

Young Adults, Intimacy, and Mutuality in Late Modernity: Contemporary Updates to  
Theological, Psychological, and Marginalized Perspectives on Relationship Ethics

By

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*“As my best friend Maureen Benson says, ‘You are not late.’”*

Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 5.

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## Introduction

*I must see my beloved as having an ultimate destiny that has a wider reach than her relationship with me. I must try and see her for who she is, quite apart from those aspects of her that attract me, and quite apart from the romanticized composite image I have of her as the answer to all my needs and lacks. I have to be sure, in other words, that when I surrender myself to her, I am not really just handing myself over to a projection of myself to a rescuer whose job it is to make everything all right in my life.*

Episcopal Bishop of Ohio Thomas Breidenthal and author of *Sacred Unions*<sup>2</sup>  
*[Millennials] don't believe in love. It is a much more selfish generation.*

Respondent Javier about the salience of love and intimacy for Millennials<sup>3</sup>

## PROBLEMS OVERVIEW

### Social and practical problems

Intimate, romantic adult relationships today are marked by ever greater struggles in work-life balance and gender equity in an increasingly commodified, fast-paced world. While intimate romantic relationships have always had their challenges, cultural and religious mores have at best fallen behind in providing wisdom and practical support that can respond to contemporary economic and technological pressures. Today, as people live longer and have access to effective birth control and no-fault divorce, they are much more likely to live a majority of their lives as non-married people.<sup>4</sup> Yet culturally and theologically, the primary paradigm for relationship ethics is that of marriage: a committed, unconditional relationship that is meant to be exclusive and last a lifetime. This paradigm reigns so supreme that most forms of relationship ethics discussed in Christian churches only refer to marriage, or preparation for marriage. Mention of the possibility of other ethical, meaningful intimate romantic relationships—such as dating or cohabitation—are conspicuously absent from liberal churches and actively preached against in

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Breidenthal, *Sacred Unions: A New Guide to Lifelong Commitment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2006), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Kate McGuire, “Millennials’ Perceptions of How Their Capacity for Romantic Love Developed and Manifests,” Masters in Social Work Thesis (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College School for Social Work, 2015), 49, 60.

<sup>4</sup> In 2014 the American population became majority single, Rich Miller, *Chicago Tribune*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-single-americans-population-20140910-story.html>.

conservative ones. Therefore, what is said about relationships from a religious perspective is limited and requires significant re-interpretation in order to be relevant to modern life.

Young people known as Millennials were in the young adult age range of 18-29 years of age for most of the research used for this study.<sup>5</sup> I use them as a case study for contemporary intimacy as they have been the young adult generation most affected by the realities of contemporary relationships as less formal and more fluid than in the past.<sup>6</sup> In addition to informality, fluidity, and impermanence as major factors of contemporary intimate life, it is important for scholars of religion to realize how a prevailing, intense level of anxiety suffuses the lives of Millennials. It deeply affects how they make decisions and envision what is possible.<sup>7</sup>

In the absence of religious support for discussing relationships besides marriage,<sup>8</sup> in places outside of the church Millennials are forming their own forums and writing their own educational materials about intimacy. In these, they debate about how to date and determine sexual interest, and how to evaluate one's desires and communicate with a partner effectively.<sup>9</sup> This makes sense, as Millennials are described by research such as Pew Research Forum reports

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<sup>5</sup> The "millennial" generation refers to persons born between 1980 and 1996, according to the Pew Forum, and thus to those who began to come "of age" at the turn of the millennium. Pew Research Forum, "Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends," March 2014. <https://archive.org/details/140307PewMillennialsinadulthood>

