The Purpose of Marriage: Beyond Self-Fulfillment

A Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

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April, 2015
Abstract

Divorce rates in the United States saw a steep increase between the late 1960’s to the mid 1980’s. This project began with looking at historical and contemporary reasons as to how and why people get married, and then examines how major cultural events, beginning with the post WWII economic boom, ultimately impacted our marriages and families. The idea of how married couples struggle to stay committed to their partners, while at the same time, pursue their own personal goals, self-fulfillment and happiness was also examined. The project went on to compare the contrasting principals of covenant relationship and contractual relationship. Finally, Alfred Adler was introduced through his relationship and eventual split with Sigmund Freud, then three Adlerian theoretical ideas were discussed; mistaken beliefs, goal orientation, and social interest. The conclusion: Understanding and applying basic Adlerian principals and theories can be helpful in addressing and improving our marriages and relationships.
Acknowledgements

It has been my experience that our greatest accomplishments in life are most always not the result of individual pursuit, but rather a collaborative experience. My final project at the Adler Graduate School came to fruition through the guidance, support and encouragement of several key people; including instructors, fellow students, family members and friends.

Firstly, I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to my project Chair, Trish Anderson, and Member, Dr. Herb Laube, for their support during the research, writing, and public presentation of my topic. I am grateful for their guidance and help in directing the project to a completed product. I am also indebted to my fellow Alder students, who walked with me on the path towards a graduate degree in Marriage and Family Therapy.

I am also truly blessed to have had incredible support and encouragement from several family members and friends who unselfishly invested time and energy into helping me complete this project. My son, Brandon Eddy, along with my brother, Dr. Paul Rhodes Eddy, gave of their personal time and support as I began to develop my topic and presentation. Also, my dear friends, Stephan Roufs and Charles Simmons, along with Dan and Julie Streeter, demonstrated true community, as they supported and encouraged me each and every step along the way to the completion of the project. Finally, I would like to offer a special thanks to my truly inspirational mother, Donna Eddy, whose life was the ultimate example of self-sacrificial social interest.
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The Purpose of Marriage: Beyond Self-Fulfillment

Marriage is an important institution in almost all societies in the world. In the United States for example, over 90% of the population chooses to marry at some point in their lives (Brubaker & Kimberly, 1993). The meaning and purpose of marriage, and the manner in which spouses are selected, varies across cultures and has changed over time. Throughout history, and particularly preceding the Age of Romanticism, which reached its peak in the early to mid 1800’s, the driving force behind marriage was economic survival, and people primarily married within their socio-economic class. Even after this period, marriages, particularly in many non-Western cultures, continued to be constructed around a person’s socioeconomic status, with the intent of preserving financial stability and raising children within the community where the couple lived.

Prior to the early 1800’s in Western culture – similar to many contemporary non-Western cultures – arranged marriages were a popular practice (Penn, 2011). Within cultures that practice arranged marriages, parents, extended family members or elders within the community seek to find suitable marriage partners for single folks who reach the appropriate age to begin the courting process.

As Western culture continued to progress through the Age of Romanticism towards the end of the 18th century, and subsequently at an even faster rate within the Industrial Age, particularly since the beginning of the 20th century, the ideology of marriage began to change. A much greater focus on marriage for love, individual happiness, and self-fulfillment began to emerge. As a host of prevailing social, political and economic changes began to take place, the idea of entering into a marriage relationship primarily for financial security began to wane. Single individuals, now equipped with greater gender equality, particularly in the workplace,
along with a more developed sense of “self,” began to seek partners whom they truly felt a love connection with, and who, they believed, could further enhance their overall quality of life. Essentially, seeking a partner who was financially secure, became just one component when choosing a spouse, whereas choosing a partner who could potentially enhance a greater movement towards personal goals, happiness and self-fulfillment became the central theme.

Deeply imbedded within the vows of marriage has always been the promise that spouses would do their very best to remain committed to each other, no matter what circumstances or problems should befall them. Cherlin (2009) argued: When discussing material from the literature, always use the past tense that when couples enter into a marriage primarily for feelings of love and personal happiness, this can naturally create a strong and polarizing conflict with staying committed to a marriage partner, particularly when larger problems arise, or when one, or both partners no longer feel happy or a sense of self-fulfillment within the marriage.

