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Love and Marriage: Through the Lens of Sociological Theories

Ana Carolina Fowler
Tufts University, carofowler@gmail.com

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Love and Marriage

Through the Lens of Sociological Theories

Ana Carolina Fowler

Tufts University

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carofowler@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper seeks to apply sociological theories to the concepts of love and marriage in order to better understand their construction and how they function in modern Western society. Illustrated by examples from my own life, the paper attempts to examine love using sociological micro-theories such as phenomenology, symbolic interaction, rational choice theory and the dramaturgical perspective. Macro-theories such as conflict theory, functionalism, and post modernism are used in order to analyze love as it relates to marriage and the ways in which the meanings of these concepts and their positions in society have changed.

Since I was very young I have believed that you grow up looking for that one special person with whom you are entirely compatible, the person that will be your partner in life through the good and the bad---someone you can depend on and who can depend on you, a person whom you have fallen in love with, and without whom you cannot imagine living the rest of your life. When you find that person, you marry them and then you have children.

This may be quite an idealistic perception, but it is the gist of what I had learned, from observation, from stories, from the media and from my parents; in short, I have been socialized to believe that this is the way things are generally supposed to go. However, my upbringing was also quite liberal and although this is what I understood to be the norm and what was generally de-sired, I also knew, understood and respected others' ideas of what was desired and that not everyone would marry the person they loved, or want to get married to or have children with at all. I knew that these variants were common and acceptable in my own culture, but I also knew about other cultures and other time periods and the different family forms that exist other than this one. Even though I was aware of all of this, part of my own stock of knowledge and something I considered to be mutual knowledge, was that the typical marriage in our current Western society was based on love. Or, in the words of Sammy Cahn, immortalized by the voice of Frank Sinatra, "Love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage."

However, in the face of the same-sex marriage debates that have been going on in

the United States for the past few years, a variety of definitions for marriage have been put forth. Much to my surprise, however, few of these definitions have anything to do with love. In fact, Republican Senator Sam Brownback from Kansas has said in his criticism of legalization of same-sex marriage that, "If marriage begins to be viewed as the way two adults make known their love for each other, there is no reason to marry before children are born rather than after. And if it is immaterial whether a couple should be married before the birth of a child, then why should they marry at all?"[1]

Naturally, I found this statement quite shocking, given my understanding that marriage was "the way two adults make known their love for each other." In the past it may have been the case that most marriages were entered into as a political or economic arrangement in order to secure a more favorable position for one's self or one's family. It was also seen as the only acceptable beginning of a new family, since sex was something that couples engaged in only after marriage and—at least in the Catholic religion—only for procreation. But it has been my understanding that our modern times have allowed these concepts to change. Women no longer have to depend on their husbands for financial, social or political security; sex before marriage and not solely for procreation also seems to be generally accepted by society, and many couples who do get married cannot or choose not to have children at all. Thus, it would appear that marriages in Western societies today are by and large entered into as a public manifestation of love, a notion that is also confirmed by Beigel: "By the end of the nineteenth century love had won its battle along the whole line in the upper sections of the middle class. It has since been regarded as the most important prerequisite to marriage. The American concept that considers

individual happiness the chief purpose of marriage is based entirely on this ideology" (Beigel 330).

Given that a national debate over who one can marry has become such a centerpiece of political discussion, as evident in the same-sex marriage debate, perhaps it is wise to explore love and marriage again. It is interesting that for a topic as popular as love has been in literature, films, music, media and popular culture for centuries, only recently have social scientists really paid much attention to it. Philosophical, poetic and scholarly explorations of the nature and definition of love abound, but only as of the twentieth century have methical and scientific studies been performed by social scientists with the hopes of better understanding love and relationships.

This paper will present an analysis of love and marriage using my won personal experiences considered through the lens of a variety of sociological theories, supplemented by several studies and views put forth by other social scientists on the subject. It will be an effort to reach a better understanding of these illusive and seemingly controversial concepts. I will begin with an exploration of love with the use of concepts from sociological micro-theories, since love is experienced in the personal social interactions of everyday life. I will then proceed to an examination of love as it relates to marriage, where I will attempt to apply various concepts of macro-theories in hopes of clarifying the place of love and marriage in our society as a whole.