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Chambers, *Sociology of Family Life: Change and Diversity in Intimate Relations* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Weighing what will come before young adults and all that they feel they need to prepare for and juggle, contemporary young adults experience considerable stress for their age. Often, at least in college, they do not immediately understand how to manage and grow, just how to escape. This has considerable impact upon their intimacy lives. It is a well-known psychological fact that persons under stress and acting out of experiences of trauma have difficulty being the reflective, responsive, and generously caring persons that they otherwise could be without the influence of stress, anxiety and trauma. How to address anxiety in the young adult population as it pertains to relationship education and counseling is an area of further research for me that, while foundational, is beyond the scope of my current project. For one possible solution, see Holly Rogers, *Mindfulness for the Next Generation: Helping Emerging Adults Manage Stress and Lead Healthier Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Psychologist Varda Konstam finds it important that nearly half of contemporary Emerging Adults do not experience anxiety and with time and age most find their way to coping well. Yet, as a pastoral care professional, while I believe it is worthy of noting that the prevalence of anxiety in the generation is often discussed hyperbolically, the rate at which it is a very real concern for a number of young adults still makes anxiety and other systemic mental health issues worthy of concern for scholars of religion, Varda Konstam, *The Romantic Lives of Emerging Adults: Moving from I to We* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Nastassja Schmiedt and Lea Roth, *Millennial Sex Education: I've Never Done This Before* (No location listed: Spring Up Press, 2015).

as “confident, connected, and open to change.”<sup>10</sup> Yet despite these characterological traits, generally, most young adults feel they are struggling to improvise their lives, romantic or otherwise, in the context of a world filled with choices and high stakes. Christian ethicist Jennifer Beste finds of the young adult she studies that *no one, including the religious people in their lives*, are presenting relationships as issues of love and justice.<sup>11</sup> She does in her classes, and students readily admit that her employment of Margaret Farley’s *Just Love* and Johan Metz’ concept of poverty of spirit are foreign concepts to them, with the root to this strangeness being how they feel their own age and culture cultivates in them a resistance to placing themselves in a position of being remotely vulnerable, especially with someone romantically.

Without much vision with which to progress forward and lots of reasons to hold back, contemporary young adults are taking their time in making commitments such as partnership, parenthood, and home ownership. For this they receive significant criticism from many in older generations. Yet, comparing for age, a study just publicized based on U.S. census data reveals that Millennials are more likely to stay married than those of other generations by eight percent.<sup>12</sup> Thus, what contemporary young adults do in relationships and why deserves greater study. Where they fail to flourish and where they manage to succeed is a scion of things to come.

## Research problems

Numerous studies have reported on college life intimacy, or lack thereof, and the liberal attitudes with which young adults approach casual sex.<sup>13</sup> Only recently, however, has there been research done on dating, cohabitation, and the transition into and experience of marriage for

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<sup>10</sup> Pew Research Forum, “Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next,” February 2010. <https://www.pewinternet.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Erin Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10.

<sup>12</sup> This controls for divorce rate against marriage rate as a ratio, meaning that while marriage is also statistically less of an inhabited status than it used to be, the divorce rate in this study is compared to the marriage rate. The dramatic difference between generations is in part because the Boomer generation continues to divorce at untypically high rates, Ben Steverman, “Millennials are Causing the U.S. Divorce Rate to Plummet,” *Bloomberg Wire Service* (New York), September 25, 2018. ProQuest. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-25/millennials-are-causing-the-u-s-divorce-rate-to-plummet>.

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2008), 4.

contemporary young adults.<sup>14</sup> Some recent studies have usefully articulated the differences between a “horizon” of marriage as an ideal aspiration and the salience of marriage as a probability for an individual’s particular life. I believe that this research should be built upon in terms of intimacy salience in general for contemporary young adults. I nudge research in this direction by dedicating theoretical and empirical chapters on intimacy across the relational status spectrums in order to provide a foundation of what “intimacy salience” apart from the paradigm of marriage might look like.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, research done on this generation about the gender equity of these intimate relationships indicates that while there are movements toward contemporary romantic partners sharing financial and domestic responsibilities as an ideal, aspiration in the abstract comes up against what young adults find to be reasonable and desirable. This leads to a shortfall to this ideal, causing intimate partners to delay digging into considerable intimate interpersonal commitment. Many factors make such delay reasonable, as tackling other concerns first become priorities. Both young men and young women are trying to gain skills and education to weather workforce insecurity and inflexibility,<sup>16</sup> and take their place in the persistent pay and power inequity between men and women.<sup>17</sup> Once contemporary young adults do begin to consider

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<sup>14</sup> Leading researchers on Emerging Adulthood, developmental psychologist Laura Padilla-Walker and her colleagues note that there is little research on gender’s effect of marriage in emerging adulthood because most of the intimacy literature for the life phase focuses on casual sexual relationships, Laura M. Padilla-Walker, Madison K. Memmott-Elison, and Larry J. Nelson, “Positive Relationships as an Indicator of Flourishing During Emerging Adulthood,” *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood*, Emerging Adulthood Series, ed. Laura M. Padilla-Walker and Larry J. Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 226.

