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# The Relationship Between Individualistic Attitudes and Attitudes Towards Traditional Marriage in Contemporary American Society

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUALISTIC ATTITUDES AND  
ATTITUDES TOWARDS TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE IN CONTEMPORARY  
AMERICAN SOCIETY

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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2010

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The Relationship Between  
Individualistic Attitudes and  
Attitudes Towards Traditional  
Marriage in Contemporary American  
Society

This report examines attitudes of a sample of 100 individuals from the 'marriage-eligible population' regarding the Institution of Marriage in relation to the rising prevalence of Individualistic attitudes in contemporary American society. This study found the rise of individualistic attitudes to have a statistically significant positive correlation to the rise in negative attitudes towards traditional marriage. It is argued in this study that the increase in individualistic attitudes is the primary contributing factor to the three trends of marital decline; the increasing divorce rate, the decreasing marriage rate, and the increasing number of alternatives to traditional marriage. This study attempts to highlight the importance of reinstating marriage as a necessary, purposive institution for the betterment of American individuals, families, and society.

## Thesis Outline

1. **PROBLEM FORMULATION:** Individualistic attitudes are slowly causing contemporary American society to self-destruct. Americans have, since the founding of our country, championed the ideas of freedom and “liberty for all”. Recently, however, society has begun to place a higher value on individualism and unrestricted personal liberty than on collective, communal, societal well-being. One of the most devastating manifestations of this value-shift can be seen in the deinstitutionalization of marriage. National marriage rates are continuously dropping, and divorce rates are increasing. Both of these trends lead towards a rapid decrease in the number of healthy, stable, permanent families upon which society is structured. Although all of society suffers when the family, its building blocks, crumble, the main victims of marital decay are our nation’s children. One needs to look no further than the considerable decline in child well-being amongst American children to understand the disturbing effects of the decay in marriage due to increased individualism. The decay of marriage as a valued institution within society is the common denominator between all of the issues that these children- and society as a whole- are facing. Therefore, it is necessary to reinstate marriage as a valuable, necessary, permanent, family-focused institution within society.
  
2. **PROBLEM JUSTIFICATION:** The deinstitutionalization of marriage is facilitated by the increasing divorce rate, the decreasing marriage rate, and the increase in socially acceptable alternatives to marriage. Together, these three trends undermine the institution of marriage and weaken the family unit- much to the detriment of society.
  - A) Increasing Divorce rate:
    - a. It is estimated that 50% of marriages in America end in divorce.
    - b. Today in the U.S., about one quarter of the adult population is or has been divorced.
    - c. Who is effected:
      - i. Women: In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau found that women had a 45% drop in overall standard of living after undergoing a divorce.
      - ii. Children: Each year, over one million children and teenagers witness their parents undergo a divorce
      - iii. Short-term effects of parental divorce include lowered performance in school, depression, and lowered self-esteem. Some long-term effects of parental marital disruptions include having an increased propensity to engage in premarital sex, to enter premarital cohabitations, to view marriage less favorably, and to be more accepting of divorce
      - iv. Society is therefore affected because family life will crumble without solid marriages. And marriages are currently declining

- B) Decreasing marriage rate:
- a. 50% drop in marriage rate since 1970
  - b. As of 2002, only 59% of adult population is married.
  - c. Possible reasons:
    - i. Less faith in the institution of marriage due to increased divorce rate as evidenced by increase in prenuptial agreements.
    - ii. Society says you no longer need marriage to have sex or to have children.
    - iii. Marriage is therefore viewed as an unnecessary commitment.
- C) Increase in non-marital alternatives:
- a. Pre-marital sex is much more accepted and practiced. According to a 2002 interview of 40,000 people between ages of 15 and 44, 95% reported having pre-marital sex.
  - b. Cohabitation is another alternative to marriage. Today, 8.1% of coupled households are made up of unmarried heterosexual partners. As of 2000, about 5.5 million people were cohabitating in the US.
  - c. Single-parent adoptions: 34% of adopters are single.
  - d. In-vitro fertilization to single women: another option made possible by modern technology.
- D) What are the effects of these trends?
- a. Break-down of traditional families.
    - i. About one-third of American children live with a single parent today
    - ii. Children should be raised in permanent, stable, two-parent households. That is the healthiest environment for child production and socialization.
  - b. Negative implications for children in single-parent homes.
    - i. According to the 2002 US Census Bureau report, children in fatherless homes account for 63% of youth suicides, 90% of homeless or runaway youth, 85% of children with behavior problems, 71% of high school dropouts, 85% of youth in prison, and well over 50% of teen mothers.
    - ii. Children who experience their parents' divorce are 50% more likely to end up divorced themselves, thus perpetuating the cycle of family disruption through divorce.
- E) Why social workers should care about this topic:
- a. Deinstitutionalization of marriage is the common denominator between all of society's problems. Need to reverse these trends to stop society from self-destructing.
  - b. Implications for Practice:
    - i. Need more marriage support programs
    - ii. Need pre-marital counseling
    - iii. Need to have more family-focused practices
  - c. Implications for Research:
    - i. Increase information about benefits of marriage- encourage objective research about marriage

- ii. Increase available information about the detrimental effects of divorce on children.
- d. Implications for Policy.
  - i. Need to reinstate marriage as a necessary, purposive, clearly-defined institution existing between one man and one woman for the purpose of child bearing and socialization.
  - ii. Need to create policies that promote traditional marriage
    - 1. Provide incentives for permanence in marriage- Revise the federal tax code to eliminate “marriage penalty” and provide more favorable treatment for married couples with children.
  - iii. Link advocacy for children to advocacy for marriage
  - iv. Reconsider “no-fault” divorce

**3. HYPOTHESIS:** As evidenced by the trends described above, marriage is already in decline as an institution. Marriage is now less an institution that one belongs to for the sake of the common good, and more an idea that one insists on bending to his or her own, individualistic purposes. Because of our desire for individual freedom and choice, we choose as a nation to ignore any kind of restrictive ‘norm’ within society. Marriage is definitely seen as one of these passé societal forms of restriction. It has therefore been replaced with a slew of new, “normal” pseudo-institutions like cohabitation, and single-parent families. The purpose of this study is to see just how entrenched in our individualistic ways we have become in contemporary American society, and what implications this may have on the future of marriage. I therefore expect to find in this study that more people will identify themselves as more individualistic than collectivistic. I also expect to find that more people will be less likely to consider marriage as an important institution within society and will be less inclined to want to get married.

#### **4. MAIN POINTS:**

A) Definition of Marriage in the traditional sense:

- a. Marriage as an institution consists of 5 dimensions
  - i. Marriage is a natural institution- meets human inclinations towards sexual expression, reproduction, emotional intimacy. (“It is not good for man to be alone.”)
  - ii. Marriage can be a sacramental institution- sacred promises (covenantal)
  - iii. Marriage is an economic institution- primary, joint unit of economic exchange, consumption, and production.
  - iv. Marriage is a social institution- socializing children, creates permanency and stability, creates network of support, promotes civic virtue
  - v. Marriage is a legal institution- protected and regulated by law

- b. Primary function of marriage within society: “Marriage is a relationship within which a society socially approves and encourages sexual intercourse and the birth of children. It is society’s way of signaling to would-be parents that their long-term relationship together is socially important- a public concern, not simply a private affair.”
  - i. Society holds the parents responsible for each other and for their offspring
  - ii. Society motivates individuals to settle into sexual union and take care of ensuing offspring by identifying children with their parents, and by penalizing people who do not have permanent relationships.