The concept of "chemistry" as it applies to relationships is one that is widely recognized in reference to romance, such that people who get along very well with each other and seem to have some sort of "spark" between them are described as having "good chemistry." In his 1809 novel, "Elective Affinities," Goethe further developed the idea of interpersonal chemistry, where he metaphorically compared the process of

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[1]   http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/brownback200407090921.asp

attraction between two people to a chemical reaction. In addition, recent neurological studies, such as Michael Liebowitz's "The Chemistry of Love" (1983), have been able to describe the actual chemical processes that occur in the human body when a person is experiencing love. However, the understanding of the biological mechanisms that allow men and women to live are merely the starting point for understanding the human experience. As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explain, human beings have the unique distinction of being born "**unfinished**" and as such they must continue to develop in order to become a fully formed and functioning human being in relationship with society. If human beings are necessarily social and cannot exist outside of society (Farganis 300-301), although love can be described, to a certain extent, as a biological and chemical process, its significance can never be fully understood without an analysis of its social aspects. In Berger and Luckmann's view, human beings are not born into a world that is prefabricated and their choices limited by biology, instincts and drives. Human beings must engage in world-building activities and thus create things such as culture and social organization to live their existence (Farganis 301). Love, as a cultural and social phenomenon, can be perceived in this light as one of the mechanisms human beings use in order to organize their world. Love is one of the processes through which human beings become attracted to one another, and in one of the way we have become accustomed to doing it in modern times, we seek a single partner with whom to fall in love with. For the purpose of forming a family, therefore, love may be one of the ways we use to select someone to have children with.

Historically, however, mates have not often been chosen on the basis of love but rather—as previously noted—on the basis of convenience; at times mates are selected by the parents or families of the individuals to be married. Berger and Luckmann believe that in the process of **world-building**, humans **search for a balance** with the world and within themselves (Farganis 301). In this light—and perhaps in a more romanticized perspective—finding the person that one wants to spend their lives with may be only one way in which humans are able to find that inner balance.

As uniquely social creatures, humans need the presence of others in order to survive. Friendships are one way in which humans surround themselves with a microcosm of society which functions as a network of emotional support when it is needed. Love can be regarded as an even deeper level of this social behavior. Love may be regarded as combination of friendship and sex, and although it may not actually be that simple, this definition clarifies the idea that the physical attraction that is a part of romantic love may take the friendship aspect into a deeper level and thus fulfill a deeper need for emotional support and companionship that may not necessarily be fulfilled by friendship alone.[2]

But how do we know what to look for in a mate? Why should we look for only one that will be our life-long partner, and not try to have multiple, short-term relationships instead? How do we know when we're in love? Berger and Luckmann observe that although humans are world-building creatures, they are born into a world that predates them and as such, those who have lived in it before must teach the newcomers how to interact with it (Farganis 301). This is the process of **socialization**, and it remains the same no matter how much society changes and develops. Berger and Luckmann's proposed process of world-build-

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[2] I should again note here that what is being explored here is a social phenomenon observable in modern Western society: the nature and definitions of love as a framework for selecting a life partner and how this relates to definitions of marriage. It is not my intention to assert that this is the only framework available or that those who deviate from this framework are right or wrong.

ing, or what they famously call, the **social construction of reality**, consists of three phases or aspects that they call **externalization**, which is when individuals construct new realities and structures in culture and society; **objectivation**, which is when those constructions become sedimented, legitimated, and perceived as "objectively" given for human actors newly entering the process; and **internalization**, which is when human actors not only have to learn and understand the meanings of the existing and previously "objectivated" cultural and social constructions, but are trained and socialized to take them for granted and to enact them as part of their subjective realities, identities, and lives.