This Master’s Project began by comparing and contrasting marriage for socio-economic reasons vs. for love and self-fulfillment. Next, it discussed the natural conflict between staying in a committed marriage, and at the same time, remaining true to one’s self and pursuing personal happiness and individual goals. Finally, the project concluded with a discussion of a possible resolution of this conflict with the help of the concept of marriage as a covenant relationship. Interwoven within the literature review and accompanying presentation were references to Adlerian individual psychology theory that support the literature and ideas that were presented within the project.

Marriage for Survival

Throughout history, and even today within many cultures, the idea or purpose of marriage has primarily been to partner with a suitable mate that will support a solid home and
build economic stability from which to create a family and raise children. One popular example of this is the concept of arranged or structured marriages. According to Roger Penn:

An arranged marriage is one where parents (rather than prospective spouses themselves) choose marital partners for their children (see Penn and Lambert, 2009). Arranged marriages so defined remain typical for around half of the world’s population. They are pervasive in China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the trans-Ural parts of Russia and Nigeria. (Penn, 2011, p. 637)

Penn added: “Not only are arranged marriages typical amongst around half the world’s population, they will become more pervasive in the future since they predominate in countries with high rates of population growth (see United Nations, 2001a)” (Penn, 2011, p. 637).

Like Tevye, the well-meaning father in the popular play Fiddler On The Roof, who (along with the village matchmaker, Yente) attempted to arrange the marriage of his eldest daughter to the financially secure village butcher, parents within cultures that practice arranged marriages seek to find suitable mates for their children. These marriages are largely structured by parents for the purpose of securing a financially, socially and religiously “successful” future for their children and grandchildren.

In the article, The Protective Effect of Marriage for Survival: A Review and Update the authors posited that, “Marriage has been theorized to have protective effects for longevity through the social pathways of social integration, social support, social control, and social role attainment as well as the material pathways of financial resources and economies of scale” (Rendell, Weden, Favreault & Waldron, 2011, p. 484). Dating back to the early colonial days in America, the idea of marriage and living with others within a close knit family was not only a communal expectation; it was, quite actually, a law. According to Andrew Cherlin (2009, p. 41):

The Connecticut law of 1636 read that ‘no man that is neither married, nor hath any servant, nor is a publick Officer shall keep house of himself without consent of the Town where he lives.’ The selectmen of a Massachusetts town in the 1670’s met ‘to setel the younge persons in such families in the Town as is most suitable for their good.’ In part,
these laws reflected the reality that living alone was nearly impossible in an environment where people needed family members to help them obtain the food, clothing, and shelter they needed to survive.

It seems evident that in early American life, the prevailing cultural ideology was that marriage was not only preferred to remaining single, but in order to survive financially, and thrive socially, it was virtually required. The reality that one must get married in order to survive was imbedded within early American society, as in most other world cultures as well.

The notion that marriage was a means to economic and social stability deeply impacted the manner in which marriage partners were chosen as well. Prior to the beginning of the 20th century, the prevailing driver was to choose a future spouse based upon their personal qualities and their ability to provide a stable and financially secure home. Whether it was a fruitful farmer in a rural area, or a successful businessman in the city, single women were pursuing men of substance over romance or appearance, and men were pursuing women who they perceived to be strong homemakers and solid mothers for their future children. As Cherlin further assessed, “Prior to the twentieth century, however, many people would have questioned this link between romantic love and marriage. Romantic love was seen as a risky basis for marriage. When it faded, and people thought it would fade quickly, you might be left with a partner who couldn’t manage a farm, earn a living, or run a household” (Cherlin, 2009, p. 63). In his insightful book, The Marriage-Go-Round, Cherlin goes on to tell the story of Isabella “Maude” Rittenhouse, a single young woman, from the influential Philadelphia family for which a public square is named. Apparently, between the years of 1882 and 1884, Maude was being courted by several well-heeled suitors. Although she was most romantically attracted to one of them, a handsome and stylish man named Robert, whom she described as, “beauty of feature and charm of tongue with little regard for truth and high moral worth,” she ended up choosing a plain-looking,
romantically awkward gentleman by the name of Elmer Comings. Maude stated, “If I do marry Elmer, it will be with a respectful affection and not with a passionate lover love” (Cherlin, 2009, p. 64). Indeed, Maude had not simply chosen Elmer over Robert for her betrothed, but had clearly chosen security over the perceived inferior emotion of romantic love.