B) Shift in values led to a shift in Marriage:

- a. Individualism:
  - i. A social theory advocating the liberty, rights, or independent action of the individual.
  - ii. The doctrine that the interests of the individual ought to be ethically paramount.
  - iii. The conception that all values, rights, and duties originate within the individual.
- b. Factors that led to an increase in individualistic thinking in society:
  - i. General wealth and prosperity- basic needs are met
  - ii. Modern technology
  - iii. Gender equality
- c. Individualism in, in essence, antithetical to marriage.
  - i. Marriage requires self-sacrifice for common good.
  - ii. Marriage is based on societal assumption that values, rights, and duties originate not within the individual, but from society.
- d. “The quest for greater individual choice clashed directly with the obligations and social norms that held families and communities together in earlier years. People came to feel that questions of how to live and with whom to live were a matter of individual choice not to be governed by restrictive norms. As a nation, we came to experience the bonds to marriage, family, children, job, community, and country as constraints that were no longer necessary. Commitments were loosened.” People now see marriage as oppositional to individualism- culture of marriage shifted to culture of divorce

C) Effects of this cultural shift in values: The Divorce Revolution

- a. Marriage began to be seen as restricting and oppressive. Divorce was therefore thought to be liberating.
- b. Divorce used to be looked down upon by society and was only used in extreme circumstances when marriages became noticeably unhealthy.
- c. Today, divorce may occur simply because one partner is unhappy or because a better partner has been found
- d. Seeking personal happiness and self-gratification has taken precedence over honoring marital commitments. Once a marriage is no longer

fulfilling the needs or wants of an individual, the individual sees no purpose to remain in the marriage.

- i. Even children are no longer seen as a reason to stay married.
- ii. Highlighting the fact that children are no longer the primary focus and purpose of marriage, a study conducted in 1985 found that 82% of people polled disagreed with the statement “when there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along.”
- e. Divorce is practically expected in today’s society
  - i. Prenuptial agreements
  - ii. Separate funds in marriage

#### D) Impact of the Divorce Revolution on American Families:

- a. Families are being re-defined
  - i. Gay rights movement- no longer just heterosexual couples as parents
  - ii. More blended families and “families by proximity”
  - iii. Step-families are more frequent
- b. Broken families are increasing. This is bad for families and especially for the children. Child well-being is declining.
  - i. “Never before has one generation of American teenagers been less healthy, less cared for, or less prepared for life.”
  - ii. Quality of life has declined for American children:
    - 1. Juvenile crime has increased
    - 2. Reports of child abuse and neglect have increased
    - 3. Psychological pathology has increased amongst American children
    - 4. SAT scores have declined nationally
    - 5. Poverty has shifted from the elderly to the young
- c. These trends are undoubtedly tied to the decline of marriage as an institution within society.
  - i. Consider the negative consequences of divorce on children.
  - ii. Compare problems of children within in-tact families to those of broken homes:
    - 1. Rate of poverty is five times higher for children living with single mothers than for children in in-tact families.
    - 2. According to the 2002 US Census Bureau report, children in fatherless homes account for 63% of youth suicides, 90% of homeless or runaway youth, 85% of children with behavior problems, 71% of high school dropouts, 85% of youth in prison, and well over 50% of teen mothers.

#### E) Impact of Divorce Culture on American Society:

- a. Families are building blocks of society; without stable families, society will crumble. Society will feel an effect of the deinstitutionalization of marriage on 5 dimensions:
  - i. Natural



- ii. Religious
  - iii. Economic
  - iv. Social
  - v. Legal
  - b. These mirror the 5 dimensions of marriage; marriage is, by nature fundamental to the proper functioning of society and so when marriage falls apart, society falls apart.
- F) What needs to be done:
- a. Shift back to culture of marriage.
    - i. Encourage marriage
    - ii. Protect marriage
    - iii. Decrease notion of individualism and focus on community and societal needs
  - b. Restrict functions or child production and rearing to marriage, alone.
  - c. Redefine marriage in clear, concise terms (legal, political, and social).

## 5. OPPOSING POINTS:

- A) The traditional idea of marriage is unrealistic.
- a. Contemporary thinking:
    - i. The forces of modernism are too strong- individualism is too deeply imbedded.
    - ii. You can no longer tell people what to do in today's society
    - iii. Subjectivity reigns supreme. There are no longer "norms"
    - iv. "A free society cannot legislate matters of the heart."
    - v. "Where there is no solution, there is no problem."
  - b. However, if one is to be realistic, one must face the facts and look at the problem as it exists. No one has faced the reality that permanent marriages between one man and one woman for the purpose of rearing and socializing children is what is best for society. No one has had the courage to do stand up for marriage in the traditional sense for fear of offending other's opinions, or seeming anti-homosexual, prejudiced, or old-fashioned. However, all society has to do is be brave enough to face the facts.
- B) Just as marriage has always existed, so too has divorce always existed. Divorce is necessary to protect individuals.
- a. Health and Safety of individuals are primary concerns that should not be overlooked.
  - b. Divorce can be a good option for couples in volatile, unhealthy relationships.
  - c. However, divorce based on a lack of emotional fulfillment is not sufficient reason. Emotional fulfillment is an important goal of marriage, but it is not the ultimate goal of marriage. "If marriage is to remain a viable social institution, the self-fulfillment of parents as individuals cannot take precedence over their obligations to their children."

- C) Society doesn't actually need traditional two-parent families to socialize children. We have services and policies that can assume these responsibilities.
  - a. Total cost of spending by all levels of government has increased five-fold in the past three decades. We simply cannot afford to pay for services and programs to fulfill the functions that families are supposed to fulfill.
  - b. Only option: to put our individualistic attitudes to rest and revert back to a marriage and family-focused society.

## **6. METHODOLOGY:**

- A) Sample: Convenience-based sample of students. Goal size = 100.
- B) Data Gathering: Administer two surveys – one testing individualistic versus collectivistic attitudes. Another testing marriage orientations and motivations.
  - a. Qualitative and quantitative questions
  - b. Likert scales, short answer questions, multiple choice
- C) Data Analysis:
- D) Findings:

## **7. CONCLUSIONS:**

Individualistic attitudes have slowly caused American society to self-destruct. This is most clearly seen in the deinstitutionalization of marriage through increased divorce rates, decreased marriage rates, and an increase in alternative options to marriage. The purpose of this study was to see how deeply embedded individualistic attitudes are amongst a marriage-eligible population and to see if these findings have any correlations to their orientations and ideas towards marriage. I hypothesized that more people would identify themselves as individualistic and that more people would be less inclined to want to get married.

The institution of marriage is in decline in contemporary American society. This decline is facilitated by three concurring trends: a decrease in the number of marriages, a rise in the divorce rate, and a growth in the number of socially acceptable alternatives to marriage. Together, these three trends undermine the institution of marriage and weaken the family unit, much to the detriment of society. The common force behind these three trends is the emphasis on individualism upheld by contemporary society. Americans have, since the founding of our country, upheld liberty, individual choice, and personal freedom as the highest ideals. These values had been balanced out by the equally strong desire for the communal, collective well-being of society and of the country. Today, however, there has been a shift in values towards Individualism and away from Collectivism. Liberty is now understood as unrestricted personal liberty; Individual choice is no longer regulated by cultural norms; and freedom to act has been replaced with freedom to act solely for one's best interest. Once again, the common denominator driving these societal value-shifts is Individualism. The over-emphasis on individualism in society is slowly causing contemporary American society to implode, and the most obvious manifestation of this self-destruction is in the disintegration of the institution of marriage in contemporary American society.