It is in this last process that socialization becomes crucial, for it is what will turn the objectified world into an internalized framework of action. Using my own life as an example, I can perhaps begin to understand the feelings that I have for my fiancé in terms of how I have been socialized. Socializing institutions such as my family and the media have transmitted to me an idea of what love is supposed to feel like so that when I detect those feelings in me, I know that love is the emotion that I am experiencing. These ideas have become part of what Alfred Schutz calls my **stock of knowledge** (Farganis 285), which includes the "commonsense" facts that I have of the world. I rely on what has become understood to be **mutual knowledge,** and because of the possibility of **reciprocity of perspectives** (Farganis 287) made possible in social interaction, I assume that my fiancé, when experiencing similar feelings, will also identify them as love and we can come to the conclusion that we are in love with each other. In the same way, I can assume that he will understand as such the expressions that I show him of my love and that he will express his love either in the same way or in a similar way that I can also understand.

In line with Berger and Luckmann's discussion of socialization, Schutz notes that the stock of knowledge of an individual is mostly **social in origin**, so that although some of the ideas that I have about love come from my own personal experience, most of it was given to me by my family, my friends, my school and other **significant others** and socializing agents (Farganis 288). However, due to what he calls the **biographically determined situation** of a human being, at any given time, a person's **definition of a situation** is determined not only by the physical space which they occupy but also by their status and role in society; likewise, an individual's moral and ideological positions are determined by his or her own history and the biographical experiences he or she has had (Farganis 285). This means that the definitions that I have of love, or the interpretation that I would have of a certain situation—such as a conversation with my fiancé about marriage—are not mine alone but also shaped by my own unique personal biography; hence, although I can assume that other's definitions might be similar to mine based on observation and **typification**, they can never fully understand my, and I their, biographically determined situation and can only hope to grasp a fraction of it (Farganis 290).

For instance, in conversations that I have had with my fiancé about our wedding, I have expressed my desire to have my whole family there and to invite my closest friends. But since I am quite a social person, as are my parents, we have lots of people whom we love and consider important enough in our lives to invite them to the wedding. I cannot assume, however, that my fiancé feels the same way. As a matter of fact, he does not, and while I have a long list of people I would really like to have at the wedding, he only wants to invite his parents and his two brothers. Although I can use the knowledge I have of his personality and of the events in his life and through **role taking** attempt to understand the reasons for which he does not feel close enough to his friends to invite them to his wedding or

what his ideas of closeness are, I can never fully grasp the way that he feels, how he perceives the world and how he defines certain situations.

The idea of role taking is present in George Herbert Mead's theories, where the **self** is the process of a constant inner conversation, or **self**-**interaction** between its two phases that are both object (**me**) and subject (**I**). The object of the "me" is in relation to others and only through this relationship can one become aware of the subjective "I." In Mead's words, "[t]he 'I' reacts to the self which arises through taking the attitudes of others. Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the 'me' and we react to it as an 'I'" (Cahill 33). Thus, only through processes such as figuratively placing myself in my fiancé's shoes (an exercise which in this process is done automatically and not consciously) am I able to be aware of my own self and can react to his words and actions with the added information and perception I gain from taking his role and applying them to the inner conversation between the two phases of my self.

Being aware of another's ideas and perceptions is a concept that is also very important to Charles Horton Cooley's concept of the "**looking**-**glass self**." In Cooley's view, the feeling we have for ourselves is constructed in three stages that occur almost simultaneously: imagining our appearance to others, imagining how others are judging that appearance, and the feeling we get in regards to that judgment (Cahill 28). Love can be analyzed through this perspective if one thinks of love as an imagination of how we appear to the person we love, imagining that they judge us favorably and love us and thus feeling satisfaction, security, happiness, etc. However, it is important to clarify that this will be the case when one is speaking of requited love, such that the imagination of how we look to our lover and the imagination of his or her favorable judgment are likely triggered by some emotional or physical indications of their affec-

tion. When I observed the way in which my fiancé acted towards me when we were a few months into our relationship, the things he said to me and how he treated me, I appealed to the stock of knowledge I had acquired through the socialization process of my childhood and adolescence in order to interpret them as indications of his attraction and deepening affection towards me. These ideas allowed me to (subconsciously) take his place and imagine how he must see me, imagine that he judges me favorably and in fact loves me, and feel happiness, satisfaction and security with regards to that judgment.

