

*I Can Have What I Want:*  
*A Draft Utopian Vision of Marriage and Motherhood (unpublished talk)*  
Presented at the American Sociological Association, August 2012  
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Pepper Schwartz, the organizer of this thematic session, asked us to reflect on our research and our observations of the contemporary social scene to comment on a utopian vision of marriage and motherhood. At first I could only summon up dystopias – perhaps because I'm a Margaret Atwood fan or a pessimist or both.

I mean, think about it: despite survey evidence in the West that shows that women believe they should have control over their reproductive lives, despite the rallies for human rights in Iran, Egypt and Malaysia that have embraced women's right to choose, and despite the way that reproductive freedom has insinuated itself into public discourse, the reality is that reproductive freedom is a fragile right even in the United States and one that could be gutted on a state-by-state basis in the next few years.

Add in the tenuous gains that women and men have made in getting companies to reshape the employment contract so as to accommodate marriage and motherhood and active fatherhood. All of us on this panel have at one time or another studied dual-career couples, third career marriages, and career off-ramps. Still, today, the burden falls on couples – and commonly on wives – to subordinate career to children. Profit maximization dictates that employers should not invest in employees who are not “reliable” – meaning compliant with timetables and deployment schedules that ignore biology. The high profile accomplishments made by people like Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook and Marissa Mayer of Yahoo notwithstanding, it still remains the case that private accommodations are made for stars and

policies that cover everyone else have not changed.

Finally, the so-called revolution in marriage – most visible in the slow accretion of laws allowing same-sex marriage – has hardly made a dent in the legal fortress that defends traditional notions of marriage. It will only take a few well-placed Supreme Court or appellate court decisions around child custody, divorce, inheritance and survivor benefits to render hollow the enthusiastic efforts of a few governors and legislatures. Equally important, decisions made by countries like China, Korea, Russia and Azerbaijan about who is “fit” to adopt can bring to a halt the formation of families through global adoption, especially couples with a divorced partner, single women or men and homosexual families.

For these reasons, I struggled when it came to responding to Pepper’s charge.

However, at the same time that I tried to imagine a utopian state of affairs, I couldn’t help but reflect on themes from my own research that nagged at me like fragments of an incomplete song. Two themes, in particular, chafed at me, demanding attention and, by attending to them, I began to get glimmers of a utopian state of affairs, a speculation about the future which might hold real possibilities, that might interest this panel and this audience.

The first theme has to do with what for me has been a puzzle ever since I began studying middle class, primarily straight, single mothers. That is, despite choosing to have children before getting married, they never gave up on the idea of a marriage or the aspiration for marriage to be one of equals. I expected them to presage a different future: one in which the very concept of marriage would dissolve because men no longer had the economic upper hand (no matter how that relationship might be disguised). Instead, what I heard over and over again is their own utopian vision about love, marriage and family – in that order. Even when it

couldn't be realized as such, they reordered the sequence to have family first without abandoning the ideal. The right partner would come afterward and now that partner would love them and the baby. In that respect, "peer marriage" and Santa Claus are alive and well in 2012 (pause) thanks to the extraordinary efforts that these women have put into preserving ideals that have great popular appeal but a kaleidoscope of meanings ... not all of them grounded in reality.

Now, it could be that pursuit of an idealized notion of marriage is just another way that the "selfish gene," as biologist Richard Dawkins put it, manages to reproduce itself – in which case it doesn't much matter what utopian visions we spin. On the other hand, the enduring belief in peer marriage even among women who've proven that they don't need husbands to have children suggests that we aren't dealing with some sort of false consciousness or Madison Avenue-driven worldview. It suggests that women want to have children and they want to have intimate, fulfilling relationships. And, because they believe that children need parents to nurture and guide them, marriage – that is, the idea of long-term bonding between pairs of adults – is not likely to disappear – irrespective of what technology allows or what ideology prescribes.

That leads me to the second theme that's been nagging at me. That is, despite what the single mothers I studied decried as their fear of commitment and their fickle habits, men also want children and marriage and families. I can't say that I didn't believe that men did not want these things; but in my study I'd met so many articulate, attractive and interesting women who swore that they could not find men ready for marriage and children. I could not ignore their complaints. However, in subsequent research and observation, it's become clear to me that in many instances – though not all instances – men are out of sync with the women who might find

them attractive. Sometimes they are out of sync because they are in the midst of intensive investments in careers that make them blind to the ambitions and aspirations of potential partners. Sometimes they are out of sync because they are trying to live out their own utopian ideals – ones that involve a protracted period of playing the field or seeking to reproduce an idealized version of their own father’s dominant role. But, because they don’t hear their own biological clock ticking, it’s possible for men to believe in the “idea” of marriage and family – like some people who like the “idea” of soccer or the “idea” of equality so long as they don’t have to do it yet. Not unlike the Dilbert cartoon that proclaims “Change is good! You go first.” But, “not yet” hardly means “not ever.”