The deinstitutionalization of marriage is most obviously represented by the national divorce trend. It is estimated that 50% of marriages in America end in divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Today, about one quarter of the adult population is or has been divorced (Robinson, 2009). These are worrisome statistics when one considers the plethora of well-documented negative effects that stem directly from divorce (Axinn,

Thornton, 1996; Cunningham, Thornton, 2006). While divorce affects all of society, mothers and children are the most vulnerable. Most single parents (84%) are women. Of that percentage, 44% of mothers are single due to a divorce (Wolf, 2009). Not surprisingly, the U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2000 that women had a 45% drop in overall standard of living after undergoing a divorce (Robinson, 2009). The possible reasons for this decline in well-being are abundant; the woman might have depended on her husband for financial support, help in raising the children, an emotional outlet, etc. Once these resources are removed through a divorce, women oftentimes turn to other friends, families, or systems for support.

Oftentimes, the financial burden of divorce falls on the government. By no coincidence at all, the annual expenditure rates on governmental family assistance programs such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program are increasing in concert with the national divorce rates. In 2006 alone, the U.S. government spent \$16,656,906,974 through the TANF program (TANF Financial Data, 2006). This is a \$3 billion increase from the 1998 TANF spending reports (Nueburger, 2001). These numbers are especially alarming when one considers that only 6% of single parents receive TANF. Therefore, the government is annually spending over \$16 billion to meet the needs of only a small percentage of the vast needy population of American families.

Although the financial burden placed on the government is enormous and the negative outcomes of divorce for mothers are severe, the most devastating effects of divorce are experienced by the nation's children. Each year in America, over one million children witness their parents undergo a divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Short-term effects of experiencing a parental divorce include lowered performance in school,

depression, and lowered self-esteem (Axinn, 1996). Some long-term effects of parental divorce include having an increased propensity to engage in premarital sex, to enter premarital cohabitations, to view marriage less favorably, and to be more accepting of divorce (Axinn, 1996). Experiencing the failure of parental marriages therefore contributes to the likelihood that these children will not believe in or support the institution of marriage, thus perpetuating its deinstitutionalization within society.

Divorce also contributes to the second trend in American society responsible for the deinstitutionalization of marriage; the decreasing number of marriages. Since 1970, there has been a 50% drop in the number of people getting married in America (Jayson, 2009). As of 2002, only 59% of the adult population is or had been married. Possible reasons that might explain this downward trend include a lack of faith in the institution of marriage due to the high divorce rate. Additionally, people today are viewing marriage as an unnecessary and impractical commitment. Whatever the reasons may be, statistics prove that less and less people are getting married in today's society.

This leads us to the third societal trend that contributes to the deinstitutionalization of marriage- the ever-expanding number of alternatives to marriage. Today, "pseudo-marriage" arrangements such as cohabitation, out of wedlock childbirth and rearing, casual, non-committed sexual relationships, single-parent adoptions, and in-vitro fertilizations by single women are rapidly increasing in popularity, making it clear that people in today's society no longer think it is necessary to restrict sexual activity and child-bearing to the confines of marriage. To start, pre-marital sex is much more widely accepted and practiced today than ever before. According to a 2002 survey of 40,000 people between the ages of 15 and 44, a staggering 95% reported having had pre-marital

sex (Jayson, 2006). Also, an increasing number of committed sexually engaged partners are deciding to cohabit. Non-married cohabitating couples increased 1200% from 1960 to 2004 (Craven, 2005). As of 2000, more than 5.5 million people were cohabitating in the U.S (Cohabitation Trends, 2009).

Not only do people no longer deem it necessary to be married in order to live together, but they also no longer think that it is necessary to be married to have children. Today, more than 35% of children are born to unmarried mothers (Craven, 2005). Out of wedlock births have even surpassed divorce as the main reason behind the single-parent epidemic. Interestingly, the number of children born to un-wed, cohabitating couples has increased steadily over the last decade (Craven, 2005). Furthermore, single women are increasingly looking towards adoption and in-vitro fertilization as alternatives to coupled parenthood. According to the available statistics, 34% of adopters are single (Stolley, 1993). As technology and medicine continue to advance, the number of women opting to purchase sperm from sperm-banks for the purpose of artificial insemination will also rise.

Combined, these three trends lead to a decrease in the number of traditional marriages within the United States and an increase in single or cohabitating parents. As previously described, the effects of undergoing a divorce or experiencing a parental divorce are widespread and costly. However, the negative effects that come from single-parenting, whether by divorce, out-of-wedlock birth, or adoption, are equally, if not more, devastating to society and to children, in particular. When children are not raised in a two-parent household, they fall ever more subject to a slew of negative outcomes. According to the 2002 US Census Bureau report, children in fatherless homes account for 63% of youth suicides, 90% of homeless or runaway youth, 71% of high school dropouts,

85% of youth in prison, and well over 50% of teen mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Furthermore, the rate of poverty is five times higher for children living with single mothers than in in-tact families (Council on Families, 1995). Additionally, teenagers from broken homes have 2 to 3 times more behavioral and psychological problems than children from in-tact, married families (Council on Families, 1995).

As evidenced by these statistics, single-parenting is not the best way to raise children. The decrease in child-wellbeing is therefore a direct consequence of the deinstitutionalization of marriage. Research has repeatedly shown that permanent two-parent families are the most effective and healthy environment in which to raise and socialize children (Council on Families, 1995). These marriages derive their stability from the permanent, covenantal marriage contract. Therefore, in order to properly create and socialize children so as to produce a contributing, useful next generation, we as a society need to re-instate marriage as a necessary institution within society. Only in doing so will healthy families be able to exist and function to meet the needs of society.

The three trends described above and their effects are actively working to disassemble marriage as an institution. Marriage has now become less of an institution that one belongs to for the sake of the common good, and more of an idea that one insists on bending to meet his or her own individualistic purposes (Council on Families, 1995). Because of our desire for individual freedom and choice, we choose as a nation to ignore any kind of restrictive 'norm' within society. Marriage is considered one of these restrictive norms and as such, has been written off as passé and old-fashioned. Marriage has thus been replaced by a number of less restrictive pseudo-marriage institutions. In order to fully understand the value of traditional marriage, one must first have a

comprehensive understanding of the natural, social, legal, economic, and sacramental dimensions of the institution.

### *Marriage as an Institution- 5 Dimensions*

In order to reverse these three trends of increasing divorce, decreasing marriage, and increasing alternatives to marriage so as to reinstate marriage within society, one must first have an understand of what marriage as an institution is and what it was originally created to do. Marriage in the traditional sense has 5 dimensions: natural, sacramental, economic, social, and legal (Council on Families, 1995). First, marriage is a natural institution that satisfies the natural human inclinations towards sexual expression, reproduction, and emotional intimacy. According to the renowned social philosopher Erich Fromm, emotional intimacy and feeling united in love is one of human's deepest natural desires (Fromm, 1956, pg 9). Fromm recalls the story of creation, found in the book of Genesis in which God creates Adam and all of creation and said that "it is good." Yet, creation was not complete until God created Eve as a counterpart for Adam, saying, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). The desire to love and be loved has therefore been a part of human nature since creation. Marriage was thus instituted to accommodate these natural, intrinsic human needs.