<sup>15</sup> See Maria J. Kefalas, Frank F. Furstenberg, Patrick J. Carr, and Laura Napolitano, “‘Marriage is More than Being Together’ The Meaning of Marriage for Young Adults,” *Journal of Family Issues* 32 no.7 (2011): 845–875.

<sup>16</sup> Workforce insecurity is a deeply gendered issue. Three-fourths of the jobs lost in the Great Recession of 2008, when older Millennials were beginning to enter the workforce, were jobs males typically inhabited, in Joan C. Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 159. Most recently, in the upper end of the knowledge-based services, men report feeling that they cannot work less than full time and be considered “real players” in their workplace in terms of collegial respect and promotion, 89. As part of this greater sense of insecurity amidst employment, Alison Pugh notes a rise in layoffs, resulting in worker positions being refilled with temporary, on-call, self-employed contractors even in places such as Silicon Valley, Allison Pugh, *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity* (New York: Oxford, 2015), 6. Pugh also writes about weakening labor unions and employer commitment, and how workers typically respond by working longer and harder rather than detaching, 2-6, 22. More examples of how the workplace has become more insecure at the benefit of employers include “on call” shifts, only giving retail workers their upcoming schedule with a week’s notice, or asking that they work both opening and closing shifts for a business in a day, but nothing in between. See “A.G. Schneiderman Announces Agreements with Six Major Retailers to Stop on-Call Shift Scheduling,” *Targeted News Service*, Washington, D.C., December 20, 2016, ProQuest.

<sup>17</sup> “Equal Pay Day: The Gender Pay Gap Persists Among Millennials,” *Industry Week*, April 4, 2017, ProQuest.

serious partnership these larger questions of economic survival and positioning reveal themselves to be intertwined with vestiges of continued ideals of men as breadwinners<sup>18</sup> and inequity between the genders in amount of time spent on household chores.<sup>19</sup>

This study concentrates specifically on the needs, desires, and expectations of contemporary young adults as a heuristic device for rethinking and deepening the meaning of mutual, intimate relationship for culture and society at large. It seeks to investigate what Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz calls *ecologies of choice*, in what young adults see before them as possible, probable, and desirable.<sup>20</sup> Nearly 90% of Millennials respond to polls that they wish to marry in their lifetimes.<sup>21</sup> Yet demographic data reveals a tendency for them to marry later (on average, five years later compared to Boomers), or not at all. The Pew Forum has predicted that 25% of millennials will *remain single* as of 2030, one of the highest rates in recent history.<sup>22</sup> This high aspiration for marriage combined with a tendency for marriage delay and cohabitation instead tells a particularly strong story of the gap between desire and practice.<sup>23</sup> Many Millennials report feeling they have no choice.<sup>24</sup> Feeling alternately up against a wall and completely unmoored by the illusion of options describes many millennials today.

Relationship ethics, as often taught or commented upon by persons with religious authority, encourages this yawning gap between desire and practice as properly religious—the properly religious being *a rejection of what is for the hope of what may be*. I identify that

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<sup>18</sup> See Kathleen Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Gerson notes that men did 15% of the housework in 1960, but by 2010 it had doubled to 30%, Gerson, *Unfinished Revolution*, 201; other research (not specifically relating to Millennials) finds this has to do more with ideas of masculinity than hours available or ratio of wages earned, see Sara Thébaud, “Masculinity, Bargaining, and Breadwinning: Understanding Men’s Housework in the Cultural Context of Paid Work,” *Gender and Society* 24 no. 3 (June 2010): 330-354.

<sup>20</sup> Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Malden, Mass: Polity Press, 2012), 19.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 2014), 75.