Maud’s story was taking place during a period known as the Progressive Era, in which political and social reform, ideas about the nuclear family, and a strong pull towards scientific method were all beginning to take place. There were; however, even stronger socio-economic and political changes on the horizon that would have an even greater impact on the American family and marriages.

There is a German word, Gemeinschaftsgefühl, which is a term Adlerian psychologists use to describe the idea of social interest, or a community feeling. Although social interest encompasses a rather broad range of psychosocial constructs and relationships, at its core, social interest described how people related to and interacted with others within their community (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). For centuries, the institution of marriage has been considered a cornerstone within communities around the world. When a couple gets married, it is within a community setting and in a very real way, as the couple begins building a life together, they most often feel a sense of social interest or a connectedness to the community where they live. This community feeling lends itself to a sort of unspoken expectation that one will grow up to marry and then begin to build a family life within the community. As couples start to raise children, this further enhances the community feeling as they begin to go to school, and participate in other social functions such as sports teams, community involvement and faith based organizations and churches. Most all of these activities involve parents and other family members, which further enhances relationships within the community. The idea of social
interest and a connectedness to one’s community not only acts as a support for marriages and families, but can also be a strong driver to choose to marry in the first place. When people live within tight-knit communities, they often meet and marry someone within that community and are often times introduced vicariously through parents, other family members, or through social interaction within the community.

**Marriage for Love and Self-fulfillment**

Near the beginning of the 19th century, the sociological structure of Western cultures began to change at a rapid pace towards a more pronounced focus on self reliance and the pursuit of individual happiness. These changes were brought on by increasingly progressive socio-economic, political and religious views, and had a major influence on how, and why, marriage partners were chosen. As the mid 20th century arrived, America, along with most other Western cultures, began rapidly moving towards an industrial and information based economic structure, away from predominately agrarian societies. These advances in technology along with the advent of progressive sociopolitical views allowed individuals not only to gain awareness of, but also have more time to focus on, their own personal goals and self-fulfillment.

As the post World War II generation started passing the cultural torch to their children, the “baby boomer” generation was born and they largely adopted more liberal and open minded views about the world and their individual lives than their more conservative parents had. Several major sociopolitical movements were birthed by the baby boomers, and one of the most robust and impactful was the **women’s movement**.

The US Department of State website gives a description of how the movement began:

During the 1950s and 1960s, increasing numbers of married women entered the labor force, but in 1963 the average working woman earned only 63 percent of what a man made. That year author Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, an explosive critique of middle-class patterns that helped millions of women articulate a pervasive
sense of discontent. Arguing that women often had no outlets for expression other than "finding a husband and bearing children, Friedan encouraged readers to seek new roles and responsibilities, to seek their own personal and professional identities rather than have them defined by the outside, male-dominated society. (Country Studies, US, n. d. para, #1)

Greater gender equality created a scenario where women were no longer largely dependent upon their husbands for financial security, and allowed them the opportunity to explore their own educational and professional goals that, historically, had only been open for men to pursue. With this came the new reality that many women could in fact support themselves financially and no longer had to fully depend upon their husbands for monetary support.

So then, what seems to drive single individuals to make the decision to begin pursuing a relationship that will lead to marriage? Like most significant choices that people make in their lives, the answer to this is multifaceted and fairly complex. Perhaps one motivator to begin the courting process involves an Adlerian theory that suggests that people are in a constant state of movement towards life-goals that they are pursuing in order to find significance in their life (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

One factor that drives movement towards a particular life-goal, or an attempt to better one’s life, is the idea of moving from a felt negative to a perceived plus (Harrison, 2001). The premise of this idea is that often times people will feel that they are lacking in something, or not satisfied with a particular area of their life (felt minus), so they begin to focus on and pursue a certain goal or life change (perceived plus). This concept has a strong application as to why individuals in our culture begin the courtship process and move from being a single person into a partnership with another individual. When a person begins to experience negative feelings such as loneliness, the struggle to accomplish life tasks on their own, lack of intimate companionship,
the desire to have children they begin to move towards the perception that being in a marriage or committed relationship would be *better* and more fulfilling than being single.