Now, it’s certainly not new news that women and men of the same age may be out of sync with one another in terms of their readiness for marriage and children. However, changes in the economy – particularly the opportunity and the need to earn a regular income – have intensified the asynchronicity between women’s life-stage “wants” and men’s. Moreover, changes in technology – particularly developments in fertilization and transplant procedures (from donor gametes to egg freezing) – have made it unnecessary for women to “wait” until men get into sync. Thus, asynchronicity may not go away, but the fact of asynchronicity no longer means that women have to “settle” in their search for Mr. Right in order to have a child or be forced into childlessness because they can’t find Mr. Right at the right age.

So, where did these themes take me? Women – and in particular the middle-class single moms I studied – have demonstrated an enduring belief in love, marriage and family despite having jobs, technology and parents that would seem to render men superfluous and marriage moribund (waning). Despite employers who have not yielded ground on careers and

a political climate that is at best lukewarm to their situation, they harbor dreams of peer marriage and families with very familiar trappings. Indeed, they make herculean efforts to keep themselves afloat financially, provide all the accouterments of middle-class nuclear families, build extraordinary support networks for childcare, and increasingly seek to create social ties with other women (and couples) whose children share the same sperm donor. These new family forms share some of the qualities of a Facebook group and some of the qualities of extended blood relations. But whatever their structure, they represent remarkable facsimiles of middle class families in terms of what they provide to children, i.e., identity, kin and roots, and in terms of the support they give to mom's who have not given up on the idea of eventually crafting the marriage they want.

What's the utopian vision? Let me take a small diversion that will lead to my answer. My husband was regaling me the other night with his deep appreciation for the science fiction writings of Isaac Asimov – perhaps best known for his stories of robots and future societies. In one of his short stories, Asimov (himself a biochemist) ponders about the effect of life-span on scientific achievement and concludes that were human beings to live much longer – say, 300 years rather than less than 100 – there would be a markedly higher level of cooperation among scientists and, therefore, a much more rapid pace of scientific advance. That is, the kind of intense pressure to distinguish oneself at an early age that leads to competition, to an unwillingness to share critical information and to burnout amongst scientists before they reach middle age would be suspended in a long-lived society and the impetus to collaborate would yield huge benefits.

As my husband droned on, it occurred to me that the ticking of the biological clock, the

sequencing of marriage and children, and the asynchronicity of women's and men's wants might be linked in a similar way. That is, if technology were to allow women to freeze their eggs in their twenties and thirties – as more and more women are seeking to do – the pounding of the biological clock might be muted. Women would be in a better position to “time” children without risking career investments or foreshortening their search for the other half of a peer marriage or simply to choose a solution that optimizes the equation rather than forces a compromise between ideals. Extending the biological clock would be like slowing time.

Alternatively, women could optimize in a different way: finding men who are ready for marriage and children but who are older than they are – by ten years or more. Men who have banked their sperm, like women who have banked their eggs, could set aside their best gametes for use at a time when they could be suffering from declining fertility themselves. The combination of younger women with older men need not be the only solution – particularly if both have banked their best chances at successful reproduction – but it could just as easily go the other way, i.e., young, ready-to-commit men partnering with older women who have, by virtue of advances in embryology, younger eggs.

So, the utopian ideal that begins to emerge is one in which certain constraints are loosened enough to allow for women and men to accomplish things they really want. One constraint is time. People may live longer, but what's more important is that if both men and women can extend the interval within which they can have children, some of the pressure that causes women exasperation and men to flee commitment can be relieved. If that pressure is relieved, then the timing of marriage and childbearing can be relaxed ... allowing an intimate, enduring and passionate marriage to flower on its own – before or after childbearing.

Loosening the coupling between marriage and childbearing – another constraint – would not necessarily lead to children who suffer from an incomplete identity or never have the benefit of an intact family – that is, of a known father and mother – if, as we are currently seeing, new family forms fulfill many of the same functions as the mythical nuclear family. With “open” sperm donations providing detailed genetic information, willing donors providing biographies, and genetic siblings providing filial ties, there need be no fear of incomplete children. In other words, if sperm or egg donation is no longer anonymous – that history comes with the gamete – then it is possible for children to be born, grow and thrive with all the elements in place ... albeit in a different order.

Finally, just so that I don't leave you with the impression that “men go away” (as I've been repeatedly accused of suggesting by certain conservative blogs), consider what this utopian portends for men. At a minimum, it means that men will have the legitimate option of seeking younger wives at a time when they are ready to “settle down” and women who seek stable men will have the option of marrying those who have reached a level of economic attainment that would benefit their children. Even though you might hear this as more traditional the men would not have an upper hand. Instead, men derive the joys of fatherhood not as an exchange but as the place where they can put their best self forward. The ages of these partners are timed to maximize guilt-free childrearing. Better yet, the sooner we stop prioritizing the “uber” career success a close partnership might become more appealing to invest in. A “best friend as a life long partner” might offer the collaboration that Asimov's believed possible. It would be a lot less lonely to be part of a group. This would not preclude the option of what I am terming “slowing time to extend the biological clock” – a child timed to when both partner's are ready.

Speculating about the future, utopian thinking can provide the first approximations of real possibilities and even invent new forms of social interaction that offer useful insights. I haven't presented a complete utopian vision for the future of marriage and motherhood. That remains to be developed. But, with the help of Margaret Atwood, Dilbert, Pepper Schwartz and Isaac Asimov I've tried to point out at least one path to utopia.