<sup>22</sup> Wendy Wang and Kim Parker, “Record Share of Americans have Never Married as Values, Economics and Gender Patterns Change,” *Pew Research Center*, September, 24, 2014. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/>.

<sup>23</sup> The Pew Forum found that in 2014, 26% of millennials were married, matched for age, compared to 36% of Generation X, 48% of Baby Boomers, and 65% of the Great Generation at the same age point in the generation, in *Pew Research Center*, “Millennials in Adulthood.”

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8.

relationship ethics, particularly ones of a theological bent, need to better address realism and dynamism in order to be more comprehensive, well-rounded, and applicable ethics. In my time spent as a family studies academic, I have discovered that the field of religion is particularly obdurate about making room for relational discussions that do not focus on or derive from a paradigm of privileging marriage. This is true even in contemporary secular offshoots of relationship education.<sup>25</sup> Yet material toward this end does already exist. Margaret Farley's *Just Love*, Edward Wimberly's *Counseling African American Families*, and Joretta Marshall's *Counseling Lesbian Partners* have suggested that love and justice are crucial ethical cornerstones to a fulfilling intimate relationship—rather than commitment, structure, or form of relationship. Yet these ideas have not gained wide cultural or religious purchase in the social imaginary. The reasons for this are numerous. I attempt to bring them up and address them bit by bit throughout this dissertation and in my future work.

I see one of the driving reasons that realistic and comprehensive relationship programming is not offered in ecclesial settings, nor in secular ones, as stemming from the common cultural adherence to overly romantic notions of intimate partnership. Relationships are assumed to be automatic, in that they are to be guided by intuition, feeling, and ideals, rather than honest and significant conversations about the patterns of human need and trial. With this automaticity comes a corresponding feeling of stasis rather than dynamism. Only recent authorship such as Kathy Breazeale has defined relationships and marriage as participation and creation rather than a covenant primarily of fidelity.<sup>26</sup> Neither are theological values such as love, justice, and sacrifice engaged in such conversations such that young adults develop an idea of how these big themes can relate to their personal moral orientation systems and their intimate relationships.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Frank D. Fincham, Scott M. Stanley, and Galena K. Rhoades, "Relationship Education in Emerging Adulthood: Problems and Prospects," *Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Frank D. Fincham and Ming Cui (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 297-298.

<sup>26</sup> Feminist theologian Kathy Breazeale defines marriage today: "Marriage is a form of participation in the becoming of God, a relationship of creative process of the human partner modeled on the relationship of create a process with God," Kathy Breazeale, *Mutual Empowerment: A Theology of Marriage, Intimacy, and Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 51.

<sup>27</sup> Pastoral theologian and military chaplain Zachary Moon puts forth the term of a "moral orienting system" to set up the foundation of what is psychologically and ethically injured in situations of moral injury, which are most common in war. I believe such a term is much more broadly applicable as a framework to describe contemporary religious patterns than scholarship around moral injury, or moral stress has yet engaged (although also picked up in Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, revised and expanded edition (Louisville:

In the European-American mainline denominations with which I am most familiar and consider my main audience, over the past thirty years white papers on human sexuality and relationships have laudably focused on the dynamism of difference and companionship.<sup>28</sup> Yet this broadness and creativity of vision does not always filter down to the seminarian and church level because of cultural lag as well as the immense hold of romanticism. In popular culture, as well as in Evangelical Christianity, aspirational romanticism reigns supreme. Most Christians perpetuate the notion of a fairy tale romance as a Christian ideal. In this dream, a happily ever after marriage is an exclusive relationship of stability, comfort, and care that goes far beyond all other relationships in quality, yet sets the standard below which all other relationships fall.<sup>29</sup> This assumption of marriage's ethical and spiritual distinction is beguiling, and dangerous.

