



Will I Marry Her?

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A Barbie and a Ken doll—complete with their two babies and a dog from my favorite aunt when I was seven years old—are the Christmas presents I most vividly remember from my childhood. This image of family influenced my vision of the future for many years to come. I believed that by the time I was twenty-five, I would look like Barbie and have her “two- kids-and-a-dog” life.

This is hardly a paper about a ruined life and image because of a plastic, yet beautiful, doll; rather, it is a look at how the image of family, even Barbie’s family, has shaped my reality. Even as late as this year, I bought a dog shortly after my twenty-fifth birthday. Something is still missing, and although I am glad that I finally know that it is not Ken I long for, I struggle with the issue of how to realize my image of family.

At the age of eighteen, while visiting a friend in college, a remarkable turning point occurred in my life. During a short walk with my friend she explained that she wanted me to meet a friend of hers, but she wanted to “warn” me about her first. She had to warn me, she explained, because the girl that I would be meeting was gay. I considered myself very open-minded but I had never met anyone that was gay, so my **stereotyping** of her began instantly, without even realizing it. I wondered what she would look like, what she would be like,

and I was a little scared of the unfamiliar that I would soon encounter. In *Twelve Angry Men*, we meet a juror who comments, “You know how ‘those people’ are!” In the film, this stereotype may have sent someone to death because the juror had a **prejudice** against a group of people they did not know. This was my fist thought upon hearing that I would be meeting someone that was gay: ‘those people.’ This prejudice did nothing but distort the truth and place an unfair label on someone. If I hadn’t overcome it, my life would be very different today.

On the walk back to my friend’s apartment, she explained to me that “the gay girl” thought that I was beautiful. I cringed and suddenly became extremely uncomfortable about the prospect of seeing her again. How could another girl look at me that way? When she explained that I should take it as a compliment and nothing more, I realized how unfair and even closed-minded I was being. When I saw “the gay girl” that day and again the next day, we spent some time together and seemed to connect in a way I hadn’t ever connected with anyone. That night, I couldn’t figure out why I was still there, still spending time with her, inexplicably drawn to her; she was gay. I began getting feelings I had never had before; suddenly wondering what my feelings were, what they meant and if it was okay to feel them. All of these thoughts were ringing in my head so much that when “the gay girl” kissed me I did absolutely nothing in return; I continued thinking about all the whys, whats, and hows. Worried about how I might become someone or something else. Fortunately, I finally kissed Nikki in return. I was not supposed to fall in love with a girl, but I did, and doing so has taught me more about love, acceptance, society and myself than any other experience in my life.

Recently, the issue of gay couples’ rights to marry has raised much controver-

sy. Over 60% of the population does not believe that gay couples should have the right to marry, but those that agree and disagree with gay marriage are all voicing loud protests against one another. President Bush is currently attempting to pass a Constitutional Amendment defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Most proponents of this amendment hold marriage as a sacred religious ceremony. **Ritual**, as defined by **Randall Collins** is a “stereotyped sequence of gestures and sounds’... that make emotions more intense, and commit them more strongly to views of reality...” (Wallace and Wolf, 148). Those who are against gay marriage hold this view of a sacred ritual with family and friends. It is something that little girls spend years longing for. What they are not seeing, however, is that marriage does not end after the ceremony, and that the ceremony doesn’t have to be about a white dress and a church.

According to the **functionalist** perspective, as stated by Farganis, “the reason people obey rules, follow codes of behavior, and abide by the laws of society, is that they accept the fundamental values of their society and see its authority structures as legitimate expressions of this consensus” (225). Individuals in society want to follow the laws of society. When others have strong arguments against gay marriage and oppose it, they trust the **institution**, or the “beliefs and modes of behavior instituted by the collectivity” (Wallace and Wolf, 22). Such institutional realities are seen by **Emile Durkheim** as a **social fact**, a set of “laws, moral, beliefs, customs standing external to the individual and shaping his or her life” (Wallace and Wolf, 22). Many trust the norms and past customs of society and try to turn them into their laws because they believe that is the way to induce what Durkheim’s called social **integration**, “the incorporation of individuals into the social order [is]...important for the maintenance of social equilibrium” (Wallace and Wolf,

21). This concept can be looked at much differently, however, if we integrate homosexual couples into society, fostering equal relationships for all individuals.