In the sense that one must constantly be taking the roles of others in order to properly react to situations, Mead asserts that **multiple personalities** are in fact quite normal (Cahill 35). In my opinion, this concept is akin to the **dramaturgical** theories that the sociologist Erving Goffman proposes as well. For Goffman, there is no such thing as a genuine or "core" self, but rather our selves are made up of all of the different roles or "characters" we perform in our daily lives (Cahill 349). Our performances rely on the reaction of our audiences in order for them to be legitimized, and the better we perform, the more acceptance and validation we will receive. Therefore, in my role as fiancée there are certain expectations that I have to fulfill in order to be accepted as such by my fiancé. If I don't fulfill some aspect of that role, he will become upset with me in the same way that I would become upset with him if I felt that he wasn't fulfilling his role. This act of being upset is what Goffman would qualify as a **disruption of a performance**, where the audience is not convinced by a performer's portrayal of a role, and it is something that we as performers try to avoid as much as possible. The dramaturgical metaphor that Goffman uses to describe how he sees social interactions may seem off-putting and be difficult to accept because it sounds like he is claiming that all of our social interactions are in-

herently fake, and that we are always trying to hide something. In my opinion, his metaphor should not be taken so literally and I feel that he is only trying to illustrate the idea that we all have a multitude of roles we play in our lives—for instance, I am a fiancée but I am also a student, a sister, a daughter, a woman, an intern, etc.—and that we try to perform our roles as well as possible in order to be perceived by others as "good" at whatever it is we're supposed to be.

Elements of the **Social Exchange Theory** may also be enlightening when analyzing love. In exchange theory, human behavior is seen as a rational choice where one seeks to maximize pleasure or benefit and minimize pain or cost. According to the sociologist George C. Homans, when someone enters into a social interaction they will gauge the reaction of others to what they are saying or doing and will continue behavior that is enforced by the behavior of others. This, in a sense, seems similar to what Goffman meant by needing the approval of the audience for one's role to be validated. Thus, the **cohesiveness** or strength of a social bond is determined by the degree of reinforcement that members of the group receive (Farganis 245). In this way, if the loving behavior I am expressing toward my fiancé is reciprocated through his loving behavior towards me, our social bond is stronger and we have more cohesiveness than if one's behavior is not reciprocated and thus enforced by the other's. According to another sociologist and social exchange theorist, Peter Blau, "Social attraction is the force that induces human beings to establish social associations in their own initiative and to expand the scope of those associations once they have been formed" (Farganis 258). For him, a person is attracted to another if they perceive a reward from the relationship that they establish, and when there is mutual attraction based on intrinsic benefits, such as the pleasure of the other's company. Then, a relationship between lovers is likely to develop.

The relationship between lovers that has been termed romantic love, which had historically been relegated to relationships outside of the marriage, has in fact developed into the very basis for marriage in present day Western (and especially American) society. This is what Andrew J. Cherlin has observed in the changes of the meaning of marriage that have occurred in the United States (and some European countries) over the last century. In his article, "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage" (2007), Cherlin suggests that especially after the 1960s marriage came to be regarded as a means for self-development and emotional expression, rather than a vehicle for satisfaction in performing traditional roles of spouse and parent. He notes that modernist (Giddens, for example) and postmodernist sociological theorists have also suggested the increasing individualization of marriage. Thus it seems that this shift in the meaning of marriage from "institution to companionship" is correlated with shifting perceptions about the nature of society as a whole, as evidenced by the transition from classical theories of social interaction to modernist and postmodernist theories of the same. Below, I will attempt to describe the differing meanings of marriage from the perspectives of each of the major macro theories of sociology in order to simultaneously illustrate both the theoretical and the socio-cultural developments pertaining to the issues under consideration.