I laud Kim and Dwight Peterson for writing the most accessible, concrete, and hopeful book on the contemporary challenges of intimacy which they see amongst their Fuller Theological students today. They argue that this notion of marriage's privilege results in emotional and social damage to young people by encouraging isolation and lack of maturity and experience. It also encourages the false idea that "emotional intimacy with anyone other than one's spouse constitutes unfaithfulness to the spouse."<sup>30</sup> Peterson and Peterson note that waiting to such a degree physically and emotionally is in fact a way to avoid addressing the real and difficult within oneself and how one relates to others generally. The Petersons believe that a closer look at the breadth and depth of human life does not support marriage as a qualitatively different relationship from others, nor a particularly Christian one. They iterate:

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Westminster John Knox Press, 2015). Moon describes such an orienting system as a "complex multidimensional system of one's values, beliefs, behaviors, and meaningful relationships as informed and impacted by one's lived experiences," Zachary Moon, *Warriors between Worlds: Moral Injury and Identities in Crisis* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), x.

<sup>28</sup> The mainline denominations are described as the seven dominant Protestant groups that have defined what it meant to be a Protestant Christian American (Congregational Church (now United Church of Christ), the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church, the American Baptist Convention, and the Disciples of Christ). While diverse in theological beliefs, they made up the Federal Council of Churches in 1908, located on the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Today, American Christianity numerically consists of more evangelicals and Pentecostals than "mainlines," yet for much of American history, members of "mainline" churches were significant leaders in government and other civic affairs. They still hold some sway in the formation of the American cultural imagination. Jason Lantzer, *Mainline Christianity: The Past and Future of America's Majority Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Kim Peterson and Dwight Peterson, *Are you Waiting for "The One?" Cultivating Realistic, Positive Expectations for Christian Marriage* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 19, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Peterson and Peterson, 23.

Real love has more than one possible object [...] Intimacy is bigger than romance, and marital love has enough in common with other human loves that you can practice it on people like your parents, your siblings, your neighbors and friends. And the more you practice, the better off you will be [...] You will be much better equipped to learn to love a spouse if you have had practice ahead of time in knowing and being deeply known by others.<sup>31</sup>

Yet so many Christian leaders put forth the idea that exclusivity and fidelity in marriage somehow is crucially and meaningfully different than other relationships.

A member of my own denomination, Episcopal Bishop of Ohio Thomas Breidenthal, promulgates the paradigm of marriage as the proper Christian approach to relationships. He honorably seeks to connect marriage to the rest of Christian life and to the actualization of care rather than just aspiration to care, goals which I share.<sup>32</sup> Yet Breidenthal largely deduces relationship ethics from preconceived ideas of ethical demand rather than broad engagement with people's lived experiences. He also scoffs at young people's desires for "reciprocity" as utterly misguided and does not see how his own comfort and privilege affect how he views and engages with concepts.<sup>33</sup> His books' myopic obsession with fidelity and exclusivity to the exclusion of other concerns is an example of how even in mainline churches relationship ethics remains unhelpfully mired in unintentional patriarchy, egoism, and lack of careful and systematic study of knowledge about human persons.<sup>34</sup>

Many researchers of young adults, particularly older religious ones, decry the supposed higher rates of casual sex, dating, and cohabitation of the millennial generation as foolishness, moral relativism, and narcissism, following the lack of listening and imagination occurring in theological circles. Peterson and Peterson blame contemporary Christian culture for contributing to the world of hook up culture by not providing guidance for what people should be doing instead (and by making romance such a big deal), a thought which Beste echoes in her own

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<sup>31</sup> Peterson and Peterson, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Breidenthal, *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1997), 81-82.

<sup>33</sup> Breidenthal, *Christian Households*, 88; Breidenthal, *Sacred Unions*, 110; Breidenthal articulates that "a path of permanence is a viable option for everyone," in *Sacred Unions*, 3; He would likely not agree with the primacy with which I give intimacy, because of its implications upon the temporal aspects of relationships. Breidenthal writes that "Momentary fidelity is a contradiction in terms," in *Sacred Unions*, 9; Breidenthal writes, "Mutuality does not have much to do with the embrace of nearness. Jesus did not die on the cross in order to reciprocate our love or in hope that we would return the favor," in *Christian Households*, 88.

<sup>34</sup> Breidenthal, *Christian Households*, 102-106.



work.<sup>35</sup> Peterson and Peterson write, “The result is a young person who may know what is expected of them, but are unable to think of any persuasive reason to meet those expectations.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, the convenience of living together reigns supreme, and deeper considerations are not thoughtfully modeled for them in the course of uplifting and improving whatever relationship they have at hand.