Ralf Dahrendorf believes “that the distribution of **power** is the crucial determinant of social structure ... the essence of power is the control of sanctions, which enables those who possess power to give orders and obtain what they want from the powerless. Power is a ‘lasting source of friction’” (Wallace and Wolf, 120). **Rae Lesser Blumberg** believes that “the most important of many factors... influencing women’s overall equality is economic” (Wallace and Wolf, 144). She goes on to state that “the greater a woman’s economic power... the greater her control over ‘marriage, divorce, sexuality, household, authority, and various types of household decisions’” (Wallace and Wolf, 144). In terms of the **stratification by gender**, whoever brings more income into a marriage will have more control over life decisions concerning the relationship. This may unfortunately hold true in heterosexual relationships, but in regards to relationships between two women, at least in my experience, it is never a question of who has more control, but rather one of equality between two individual who are oppressed in terms of gender and sexual orientation. In addition, marriage should never be about power and control, especially economically; it should always be about a shared and equal relationship between two people.

In the future, however, I see a different image forming, especially in regards to lesbian marriages. In the film *The Big One* Michael Moore, touring city by city, uncovers corporate greed in the United States. Company after company make millions, or even billions of dollars, lay off people, shut down entire factories, and move their facilities to other countries so that they may pay individuals in countries with no minimum wage law considerably lower sums of money. In the movie, we also meet Phillip

Knight, the CEO of the Nike Corporation. The Nike Corporation has absolutely no shoe-making factories in the U.S., but has factories in Indonesia among others. There, girls as young as 14 years of age work for as little as \$2 a day to make sneakers for Nike. Mr. Knight is aware of this and the fact that Indonesia is an extremely exploited country with a regime that during some protests had killed over 200,000 of its own people. Mr. Knight, however, and so many other CEO's just like him, is not concerned with these conditions. Their goal is to make as much money as possible and they do not care who is negatively affected while they are doing it. In the film *Affluenza*, we learn of businesses, like Nike, subconsciously influencing our minds through advertisements. Although gay marriage is only fully accepted by about 25% of the population, gay magazines are already filled with advertisements aimed at the homosexual lifestyle. Not only are beer advertisements changed to sell the sexiness of two women rather than a heterosexual couple, but businesses such as hotels, cruise ships, and even sections of cities and towns are advertising specifically for the gay lifestyle so that they may cash in on gays' feeling more comfortable by helping gather their "group" in one particular location.

Norms "are established and maintained... by power, and their substance may well be explained in terms of interests of the powerful... established norms are nothing but ruling norms" (Dahrendorf, as cited in Wallace and Wolf, 121). Norms are established by the economically powerful. **Social stratification** "is caused by norms, which categorize some things as desirable and other as not" (Wallace and Wolf, 121). Society has always had norms; it is the image of desire, or undesirable, norms that causes conflict. Through social stratification, individuals in society, including myself, see a heterosexual marriage, and all that comes along with it, as desirable. When this happens, homosexual relation-

ships and its conflicts, struggles, and negative images formed by society, become undesirable. Why have all that conflict when you can have the desirable vision?

Homosexual couples who are hoping to someday marry may be aided by what **Randall Collins** calls **mutual surveillance**—"the more people are in the physical presence of others—the more they accept the culture of the group and expect precise conformity in others" (Wallace and Wolf, 147). In addition, according to **Peter Blau**, **social exchange** "creates **trust** between people and integrates individuals into social groups" (Wallace and Wolf, 331). He believes that social exchanges

... tend to start small and evolve slowly. ... **Reciprocation** and expanded exchange are 'accompanied by a parallel growth of mutual trust. Hence, processes of social exchange, which may originate in pure self interest, generate trust in social relations through their recurrent and gradually expanding character. (Wallace and Wolf, 331)

Recently, when Nikki and I were out with a married couple, I realized how differently they viewed our relationship from theirs. It wasn't until later on in the evening when we talked about plans to visit family the following day—a family wedding planned for the summer that we had to attend, and a battle over who was going to walk the dog when we got home—that I think they finally realized that Nikki and I were almost exactly like them. Individuals need to spend more time with those that are different from them so that they will feel better about fully accepting them. I have always believed that no one who spent time with Nikki and I would really believe that we don't belong together.