Secondly, marriage can be a sacramental institution in which two individuals make a covenantal agreement before their god and religious community to love and serve each other "till death does them part." In the Catholic tradition, one female and one male unite with both each other and with God, forming one new entity. The creation of this new married life is sacred and breaking this covenant is sinful.



The third dimension of marriage is marriage as an economic institution. Married couples are seen as a primary unit of economic consumption, exchange, and production. This can be interpreted in two ways. First, married couples oftentimes share incomes and expenses. Furthermore, married couples receive tax benefits and economic advantages. Fromm describes the economic nature of marriage in a second way, describing marriage as a mutual exchange *between* the married individuals, themselves. He says that a man in love

gives of that which is alive in him; he gives him of his joy, his interests, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humor, of his sadness.... In thus giving of his life, he enriches the other person, he enhances the other's sense of aliveness by enhancing his own sense of aliveness.... Giving implies to make the other person a giver also and they both share in the joy of what they have brought to life (Fromm, E. 1956, pg. 23)

Thus a married couple's love for each other involves a mutual exchange of self, and this exchange creates a new life within them, which ultimately satisfies both of the individuals within a marriage. Fromm takes this analysis one step further, saying that the even the act of falling in love is tied to the economy in its resemblance to the market culture in which the couple exists, saying

Two persons thus fall in love when they feel they have found the best object available on the market, considering the limitations of their own exchange values... In a culture in which the market orientation prevails, and in which material success is the outstanding value, there is little reason to be surprised that human love relations follow the same pattern of exchange which governs the commodity and the labor market (Fromm, E. 1956, pg. 3).

Therefore, marriage is economic in nature in that couples exist as an economic unit within society, that couples resemble the economic culture in which they fall in love through the very act of falling in love, and finally, that once married, couples exchange "that which is alive in them" to bring the other person to life, thus satisfying both parties.

A fourth dimension of marriage is the social dimension by which the husband and wife work together to socialize their children, teaching them cultural norms and instilling in them a moral sense of right and wrong. In this regard, marriage as an institution can be seen as “a seedbed of civic virtue- it is perhaps society’s most important contrivance for protecting child well being, turning children into good citizens, and fostering good behavior among adults”(Council on Families, 1995). Additionally, marriages link people together by creating extended families. This widens people’s support systems and increases available resources. Therefore, when looking at marriage as a social institution, it becomes clear that marriages allow for proper family functioning, which allows for socialization of children, who will then in turn become productive members of society.

The final dimension of society, the legal dimension, includes the laws that govern entry into the institution, exit from the institution, and expectations of behavior within it (Council on Families, 1995). These laws reflect the truth that all affective relationships between men and women are fragile and subject to change and should therefore be legally protected. Because of this fact, the legal vows of fidelity and permanence are essential elements to the institution of marriage. Furthermore, laws that regulate who can marry and who cannot are necessary to ensure that everyone who gets married is capable of fulfilling the primary functions of marriage. One might then ask what the primary functions of traditional marriage are.

Marriage is a relationship within which a society socially approves and encourages sexual intercourse and the birth of children. It is society’s way of signaling to would-be parents that their long-term relationship together is socially important (Council on Families, 1995). This definition of marriage incorporates all five dimensions of

marriage. The institution of marriage meets the natural, spiritual, social, and economic needs of human beings while protecting their rights and legitimizing their status as married couples. In accomplishing all of these things, society is also helping itself; happy individuals make a happy society. If all couples were able to have their needs met within marriage while producing happy, well-socialized children, society would run smoothly. For this reason, society sanctions the institution of marriage as a means to satisfy the needs and desires of individuals *and* of society. Thus upholding the institution of marriage is a public concern, and not simply a private affair (Council on Families, 1995).

### *The Decline in Marriage- Individualism*

Since marriage is so obviously axial to societal well-being, one might ask what has caused society to drift away from the institution and the ideas of marriage. The answer lies in the recent shift in American values away from collectivism and towards individualism. ‘Individualism’ is defined as, “a social theory advocating the liberty, rights, or independent action of the individual” (Merriam-Webster online Dictionary). According to this definition, individualism is a positive thing. Individuals should advocate for their own rights and freedom. This is the traditional definition of individualism which Americans have upheld and championed- until recently. Today, individualism can be more accurately defined as “the doctrine which asserts that the interests of the individual ought to be ethically paramount ” (Merriam-Webster online Dictionary). This understanding of individualism is deeply problematic. Ethics is not defined by desires or “interests” of individuals, as implied by this definition. Rather,

ethics are a set of moral guidelines that determine appropriate conduct for a couple, a group or a society.

One can see, therefore, why a person in whom the ideal of individualism according to the current definition is deeply embedded would find the institution of marriage unappealing. Marriage requires self-sacrifice on the part of both individuals involved for the good of someone or something other than him or herself- namely, for their marriage, their family, and society as a whole. The concept of self-sacrifice is not only unfamiliar to individuals with an individualistic mindset, but is also against their “morals.” Because attaining whatever he or she wants when he or she wants it is the most ethically paramount interest of an individualist, the concept of sacrificing for the good of another is amoral.

Therefore, marriage and individualism are antithetical in nature. The Council on Families articulated this concept perfectly in their 1995 Report to the Nation, saying

The quest for greater individual choice clashed directly with the obligations and social norms that held families and communities together in earlier years. People came to feel that questions of how to live and with whom to live were a matter of individual choice not to be governed by restrictive norms. As a nation, we came to experience the bonds to marriage, family, children, job, community, and country as constraints that were no longer necessary. Commitments were therefore loosened (Yankelovich, as cited by Council on Families, 1995).

This loosening of commitments was one of the main objectives behind the societal push for a redefinition of marriage. Because individualism, according to its new definition, and traditional marriage are adversative by nature, their co-existence is impossible. The people of society therefore have to choose between the two. The three trends of increasing divorce rates, decreasing marriage rates, and increasing alternatives to marriage show that society has decided that the ideal of individualism is more

important than upholding the institution of marriage. As a result, marriage has been re-defined in order to accommodate the “interests” of each individual.

*The Re-Definition of Marriage in Contemporary American Society*

Never before has marriage as an institution existed for the primary purpose of satisfying individual desires. Rather, the definition of marriage and its functions has always been unanimously understood by the society as a permanent union between individuals for the purpose of child bearing, socialization, and family formation. The societal guidelines for who could participate in marriage have always been determined by who could perform these functions. Therefore, society’s understanding of marriage was functional, logical, and objective. Today, however, the definition of marriage has been diluted, subjectified, and partialized. There is no longer any general consensus on the understanding of marriage within our society because each individual feels that it is within his ethical rights to define marriage according to his own wants and desires.

For example, in contemporary society, there is much debate over who should be allowed to be legally married and who should not. According to traditional marriage, the answer is simply based on the functionality of marriage; who is capable of performing the roles of child production and rearing? Biologically, only one man and one woman can naturally produce children. Therefore, marriage should exist between a man and a woman. It is not that simple in today’s society, however, because marriage’s main purpose is no longer child production and rearing. These historically marital functions have been replaced by self-gratification. The question of who should now be allowed to marry is no longer based on objective, biological, and functional requirements. The new

question is ‘who can make me as an individual happy?’ The answers to this question are subjective and vague. If marriage requirements are based solely on one’s right to pursue happiness, marriage can no longer be restricted to heterosexual couples, alone. Recent political debates about gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual’s rights to marry reflect the ambiguity of the contemporary definitions of marriage.