## THESIS

While young people are not often taking the lead themselves, thoughtful engagement *with them* by scholars and practitioners of religion can helpfully lead to *listening carefully to the lives* of young adults *and the questions they are asking of themselves*. This allows for a more positive generational cohort story and also tells us something about general cultural trends around relationships.<sup>37</sup> This project asks: *What do scholars and practitioners in religion, and even young adults themselves, need to understand about young adults today to develop an adequate relational ethic that comprehends, and can respond to, the complexity of their needs and lives?*

I answer that first, scholars and practitioners in religion need to know what is actually happening in the intimate lives of young adults. Second, scholars and practitioners must come to understand how postindustrial precarity influences the worldview, psychology, and behavior of young adults. This is covered in Chapters One through Four. Third, scholars and practitioners must then appreciate how these factors require incorporating notions of reflexivity, self-reflection, self-assertion, reception of others, mutuality, and moral improvisation into discussions of ethical relationship (Chapters Two, and Five through Seven). This will help meet young people where they are. It will also provide a foundation for connecting their lives to ancient religious and ethical ideals of love and justice.

Having done this research, I argue that we should evaluate relationships based on the capacity for and presence of intimacy as psycho-relational quality and how this allows for pursuit of greater love and justice. This is in contrast to organizing and assessing relationships by qualities of formal commitment and official structure, because these latter qualities often serve as

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<sup>35</sup> Peterson and Peterson, 15; also Beste, 2, 4, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Peterson and Peterson, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Konstam notes that each generation in recent memory has, on average, taken longer within their life course to couple, thus indicating that contemporary young adults exemplify a cultural trend not aberration, Konstam, 322.

obfuscating substitutes for deeper deliberation of the ethical qualities. Furthermore, we can improve the pursuit of intimate intimacy, love, and justice through bolstering people's psychological resilience and moral creativity through processes of auto-ethnographic reflexivity as exemplified in Chapter Five. This personal moral knowledge can then be integrated into 1) a process of ethical discernment around questions of love and justice in personal relationships (Chapter Six), and 2) a process of interpersonal psycho-social balance and assessment toward greater gender justice (Chapter Seven).

## **MAJOR CONCEPTS: INTIMACY AND MUTUALITY**

### **Intimacy**

Having spent years talking with other young adults in liberal church settings, as well as deepening my own interpersonal skills over the course of doing this project, I conclude that particular shifts in the way that the church talks about relationship ethics need to happen. *I argue that scholars, clergy, and human development professionals need to evaluate and promote love and justice within intimacy as key relational cornerstones.* Intimacy from a psychological perspective is defined as involving a sense of connectedness, shared understandings, mutual responsiveness, self-disclosure, and interdependency.<sup>38</sup> It can occur in a variety of relationships, but for adults it ought to be particularly strong in our relationships of sexual and domestic closeness. For the purposes of this project, I generally define “intimate relationships” psychosocially as partnerships of common responsibility, of either households if the persons within them are committed or cohabitating, or of relationship, if the persons are dating. Intimacy as a cornerstone is an ethical, encouraging way to discuss where people are in their relationships while showing them paths to greater mutuality and closeness.

Intimacy is postmodern enough of an idea to be fluid and highly contextual, yet highly applicable across relationships. It is robust enough in theory and practice to meet young people where they are and yet also provide encouragement and a path toward improvement in intimate capacity as a skill. In some ways, highlighting intimacy as thread and proscription is not new, and I am simply joining the ranks of an established and growing area of scholarly categorization.

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<sup>38</sup> Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron, “Introduction,” *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, ed. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 1-5.

