

Marriage and Modern Society: Lagging Evolution toward Egalitarianism

by Margaret Swanson

Divorce as a trend has not varied over time to the degree many people imagine. Before the 1950s, many couples divorced because of wartime hardships such as adultery during wartime separation, difficulties adjusting to married life, and the weak marriages that people made in haste before or during the war (Phillips 557). In the two or three years following World War II, divorce rates reached an all-time high that was not matched again for twenty years (Phillips 555). Although post-war divorce levels were high, pre-war divorce levels had already shown a steady increase in the number of divorces per year. This trend changed during the 1950s due to the economic prosperity and social conservatism of the times. 1950s divorce rates steadied and did not show tendencies to increase (Phillips 560). This stability ended in 1962, however, with increases in divorce levels that continued to rise through the 1960s and 70s. These decades were times when the conservative values held in the 1950s began to diminish in the context of the feminist and civil rights movements (Phillips 561). Divorce became interpreted as the unfortunate response to two things: one, industrialization and urbanization, and two, changes in morality due to declining religious devotion. Attention began being paid to the role of women in divorce, since “most divorces were sought by women” (Phillips 582). This trend was typically linked to the new level of women’s involvement in the workplace (Phillips 582), as well as the modernization of women’s roles in general.

The question clearly arises as to why divorce trends function as they do. Roderick Phillips, for example, asserts that divorce happens more frequently with the industrialization of society (Phillips 582). Therefore, it can be supposed that the traditional aspects of marriage are not adjusting to the liberalization of the environment in which they exist, especially regarding gender roles. It often becomes difficult to determine the causes and effects of these changes over time. Many studies have been done to determine if women's involvement in the workplace has played a role in rising divorce rates. On a more personal level, modern couples tend to have strong desires to create an egalitarian home for themselves. However, they are often disheartened to discover how difficult this is, especially when they find they have resorted to traditional methods regardless of their attempts to be equal (Bianchi 13). Thus, marriage is a faltering institution because couples have adopted (both consciously and unconsciously) aspects of traditional gender roles without adapting them to the egalitarian ideals of the times. In order for marriage to be successful in modern times the institution needs to be adjusted to accommodate egalitarian roles for both sexes.

Young couples in society often feel prepared for marriage and feel in control since they intend to have an egalitarian relationship in terms of domestic duties. Marriage is often idealized for young people—the romance is concentrated upon heavily, while the realities of living together that create major relational strains are ignored (Maushart 15). There are also pressures inherent within society that encourage young people to get married, which becomes especially important since young couples are the most susceptible to divorce. Their divorces often occur within the first two to four years of marriage (Maushart 2). The “street appeal” of marriage in the eyes of women is when a “companionate marriage” ideal is verbalized, which implies equality within the marriage. However, with this model, what the woman sees is not

what she gets (Maushart 4). Most divorces are initiated by women because once they are married, they are often exposed to the inherent gender differences that are ingrained in the conception of marriage that were not visible throughout the engagement period. The workload in the home becomes largely their responsibility (Maushart 12). “The very meaning of marriage has gender at its core” (Maushart 13). The inability to move away from gender roles even with professed egalitarian intentions is called “pseudomutuality” (Maushart 23). This is when the couple “pretends” they are sharing household duties equally, but the reality is that they are still falling into set gender roles. It is a way of thinking that gender roles are different today than they were in the 1950s, and pseudomutuality can be perceived as a form of denial (Maushart 23). This implies that there is a strong discrepancy between the egalitarian ideals perceived in engagement and the reality of the division of domestic labor within marriage. This concept strongly coincides with the idea that lingering traditional aspects of marriage are making it fail in today’s society because it is not as egalitarian as is necessary for modern times. As an institution, marriage has not properly evolved to allow modern gender roles to be established within it.

In many cases, wives are unaware that their situation actually involves extensive marriage inequalities (Maushart 10) because many of the problematic aspects of marriage inequality are latent and not clearly visible to the couple. “[H]ousehold labor [is] theoretically important because it reflects underlying (and sometimes invisible) gender relations in the household” (Artis and Pavalko 746). Maushart comments on how in her own marriage, she felt “awkward and unconvincing” because she eventually realized that she was “acting from a script” (Maushart 27). This script typically includes not only an unequal distribution of domestic labor, but also an unequal fulfillment of other emotional or physical

needs within the relationship. Marriage tends to increase a woman's workload – both physically and emotionally – while it creates more leisure time for men in general (Maushart 16). This all becomes more prevalent, however, upon the birth of children.