Marriage has therefore been subjectified and partialized. It no longer contains all 5 of the dimensions that it once did. Instead, individuals are picking and choosing what dimensions they wish to include in their particular marriage. Take for example, the rising trend of signing prenuptial agreements. This blatantly contradicts the economic dimension of marriage by resisting both the unity and mutual exchange of each individual’s assets and talents from a marriage. To function properly as an economic unit, both individuals must give and share freely with each other within the marriage. Safeguarding one’s individual possessions against one’s spouse does not make sense because in marriage, one individual unites with another in every regard *including* economic well-being. ‘Yours’ and ‘mine’ become ‘ours.’ Prenuptial agreements prohibit the couple from becoming one, and sharing in the ‘ours.’

As a consequence of being partialized and subjectified, today’s marriages are no longer capable of providing individuals or society with the structure and stability as it once did. When not all five dimensions of marriage are present in a marriage, the marriage is incomplete. This incomplete unity between two individuals leads to volatility and dissatisfaction. The bonds that are created in these ‘new-age’ marriages can easily be broken apart through divorce.

*The Divorce Revolution*

Society has shifted away from the “restrictive” traditional culture of marriage and towards a new culture of divorce. Never before has divorce been as widely accepted as it is today. In fact, until recently, divorce was looked down upon by society. Divorced couples were thought to have failed and were usually either pitied as victims of domestic abuse or shunned as selfish adulterers. Today, however, not only is divorce merely deemed tolerable, but it is oftentimes encouraged as method to liberate oneself from the confines of marriage. Furthermore, whereas divorces used to occur only when one or both parties involved in the marriage were in danger or had been outwardly unfaithful, today, the most frequent reasons for divorce is lack of emotional intimacy, followed by dull sex (The Most Frequent Cause for Divorce, 2009). Evidently, people today place a higher value on seeking personal happiness and self-gratification than on honoring marital commitments. Once a marriage is no longer fulfilling the needs or wants of an individual, the individual sees no purpose in remaining in the marriage.

One might assume that a couple would be more inclined to honor their marital commitment if there were children involved. However, this is not the case. A study conducted in 1985 found that 82% of people polled disagreed with the statement, “when there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along” (Thornton, 1989). While emotional fulfillment and personal satisfaction are worthy goals to obtain within a marriage, it should not be the sole purpose of the marriage- especially when children are involved. If marriage is to remain a viable social institution, the self-fulfillment of parents as individuals cannot take precedence over their obligations to their children (Council on Families, 1995).

Sadly, people today are beginning to expect divorce to be the natural end to a marriage. The prenuptial rate is undeniable evidence of this fact. Prenuptial agreements have grown in popularity over the past 20 years. Currently, about only one percent of Americans have prenuptial agreements. However, according to a 2002 study polling over 2,000 Americans, over one fourth of Americans reported believing that prenuptial agreements “make smart financial sense for anyone getting married.” This number outweighed the number of participants who said that prenuptial agreements are not a good idea and “are never needed when two people really love each other” (A Study About Prenuptial Agreements, 2002). While some argue that prenups are not only “a vaccine against a contentious divorce but also a blueprint for negotiating money issues before they wreak havoc in marriage,” others argue that prenups undermine the institution of marriage by assuming things will go wrong. Furthermore, prenuptial agreements legally separate a couple’s assets and belongings, implying that although the spouses might love each other, they don’t want to fully give themselves to each other.

Furthermore, it is usually not the couple who collectively decide to sign a prenuptial contract. Rather, it is usually one spouse who is trying to render him or herself invulnerable. Without a prenup, the stronger party has to engage in more compromises throughout the course of the marriage. But with a prenup, that individual can just say, “If you don’t like it- leave”(Flora, 2004).

As previously described, marriage is an economic partnership that involves uniting two persons in mutual self-giving and sacrifice. By signing prenuptial agreements, people of society are implying that they are no longer willing to take the risk involved in fully uniting themselves to someone else. Individuals today want to be united



in marriage only as much as it benefits them, personally. And then, once this marriage is no longer fulfilling their needs, or once the first sign of trouble or hardship arises, people want to know that what originally belonged to them prior to their marriage is, in fact still theirs and theirs alone.

Not only are divorces practically expected in contemporary American society, they have recently been made extremely easy to obtain through the creation of “no fault divorces.” These new divorce laws, first made effective in the state of California in 1970 allow for divorce without evidence of adultery or abandonment (Flora, 2004). Prior to these laws, a request for a divorce had to be substantiated by something more than merely ‘falling out of love.’ Before no-fault divorce became legal, one party within the marriage had to plead guilty to adultery, abandonment, felony, or other similarly culpable acts. The no-fault divorce laws make divorce much easier to obtain. Furthermore, they highlight the societal belief that ‘falling out of love’ is reason enough to divorce- that marriage exists for no other purpose than individualistic satisfaction and gratification. This widespread manifestation of individualism has had detrimental implications for American families and society.

### *Impact of the Divorce Revolution on American Families*

Divorce results in broken families and broken families can result in damaged children. As previously discussed, the effects of divorce on children are devastating. However, it is not just the children who have experienced parental divorce that are suffering. The well-being of all children throughout the nation is in general decline. In a 1990 report on child well-being, a nonpartisan commission of prominent political,

medical, education, and business leaders concluded, “never before has one generation of American teenagers been less healthy, less cared for, or less prepared for life” (Council on Families, 1995). Juvenile violent crime has increased six-fold since 1960, reports of child neglect and abuse have quintupled since 1976, eating disorders and rates of unipolar depression have soared amongst adolescent girls, teen suicide has tripled, SAT scores have declined nearly 80 points, and poverty amongst the young has increased to 38% (Council on Families, 1995).

This evidence of the drastic decrease in child-wellbeing is undeniably linked to the breakdown in family systems within the country. According to the report issued by at the 1995 National Council on Families, “by far, the most important causal factor [in the decline of child well-being] is the remarkable collapse of marriage, leading to growing family instability and decreasing parental investment in children.” In order to stop the decline in child well-being, society needs to stop the breakdown of traditional family structure, and in order to do that, marriage needs to be reinstated within society as a necessary, purposive institution.

### *Reasons for Contemporary Opposition to Marriage*

Society as a whole has not yet come to the realization that the deinstitutionalization of marriage is in fact the common denominator of almost all contemporary American problems. Rather, society downplays the importance of marriage, opting to focus on more obvious problems such as education reform, homelessness, welfare costs, and healthcare issues. Thus, there has there been practically

no consistent, widespread effort made to reverse the divorce trend and reinstate marriage as a legitimate, vital institution within society (Council on Families, 1995).

Some argue that the forces of modernism and individualism in contemporary society are simply too strong. As a result, morality has become subjective, political-correctness has morphed into social hypersensitivity, and societal norms are no longer thought of as guidelines. Therefore, some argue that traditional marriage can no longer exist in today's society because it limits people's freedom. It has been said that, "a free society cannot legislate matters of the heart," (Council on Families, 1995). While this may be true, it is important to recall that the primary function of marriage is *not* to accommodate adults in love, but rather to ensure the proper functioning of society and to promote the care and socialization of children.

A similar argument against the reinstitution of traditional marriage in contemporary American society is that it is simply unrealistic. The parameters of marriage have been irreversibly widened; the right to marry has now been extended to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender citizens, for example. Reneging these "non-traditional" person's or group's right to marry in today's society would not only be extremely socially and politically unpopular, but also legally complicated. Reverting back to traditional marriage therefore seems totally unrealistic. However, we as a nation must ask ourselves how diluted we are willing to let the institution of marriage become, once we have fully considered the *realistic* consequences that this dilution will hold. It should be considered when, if at all, we as a nation will draw the line as to what constitutes a marriage. If marriage now exists merely for "love," and no longer for the traditional purposes of creating societal stability through child production and socialization, one

could argue that a daughter who commits herself to live with, care for and *love* her aging mother should technically qualify as a marriage within the legal definition (Vacek, 2003). Then, as a married couple, this mother and daughter could qualify for marital benefits, tax breaks, and the other additional benefits of being legally married.