Intimacy has been developing as a psychological and sociological research construct since the late 1970s and early 1980s,<sup>39</sup> in an effort to track social ties which were becoming “looser and more fragmented.”<sup>40</sup> As a concept, intimacy began to pick up a significant citation trail in the 2000s in an attempt by researchers to capture—and accept—greater family diversity.<sup>41</sup> Sociologist Maxine Baca Zinn notes that family studies in particular used to have a strong sociology of race lens which led to a white idea of family as normative and everything else as “backward and deviant.”<sup>42</sup> Intimacy as a cornerstone lens helps change this, and also offers a valuable psychological angle.<sup>43</sup>

As human development theorists Evelyn and James Whitehead note, from a theological angle, intimacy is calling someone to be their best self, and knowing and loving all of them better than they know themselves. If this indeed happens, they conclude, intimacy will lead to a better, more actualized effort at love.<sup>44</sup> True intimacy cannot help but be generative, for knowing and being known, being encouraged to grow and widen in capacity via an ongoing relationship, this leads to progress of self and relationship. Thus, *achieving true intimacy is one and the same with engaging in generativity and practicing love*. When one is truly intimate, it is hard not to be pulled into a desire to further love and empower the other. This desire, and its fulfillment in interpersonal action within a relationship, is called mutuality.

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<sup>39</sup> Jacqui Gabb, *Researching Intimacy in Families*, Studies in Family and Intimate Life (Basingstroke; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 66.

<sup>40</sup> Chambers, 4. Chambers notes that while intimacy is not a perfect concept, other terms, such as “families of choice” excludes too many, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Kassia R. Wosick, *Sex, Love, and Fidelity: A Study of Contemporary Romantic Relationships* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2017), 5; Chambers, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Maxine Baca Zinn, “Family, Feminism, and Race in America,” *Race, Class, and Gender: Comment Bonds, Different Voices*, ed. Esther Ngan-Ling Chow, Doris Wilkinson, and Maxine Baca Zinn, Sociologists for Women in Society (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), 172.

<sup>43</sup> Another conceptual terminology change involves moving from conceptualizing progression of human development through time as a “lifecycle” to a “life course” in order to indicate an individual’s passage through life that attempts to remove any normative assumptions as to the correct timing and sequence of major life events. A life course model also insists that development occurs throughout life. How development in an advanced stage occurs depends on the timing, sequence and experience of prior moments in the life course. I generally side with the life course model, as do most theorists after the 1960s, as it is more open in terms of accepting a variety of pathways an individual’s life may take, Chambers, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Marrying Well: Possibilities in Christian Marriage Today* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 106.

## Mutuality

Mutuality involves a paradoxical tandem of empathy and self-integrity, of assertion and reception, and respect of and engagement in difference. It has theological, psychological, and ethical aspects to it. Herbert Anderson and others describe mutuality as a Christian ideal that requires a high capacity for interpersonal relationship.<sup>45</sup> In their introduction to the book *Mutuality Matters*, Anderson and his colleagues write, “Mutuality is only possible when people can empathetically imagine the world of another without fear of losing their own voice and when they are able to change their mind or be changed by another as a result.”<sup>46</sup> There is a connotation of closeness, interdependence, and graceful elasticity. Mutuality implies attention and respect to situational need rather than equality of capacity or ultimate outcome.

Other theorists on the issue of feminism in family intimacy have also offered quick reference, short-hand concepts as to what such mutuality might look like. Since intimate partnership is so significantly a domestic partnership, Australian feminist psychotherapist Petra Bueskens suggests that a good measurement of interdependent equality in intimate partnership is whether or not either partner can fully take care of the domestic scene on their own for a limited period of time.<sup>47</sup> Mahoney and Knudson-Martin echo this sentiment, and indicate that this ability to be domestically capable alone requires a type of emotional and management responsibility for the domestic scene (making sure tasks were planned for and completed, not just the act of doing the tasks themselves). Generally shared responsibility for *routine* housework is another measure researchers have found indicative of a through-line of equity throughout other facets of the relationship.<sup>48</sup> This is a highly relevant measurement tool to some feminists as routine chores are not easily commensurable to other household duties because they are the “most time intensive,

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<sup>45</sup> Mutuality at its fullest requires the capacity for complex interaction which Robert Kegan describes as Stage Five Inter-individual intimacy, Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 100.

<sup>46</sup> Herbert Anderson, Edward Foley, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, and Robert Schreiter, “Introduction,” *Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith, and Just Love*, edited by Edward Foley (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 8.

