

Sociology of the Family Midterm Review Paper

As we know, norms shift and change throughout time periods and cultures. This applies to social institutions as we know them, even ones that seem cemented by tradition. Marriage, as we have discussed at length in this class, shifts in its meanings and norms as an institution. Even the family structure, with its gender ideals and typical iterations has looked different across decades, countries, and racial and ethnic groups. Traditionalists fight for a nuclear family structure, while more liberal ideologies assert that family units do not have to look a certain way in order to be healthy and nurturing. Kin relationships, step-families, queer couples, and polyamorous relationships all stray from the traditional ideas of family structure. Even differences in having children, like IVF, surrogacy, and adoption are outside of what would be considered a “normal” family structure. But what purpose does marriage serve, and how will it continue to shift and change in the coming years?

All social institutions serve purposes within our societal structure. Marriage is not merely a symbol of love, devotion, and partnership, but also an economic and practical decision to conjoin finances and households. Historically, marriage has served different purposes across time periods and geographic areas. In some cultures, marriage is pre-arranged, leaving individuals with no choice in who they will be tied to forever. In past times, marriage was extremely political, with families choosing lifelong partners for their children based on furthering their wealth or status. Debates have long existed about what counts as a ‘proper’ marriage, even in the U.S. With the passing of the Respect for Marriage Act in 2022, and the decision of the Supreme Court in Obergefell v. Hodges in 2015, both same-sex marriage and interracial marriage are now completely legalized in America.

In addition to the changing legal definitions and practical purposes of marriage, there have also been changes in how and when people get married. As discussed in class, cohabitation before, or instead of, marriage has become increasingly more common in the last several years. Furthermore, while marriage is still desirable for younger generations, many are waiting until they are much older to marry and start families. Additionally, the divorce rate now sits at around 50%. If half of all marriages end in divorce, why is marriage still a desirable marker of social status?

While it is impossible to know what the future holds, past trends can assist us in predicting future ones. I predict that family structures will continue to evolve further and further from the idealization of the traditional, nuclear family. I predict that cohabitation will become even more popularized and normalized in society. Though marriage is still an ideal for many younger individuals, it is no longer seen as a necessity. With the increased percentage of women in education and in the workforce, marriage is no longer a necessary economic proposition for a woman. This is what is known as the “quiet revolution,” and is a direct result of second wave feminism. (Lundberg and Pollack, 2015) Additionally, I predict that the birth rate will decrease over the next 10 years. I know of many women my age who do not want to have children, for a multitude of different reasons.

This is not to say that the traditional nuclear family structure will disappear altogether. In fact, I think that this will always be seen as an American ideal. Many American Christians hold onto this idea of a traditional family as the ‘correct’ way, some going as far as condemning divorce, gay marriage, and polyamory. As with any push towards modern ideals, the pendulum will swing for a counteraction of conservative traditional ideas. Besides the religious push for traditionalism, there is nothing wrong about a traditional, nuclear structure of family. In my

opinion, more modern ideals are not anti-traditional, rather, they are about becoming more accepting of more diverse versions of family structures.

I also predict that the divorce rate will continue to stay high, but eventually will lessen.

With women becoming more financially independent, it is less necessary for them to be married. Women no longer have to stay in unhappy relationships just because they rely on a man for their economic wellbeing. Eventually though, I think the divorce rate will plateau and lessen. I think people waiting until they are older to marry, and women being more firm in their expectations of what a man will bring to the table, will eventually lessen the rate of divorce. It is less common now to ‘settle’ for a man, because women can be financially independent.

Conversely, I think that unmarried birth rates will continue to rise. Many people are choosing to cohabit now without getting married. I think that this will continue to be a pattern, and that many people will choose to have children in this kind of relationship rather than getting legally married. 50 years ago, cohabitating without being married was seen as extremely taboo. Now, we are seeing it become more and more normalized. I think this will only rise in popularity and that the birth rate outside of marriage will continue to increase over the next ten years. In Europe, this is already the norm as many choose to cohabit for life instead of marrying at all. (Lundberg and Pollack, 2015)

As for gender roles in relation to marriage, I think these are shifting as well. Traditionally, the man of the house is the breadwinner. He goes to work and provides financially for the family. The woman, whether she works outside of the household or not, is responsible for most of the caretaking and household tasks. She cooks, cleans, and takes care of the children. When she works a job outside of the household as well, the housework becomes her ‘second shift’. As we’ve talked about in class, we are seeing a rise in stay-at-home dads, and of fathers assuming

some of the household roles and tasks. I think (and hope) that it is becoming more normal for fathers to help out around the house, and to be more involved in caring for the children.

Ideally, by 2035, policy will reflect the modernization being experienced by individuals in America. For one, hopefully a mandatory paid parental leave will be instituted nationwide. For another, quality childcare should be more affordable, especially for families in which both parents need to work in order to live. Hopefully, there will be no policy changes that threaten the legality of same-sex and interracial marriage. Ideally, this would become a Constitutional right, and not something that could be threatened by particular presidential administrations.

In conclusion, family structures may not change drastically in the next 10 years. Rather, what we may see is more of a normalization of familial trends that we already see in 2025. Same-sex marriage, blended families, kinship networks, and other non-traditional forms of family structures will become more and more regular. I predict that divorce rates will lessen, however, unmarried birth rates will continue to rise. Social institutions are important in society but it is necessary that they change with us. Stagnant norms do not give rise to growth and change. Norms have shifted and changed drastically over the last 50 years and I predict that they will only continue to do so in the future.

Works Cited

Lundberg, S., & Pollak, R. A. (2015). The Evolving Role of Marriage: 1950-2010. *The Future of Children*, 25(2), 29–50. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43581971>