As far-fetched as this hypothetical situation may sound, society is not far from such incidences. Luckily, most of society is still in agreement that incest, polygamy, bestiality, and the like are socially unacceptable. However, if the parameters of marriage continue to be widened based on the subjective premise of “love,” it will not be long before such absurd hypothetical situations like the one described above become commonplace within society. What society needs, therefore, is to realize that the reinstatement of traditional marriage is the only *realistic* solution to society’s problems.

Still, some might propose that marriage as an institution is in a natural decline and therefore should be eliminated altogether. If legal marriages ceased to exist, defining marriage would no longer be an issue, the government would no longer have to compensate for marital tax breaks and monetary incentives, and divorce would cease to exist. Others propose that marriage should only exist within the religious sphere. While getting rid of or restricting marriage in such a way may seem like an easy short-term solution to the problem of marriage, it overlooks the all-important fact that marriage was created *by society for the benefit of society*. The institution of marriage has existed for thousands of years, throughout hundreds of society for the common purpose of giving society structure and stability while enhancing productivity. History proves that marriage has been a vital institution in almost every society in which people place the well-being of the collective good before the attainment and satisfaction of individual desires. Rather

than giving up these individualistic quests for self-satisfaction by reverting to marriage in the traditional sense, society has chosen to give up the institution of marriage. Therefore, one can conclude that the problem in today's society is not with the institution of marriage, itself, but rather, with the individuals who refuse to set aside their individualistic desires for the betterment of society.

Finally, some say that society does not actually need the traditional two-parent families created by traditional marriages to create and socialize children. An argument can be made that governmental services and institutions can continue to assume the responsibilities that parents have historically held within society. Raising and socializing children born out-of-wedlock can be accomplished by the state, some argue. However, as of 1990, the total cost of spending on welfare had increased over 630 percent since the 1970s (Bennett, 1994). If the rate of non-marital births continues at the rate of 4 percent per year, the ensuing growth of annual governmental costs in services would become astronomical (Bennett, 1994). Our current fragile economic government would not be able to withstand the extra financial burden that results from improper parenting. Given the state of our current economy, it is imperative that the government runs as fluidly as possible. As a democracy, each system within American society is responsible for being as productive and efficient as possible. This means that families must function properly and effectively in order to accomplish the familial tasks of child socialization and creation of healthy, productive citizens. And once again, research has repeatedly shown that the most efficient method of achieving the goals of child upbringing and socialization occur within families with married parents. The American government simply cannot afford to pay for the services and programs needed to fulfill the functions

that families are supposed to fulfill. Therefore, contemporary society's best option is to put the individualistic attitudes to rest and revert back to a marriage and family-focused society.

### *Hypothesis*

It is undeniable that marriage is in decline in contemporary American society. This decline seems to be directly correlated to the prevalence of individualistic attitudes amongst Americans. This study therefore seeks to explore the relationship between attitudes towards marriage and individualistic attitudes. Given that the marriage rate is steadily decreasing, that the divorce rate is increasing, and that there is a growing number of socially acceptable alternatives to traditional marriage, one would expect to find a negative correlation between individualistic attitudes and favorable traditional marriage attitudes. Likewise, a positive correlation between individualistic attitudes and anti-traditional marriage attitudes should also be evident.

### *Methodology: Sample*

The sample for this study consists of 100 students from a private, Catholic college in the Northeast. The convenience sample consisted of 75 females and 25 males. The majority of the students identified themselves as Caucasian (96%) and Catholic (71.7%), and ranged in age from 18 to 22 years. Regarding political affiliation, 36% of participants identified themselves as Moderate, 27% as Conservative, 22% as Liberal, 7% as Apathetic, 6% as very Liberal, and 1% as very Conservative. Approximately 81% of the participants' parents are married.

This sample was selected for the purpose of testing a group of the pre-marital population so as to get an idea of how today's marriage-eligible population views the institution of marriage. It should be noted that due to the Catholicity of the sample, one would expect results to be slightly skewed in favor of traditional marriage.

### *Data Gathering*

An anonymous survey was administered to each subject. The survey (Appendix A) tested for individualistic versus collectivistic attitudes, as well as one's attitudes towards marriage. The survey consisted of both qualitative and quantitative questions. A number of Demographic multiple choice questions, 5 short answer questions, and 32 likert scale questions were used to gather information regarding individualistic versus collectivistic attitudes, as well as attitudes towards marriage. The likert scale questions consisted of statements about which participants were asked to circle whether they 'Strongly Disagree,' 'Disagree,' 'Neutral,' 'Agree,' or 'Strongly Agree.' Additionally, subjects were asked to write down 5 words that described themselves. These 5 words were used to interpret whether the person identifies him or herself individually or collectively.

Together, these questions tested for 4 variables: Individualistically-oriented Attitudes (IA), Collectivistically-oriented Attitudes (CA), Positive Attitudes towards Traditional Marriage (PM) and Negative Attitudes towards Traditional Marriage (AM). For the purpose of this study, Individualistically Oriented Attitudes are defined as being more concerned with one's own wellbeing than those of a family, group, or community. Collectivistically Oriented Attitudes are defined as being more concerned with the

wellbeing of one's group, family, or community than of one's own well-being. Positive Attitudes towards Traditional Marriage are defined as being in agreement with the traditional idea of Marriage which holds that Marriage is a sacred, permanent covenant between a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation and child socialization. Negative Attitudes towards Traditional Marriage are defined in this study as being opposed (in any degree) to the traditional definition of marriage.

### *Data Analysis*

The findings were entered into SPSS. Descriptives were run on the demographic information to gather means and percentages of the participant's age, gender, race, political affiliation, religious orientation, current relationship status, and parent's relationship status. The short answer questions were scanned for repeated or similar answers and trends. The responses to the 5 self-descriptive words about the participant were analyzed in the following way: Adjectives that described the participant's individual attributes (such as funny, smart, unique, caring, athletic, etc.) were interpreted to identify the individual as 'Individualistic.' Adjectives (or nouns) that described the person in relation to others, or as a member of a group (such as 'Christian,' 'Republican,' 'Asian,' 'Student,' etc.) were interpreted to identify the individual as Collectivistic. If all 5 words were 'Individualistic,' words, the participant received a score of 5. Likewise, if all 5 words were 'Collectivistic,' then the participant received a score of 1. Thus, the higher the score, the more Individualistic the participant identified.

The 32 likert scale questions were divided into groups according to which of the 4 attitudes (IA, CA, PM, or AM) the question tested. These 4 groups were given the names



of “Individualistic,” “Collectivistic,” “Pro-Marriage,” and “Anti-Marriage.” For example, question #31 reads, “It is generally more important for me to satisfy my own needs in life than to work to meet the needs of the groups to which I belong.” The possible answers were assigned numbers 1-5, with 1 being ‘Strongly Disagree,’ and 5 being ‘Strongly Agree.’ Because the answer to this question has to do with how strongly oriented one’s individualistic attitudes are, this question is categorized in the ‘Individualistic’ variable group. All 32 questions were grouped in a like manner. Once all 32 questions were grouped according to the 4 variables, Pearson’s  $r$  correlations were used to explore the relationship between the 4 variables (IA, CA, PM, and AM).