As the capitalist economic model took over Europe and then underwent its cyclical and deepening crises, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels developed theories to explain social relations on the basis of what has been termed **conflict theory**. In their view, the history of society is a history of **class struggles**, involving power struggles among groups with irreconcilable interests for scarce resources. They were particularly concerned with the power of the bourgeois capitalists over the working proletariats in the modern period, and predicted that the

inevitable progress of history would see the rise of the proletariat against its oppressor leading to the rise of workers to power. Marx's **materialist conception of history** was developed as a way to analyze the way in which human societies are based upon and change in response to their **mode of production of material life**. Thus for Marx, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness" **(**Marx, in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). The **relations of production** in a particular society are centered on a division of labor, where, under capitalism, the owners of capital (the **bourgeoisie**) live by exploiting the labor of others (the **proletariat**). Both Marx and Engels appear to regard marriage as being an expression of such a class struggle: "The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamian marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male" (Engels 17).

Crucial to this conflict theory of marriage is the idea that the interests of the different groups (or classes) are perpetually irreconcilable so that the success of one group is inevitably linked with the exploitation of another. Engels argues that as the structure of the family developed into a monogamous, patriarchal unit in which the man was the breadwinner and the woman the homemaker, the administration of the household historically entrusted to women as both a public and a private activity lost its public dimension. This means that the exploitation of the proletariat that can be observed in industry is echoed by the unpaid domestic labor of the woman in the household so that, "The modem individual family is based on the open or disguised domestic enslavement of the woman; and modern society is a mass composed solely of individual families as its molecules" (Engels 21). In

the industrial age where women have the opportunity to work outside the home, they are faced with another dichotomy: If they have to participate in public production by joining the labor force they cannot fulfill their duties at home; but if they remain at home, they are deprived of the possibility of earning their own living independent of men (Engels 21).

While the Marxist conflict theory sees marriage as a result of the human relationships that develop as a result of economic structures, functionalists perceive marriage and the family as institutions whose preservation is vital for the maintenance and reproduction of society. The **functionalist** perspective views society as interrelated structures, such as **social institutions**, that have specific functions that work together by means of consensus to allow society to operate properly and to reproduce itself successfully. If one of the parts is not working correctly, the organism will find a way to fix it so that the whole is able to return to **equilibrium**. Thus, if there are behaviors that are perceived as upsetting to the balance of the social structure, the society will find a way, based on shared norms and values, to discourage or eliminate it.

The main difference between the conflict theories and the functionalist perspective is that conflict theories base their understanding of society on the assumption that change is constant and inevitable and based on the struggle between different interests, and that control is often achieved by means of coercion, while functionalist focus their explanations on the assumption that society naturally seeks to maintain its equilibrium and that control is derived from consensus regarding a specific set of values.

Talcott Parsons, a leading functional theorist, is known for developing what he called the **theory of human action**, based on his ideas of works by classical theorists such as Emile Durkheim applied to modern society. For Parsons, human action is predictable and patterned, and is determined by

the structure of the society that the individual inhabits. Parsons identified four types of action systems, each tied to a specific function, that work together to maintain the total societal structure. The **behavioral system** is tied to the function of **adaptation** so that the systems can adapt to the particular environmental conditions in which they are embedded. The **personality system** is **goal-oriented** so that the actor or actress internalizes the goals, values and beliefs of the society as their own and strives to achieve them. The **social system** functions to **integrate** human action with the various **normative standards** that serve to maintain the whole. Finally, the **cultural system** is tied to the **latency** function, which establishes values and norms that motivate individuals to perform their roles according to the expectations of society (Farganis 162).

In this view, if one were to consider typical marriage at the beginning of the twentieth century, one would be able to identify a culturally defined goal, such as economic stability, that a person might be motivated (latency) to achieve. One of the most prevalent ways to achieve such a goal was through marriage. Therefore, the (goal-oriented) actress in the middle or upper class, for instance, is motivated to perform the role that is expected of her by society, namely, becoming a good wife and mother. She would therefore decide to enter into a marriage with a man that has a good job with a steady income (so as to adapt to the socially organized environmental conditions at the time for the woman's survival and for bearing/raising children) and would dedicate herself to complying with the normative standards associated with her roles (integration).

