

Marriage: Evolution of Society

Gender Issues Project

Tyler Mendenhall

4/28/2009

“... Each marriage is an ever-adapting relationship, altering over time as circumstances change. Similarly, the institution of marriage has evolved and will continue to do so. Since the earliest marriages in very primitive societies, the custom has taken various forms, always adjusting as society evolved.” (Layng, 2009)

In the last 50 years, the evolution of marriage in American society has left an increase in the rate of divorce between heterosexual married couples. Throughout these years, the purpose of marriage in America has been impacted for various reasons, but most importantly the rise of women’s rights throughout American society. With this rise, many traditional reasons for marriage have been altered, and include additional responsibilities that were not required in earlier years, and in turn, an uprising in the divorce rate. By analyzing multiple articles and data, the change in perception of American marriage will be examined and explained to allow a focused answer of the most important factor of modern American marriages, communication.

Marriage is not new, but neither is divorce. “Marriage, as we know it in our Western civilization today, has a long history with roots in several very different ancient cultures...” (Hirschfeld) In early civilizations, marriages were commonly arranged for the purpose of procreation and economics. However, in those same civilizations, marriages were also dismissed for the same reasons. For some examples, in early medieval Europe, an upper-class man would often seek divorce if his wife had not provided him with a male heir. (Coontz, 2007) Among the Shoshone Indians, a wife who wanted a divorce would simply place her husband’s possessions outside the dwelling. (Coontz, 2007) In China, a man’s parents could force him to send his wife away if he took her side against the parents or if they thought that his affection for her interfered with his filial duties. (Coontz, 2007) In addition, some Christian church counsels allowed “no-fault” divorce by the couple swearing that “communal life has become impossible between us” or that “there is no charity according to God” in the marriage.

(Coontz, 2007) Throughout the last 50 years in American society, the former idea of a “no-fault” divorce has emerged as an accepted antidote to various contemporary troubles of marriage like the absence of love in the marriage.

According to our textbook, “romantic partnerings often cling to old patterns,” (Gender, 2008), which creates a clash between current principles of marriage and old patterns of marriage. Within this contrast, “...increasingly, people filed for divorce because their marriages did not provide love, companionship, and emotional intimacy, rather than because their partners were cruel or had failed to perform their marital roles as housekeeper or provider. (Coontz, 2007) “Americans today place less value on obligation to others, on sacrifice, and on self-restraint. By contrast, we place more value on individualism, on self-expression, and self-realization, and on personal choice.” (Galston, 1996) To support these statements, I conducted a survey of 87 random individuals ranging from age 15 to 67 at the Glenbrook mall. Within the results of my survey, there were strong correlations between the purpose of marriage with age and gender. I asked 50 females and 37 males a question regarding the importance of marriage, “in one word, what is the most important factor in a marriage?” Interestingly enough, 95% of (25) individuals in the age range of 15-24 said “love”, 72% of (26) individuals in the age range of 25-35 said “commitment”, and 63% of (19) individuals in the age range of 36-46 said “trust”, and the age range of 47-67 (17) had a split at 45% stating “communication” and 35% stating “cooperation”. From this data, it is apparent that the most important factor of marriage changes as an individual matures; however, it could also be the generation that they are from.

Marriage changes when society changes. In agreement with this statement, government data supports this change of values in America throughout the years. According to the data published by the U.S. Census Bureau, between the ages of 15 years and older, 78.2% of women had been married, and 71% of men had been married. (Marital, 2005) In addition, 21.9% of men and 24.2% of women had

been divorced. (Marital, 2005) However, the correlating information between age categories reiterates the change in American values on marriage in the last 50 years. Logically, the amount of married individuals increased as the age of the individuals increased from the youngest (born in the 1980's) to the oldest (born in the 1920's). (Marital, 2005) Although, the amount of divorced individuals is most prominent with those born in the 1940's and 1950's at about 42% of individuals being divorced, and a significant decrease to about 18% of individuals being divorced that were born in the 1920's. (Marital, 2005) Within this data alone, additional factors are not apparent, but are extremely important.

