, the rate is about six in ten)...Today’s divorce rate is four times what it was a century ago...the more traditional culture of that time defined divorce as sinful and a sign of personal failure, so moral pressure also helped keep couples together, whether they were happily mar-

ried or not. During the twentieth century, the share of women working for income went up, and the average number of children per woman went down. These trends made divorce a more realistic option, and gradually, public attitudes became more accepting of divorce. (Macionis 2010: 324-25)

Continuing with considering important Conflict Theories, Feminist Theory can provide an interesting outlook on marriage in society. Marriage has morphed over time and one of the contributing factors to the changing concept of marriage is women entering the workplace and gaining more economic independence. Historically—viewing marriage from a woman’s perspective or *standpoint* as most theories come from the standpoint of men (Appelrouth and Edles 2008)—marriage can be seen as a very oppressive institution for women. Historically, wives were seen as being men’s property and being married was an economic necessity for women as they were not able to bring in an income on their own. Linking back to my discussion of intersubjectivity and my difficulty in presenting myself as somebody’s wife has a lot to do with the historical nature of what it means to be a married woman. Though many of those presuppositions have changed over time, the origin of what it means to be a wife remains uncomfortable for me.

Dorothy Smith discussed the *bifurcation of consciousness* where many women experience very different roles in the home and in their professional lives. This concept is something I related to directly while I was married. Women must balance different positions within the workplace and the home. At the time when I was married, it was a stark contrast between my work life where I made very few decisions and was considered to be at the bottom of the totem pole and my home life where I was more of a decision-maker. In the workplace I had

very little say regarding the actions of others. This was very different from my home life where I was the primary decision-maker and though my husband and I typically discussed every decision, it was usually ultimately my choice as to what we did. There were very different roles between the workplace and the home and as women in the workplace have changed the role of marriage in the past (Macionis 2010), there is no doubt that this duality of roles affects marriages today.

Looking at marriage and divorce now from a global perspective, I realize the importance of recognizing how fortunate I am to be able to make decisions so freely. I have the freedom to pursue the jobs that I want, a higher education, and be with (or not be with) the people that I choose. At first glance, it may appear that this freedom is possible more in what Immanuel Wallerstein describes as the *core* regions of the world-system. A core region or nation, according to him, is one in which higher technologies, wealth, and higher skilled and paid labor force are concentrated. There are many more economic and personal freedoms in core regions which control a larger share of the means of production; however, these additional resources, wealth, and opportunities come at the expense of the exploitation of *Peripheral* regions and nations in the world-economy. Peripheral nations are often used for their raw materials and cheap labor force which are used as such on location and/or exported/“migrated” to the core nations. For Wallerstein, semi-peripheral regions include some attributes of both core and peripheral regions. My life would be very different if I lived in a peripheral nation; I would most likely not be making decisions based on my own need for self-fulfillment but instead on trying to seek the basic means of survival (Appelrouth and Edles 2008).

After seeing the living conditions of the working women in peripheral nations in

the film, *The Corporation*, I feel a sense of guilt to have the luxuries I do to make the decisions that I have. Seeing the world as one large *world-system* as Wallerstein describes and seeing the many connections we have to people all over the globe, it is difficult to avoid a real sense of the interconnectedness of every decision that we make. My decision to buy a shirt and perpetuate oppression of men, women, and children overseas makes me think twice about my consumerism. My decision to divorce my husband as a matter of my own self-fulfillment is not a reflection of what I have worked for or who I am but a matter of where I live, the influences around me, and the freedom not to worry about making sure there is food on the table every day.

Advancing a postmodern perspective, Michel Foucault is insistent upon always seeing the link between *power and knowledge*. As I stated above, my having knowledge and freedom (or not) is closely tied to where I am located in the world-economy, geographically, but also in terms of class, gender, and race/ethnicity. In this society, I have the knowledge and acceptance of divorce along with the resources available to get a divorce. Though I did not and would not go such a route, it is even possible to get a divorce online these days. This knowledge and accessibility to resources allows me the power to get a divorce, one that is not a “natural” fact but instead a constructed fact, one that is closely tied to the extent that I have the knowledge and power to not only understand but also resist the function the institution of marriage is supposed to serve in society. By problematizing the metanarrative of marriage, I begin to liberate myself from the lenses and powers of those forces historically shaping the everyday lives of people everywhere, including myself. Looking at marriage through a *postmodernist* lens, we develop critical insight to deconstruct and transform the definition of

marriage—this is why there is a shift in the beliefs and actions of people regarding marriage and marriage has a different reality than it once did (Appelrouth and Edles 2008).

## V. CONCLUSION

There is a parallel between my realizations about the role marriage and relationships play in my life and the story portrayed in the film, *Awakenings*. Similar to how patients were awakened out of their catatonic state, or the way in which Dr. Sayer was awakened to new appreciations of his personal and the social world (e.g., asking the nurse Eleanor for a cup of coffee at the end of the movie), I feel I have been awakened from the previously rigid state of conceptualizations of marriage and relationships. I now find myself awakened to the realization that just because the way things have been or because everyone around you tells you this is how it is, it does not necessarily mean you have to follow that mold. I am sure that I will experience many similar “awakenings” in my life where I stop and analyze why it is that I think in a certain way or am taking a particular action. It is my hope that I can remain awake and not fall back into the catatonic state of sleep as the patients in the movie found themselves in.

In conceptualizing marriage and divorce in society, I am forced to take an outside look at the role marriage plays in our society and also the role it has played in my own life. Cultivating my sociological imagination, I can begin to see how society has shaped my beliefs about marriage and also, how individuals have changed the concept of marriage over time. There is an important interplay between society’s impact on individual decisions and also the individual’s impact on society (which can be seen in the changing definition of marriage over time). Also, in conceptualiz-

ing the way in which my thoughts have been shaped in my beliefs that led to my decision to marry, I can also attribute the same process to my thoughts about divorce.

The American quest for self-fulfillment can account for many of the decisions people make to divorce (as it is also ironically the case for the decisions to marry). Applying various theoretical perspectives and concepts to these social constructs allows me to see how society influences not only our daily everyday choices but some of our major life decisions. Moving forward, I can use this knowledge and awareness to actively assess my decisions not only in relationships but all major (and minor) choices that I make.

Though in most cases I will still be affected by and probably even follow the socially acceptable norm, I will not do so blindly and in making my decisions I will be aware of the ways in which society influences me as an individual so that I can make the best *conscious* choice possible.

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