There may be a few similarities between how courting took place historically and how the process of finding a partner takes place today; however, things have vastly changed within the dating process, particularly over the past half-century or so. One area that has remained a center of influence, both with regard to choosing a partner and the actual success of the relationship itself, is a person’s social network. If a person’s close friends and family approve of the partner they chose, the person is more likely to continue seeing the person and the relationship as having a higher probability of working out long term (Bryant & Conger, 1999). Although the drive to find happiness and significance is a major factor in the courting process, the actual feeling of falling in love with another person is equally as strong. In fact, according to the authors of the classic book, *The Mirages of Marriage*, the idea of love and romance, coupled with the natural desire and need to reproduce, are perhaps the strongest forces driving the decision to enter into a relationship in our current culture. As Lederer & Jackson (1968, pp. 42-43) observed:

Courtship – the time of ecstatic paralysis – has been cleverly designed by Nature to lure members into reproducing themselves. Courtship is a powerful manifestation of sexual excitement. In Western culture, it has well-defined rituals; these are simple steps leading up to ultimate goal – legal breeding. The man and woman are in a trance. By the magic of Nature, they have become wonderfully attracted to each other.

The authors went on to suggest that when a couple is in the courting stage, their strong romantic feelings toward each other can seriously cloud the reality of how difficult marriage can actually be. They wrote:

It is marvelous to observe how ruthless and cunning Nature is in her effort to perpetuate the species. Individuals are in such a dizzy state that they become reckless. The problems of marriage are not noticed or considered. The frightful divorce statistics mean nothing; it seems obvious that bad marriages, like death, are for others only. Frequently, the
partners-to-be know they are marrying the wrong persons, but they are in such a passion (some call it romance), and they are being driven so hard by the applause of society, that they cannot help themselves. For example, they may realize that the man is unable, as yet, to earn a living; or that the woman is incompetent to manage a home; or that each has radically different tastes from the other. These and many other obstacles to a workable marriage usually have no significance to a couple in the courtship stage. (Lederer & Jackson, 1963, p. 43)

This text was written in 1963, and at first glance seems like a rather harsh critique of the courting process, along with some gender stereotyping, however, at least some of the criticisms made by the authors do seem to play out in the reality of relationships today. It seems as though the honeymoon phase of marriage wanes very quickly in our culture, and when the reality of how difficult blending two lives together can be sets in, many couples are simply not equipped to cope with the problems and challenges that marriage can bring. Interestingly enough, the fact the book was written in 1963, when U.S. divorce rates were relatively low (compared to today), seems to add to the validity of the author’s claims that deep feelings of love and romanticism can seriously cloud the judgment of those in the courtship stage of their relationship. The higher divorce rates of today prove, if nothing else, that many people believe they are going to be happier and more fulfilled in their marriages than they actual are, after the strong feelings of intimacy and infatuation wear off and the reality of married life actually sets in.

**The Conflict Between Commitment and Self-fulfillment**

A good share of research seems to suggest that the decade in which the greatest change in the overall attitude and approach towards marriage took place was in the 1960’s. Andrew Cherlin in *The Marriage-Go-Round* highlights a project by researcher Francesca Cancian in which she examined 128 articles in popular women’s magazines such as *McCall’s* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* that offered marriage advice to women from the early 1900’s through the 1970’s. Cancian focused on articles that characterized a more individualized marriage with three central
themes: self-development, more flexible and less pre-determined roles, and openness in communication and confronting problems within the marriage. Her research led her to conclude that approximately one-third of the articles between 1900 and 1950 focused on these individual oriented themes, whereas articles between 1960 and the mid 1970’s discussed these themes two-thirds of the time. Cancian described this shift as a movement from “role to self” (Cherlin, 2009).

Highlighted within the narrative of The Marriage-Go-Round, the author described the contradictions of American culture related to committed relationships:

Cultural models are habits of thought, taken-for-granted ways of interpreting the world that we draw upon in everyday life. But sometimes there is more than one cultural model—more than one set of tools—that we apply to a given situation. That is the case with intimate partnerships, where Americans can draw upon both a cultural model of marriage and a cultural model of individualism. (Cherlin, 2009, p. 25)

Through his research of marriage relationships within the US, Cherlin discovered a deep cultural struggle between making an effort to stay in, and work through, marriage issues, while at the same time, attempting to satisfy one’s own personal goals and happiness.

