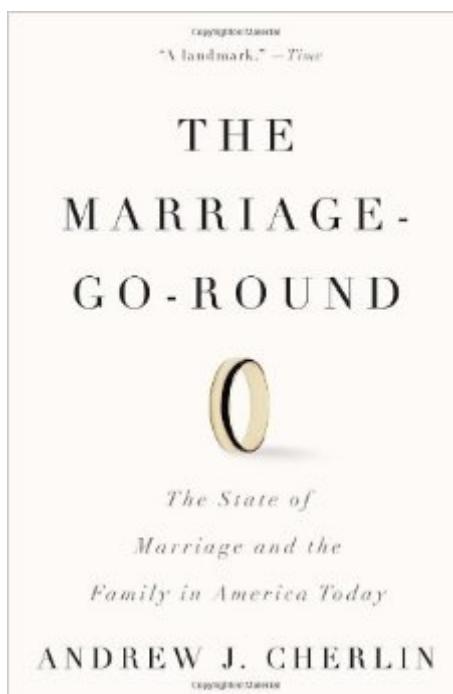


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The Marriage-Go-Round: The State Of Marriage And The Family In America Today



Synopsis

The Marriage-Go-Round illuminates the shifting nature of America's most cherished social institution and explains its striking differences from marriage in other Western countries. Andrew J. Cherlin's three decades of study have shown him that marriage in America is a social and political battlefield in a way that it isn't in other developed countries. Americans marry and divorce more often and have more live-in partners than Europeans, and gay Americans have more interest in legalizing same-sex marriage. The difference comes from Americans' embrace of two contradictory cultural ideals: marriage, a formal commitment to share one's life with another; and individualism, which emphasizes personal choice and self-development. Religion and law in America reinforce both of these behavioral poles, fueling turmoil in our family life and heated debate in our public life. Cherlin's incisive diagnosis is an important contribution to the debate and points the way to slowing down the partnership merry-go-round.

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Customer Reviews

The Marriage Go Round will shift the way you think about America's most hotly debated institution. Unlike so many treatments of the subject in the popular press, which often seem to be little more than political pamphleteering, Professor Cherlin's book does not easily yield a liberal or conservative label. Its main ideas are big and non-intuitive -- the way I like 'em. It's got the "wow on every page" factor that Malcolm Gladwell's books offer. But unlike Gladwell, who's a journalist who summarizes other people's research, Professor Cherlin's the real deal: an academic who's spent decades in the trenches studying this stuff. So what does Marriage Go Round tell us? First of all, Americans marry

and divorce way more than people from other countries do. And our high rate of "relationship turnover" causes extreme agita. In other words, it may not be great to get divorced, but it's even worse to cycle in and out of relationships, particularly when children are involved. Instability is worse than stability, even the "stability" of being alone. The book also talks about the schizophrenic attitude Americans have towards marriage. On the one hand, we idealize it. (It's crucial to marry in order to live a full life.) On the other hand, we idealize our freedom and independence. (If a marriage isn't giving us what we need, it should be abandoned.) We embrace both ideals without realizing they contradict each other. But they do. And when they collide, it drives us over the bend. So what should we do? How do we "get off" the Marriage Go Round? Here, Cherlin's advice seems apropos for our time: we need to slow down! Stop hopping in and out of relationships. Take the time to figure yourself out first.

The author focuses on 2 themes here - the high value Americans place on marriage and the high value we place on independence. His main point is that these values are rather contradictory. He sees that as explaining our rather unique approach to marriage in the industrialized world - i.e., the marriage churn, or merry go-round, of cohabit-marry-divorce-repeat. The big issue here, of course, is the effect on the kids. In fact, Cherlin goes so far as to claim that a single-parent family is healthier than one where the kids are exposed to multiple parental partners and the lack of stability that involves. Cherlin covers the topic from all angles, touching on history, class, race, religion, mobility, globalization - all the important pieces of the puzzle. He also has an incredibly clear and lucid style. In fact, it's almost impossible to misunderstand what he's trying to get across. He really takes his time to make sure you hear and understand his argument. He also really knows his stuff. As another reviewer pointed out, we're not just dealing with another Malcolm Gladwell here. At the same time, his mastery of the details doesn't keep him from putting the pieces together and coming up with some very insightful and thought-provoking explanations and connections. One of the editorial reviews slighted the book for not really providing a solution. Cherlin does mention a few ideas but, no, he really doesn't offer the magic, all-encompassing fix that a lot of people expect for issue books like this these days. I actually admire him for this. This topic is way too complex to admit of any silver bullet. I think it's enough that he points out the problem and analyzes it so incisively. That's the first step.

Andrew Cherlin's "The Marriage-Go-Round" is a careful and well-researched sociological study examining how Americans keep shuffling partners. Why do we seem to marry, divorce, and re-marry

with such frequency? The merry-go-round metaphor is apt -- "frequent marriage, frequent divorce, more short-term cohabiting relationships ... Americans step on and off the carousel of intimate partnerships" he writes. He examines how attitudes towards marriage have changed drastically since the 1950s: "That people could skip from one live-in relationship to another, not because their partners were abusive or unfaithful but merely because that's what they wanted, would have horrified many people." I had not realized the 1950s generation was somewhat atypical of longer term trends. The husband-breadwinner wife-at-home combination of marrying early, having many children, with a fairly stable home life was a result of pent-up demand for families created during the Depression and World War II years. It produced an unprecedented baby boom generation of which both the author and myself are members. Mr. Cherlin's plausible conclusion is that two sets of conflicting values are at play -- one valuing commitment, another valuing personal choice. "... this distinctive pattern of multiple partnerships is related to the central place in America culture of both marriage and a kind of individualism that emphasizes self-expression and personal growth." And I think he's basically right. He examines historical patterns, legal considerations such as divorce laws, gender relations, the impact of religion. He contrasts patterns in the United States with Western Europe, particularly Britain and France. He writes: "...

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