I was forever looking at myself wondering how I could now be this person that I was not supposed to be. **George Herbert**

Mead explains that there are “two ‘phases’ of the self,” the “**I**” and the “**me**” (Wallace and Wolf, 198). The self is the determining factor in an individual’s behavior, split into the “**I**,” or the creative, active self of you, and the “**me**,” or society’s version. Mead believed that individuals can “adjust, adapt, and control behavior based on self-reflection” (Farganis 12) through **symbolic interaction**. In “Theoretical Reflections on Peer Judgments” (2003), M. Goltry explains that her self-awareness and her focus on how others viewed her shaped her self-identity. Mead believed in individualism, and gave individuals tremendous faith in their own individuality. Based on his views, there is a “**fixed-entity**” in human beings that allows us to govern ourselves. He seems to suggest that we rely on our predictability and values as we increase our creativity and interests. This notion gives the individual tremendous personal power, if we use it in a positive and confident way. It is through symbolic interactionism that I accepted the fact that I was in love and that was okay. It took a tremendous amount of personal strength however, to keep reminding myself of that, of the meaning in love in new symbolic forms.

Phenomenology approaches the world from a stranger’s point of view with no presumptions. “People who question the way their world is ordered or who are members of a **subordinate group**... like ... gays and lesbians... will acquire many insights into their situation if they put on the lens of this perspective... the ‘bracketing’ or suspending of taken-for-granted assumptions by oppressed groups makes sense in such situations... phenomenology took shape through political unrest. (Wallace and Wolf, 253, 254). It “challenges our culturally learned ideas... to question our way of looking at our way of being in the world” (Wallace and Wolf, 253). Unknowingly, I used phenomenology when questioning if it would be okay to have my relationship with Nikki. Questioning our way in the

world opened my mind to a possibility I had never thought of before; it allowed me to be the person that I am today. I began this paper with another struggle, however, one about my images of family and marriage conflicting with the person that I am today, realizing that I was no longer a stranger to the concept.

Sociobiology is the study of “the biological basis of behavior.” Sociobiologists “believe that biological factors and genetic influences set limits to the range of possible behaviors. These limits and behavioral tendencies, they argue, result from evolution, just as does the behavior of other species, and they must be understood in the context of natural selection” (Wallace and Wolf, 383). In contrast, **sociology of the body** is the study of a “social construction of our behavior” (Wallace and Wolf, 373). The question of why it felt okay to have my relationship is one related to the controversy between sociology of the body and sociobiology (Wallace and Wolf, 383). I personally believe that I was not born gay. On the other hand, I give no credit to the alternative concept of **social construction**. I truly believe that I simply fell in love and that what society would think played no part in how I fell in love. When I begin to think of marriage, however, I am consciously aware that society is playing a big part in how to live with my relationship.

Emile Durkheim explains that due to the **dualism of human nature** individuals have two sides. They have an egoistic side and the social side stems from the characteristics of society (Hurst 43). Individuals are constantly functioning through biological and societal impulses. When Nikki and I first met, I had an inner battle with the societal disapproval and my natural feelings. This conflict continued for years and is the reason why our society has the term “in the closet.” For those who do not possess a strong sense of themselves in a society that fears difference, the societal impulses win over the individuals’ personal feelings and

cause them to conform themselves to a traditional society. **Georg Simmel** believed that conflict was good for society because it brought about change. Simmel also believed that “social action involves harmony and conflict, love and hatred” (Wallace and Wolf, 77). In my view this approach to **conflict theory** also holds true for individuals as well. “Individuals possess rationality, intellect, and a mind, they also possess a ‘soul,’ a nonrational dimension” (Hurst 44). On that fateful night I experienced inner conflict, when my soul (and heart) presided to change my life. Now I struggle with how to have the Barbie doll family and stay happy in my relationship with Nikki. Since there is currently no harmony between those battling for or against the issue of gay marriage, I hope that the conflict will eventually bring about a change that will be more equal for everyone.