In the Parsonian model of human action, when people exhibit behaviors, or when institutions pursue activities, that are not in line with the functions that the society perceives as necessary for its survival and perpetuation, that behavior or activity is classified as a dysfunction and a remedy is

sought in order to return the society to its healthy, functioning equilibrium. Even thought this theory maintains that all the functions of prevalent social behavior are good and necessary for the survival of the society, Robert Merton, another functionalist theorist, has a slightly different interpretation of the functions of social behavior and institutions.

In his theory, Merton suggests that social institutions and human behaviors while serving a visible and expected function in society, i.e., a **manifest function**, they may also serve another, less obvious and often imperceptible function that he calls a **latent function**. Some of the functions may in fact even be **dysfunctional** for society or for a specific group while still being functional for another (which alludes to the idea in conflict, and especially Marxist, theory that the success of one group is inevitably linked to its exploitation of another). Therefore, Merton emphasizes the importance of recognizing all of these functions in order to be in a better position to explain the emergence of **functional alternatives**.

Keeping with the theme of marriage, I would suggest that for Merton the manifest function of marriage in the first half of the twentieth century, for instance, was to secure the economic stability of a woman, to supply a man with a counterpart to provide domestic services while he earned his income outside the home and to raise a family that would be able to inherit his wealth. The latent functions of this arrangement *for the man* could have included personal satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment in participating and succeeding in roles that were highly regarded in society: that of being a male spouse and a parent. For the woman, however, Merton may argue, the latent function of this arrangement was women's continued subordination to and dependence on the man, and the perpetuation of male dominance in marriage and by extension in society as a whole.

In the hundred years between mid

nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries, the liberalization of society resulted in the change of many of the values, goals, and norms of accepted behavior. The meaning of marriage was one of the many things that changed a great deal in the twentieth century. Cherlin notes that from a cultural perspective, an increased emphasis on emotional satisfaction and on the importance of romantic love in relation to marriage, as well as en ethic of "expressive individualism," were significant developments. From a materialist perspective, the transition from agricultural subsistence to wage labor, rising standards of living, and the eventual joining of married women to the work force, were also instrumental in changing the meanings that were associated with marriage (Cherlin 187).

The first major transition is "from an institution to a companionship," according to Ernest Burgess, as quoted in Cherlin. This was a shift observed mostly in the 1950s; although, then, the traditional divisions of labor were still highly persistent, married couples were supposed to be each others' partners, friends and lovers. A greater importance was placed on the emotional bonds of the family, increasing its individualization, even though spouses still derived much of their satisfaction from participation in the nuclear family (Cherlin 188). In the 1960's however, the rise in the number of young adults that remained single as they went through college and started their careers, as well as the rise in childbearing outside marriage, divorce rates, same-sex unions and a greater acceptance of cohabitation before marriage, led to the second great change in the meaning of marriage for society. Marriage transitioned from the companionate model to what Cherlin calls "individualized marriage" (189), quoting F. M. Cancian (1987) who characterizes the nature of this transition as a shift from concern with playing a role to concern with self-development and emotional fulfillment.

In terms of Merton's concepts, one might express this transition as a transformation of latent functions into manifest ones, where for instance, if marriage was once a means for economic stability and the reproduction of society that had the latent function of providing personal fulfillment for the individuals involved, the personal fulfillment is now seen as the main purpose of marriage and economic stability and raising a family may be seen as latent functions. I can observe this in my own life as well. The reason I have decided to marry my fiancé is that I love him and am loved by him and being his wife will contribute to my personal development and emotional satisfaction. In terms of economic stability, I am perfectly capable of providing for myself, so the stability that I might gain from being married to him is a secondary consequence. We do want to have children, but there are many families that do not intent to have children or cannot have children, but nonetheless are, or want to be, married. These changes have also led to the acceptance of a variety of structures that can be termed a family—including single parent families, stepfamilies, cohabitation and same-sex unions—which have been argued to be able to provide social functions parallel to those provided by traditional, heterosexual, monogamous marriages and nuclear families and are thus prime examples of Merton's functional alternatives.