Biologically, initial care for infants places demands upon women that cannot be shared with men. No matter how clearly the couple states they wish to have an egalitarian system regarding childcare, they tend to fail and default to rigid gender roles (Bianchi 9). “Couples start out talking about co-parenting and fifty-fifty sharing, yet over time—usually a very short time—something happens to those good intentions. New mothers and fathers emerge from the haze of baby-shock to find themselves behaving like something out of a 1950s sitcom.... ‘It’s only temporary,’ they tell each other” (Maushart 13). Based on these examples, it is clear that traditional marriage roles are easy to fall into, even if the couple intends to be egalitarian. Pseudomutuality is ingrained in the couple. The inequality becomes more severe and simultaneously more difficult to repair upon having children (Maushart 13). The traditional aspects of marriage allow couples to revert to these gender roles easily and naturally, while trying to remain egalitarian produces many obstacles without any known answers (Bianchi 4-5).

Roderick Phillips has questioned whether women entering the workforce are a significant reason for the dissolution of many marriages. There are two sides to this issue: does women's involvement in the workforce deplete marital quality and cause more divorce, or does a decline of marital happiness lead to more involvement in the workforce and allow for divorce to be a viable option for women in unhappy marriages? Along with this, wives earning a steady income while being involved in a negative marriage would be more apt to leave since they are not dependent on the marriage for financial stability. Using census data,

social scientist Ruggles said in 1997, “Female labor force participation was positively, consistently, and significantly associated with divorce” (Schoen 645).

The first hypothesis is referred to as “sex role specialization,” detailing that when clearly defined gender roles become blurred, marriages suffer and divorce results (Schoen 645). Gender roles may be considered blurred when a woman enters the workforce. One social scientist, Parsons, concluded that marriages of the 1950s were more successful because the roles of husband and wife were clearly defined, and rarely overlapped (Schoen 644). The practice of women staying in the home and men working as breadwinners is not simply considered working, but “a contested, negotiated and renegotiated meaning system that defines boundaries of gender” (Thompson and Walker 851). Once women enter the workforce this stability diminishes, and thus so does the marriage which is reliant on the benefits of an efficient system (Schoen 644). Divorce perhaps becomes more common when the couple has less to exchange (Rogers 124). The pattern of a couple’s involvement in the workplace needs attention particularly when there is a “strong commitment” to their employment, because this can create high levels of marital instability (Rogers and May 482). This hypothesis, whether true or not, depicts that few changes can be made within the marital structure that allow for happiness. Women now are working more; however, marriage as an institution cannot seem to adapt to fluctuating gender roles. This illustrates that marriage needs to evolve so as to accommodate modern ideas of egalitarianism, especially regarding women in the workplace.

The other common and more accepted hypothesis is named the “economic opportunity process” (Schoen 645). This hypothesis posits a causal relationship between women’s paid employment and divorce rates. It states that women who work and are in negative

relationships are more likely to divorce because they are not reliant on their husbands for financial stability, and find it much easier to leave the marriage (Schoen 645). Thus, along with women's increasing involvement in the work place, there has been a marked decline of dependency on marriage over time (Rogers 123). It is possible that there are as many women who are not in paid work and are in negative marriages. Therefore, they do not want to divorce because they feel unable to financially support a new life, especially if there are children involved. It is also possible that an unhappy marriage could encourage a woman to enter the workforce in order to leave the marriage. Thus, it is easy to see how uncertainty comes about: if a woman in an unhappy marriage decided she needed to start saving so as to be able to afford life without her husband, she would find a job, and, after a certain period, would likely divorce her husband. However, from a statistical point of view, it could be argued that along with her job, the marriage became unstable, and therefore it was the fault of the job that the divorce arose. Schoen's study concludes that the economic opportunity hypothesis is a better explanation for the rise of divorce rates (Schoen 645). Unhappy marriages have existed forever; however, before more modern times, women were more reliant on their husband's salaries. "Women's employment plays enabling role important in explaining contemporary divorce patterns" (Schoen 645). Essentially, this hypothesis suggests that marriages have always been unstable. What has changed is that higher divorce rates – stemming from women's increased involvement in the workforce – have simply rendered that instability more visible (Rogers 123). Perhaps the inherent instability of marriage is a result of the ingrained traditional aspects that have not properly adjusted to modern society.

The “traditional family” only makes up about one quarter of American families, making it increasingly a less common reality (Maushart 2). A traditional family defines the wife as the “homemaker,” and the husband as the “breadwinner.” The way a traditional family operates largely favors the husband, and typically the husband is regarded as much happier in this traditional nuclear family than the wife (Maushart 7). In comparison to the 1960s, women today are doing ten percent less housework, while their husbands are doing only “slightly” more. This step towards egalitarianism is quite small (Artis and Pavalko 754). According to Maushart, men are ready to accept appreciation for little household duties, and still rely on their wife to give them orders. She becomes the “boss,” while he remains a mere “volunteer,” which may create further frustration for the wife if she feels that she must assign tasks (Maushart 12). It also proves who is responsible for the domestic work. Clearly, more women are entering the workforce than ever before, which creates a new situation: since the spouses are now dual earners, should the domestic tasks be divided evenly as well? This is not the case for most wives. They find themselves balancing both work and family life to a degree they never had to before. With the greater workload more sacrifices must be made, creating great balancing difficulties that result in a lower position in the social structure (Milkie and Peltola 476). Annually, women work one month of twenty-four hour days of domestic labor more than their husbands (Milkie and Peltola 478). According to a Demo and Acock study in 1993, women do one to three times the housework of their husbands, no matter what type of family it is or work the woman does outside the home. If the husband is unemployed and the wife is employed, he still only does about forty percent of the work in the domestic sphere (Thompson and Walker 852). Domestic tasks themselves continue to be divided along gender lines. The husband’s typical tasks, such as mowing the lawn, are