Since the 1920's, the traditional American way of life, especially for women, has changed. "When our divorce law was originally drawn, a [woman's] role in society was almost totally that of a mother and homemaker. She could not even vote. Today, increasing numbers of married women are employed... have long been accorded full civil rights." (Galston, 1996) "...women surged into the paid workforce in unprecedented numbers. Male salaries and wages declined, both absolutely and relative to those of women." (Galston, 1996) With this in mind, there has been a significant increase in women's rights and independence, and a decrease in the dependence for a man to take care of the woman.

As independence and women's rights increases within American society, the traditional roles and purpose of heterosexual marriages has changed. "Even as divorce and non-marriage have increased, our standards for what constitutes a "good" marriage have risen steadily." (Coontz, 2007) Marriage is no longer acceptable in American society to just be functional and economical, but now rather, "marriage as a *relationship* between two individuals is taken more seriously and comes with higher emotional expectations than ever before." (Coontz, 2007) Therefore, marriage in present America has become much more complicated and complex than marriage in earlier America, which as a consequence, divorce has increased as well throughout the years. However, divorce within a marriage is

not all women's fault, but rather an equal breakdown between both individual's communication and expectations.

The communication between individuals in a marriage is the most important to sustain a healthy intact marriage. "...confront problems that could lead to marital dissolution if left undressed," (Galston, 1996) is a critical statement and often the cause of many divorces. Although, noticing the breakdown in communication and working to improve it can cause additional stress and more miscommunication. This causes many individuals to live in an unsatisfying marriage by constantly trying to improve the communication in the relationship. However, "some couples will stay married, regardless of the legal regime; others will get divorced, even at enormous cost; but many in the middle zone of discontent will be influenced by the perceived difficulty of ending an unsatisfying, but not disastrous, relationship." (Galston, 1996) Therefore, not all of marriages that have trouble with communication end in divorce, but they rather continue in an unsatisfying relationship to avoid communicating and divorce.

Personally, I feel that the most challenging part of marriage is understanding the purpose of marriage in current American society. In my understanding, the majority of Americans believe marriage is something two individuals do to show they love each other, but it also can create additional problems if that love is lost between those individuals, or additional factors are introduced into the relationship like conflict and infidelity create problems. However, I do feel that marriage is important and necessary, but rushing into a relationship of that magnitude is a mistake. In addition, I feel that there are more important facets of marriage than love, but rather it is important to be compatible and complementing of one another. Throughout my research, I have found the most important factor to a "good" marriage, which is not love, but rather effective communication and "...confronting problems that could lead to marital dissolution if left unaddressed." (Galston, 1996) In conclusion, the most solid foundation to build a "good" and "healthy" marriage on is good communication.

References

- Galston, W. (1996, Summer96). Divorce American Style. *Public Interest*, Retrieved April 23rd, 2009, from Academic Search Premier database.
- Layng, A. (2009, Winter09). Where Is Marriage Going? *USA Today Magazine*, Retrieved April 23rd, 2009, from Academic Search Premier database.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2005). Marital History for People 15 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Race: 2001, *U.S. Census Bureau*, Retrieved April 21st, 2009, from www.us.gov
- Coontz, S. (2007). The Origins of Modern Divorce. *Family Process*, Retrieved April 23rd, 2009, from Academic Search Premier database.
- Hirschfeld, M. (?). History of Marriage in Western Civilization. *Magnus Hirschfeld Archive for Sexology*, Retrieved April 15th, 2009, from Academic Search Premier database.
- Ivy, D. Backlund, P. (2008). Gender Communication in Romantic Relationships. *GenderSpeak*.

My Survey- 87 individuals, (50 female, 37 male) ages ranging from 15-67. 12 question survey with two open ended questions. Main questions of survey was (in one word, what is most important factor in a marriage?) and (In one word, what is the most relevant source of divorce?) – results were inconclusive.