However, as marriage seems to be receding from its central importance in social life and becoming simply another lifestyle to be selected from a variety of alternatives, the majority of people in the United States today still see getting married and raising a family as goal. Cherlin suggests that this may be due to the symbolic significance of marriage as a status symbol, a public expression of the quality of the relationship, and a capstone achievement of adult life, rather than its foundation (Cherlin 193). In this sense perhaps the notions of the conflict sociologist Max Weber on **status** might be applied.

Weber, unlike Marx, believed that power could be derived not only from one's class (economic status and degree of material wealth) but also from other social positions such as status groups (determined by degrees of honor and esteem) and political parties. The symbolic meaning that marriage retains despite the decline of its traditional practical significance, speaks to its powerful role as a status symbol. Since today it appears that a greater emphasis is placed on individualized satisfaction of emotional needs and on the perception of marriage as an avenue for such satisfaction, when a couple gets married it is a public declaration of their ability to maintain a loyal, stable and emotionally fulfilling relationship, thus elevating them to a privileged status. At the same time, however, the increasing lack of faith in the ability of marriage to provide this satisfaction, or in the durability of such a union and the negative connotations that it evokes among today's youth (female repression, lack of professional freedom, etc.) contributes to a degree of negative attitude towards couples who decide to get married. In my own life, most of my friends seem to be happy that I have been able to find a person with whom I can have a relationship that is loving and rewarding enough to give me the confidence in its long run durability, allowing me to decide to get married. Many of them are seeking similar relationships themselves. Other friends, however, are less enthusiastic and even quite skeptical of the situation, especially because they consider me too young to be making this commitment.

Cherlin suggests that for postmodern theorists modernity, which is associated with the power of social norms and laws that regulate family structures, has declined and that traditional sources of identity such as class and religion have begun to lose their influence, and instead personal relationships have become the main source of identity (Cherlin 189). The changing focus of society—from community based action dedicated to the maintenance of its successful operation to action based on the individual and aimed at maximizing individual satisfaction and development—has affected the meanings attached to traditional institutions such as marriage. While for postmodernists the change underway is a linear trend, however, for sociologists such as Immanuel Wallerstein, this transition could be partly explained as a recurring shift between a **phase A** (economic growth with corresponding optimism and expansion) to a **phase B** (economic contraction with corresponding frustration and rebellion against the system) of the world-system which leads to a period of transition plaguing the population with feelings of vulnerability and unpredictability. Wallerstein believes that the calls for the resolution of crises usually lead to a falling back into ritualized and familiar practices, which could also be a reason for the continued symbolic importance of marriage. At the same time, relaxation of norms and laws regarding marriage and the family and the declining practical importance of traditional forms of marriage in society can be seen as the continuation of the rebellion against the traditional, community-based, conservative society.

Even though Wallerstein is not a postmodernist, the ambiguity and uncertainty that he observes in the current transition may correlate with the postmodernist idea that the unpredictability of social development is derived from the increasing social and cultural fragmentation and heterogeneousness of modern society. Relativism thus replaces the objective assumptions of the **metanarratives** inspiring previous social theories, based on the belief that there is a single coherent reality or truth about society and that it is knowable, and that its development is progressive and determined by specific laws. The nature of the changes in the meaning of marriage, the increased emphasis on romantic love and emotional fulfillment as the principles upon which to base a marriage and the increasing accep-

tance of various forms of families and conjugal unions all represent this individualization, this transition from collectivity to self, from ascription to achievement, and from particularism to universalism---if we use Parsons's **pattern variables**. However, postmodernists will add that although these pattern variables are indeed the main themes of modern society, individual and collective behaviors are not entirely determined by the structure of society. Whatever the pattern variables prevalent at the time, people and groups have the ability to choose whether or not to act according to them.