When we imagine how we appear to others, how we imagine they see us and then allow that to affect our feelings about ourselves, we are experiencing what **Charles Horton Cooley** termed the **looking glass self**. In his own words, Cooley identifies three moments of the process as follows: “the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification” (Wallace and Wolf, 195). These feelings, based solely on your imagination of someone else’s judgment, can be positive or negative. Kristy Canfield, in “Repairing the Soul: Matching Inner with Outer Beauty” (2002), talks of “setting up a plan of protection against the cruelties of the world” after feeling no acceptance due to her speech impediment. Since all too often I assume that people are looking at me negatively causing feelings of low self-esteem about my physical characteristics, I decided to change my looking glass self in regards to my relationship. Believing that everyone who observes the interactions between Nikki and me is actually jealous of our rela-

tionship has made my relationship easier when faced with possibly uncomfortable situations. In the issue of marriage, however, I believe that everyone views it in a negative sense. Since I struggle with my future image of having a family, my looking glass self gives me a more negative view.

Ethnomethodology is the process in which we as people make sense of the world around us in everyday life. **Harold Garfinkel** believed that we should begin “to treat as problematic what is taken for granted in order to understand the commonsense of the everyday world.” This concept becomes quite humorous for me when questioning heterosexual marriages. We take it for granted because it is the norm but if society began to treat it as a problem the way that homosexual marriages are currently being treated, it may be understood more that it is common sense that when two people are in love, they’re in love. In *The Matrix*, Neo “struggles to overcome the opposing images of his life, the one in “the Matrix” and the one in the real world.” (Danahay and Rieder 221). Neo’s situation is especially complex, however, because he must attempt to make sense of the entire concept of life itself. When struggling with the issue of marriage, I cannot see heterosexual marriages as a problem because the image of Barbie’s family was impressed on my views to be a perfect family.

According to Charles Hurst, for **Karl Marx** “much of what we become is determined by our relationships in society” (Hurst 44). He defines this as one aspect of our **species being**. Hurst further suggests that in Marx’s view, individuals and society are in a “love-hate relationship of necessity.” Marx believes that the capitalist society suppresses individuals’ personal expressions. This proves true today in relation to the controversy of gay marriage. Seven years ago I never thought that anyone would be so much against simple expressions of a love that can only make people

happier. My relationship to society, in my opinion, has always been very positive. If I am in a homosexual marriage, however, my relationship to society will be negative in the eyes of many.

Erving Goffman believed that “to interact with others successfully to achieve individual or collective objectives involves the ability to play a variety of roles and to manipulate the self in order to get from others the desired reactions, responses, or rewards” (Farganis 351). **Dramaturgy**, as he coined it, involves viewing “our actions and those of others through the prism of a dramatic stage play.” Preparation for our interactions, the act itself performed in the **front stage**, took place **back stage**, hidden from the audience. Often I need to use this concept because I am forced to shield my relationship. I cannot see myself doing this, however, if I marry another woman.

C. Wright Mills’s concept of **sociological imagination** “allows us to understand our personal predicaments by reference to wider events and institutions. It forces us to look around us for broader social conditions and processes” (Hurst 7). This concept took shape for me especially when studying the social movements in history and their similarities to the Civil Rights Movement. Currently, many people are claiming that the debate over gay marriage should be put to a popular vote. What they are forgetting is that not that long ago, millions were against civil rights for blacks, and that if left to a popular vote, there might still be segregated schools today. Fighting with myself about why it is not always okay to be who I am is always less painful when I realize that I am not alone and that society, and the events that shape it, take time for change.