### *Findings*

Regarding the correlations between the 4 variables (IA, CA, PM, and AM), as anticipated, the study found there to be a significant positive correlation between Individualistic Attitudes and Negative Attitudes towards Traditional Marriage ( $r = .250$ ,  $p = .006$ ). Likewise, there was a significant positive correlation between Collectivistic Attitudes and Positive attitudes towards Traditional Marriage ( $r = .251$ ,  $p = .006$ ). These findings prove that the more Individualistically oriented one is, the more likely he or she is to hold negative attitudes towards Traditional Marriage, and vice versa. Similarly, the more Collectivistically oriented one is, the more likely he or she is to hold positive attitudes towards Traditional Marriage.

Analysis (using one-way ANOVA tests) of each of the variables separately yielded equally interesting data. According to the findings of this study, today’s marriage

eligible population is more individualistically oriented than collectivistically oriented. Although the differences between the mean scores for Individualistic Attitudes (29.58) and Collectivistic Attitudes (25.79) were not statistically significant, it should be noted that the mean scores for IA were more than 4 points higher than those for CA. These statistical findings were congruent with the results of the “Describe yourself in 5 words” Individualistic/Collectivistic attitude test. Ninety-six percent (n=96) of the participants received scores of 5. This means that they described themselves in entirely individualistic adjectives. The remaining 4% (n=4) received scores of 4. This means that they described themselves in 4 individualistic adjectives and 1 collectivistic adjective. To the extent that this test can be accurately used to define one’s individualistic versus collectivistic attitudes, the results of this test show that the sample population identifies as overwhelmingly Individualistic.

Other findings of interest regarding Individualistic attitudes include the finding that the mean scores for IA for both men and women were almost the same (Men had a mean score of 29.77 and women had a mean score of 29.51.) Also, although there was no significant correlation between religious orientation and IA, those who identified themselves as Catholic had the lowest Individualistic score (m=29.20). Regarding the correlation between political affiliation and IA, the participant who identified as Very Conservative (n=1) had the highest score of 33.00, while the participants who identified as Apathetic (n=7) had the lowest mean score of 28.43. The only statistically significant correlation between any of the demographic qualities and IA was found in the correlation between Father’s Relationship Status and IA ( $r=.033$ ). The mean scores for participants with fathers who are either divorced (n=2) or widowed (n=1) had the lowest mean scores

of 25.50 and 25.00, respectively, while the participants with fathers who had never been married ( $n=3$ ) had the highest mean score of 33.67. Most participants ( $n=82$ ) had fathers who are currently married. Their mean score was 29.27.

Analysis of the CA variable provided interesting results as well. Again, the correlation between CA and the Father's Relationship Status was found to be statistically significant ( $r=.015$ ). As to be expected, given the low mean scores on the IA correlation to Father's Relationship Status, the highest mean score for CA was the participant ( $n=1$ ) whose father is widowed. Interestingly, however, the lowest mean score was found amongst the participants whose fathers are Re-married ( $m=23.33$ ). Another statistically significant correlation was found between CA and Religious Orientation ( $r=.008$ ). The highest mean score for CA was found amongst the Catholic participants ( $n=72$ ,  $m=26.35$ ), while the lowest mean score was amongst the Jewish participants ( $n=1$ ,  $m=23.00$ ).

When analyzing the sampled populations' negative attitudes towards traditional marriage (AM), it became apparent that they held more negative attitudes than positive attitudes. The mean score for AM attitudes (23.01) was higher than PM attitudes (19.90). Further analysis of the AM attitudes showed that the demographic variables with statistically significant correlations to AM attitudes included the political affiliation ( $r=.012$ ) and the relationship status of the mother of the respondents ( $r=.011$ ). There were not statistically significant correlations between gender, age, religion, current relationship status, or father's relationship status.

Analyzing the sampled population's positive attitudes towards traditional marriage yielded some surprisingly significant results. There was a very statistically significant positive correlation between PM attitudes and Religion ( $r < .001$ ). The participants who identified as Catholic had the highest mean score Pro-Marriage attitudes ( $m = 20.72$ ). There was also a very statistically significant positive correlation between Pro-Marriage attitudes and political affiliation ( $r < .01$ ). The participants who identified as Conservative ( $n = 28$ ) had the highest mean score ( $m = 22.10$ ), while the participants who identified as Very Liberal ( $n = 5$ ) had the lowest mean score ( $m = 14.20$ ). Additionally, both the mother and the father's relationship statuses had significant positive correlations to PM attitudes ( $r = .023$ ,  $r = .025$  respectively). For both, the highest mean scores were found in the group of participants whose mother and father were separated. The lowest mean scores were for mothers and fathers who were never married or deceased.

The qualitative responses to the short answer questions regarding the nature and definition of Marriage shed further light onto these quantitative findings. When asked to finish the sentence, "Marriage is..." the most frequent response was, "a loving bond between two people." The words 'bond,' and 'commitment,' 'union,' and 'love' were used in most of the responses. Others responded with adjectives such as "important," "beautiful," and "loving." Some of the answers insinuated that marriage is a 'lasting,' 'life-long,' or 'permanent' union between two people. Furthermore, when asked to finish the sentence, "I do or do not have a desire to get married because..." most participants answered affirmatively and provided reasons including wanting a family, stability, and the security of having a life-long partner. Interestingly, while some of the respondents phrased these desires by using collectivistic terms such as 'sharing,' 'mutual,' 'each

other,' and 'commitment,' most respondents used more individualistic terms and phrases such as 'someone to care for me,' 'security,' and 'have someone that will always love me.' Thus, while the majority of the respondents view marriage favorably and as something to desire, most of the respondents have the misconception of marriage as something that exists to meet his or her individual needs and desires. One respondent epitomized this misunderstanding of the traditional marriage in her explanation for why she wants to get married, stating, "I do have a desire to get married because I want someone to come home to at the end of the day who loves and understands me." While this is not a bad desire in and of itself, it is not a suitable reason to get married because it presupposes that the purpose of marriage is to meet one's own needs and desires.

Therefore, in many ways, these qualitative responses highlighted an important distinction between Positive and Negative attitudes towards marriage. Although almost all of the participants defined marriage as something positive, most answers were exceptionally vague, leaving the purpose and parameters of the institution either undefined or misunderstood. Ironically, when asked if they were to give one newly engaged couple one piece of advice concerning the key to a happy marriage, the two most frequent responses were the necessity of 'compromise,' and 'communication.' Hopefully, this marriage-eligible population will heed their own advice in the future.

In summary, regarding the sample's CA versus IA, the group as a whole identified as having more Individualistically-oriented attitudes than Collectivistically-oriented attitudes. Statistically significant factors whose relationship to Individualistic and Collectivistic attitudes that should be further investigated include the Relationship status of fathers and Religious Orientation. Regarding attitudes towards marriage, the

sampled population's responses show that although they view marriage positively, their views regarding Marriage in a traditional sense are misguided and misunderstood.

Although it cannot be directly conferred from the findings of this study alone, one could argue that the strong positive correlation between anti-marriage attitudes and Individualistic attitudes is evidence that the rise in negative attitudes towards traditional marriage is actually caused by the rise in individualistic attitudes.

However, this study was limited in that its sample consisted of a racially homogeneous group, whose upbringings and life circumstances are for the most part very similar. Other limitations include the relatively small sample size.

