

Sociological Theories and Contemporary Patterns of Marriage

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In the contemporary world, marriage seems to be the most valued and supreme form of union, far beyond dating or cohabitation without living together. In spite of the fact that marriage is contemporary and not perceived as a pointer to adulthood, the ideal of marriage remains and is widely viewed as an obligation for childbearing as well as child-rearing. Despite the prevailing ideal for marriage, there is a considerable disconnect between societal notions about marriage and the marital behavioral trends in society. According to Shonkoff et al. (2012), several young adults believe that a prolonged period of singleness is essential for marriage preparedness. In light of this, many young adults spend their time forming their identities, pursuing education, and pursuing their professional careers. In view of Lauer & Yodanis (2010), since young adults are believed to experiment with different relationships, there is a high likelihood that these adults spend most of their time dating numerous partners before they settle down in marriage. Shonkoff et al. (2012) established that a third of young adults are hesitant about marriage in the belief that they are unprepared for it. Overall, the various trends in marriage can be understood through the lens of attachment theory, economic theory, and life course theory, all of which have unique explication of the trends in marriage.

Explaining Marriage Trends Using Attachment Theory

It has also been established that individuals who are insecurely attached are significantly influenced by the negative experiences they had as young adults, compelling them to retain their insecure styles of attachment. By strengthening the negative beliefs about marriage and relationships, such individuals may remain insecurely attached and consequently avoid marriage (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010). On the other hand, research findings have indicated that secure young adults who experience positivity during dating are likely to be less affected by dating experiences compared to their insecurely attached counterparts. Such individuals tend to have little or no reasons to be hesitant about marriage, particularly when they maintain their positive ideals about marriage. Carriere & Richardson (2009) posit that young women, particularly low-income women who have children, tend to delay marriage because of their desire to have a long period of courtship for purposes of evaluating whether their relationship is serious enough to lead to marriage. This belief is in line with the attachment theory that supports the idea that if previous relationships have yielded attachment insecurity, then young adults, both male and female, are likely to prefer a long courtship period in an attempt to build a secure relationship attachment that seeks to strengthen their marital bond.

Lauer & Yodanis (2010) note that parental divorce, as well as fear of divorcing one's partner, can have an effect on the attachment security of young adults, thereby influencing their desire to get into marital unions. While divorce is increasingly gaining acceptance, the fear of divorce usually bars young adults, especially women, from getting into premature marriages. According to Buss & Schmitt (1993), in view of most young women, marriage is a stage they would like to consider only once, arguing that divorcing shortly after marriage significantly undermines the purity of the engagement.

Much as attachments are established early in life with their secure base being primary caregivers, the role is later moved onto romantic partners once individuals reach adulthood. In contrast to childhood attachment bonds, attachments in adulthood are not asymmetrical but rather reciprocal relationships that involve a sexual dimension (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010). However, both parties have to equally contribute to the relationship to avoid any challenging power imbalance. Since every individual gets into a relationship with his or her attachment history, their relationship with their partners will considerably be affected by their attachment style. Therefore, having an understanding of the differences in attachment styles is critical to explaining the variance in the quality of relationships across various couples (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). The major elements of the attachment theory are an individual's configuration of the dimension of the attachment and the internal working models. In this context, internal working models refer to mental models of how a person perceives others and themselves (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010). The models serve as guiding principles on how a person views himself or herself as unacceptable or acceptable to his or her attachment partner. Conversely, other people's internal working models allow one to predict their view of how supportive and responsive their attachment partners are. In this sense, Shonkoff et al. (2012) argue that maintaining a positive model of both others and self leads to developing a secure style of attachment. Similarly, having a negative model of either others or self breeds an insecure style of attachment.

As Carriere & Richardson (2009) note, attachment is also gauged by a person's configuration of the dimensions of attachment- avoidance and anxiety. Despite the fact that having low levels of both avoidance and anxiety is linked to having a secure style of attachment, exhibiting high levels of these dimensions is linked to having attachment insecurity. Carriere & Richardson (2009) describe the dimension of anxiety as having a fear of apparent rejection, an extreme need for other people's approval, and a feeling of distress whenever your partner is unresponsive or unavailable. On the other hand, possessing a high level of anxiety is linked to emotional reactivity and assurance-seeking. In other words, people who have high anxiety levels tend to cling to their partners for fear of any indication of abandonment. Such individuals often fall in the classification of anxiously attached. On the other side, the avoidance dimension is often associated with fear of intimacy or dependence, hesitancy towards self-disclosure, and an elevated level of self-reliance.

Lauer & Yodanis (2010) link having a high avoidance level with emotional cutoff. In their view, individuals with high avoidance levels are less likely to use their spouses as a secure base. Rather, these individuals tend to distance themselves as opposed to turning to their spouses for comfort and support. Therefore, a high avoidance level has been linked to the possession of an avoidance style of attachment. Moreover, it is possible for a person to have elevated dimensions of both attachment

avoidance and attachment anxiety (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010). Typically, such individuals demonstrate traits of both forms of insecure styles of attachment and find it very difficult to cope with interpersonal relationships. Individuals who are securely attached demonstrate positive models of both other people and themselves. Similarly, such people measure low not only on dimensions of avoidance but also on dimensions of anxiety (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010). It is also worth noting that having a secure style of attachment increases the possibility of using security-based strategies that enable people to attain the objective of seeking support and comfort from their romantic partners for the purpose of regulating their emotional effects.