Collective conscience is “underlying common beliefs and attitudes that exist independent of particular individuals and across generations, and that tie a society together” (Hurst 32). These beliefs, once socially constructed, however, acquire “their

own life,” and are not open to individual variations. We allow this to happen because society does not allow us to question the rules. When we step outside of this we are destroying the image. That is how some of my friends made me feel after I told them about my relationship with Nikki. I was suddenly this flawed character because they could no longer have the same image of me that they had before. When they question my future with her, it involves statements about who will wear the white wedding dress and who is more in charge in our relationship. When they ask questions like this, they are using what **Alfred Schutz** calls the “common sense” **stock of knowledge**: “Social recipes of conceptions of appropriate behavior that enable them to think of the world as made up of ‘types’ of things” (Wallace and Wolf, 255). This is when I realized how much we were being pressured to define ourselves in terms of our sexual orientation. Individuals, and society, form our society through **labels** and “types” without regard for its effects. A marriage may soon be defined as a union between a man and a woman, simply because society expects a white wedding dress and a black suit.

The world around us, including ourselves, is shaped by society. It tells us how we should look to fit society’s “okay” image. **Ralf Dahrendorf** questions **deviance**, or deviant behavior, as the “failure of the socialization process rather than an expression of difference and dissent” (Farganis, 265). If we continue to label and stigmatize differences, society and the individuals in society will continue to fear these differences, or alter what is deviant with no regard for the individual. This is explored in Emily Margulies’ “Why I Smoke: Sociology of a Deadly Habit” (2003). Society played the largest part in causing her smoking habit. When it became an addiction, however, society—which now had become intolerant of smoking—saw her as a deviant. Deviance is used to label anything that is differ-

ent from the norms of society. In the film *Erin Brockovich*, Erin is portrayed as a deviant not only because of the way she dresses, but because the way she dresses conflicts with the image of who she really is. One of the negative responses I have heard upon telling someone else about my relationship with Nikki was, “Why, you’re such a pretty girl?” What that person was ignorant about is that looks do not define who a person is and their life choices, and that those two are not always in perfect sync with society’s expected relationship between the two.

Lewis Coser believes that “a group’s position to and conflict with ‘deviants’ makes apparent to group members what they ought to do” (Wallace and Wolf, 131). “In this sense *internal conflict* is central to defining a group’s identity, which is embodied in norms that define correct behavior. ... Coser also argues that internal conflict can increase a group’s survival, cohesion, and stability” (Wallace and Wolf, 131). **Georg Simmel** believes that “opposition gives us inner satisfaction, distraction, relief” (Wallace and Wolf, 131). Although I struggle with many, trying to show them that gay marriage is okay even when they do not change their views instantly, I am relieved knowing that I can defend myself, my relationship, and the homosexual marriages of others with pride, in myself and in my group.

Billy Elliot, in a motion picture of the same name, grows up as a young boy in England, hiding his ballet slippers and sneaking to ballet class so that he may be able to dance without condemnation from his father. When his father does catch him, Billy’s response—“What’s wrong with ballet, it’s perfectly normal”—is also a reflection of his own insecurities in a society that wants 10 year old boys go to boxing class. Eventual acceptance from his father causes Billy great joy, while still causing his father embarrassment. When Billy dances all along the street while walking with his father, his father replies “Is that absolutely neces-

sary?” This scene reminded me a lot of my relationship with my father after he finally accepted my relationship with Nikki. Seven years later, my dad still refers to Nikki as his “other daughter,” fielding the uncomfortable questions. The end of Billy Elliot gives me great hope as Billy’s father and brother rush to see a ten-year-old Billy’s performance of *The Swan Lake*. The pride that Billy’s father feels can be felt. This was so important to me because I constantly struggle with how my father will feel if I do decide to marry Nikki. I hope that one day, when I am not looking, my father feels this same sense of unconditional pride over who I have become. Maybe this will happen after he walks me to my bride in my white wedding dress.

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