### *Conclusion*

People in contemporary American society are becoming increasingly individualistic. These individualistic attitudes have undermined the institution of marriage by dismissing marriage's fundamental components of commitment, self-giving, exclusivity, and permanency as both unnecessary and restricting. Sadly, this study confirmed my hypothesis that today's marriage-eligible population is not only highly individualistic, but also, views marriage as nothing more than "a loving bond between two people." These results are especially interesting because the population from which they were drawn consisted almost entirely of Caucasian, Catholic, Middle-class students from a Northeastern college. A recent article stated that throughout the United States, positive attitudes towards marriage are highest and divorce rates are lowest amongst this exact population (Flynn, 2009). Thus, given the results of this study, the future of marriage as an institution within American society appears bleak.

Society as a whole has not yet come to realize the devastating effects that the deinstitutionalization of marriage could have on the country. As examined earlier, society depends upon the institution of marriage to create stable, lasting family units through which children are created, socialized, and fostered so as to then become contributing, productive members of society. Society therefore needs to reclaim the idea of marital permanence and reinstate marriage as the supreme environment for childbearing (Council on Families, 1995). By doing so, society will need to become aware of the dangers of the rising divorce rate and the diminishing marriage rate. Also, an initiative aimed at promoting the idea of married two-parent households will need to be enacted throughout society.

Clearly, there is much that can be done to promote the institution of marriage within contemporary American society. Perhaps the profession with the most influence in this sector of society, and the most access to the most families is that of Social Work. Social Work professionals will therefore need to play an integral role in reversing the divorce and anti-marriage trends throughout the country. Thus, this study has many implications for social work research, practice, and policy.

Embedding this new set of marriage and family-oriented values into society's individualistic framework will require a fundamental shift in cultural values, social work research and practice, and in policy. When beginning this work, social workers must be cognizant of the increasingly individualistic attitudes of contemporary Americans, recognizing that this might be an obstacle in spreading pro-marriage ideals. Social workers might want to begin by putting an end to the glamorized ideas that society holds regarding sexual promiscuity, unrestricted personal liberty, marital infidelity, and unwed

motherhood. Social workers could accomplish this by creating grass-root organizations which lead boycotts against companies and advertisers that promote these anti-marriage values. Additionally, social workers could work with the media, as well as parents, educators, and religious leaders to create positive, pro-marriage propaganda to replace all of the contemporary anti-marriage literature, movies, books, and overall attitudes in America.

The findings of this study and future studies of the same type will also have significant implications on social work practice. Social workers need to make the reinstatement of marriage a forefront feature of the national social work agenda. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) should adopt as one of its values the promotion of healthy, stable, permanent two-parent families. On a more tangible basis, social workers should provide more services geared towards supporting and nurturing marriages. More time should be spent preparing engaged couples for marriage as well as cultivating existing marriages. Furthermore, social workers should work to reduce the stigma of receiving marital therapy and other marital services, as they have been proven to be both helpful and beneficial ways to preserve marriages.

Additionally, social workers need to adopt a more family-oriented approach to practice. Oftentimes, social workers in today's world focus on the individual as an isolated entity. Social work practice needs to shift towards a more family-friendly perspective that has as its main goal the promotion of healthy, productive, stable, and lasting family life.



In order to implement these practice and theoretical goals so as to foster positive attitudes towards traditional marriage, policy changes will need to be made so as to reflect the importance of the family and of marriage as an institution within society. The following are some avenues through which social work advocacy could impact policy: Social workers should advocate for the reconsideration of state marriage laws that allow for “no-fault” divorces; Social workers could advocate for more tax benefits for married couples, and for more federal dollars to be allocated to programs that enhance, support, or promote family life; and social workers could formulate “vision statements” that publically establish the goal of strengthening the married, two-parent home and decreasing the number of children born to unmarried parents (Council on Families, 1995).

To make these cultural, practice, and legal changes, social workers will need to point to empirical evidence that shows that having a strong marriage is the foundation to a healthy family, and therefore to a healthy society. Thus, more research should be conducted within the social work field that shows this. Due to the relatively significant limitations of this study, further research and follow-up studies should be conducted to see if similar findings are collected amongst populations with more diversity. Furthermore, researchers should create a new survey instrument that will yield more reliable and valid results. That way, the findings of future studies can be more authoritatively used when arguing for the reinstatement of marriage within society.

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*Appendix A- The Survey Instrument*

**MARRIAGE AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

**Sex:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Race:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Religious Orientation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Graduation Year:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Political Affiliation (circle one):**

Very Liberal   Liberal   Moderate   Apathetic   Conservative   Very Conservative

**Current Relationship Status:** Single   Exclusive Relationship   Non-exclusive relationship   Other

**My mother is:** Married   Never Married   Divorced   Separated   Widowed   Re-Married   Deceased

**My father is:** Married   Never Married   Divorced   Separated   Widowed   Re-Married   Deceased

**Describe yourself in 5 words:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_ 5. \_\_\_\_\_

*Please finish the following sentences:*

1. Marriage is.... \_\_\_\_\_

2. The main purpose of marriage is....  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. I do or do not have a desire to get married because....  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Today, most of the couples that get married do so because.....  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. If you were to give **one** piece of advice to a newly engaged couple about the key to a happy marriage, what would it be?
- 
- 

*Please rank the following statements according to your personal beliefs:*

- |                                                                                                             |                   |          |         |       |                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| 1. I usually get my way.                                                                                    | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 2. Marriage is a necessary institution within society.                                                      | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 3. Marriage is a life-long, exclusive commitment between two people.                                        | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 4. My happiness depends very much on the happiness of those around me.                                      | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 5. I am a unique individual.                                                                                | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 6. I prefer to be direct and forthright when discussing with people.                                        | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 7. The option of Marriage should be open to homosexual couples.                                             | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 8. I like sharing things with my neighbors.                                                                 | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 9. The main purpose of marriage is to meet my emotional, physical, sexual, cognitive, and spiritual needs.  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 10. I prefer to work in a group.                                                                            | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 11. Marriage is merely an extra commitment that is no longer needed or wanted by people in today's society. | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 12. It is important for a couple to live together before getting married.                                   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| 13. Sex should only occur within marriage.                                                                  |                   |          |         |       |                |

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
14. Marriage is the contemporary cultural 'norm.'	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
15. Divorce is morally wrong.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
16. Divorce is morally wrong only if there are children involved.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
17. When I succeed, it's usually because of my abilities.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
18. If the needs of an individual spouse are no longer being met, the couple should divorce.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
19. If my marriage was in danger, I would seek help in the form of couple's therapy.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
20. One should live as independently as possible.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
21. I like being alone.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
22. Prenuptial agreements are a good idea.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
23. I do not like to stand out in a crowd.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
24. It is important to maintain harmony within my family, groups, teams, etc.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
25. I often do "my own thing."	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
26. Marriage is a sacrament sanctioned by God in which a binding, eternal covenant is formed between God, the husband, and the wife.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
27. When playing a team sport, it is more important to me that my team wins than that I, personally have a good game.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

28. I would prefer to receive individual praise for work that I have accomplished independently than to receive collective praise for work done as a member of a group.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

29. Doing something nice for someone else is more satisfying than doing something nice for myself.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

30. Marriage encourages female subordination and oppression.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

31. It is generally more important for me to satisfy my own needs in life than to work to meet the needs of the groups to which I belong.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

32. The 50% divorce rate discourages me from getting married.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly Agree