Explaining Marriage Trends Using Economic Theory

The most basic manifestation of the social nature of human beings is the family, realized through marriage. As a social being, man has been established to be naturally focused and family-oriented (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Since family is the basic unit of marriage, marriage establishes the creation of a family. For one to be a productive member of society, marriage has to come into the picture since people come into the world by virtue of families. From an economic standpoint, marriage is important. For instance, a healthy marriage relationship is critical as it directly influences moral, human, as well as social capital. In so doing, marriage influences economic activity, resource use, as well as economic structures. In light of this argument, the economic theory contends that resources are used inefficiently when channeled towards policies that discourage marriages rather than those that support them. Consequently, this hinders the sustainability of actual economic growth, thereby propagating poverty. However, the economic theory is engaged in attempting to ring a clear understanding of the reality of marriage within the economic activity. When dealing with the functions of distribution, consumption, and production in the economy, economic theory tends to approach the decision-making processes of families from a personal point of view (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). In a marriage setting, this approach applies to both the decision-making processes of members of a family and to the economic nature of the marriage covenant, both as producers and consumers.

In view of Sabatelli & Shehan (2009), individuals will marry when the expected utility to be obtained from marriage exceeds that of remaining single. Similarly, people will stay married provided the anticipated utility from being in a marriage surpasses that of remarrying or becoming single. According to Stevenson & Wolfers (2007), this logic applies to other relationship contracts, usually of indefinite duration, whereby the partners involved have the choice of divorce or termination of the relationship. Economists have compared the association between length of employment and employee turnover to marriage through assessment of the utility-based decisions that occur irrespective of terminating either employment or marriage. This analysis is furthered by Sabatelli & Shehan (2009), who explore the process behind the decision of a partner to divorce. They argue that within the marriage contract, the basis of the decision to divorce is whether the combined wealth of the duo exceeds that of their total single wealth. In light of this argument, a spouse will consider terminating a marriage if the anticipated single wealth will be higher than that of pre-divorce output, after any redistribution. In view of the authors, the economic decisions made by employers are similar

to those arrived at by couples within a marriage. Through their analysis of the contract of marriage, Sabatelli & Shehan (2009) reduce the associations within marriages to the pursuit of utility, hence shifting the natural sociability of human beings to self-interest. As such, the authors distort the definition of marriage by converting a connection between spouses into an exchange of objects.

In an attempt to rectify Stevenson & Wolfers (2007), distortion of the idea of marriage, Sabatelli & Shehan (2009) compares marriage to other commercial relationships by using a partnership. They contend that the association between a wife and a husband closely resembles that of a contract of all family associations. However, they acknowledge that this relationship fails to capture the reality of marriage. The reason they present is that it is chosen by the parties, and in doing the choosing, individuals anticipate to be better off. What is more, marriage vows are publicly and expressly exchanged the same way promises are exchanged during contracts (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Additionally, at the most trivial level, marriage involves the sharing of a household by couples, with exclusive sexual rights in the picture. However, the authors note that the key facets of marriage are commitment as well as self-submission to your partner. It is these aspects that explain the seemingly irregular facts about modern marriage when viewed against contracts (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). For instance, individuals often do not marry on the basis of negotiable contracts, despite the fact that other types of negotiations take place over the customary terms of marriage.

As opposed to the expectations of some people, study findings have indicated that individuals who cohabit prior to their marriage have a relatively higher chance of divorcing compared to those who do not. In view of Sabatelli & Shehan (2009), a partnership is relatively more than a contract since partnerships involve voluntary exchanges whereby each party contributes something and later receives something as a form of compensation for their efforts. However, Sabatelli & Shehan (2009) acknowledge that finding an appropriate partner can be a very painful business. As a result, economists have formulated methods of understanding this process. For instance, Stevenson & Wolfers (2007) maintain that people marry or get married because doing so makes economic sense. They add that marriage is grounded on the principle of division of labor, arguing that the benefits accrued from marriage are determined by the efficiency of the division.

In Sabatelli & Shehan's (2009) model, getting a spouse hinges on two fundamental principles. To begin with, the authors make an assumption that the form of exchange between couples is a voluntary one. What is more, they assume that there are individuals looking for other people either on internet boards or in newspaper ads, indicating the presence of a market. Moreover, the authors argue that there is a demand for potential spouses as well as a rich supply of hopefuls. Therefore, in view of the economic theory, an individual decides to marry when the anticipated marriage utility surpasses that anticipated from being single or from a continued search for a more appropriate partner (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). On the same note, a married individual considers terminating his or her marriage once the utility expected from being single or remarrying another person outdo the loss in utility from divorce. The losses include those arising from physical separation from children, among others. The authors conclude that due to the fact that many people are searching for spouses, a market segment in marriage exists (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Sadly, however, marriage

is not the ultimate result of two persons agreeing to be together. There are other pertinent questions that need to be answered, pertaining to whether they will have children, and who will perform house chores, among other questions. The answers to such questions, according to Sabatelli & Shehan (2009), lie in the division of labor. For instance, the person with a comparative advantage in terms of earning a wage is the one to go out to work, and the other to remain behind to carry out household chores.