The ideas that Marx and Engels put forth on the nature of the monogamous marriage relationship can be observed in real life. In my own considerations of marriage I have often struggled with myself on the issue of whether or not I would like to stop working when I have children. I would like both my husband and me to be the main participants in the upbringing of our children, but my fiancé is already established in a career that requires the majority of his time but that is also the major source of income for our family. Therefore, I know that in reality I will most likely be the one responsible for most aspects of our children's upbringing. I am in fact quite eager to take on that responsibility, as I believe that being a mother will give me great pleasure. At the same time, I would very much like to have my own job and develop a career, mostly because I feel like I would be unfulfilled if I don't participate successfully in activities outside domestic work and child-rearing and feel like I am using my abilities to contribute to society in other ways as well. This is a notion that I have also been socialized into by having been brought up in a society where a woman's options are much more diverse than they used to be, and where having a career has become expected. Since my mother is such an important role model for me, I also believe that it is important to take her advice into consideration, and even

though she tells me that she has had a gratifying life so far, she also expresses some regret for having had to give up her own career a few years after getting married. But the circumstances of my parents' lives at the time were such that she feels that her choice was the right one. Given the great education that I have received in college, my mother's experiences, and my own desire for personal achievement in my career, I am faced with a difficult and perhaps irreconcilable decision that no doubt cause inner conflict in most women of my generation.

Meanwhile, considering the prevalence of increasingly acceptable alternatives to marriage, as well as the decreasing faith in its durability, I must consider why it is that I am deciding to participate in it. I believe that part of this desire comes from the way in which I was socialized, being taught to treat marriage and forming a family as natural stages in my life. But after considering marriage in many of its sociological interpretations and understanding the different meanings that it has taken throughout history, I believe that a larger part of my decision is based on the belief that this relationship will bring me emotional gratification and will help me on my path of self-development. It will provide me with support in difficult times and encouragement in happy ones, and the reciprocation of those attitudes towards someone I love will bring me gratification as well. Getting married, as opposed to cohabitation, is for me a symbolic occasion, meant to celebrate our love and dedication and make public our commitment to each other---something that I believe could be akin to Cherlin's suggestion that marriage can be thought of as a sort of status symbol, but also as what he terms "enforceable trust," or the freedom to invest in a relationship without fear of abandonment. Additionally, there is a sense of security that comes from knowing that if, for any reason, I decide not to pursue a career, my husband will be able to provide for our family. And finally, being married also provides

for me a sense of balance and constancy, something that has been lacking in my life for a very long time—due to my family's constant relocation and my consequent lack of identification with a permanent home. In an ever changing and unpredictable world that may very well be in what Wallerstein considers to be the transitional phase B, O'Neill expresses in her book *The Marriage Premise* that, "Today, as never before, our marriages are assuming more responsibility for fulfilling the need to be known, for providing the continuity in our lives" (Ross 114).

Romantic love, once something that occurred outside of marriage, has replaced other social benefits such as economic stability and the formation of a nuclear family as the basis of marriage. This change is just one example of the transitions in the meaning of love and marriage as well as of the individualization and fragmentation apparent in society today. But this is a development that has prompted much criticism. Senator Brownback's conservative denouncement of same-sex marriage, for instance, and his refusal to accept functional alternatives to the traditional nuclear family structure has the manifest function of attempting to protect the institution of marriage and family as being critically functional for society. However, in reality it could be a latent attempt to return to what Wallerstein considered to be the ritualized and familiar practices of the past, or even to preserve a status quo that is favorable for Brownback's agenda, which is not in line with accepting changes that may be a step in the direction of reversing the dysfunctions that traditional marriage and the nuclear family present to society in general and to women in particular. In fact, it has been argued that the emphasis on romantic love as a basic premise for marriage has affected this institution in a way that is quite contrary to what Brownback accused it of doing. As Beigel puts it,

Love aims at and assists in the adjustment to frustrating experiences. To measure its effect on marriage it must be judged in its true form and not in poor falsifications. Seen in proper perspective, it has not only done no harm as a prerequisite to marriage, but it has mitigated the impact that a too- fast-moving and unorganized conversion to new socio-economic constellations has had upon our whole culture and it has saved monogamous marriage from complete disorganization. (Beigel 333)

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