How then do professional helpers make an attempt to address the struggle couples may bring into the therapeutic process between staying committed to their marriage when they or their partner no longer feel fulfilled or happy within the relationship? Perhaps one area to explore would be the principles and ideas within a true covenant marriage.

**Principals of Covenant Marriage**

When discussing aspects of covenant relationship within therapy, it is helpful to recognize that when the issue of spirituality or faith enters into the therapeutic process, the professional helper is likely supporting and perhaps expounding upon ideas and principles that couples bring into the therapeutic relationship themselves regarding their personal religious
beliefs. According to the article, *Partners in the spiritual dance: learning client's steps while minding all our toes*, the author’s stated:

Interest in the role of spirituality in marriage and family therapy (MFT) practice has grown over the past 15 years, as evidenced by an increasing number of publications (Bailey, Pryce & Walsh, 2002; Weaver et al., 2002). Many authors point out the importance of spirituality and religion to the American public (Bailey, 2002; Hodge, 2000; Wolfe & Stevens, 2001), noting that spiritual matters are therefore important, or even integral, to therapy (Aponte, 2002; Kimball & Knudson-Martin, 2002). As a result, articles and books have contrasted traditional, secular approaches to MFT training and practice with the prevalence of spiritual priorities among the majority of clients and therapists, pointing to the need of additional training to enable therapists to address spiritual issues competently (Dunn & Dawes, 1999; Haug, 1998; Helmeke & Bischof, 2002; Patterson, Hayworth, Turner, & Raskin, 2000). Despite this call for additional training, therapists may still struggle with the challenges associated with addressing spiritual issues in practice. (as cited in Keeling, Dolbin-MacNab, Ford & Perkins, 2010, p. 229)

Exactly what couples are committing to when entering into a marriage relationship, whether assumed, or even explicitly stated within the wedding vows, is often times misunderstood, or not fully recognized by the couple getting married. Individualism and the pursuit of personal goals has caused us to view marriage as more of a "contract" between two people who may be, even at a subconscious level, wherein the marriage is primarily being used for personal happiness and self-fulfillment. A covenant agreement; however, invokes a bond of self-sacrificial love in which both parties put the good of the other, and the overall health of the relationship above their own individual happiness. Historically, the practice of entering into a covenant relationship between two parties was considered a deeply significant and serious undertaking. Drawing upon data from ancient times, British theologian Malcolm Smith offers the following definition of a covenant:

A covenant is a binding, unbreakable obligation between two parties, based on unconditional love sealed by blood and sacred oath, that creates a relationship in which each party is bound by specific undertakings on each other's behalf. The parties to the covenant place themselves under the penalty of divine retribution should they later
attempt to avoid those undertakings. It is a relationship that can only be broken by death. (Smith, 2002, pp. 12-13)

Margaret Brinig and Steven Nock, two scholars who have done significant work in applying the concept of covenant to contemporary marriage, observe that, at its heart, a covenant involves three central aspects: “(1) unconditional love; (2) permanence . . . ; and (3) involvement (or witness) of God, or, at minimum, the larger community” (Brinig & Nock, 2005, p. 266).

In our contemporary American culture, covenant is easily confused with the concept of a contract. Malcolm Smith helpfully articulates the important differences between a contract and a covenant:

Let us get the concept of a contract out of our heads right away. A contract is a vehicle whereby properties and goods are conveyed from one person to another. Contracts are negotiable by both of the parties and can be changed or even canceled. In a contract, promises are made that are as good as the character of the contracting parties whose signatures seal the document; therefore, they are easily broken. (Smith, 2002, p. 17)

Indeed, in our modern world, this level of covenant commitment may seem quite extreme. However, aren't the words, “Until death do us part,” spoken, in many marriage vows? In many cases, it seems that the promise, “Until you no longer make me happy,” seems to be a more appropriate vow. A relevant point in the discussion of marriage commitment seems to be that within America today, we have largely evolved into a culture that values the growth and happiness of the individual vs. the well-being of the other.