Overall, according to economic theory, everything that occurs after marriage is determined when choosing a marriage partner. Essentially, within the marriage, whoever has the highest share of resources often decides on most family issues. However, the equilibrium in a marriage market is influenced by how couples can foresee the tribulations or gains from the potential marriage (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). The theory, however, has key underlying assumptions that need to be understood before its application. Fundamentally, it assumes that families often pool their resources, which determine the choices made by the couples.

Explaining Marriage Trends Using Life Course Theory

Several fundamental principles that underpin life course theory offer great explanations for the concept and implications of marriage. The principles include heterogeneity, geographical or socio-historical location, personal control, the influence of the past on the future, and the timing of lives. According to Hofferth & Goldscheider (2016), families in the contemporary world are extremely heterogeneous, in comparison to those of the past. The reason is that besides families with two biological parents who are married, children are increasingly living with unmarried biological parents, some of whom are single parents, stepparents, and grandparents, among other relatives. What is more, children may have parents who are of the same gender (Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2016). In this sense, the socialization of parenting life is increasingly becoming complex. As a result, it can be misleading to assume that particular children are being brought up after engagement in two-sex by two biological parents. The implication is that the early childhood experiences of family structures can have long-lasting effects on adulthood behaviors and socialization during the marriage.

Amato & DeBoer (2001) note that parenthood is increasingly becoming a heterogeneous experience, especially for males, in comparison to females. While mothers tend to stay together with their children, most fathers do not. Rather, men have been found to commonly live with their stepchildren. In this sense, Amato & DeBoer (2001) contend that the fact that young boys brought up by their stepfathers have a higher likelihood of being stepfathers is a clear indication that there is growing socialization for various forms of fathering roles.

Life course theory offers an explanation as to why there are varying outcomes of being raised in different marriage types. The theory predicts that past childhood experiences in a family have a significant influence on marriage attitudes, roles, and expectations in adulthood (Amato & DeBoer,

2001). For instance, a child raised by two-parent families will have vital training with regard to the roles of women and men in a marriage. It is inappropriate to assume that siblings brought up in other types of families will be taught the same. Instead, they are likely to learn different lessons from the very forms of families in which they were raised. The result will be various concepts and beliefs about marriage life.

Following the fundamental role played by the emotional setting of learning about marriage and family life, the learning that occurs at home is often very useful and significant to children. As a result, such a form of learning is often difficult to influence or modify (Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2016). Children are, hence, likely to apply the very principles by which they were brought up with regard to marriage ideals. For instance, research findings have established that being raised by a single parent leads to an isolating experience for children, thereby planting unique marriage outlooks in the minds of such children. While few children spend their whole childhood with single parents, boys may find it difficult to learn about partner skills when their stay with single parents is prolonged (Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2016). Consequently, it requires the help of a role model outside their family to help boys develop such skills.

Life course theory also maintains that social control, a factor that varies across different forms of marriages or families, affects the manner in which individuals socialize and their marriage decisions. Recent research findings have revealed that although a particular family may be warm when children are not properly monitored, they may not do well in their future married lives in comparison to those who experience regular monitoring from their parents or guardians (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). This finding implies that setting limits is a critical aspect of proper parenting. It is, however, worth noting that keeping track and monitoring children is relatively easy when both parents are responsible for and committed to the task. Following the ambiguity of stepparents' role in childrearing, stepfamilies may be ineffective or less effective in monitoring children. While some may argue that the parent can remarry, the new stepparent will often experience difficulty in filling the role of the other parent in relation to monitoring children (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). It is for this reason that stepfathers have been found to be less effective in monitoring children in comparison to biological fathers. As such, the issue of control has become extremely relevant to immigrant parents, who tend to be relatively less proficient in the culture and language of the host country (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). The reason is that children usually act as guides and translators to their own parents, thereby reversing family roles.

A child's future marriage life and ideals can also be influenced by instability. According to Hofferth & Goldscheider (2016), the disruption of future marriage practices is more detrimental to the future lives of children. Changes in family structures often lead to more disruption beyond changes in parenting, school, neighborhood, and friends, all of which have a bearing on the children's marriage mentality in the future. Such changes may impact children by increasing stress upon them, thereby leading to behaviors aimed at reducing conflict and enhancing closeness outside their families (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). The behaviors may include increased sexual activity, drug abuse, precocious behavior in adulthood, as well as an early withdrawal from the parental home.

Overall, research findings have indicated that the responses of men to various family processes are extremely different from those of females (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). The studies argue that females tend to be influenced by the bonds they have with their mothers. It has also been established that females growing up attached to their mothers do not transition to early parenthood compared to those who are less close to their mothers. In view of Hofferth & Goldscheider (2016), young women growing up with single mothers without living with their fathers seem to transition to single motherhood at an earlier age compared to those who live with both parents.

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