typically more flexible, and sometimes regarded as more leisurely. They can be done under looser time constraints as opposed to jobs wives commonly do daily such as washing dishes (Milkie and Peltola 478). This unequal distribution of household tasks, which creates frustrations between the couple, has clear connections to the ingrained ideals within marriage today that are keeping it from becoming more egalitarian. “The very meaning of marriage has gender at its core” (Maushart 13). These gender roles sometimes surface without the couple’s realization, which indicates that marriage is not adapting to the egalitarian ideals our culture asks of it.

What is it about us or society that causes the spouses in a marriage to resort to these identified gender roles unknowingly? As George Mead wrote, “The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process...” (Mead 80). We learn roles as children, very strongly, both through play and games. Games require the child to fall under the “organization of these roles” (Mead 84). We have been learning since childhood how to act according to our sexes, which is very difficult to overcome in marital relationships. Mead also describes how humans grow to act in ways that are valid within the social attitude of the “generalized other” – thus each person grows to examine themselves in the eyes of others (Mead 86). Perhaps this is an important detail in why traditional gender roles still remain so prevalent in marriages today. On one hand, women feel compelled by society to be good mothers and wives. Thus, they do domestic tasks so as to fit that role and to avoid being looked down upon as a mother or wife. On the other hand, they also may feel compelled to act more according to feminist culture. Thus, they get jobs and try to have

egalitarian marriages to please this specific attitude of the “generalized other” (Mead 86). Clearly, this straddling becomes extremely difficult. As Mead suggests, multiple personalities naturally arise in order to please the cultural norms (Mead 83). One of the reasons gender inequalities have remained in marriages even in more modern times is because certain tasks are still deemed mostly male or mostly female. To see a man doing work perceived as “women’s work,” or a woman doing work deemed “male work” may attract attention from others that is considered negative. At the same time, each person wants to be perceived as good at what they do. One reason why wives may act the way they do (perhaps stretching to accommodate many different people or situations) is so they can be perceived as good wives or mothers. Mead’s ideas are vital to understanding why much of the problem with marital instability is due to gender roles, since much of the problem is latent. Many wives do not know why they do most of the domestic tasks, while their husbands do tasks that are deemed male. Mead explains that this traditional sexual division of domestic labor continues because it is so ingrained in “the self.”

The main reason why marriage is faltering in today’s society is the result of the social patterns that are ingrained in our culture. Gender issues penetrate not only marriage, but nearly every facet of society. It is an invisible force (Charon 22) that acts everywhere, but the most ideal position for gender inequality to function is within marriage.

A vital task of sociology is to connect the micro level to the macro level, so as to get a vision of what is happening in society from a perspective that may create solutions. The many couples who try to establish the parameters (Maushart 15) in egalitarian marriages may encounter problems and perhaps divorce, but sociology could perhaps offer answers by analyzing the larger societal pressures within institutions that may cause the problems couples

encounter. As Mill explains, “[n]either the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (Mills 1). The traditional gender aspects of marriage that cause it to be a faltering institution can be analyzed on a micro level with the hope of revealing to couples the difficulties in fulfilling their egalitarian ideals. It is simply not cohesive with the nature of marriage. Sociology however, can describe the problem on these different levels, and suggest solutions that may help marriage evolve towards a more successful institution.

Marriage needs to be redefined. It is theorized that it functions best if tasks are clearly defined between the spouses. Clearly, this has resulted in unfair workloads over time, especially when women began entering the paid workplace. An egalitarian marriage immediately puts the couple at odds with each other, because each type of job needs to be divided equally between them. This becomes more and more difficult to uphold as time goes on – there are different stresses from the couple’s employment and discrepancies about which of their jobs is more valuable. Of course this problem arises most poignantly upon the birth of their first child. At this point many couples – often without noticing – fall into the traditional roles they have rejected. The wives are considered responsible for the domestic sphere, in which the participation of men has increased slightly, but not enough to create an egalitarian marriage. Many couples are stuck in pseudomutuality, because, as many sociologists have determined, cultural norms have been embedded in our minds throughout our lives. One cannot expect suddenly to go against that grain without causing problems in the marriage. Sociology may help alleviate the problem of divorce by using both macro and micro analyses of gender roles in marriage. Nevertheless, marriage as an institution needs to

evolve to adapt to a more egalitarian time and become egalitarian itself, because only then will divorce rates begin to decrease.

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