**Application of Covenant Relationship within Adlerian Therapy**

Many ideas related to covenant relationship can be found within various psychological theories. I will focus on three covenantal principles that seem quite compatible with Adlerian theory: mistaken beliefs, goal-alignment and social interest.
Mistaken beliefs: faulty thinking and negative experiences individuals bring into their marriage. The authors of Adlerian Therapy, Theories and Practice, give a clear and concise description of how a person's personal belief system, or private logic, becomes established:

Private logic is composed of ideas conceived in childhood, which may or may not be appropriate to later life. Adlerians believe that "you are what you think." The life style is built on deeply established personal beliefs or constructs that are referred to as private logic. As we develop, we establish ideas about what is right and wrong on the basis of our subjective personal experience. If, for example, a person's early life experiences were painful, then he or she is likely to develop mistaken ideas or faulty logic. (Carlson, Watts & Maniaci, 2006, p. 12)

One of the first events most children experience is how their family system operates and how their parents relate to each other and handle their relationship. If the child's parents were in a loving, nurturing and fairly functional marriage, the child would most likely develop a positive and secure view of intimate relationship and marriage. On the other hand, if the child witnessed a negative relationship between their parents, one that was perhaps cold, unloving or even abusive, then these negative experiences would also have an impact in the development of the child's private logic and would most likely play out in how they perceive marriage and actually conduct themselves in their own intimate relationships in the future. A person, therefore, can develop what Adler described as mistaken convictions or mistaken beliefs regarding various aspects of their lives, including marriage and intimate relationships. Unless a person's mistaken beliefs are exposed and their faulty thinking redirected, they will most likely bring negative and even harmful behaviors into their marriage.

In his book, The Meaning of Marriage, bestselling author, Timothy Keller, who pastors one of the largest, "mega-churches" in downtown Manhattan, explores the complexities of post-modern relationships and marriages. Keller's church is home to several thousand single
members which offers a solid base from which he has conducted survey's and interviews around the topic of marriage and committed relationship. Interestingly enough, one of the trends Keller discovered through his day-to-day interactions and research with his single congregation, was that many of his parishioners had social and cultural misperceptions (i.e., mistaken beliefs) regarding marriage. Keller wrote:

As the pastor of a church containing several thousand single people in Manhattan, I have talked to countless men and women who have the same negative perceptions about marriage. However, they underestimate the prospects for a good marriage. All surveys tell us that the number of married people who say they are “very happy” in their marriages is high, about 61-62 percent, and there has been little decrease in this figure during the last decade. Most striking of all, longitudinal studies demonstrate that two-thirds of those unhappy marriages out there will become happy within five years if people stay married and do not get divorced. (Keller, 2011, p. 26)

Mistaken beliefs or misperceptions about marriage can stem from many different sources and life experiences. Again, often times our perception of how marriage "works" originates through our early childhood experiences within our own family and has a deep, psychological and emotional impact on our lives and how we eventually approach and behave in our own marriage and intimate relationships. Our learned experiences often times dictate how we relate to our partners. As Keller pointed out, there are also sociological factors that play into how we perceive and ultimately live out our marriages.

It is the task of the therapist to help their clients uncover and expose the mistaken beliefs or goals in regard to their marriages and assist them to create a new and healthy way of thinking about, and approaching their marriage relationships. Covenant relationships became a way to clarify and correct both mistaken personal and cultural beliefs about marriage when working with couples. A therapist can help reframe a troubled marriage by offering covenantal perspective while helping couples expose and redirect mistaken beliefs they have brought into the marriage.
Goal orientation: marriage partners creating and pursing common goals for their marriage. Adler theorized that most all human behavior was goal-driven, and that people tend to strive to reach a future goal, or place in life where they feel significant and are successful in what they hope to achieve. Adler posited that many times future goals are indeed fictional, and tend to be created early in our childhood as we begin to overcompensate for feelings of inferiority that we experience in our formative years (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Thus, our goal-driven conduct can have a direct impact on our broader relationships and more intensely within how we behave and operate within our intimate relationships. Oberst and Stewart, the authors of Adlerial Psychotherapy, An Advanced Approach to Individual Psychology, described how the professional helper can use the insight they gain into their client's fictional goals related to their marriage (as well as other aspects of their lives), to aide and encourage them to set new goals that align with their partner's goals. They continued:

Knowledge that a client experiences feelings of inertness and powerlessness may render interpretable his or her failed attempts to achieve control and mastery through aggressive, domineering, or threatening behaviours. At this juncture in therapy, the inappropriate and exhaustive goal-striving for personal superiority over others may be addressed and modified along healthier and more socially useful lines. That is, life goals are realigned so that the client no longer is working against others but is able to find a place among others and to contribute to others so that life is experienced as fulfilling and rewarding. (Oberst & Stewart, 2003, p. 123)

The idea of setting covenant terms, or covenant stipulations, within a marriage can be a useful tool for couples to define, align and pursue marital goals. Most couples it seems, simply enter into their marriage without addressing what their marriage goals actually are. This is quite troubling considering the fact that entering into a marriage is perhaps the most important decision a person will make in their lives. Would a person accept a new job, enter into a financial agreement, or even plan a trip without fully understanding and defining what the terms
of the agreement are, or where they were going and how they are getting there? Indeed, no, but it seems the same amount of scrutiny is not applied to the serious undertaking of marriage!

A therapist can help couples, no matter what stage in their relationship they find themselves, to enter into a dialogue about their current and future goals and dreams. The therapist can help define, set and create a practical plan for couples to reach common goals together. At this time, individual goals can also be addressed in a manner in which each partner is aware of, and willing to support, their partner's personal goals in a way that will not be harmful or disruptive to the marriage.

**Social interest: marriage within a social context.** As Adler viewed the world around him, he observed that individuals lived within fairly tight-knit family and community groups, and he began developing a concept that he would eventually term *social interest*. Adler suggested that if an individual was closely connected to their community and were actively involved in adding value to that community, then their life was, in fact, *useful*, or helpful to the community. On the other hand, if an individual was primarily self-centered and unconnected to their community, then their life was not useful or helpful to others because it was not being used for the common good of the community (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). The same theory, I believe, can be applied to marriage.

Whether a couple is marrying within or outside a faith-based community, they most often recite their vows in the midst of their family and friends in a semi-public forum and this event is strongly tied to the idea of covenant marriage. When the couple vows to love, honor and support each other, they are not only committing these things to each other, but also to their family, friends, and their greater community. If the couple chooses to have a religious ceremony, they are also most likely committing their marriage to God, or the higher entity they worship.
A primary tenet in support of gay marriage in the United States is that legalizing gay marriage allows homosexual couples to enjoy the same benefits and privileges as heterosexual spouses which help strengthen communities, and allows gay couples access to community and family involvement that heterosexual couples enjoy. The gay community at large appears to rally behind and support the idea that families, regardless of sexual orientation, are closely tied to their larger community, and that it is important to be able to enter into community relationships without barriers related to sexual orientation (Becker, 2012).

One of Adler's main reasons for supporting and promoting social interest was to encourage people to engage with and support their families, friends, neighbors, and community, not simply to focus on promoting their own lives and self interests. Adler's ideas around social interest and community involvement appear to be quite compatible with the principles of covenant relationship.

The Adlerian therapist can use ideas associated with social interest and covenant relationship with their clients. Encouraging clients to use and invest in their marriages and relationships to help others and support their communities can be an effective tool when working with couples. Through social involvement, couples and families may begin to recognize that they are not the only ones who are dealing with relational challenges and issues, which can help put their own marriage and family issues into perspective. Social interest and covenant principals can also help bring greater meaning and purpose within a marriage so the underlying theme is not about "me" and what I can take out of the marriage, but rather, how can "our" marriage have a real and positive impact within our sphere of influence and greater community?

Within the therapeutic relationship, a professional helper can offer tools that help couples get involved in activities within the community that they enjoy doing together and feel that they
are making a real difference in the world. Setting therapeutic goals around social interest and covenant principals can be an effective in working with couples and families.

Conclusion

Over time, the definition and purpose of marriage has changed and evolved. Religious, socio-economic, political, and other cultural factors continue to shape how marriage is viewed and approached around the world. The idea of covenant marriage is simply one way in which to frame and pursue the formation of a strong and binding commitment between two individuals who seek to love and support each other, their children, and their community.
References