<sup>47</sup> Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* (London; New York: Routledge, 2018), 281.

<sup>48</sup> Mick Cunningham, “Gender in Cohabitation and Marriage: The Influence of Gender Ideology on Housework Allocation Over the Life Course,” *Journal of Family Issues* 26 no. 8 (November 2005), 1040.

are perceived as the least enjoyable, and are the most likely to require relatively rigid time schedules for their completion.”<sup>49</sup>

As a theological concept, mutuality has an eschatological quality to it, a temporal long-view which at the same time involves intense attention to the moment at hand. As such, mutuality is a promise that is always coming into deeper fruition, even as aspects of it are already present and achieved. Counselors Suzanne M. Coyle and Christina J. Davis note in their article, “Christian Couples and Families,” that from a spiritual perspective, “mutuality is understood as a process of give-and-take between individuals that reflects God’s care for all of humanity.”<sup>50</sup> This care of God results in a Christian ethical call among humans to work toward justice and hospitality. Christian ethicist Ellen Wondra highlights the gift, love, and fullness dimensions that make mutuality a theologically-inspired term:

Mutuality or reciprocity means that I offer you what you offer me---not as an exchange or contract, but as a free gift, inspired by mutual regard, usually called love. Openness beyond the immediate relationship occurs when you and I enhance each other’s God-given full humanity. In turn, this is an outgrowth of love for God, that desire for God inherent in being human, practiced in love of neighbor as oneself.<sup>51</sup>

As such, mutuality stands in stark contrast to other norms and values by which society might organize itself interpersonally, such as those of patriarchy and consumption, as operative in contemporary society.

In her commentary on Beverly Wildung Harrison’s impact upon the field of Christian social ethics, feminist ethicist Carol Robb writes that “Mutuality, rather than control, ownership, or paternalism, is a major [feminist] moral norm.”<sup>52</sup> She makes note of this to set up the context in which Harrison discusses how frequently as a student of Christian ethics she was told not to

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<sup>49</sup> Cunningham, 1040.

<sup>50</sup> Suzanne M. Coyle and Christina J. Davis, “Christian Couples and Families,” *Diversity in Couple and Family Therapy: Ethnicities, Sexualities, and Socioeconomics*, edited by Shalonda Kelly (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger, 2017), 217.

<sup>51</sup> Ellen K. Wondra, “Ethics and Moral Theology,” *Christian Holiness and Human Sexuality: A Study Guide for Episcopalians*, edited by Gary R. Hall and Ruth A. Meyers (New York: Church Publishing, 2011), 34.

<sup>52</sup> Carol S. Robb, “Introduction,” *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics by Beverly Wildung Harrison*, edited by Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), xix.

concern herself with “mere mutuality,” as it would confuse her from working toward what were considered higher ideals.<sup>53</sup>

Breazeale offers a useful distinction between equality and mutuality. She writes:

While equality suggests the attainment of the same rank for each person, mutuality ‘signals relational growth and change and constitutes an invitation into shaping the future together.’ Thus mutuality in marriage is an invitation for couples to strive for God’s justice of right relation, rather than equity. Furthermore, the circumstances of daily life make it difficult to maintain equity or a 50-50 balance in giving and receiving. Most often, the balance will be 60-40 or even 80-20, yet the justice of mutuality requires the same partner is not always giving more and receiving less.<sup>54</sup>

This “justice of mutuality” to which Breazeale refers can be adjudicated in different ways, depending on the goal at hand and the aperture of vision. Yet, generally speaking in terms of what this justice might mean typically, a working definition can be articulated if “partners hold equal status, attention to the other in the relationship is mutual, accommodation in the relationship is mutual, and there is mutual well-being of partners,” write feminist family counselors Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney.<sup>55</sup> By their definition, which I take on as my favorite, mutuality is a social, interactional, physical, psychological, emotional, and power-laden concept. To achieve such a standard with all of these facets requires resources and strategies from a variety of fields.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY FEMINIST METHODOLOGY

### Rooted in pastoral theology

I root this project in pastoral theology, which, as editors of *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology* Bonnie Miller-McLemore and Brita Gill-Austern describe it, seeks knowledge for the sake of love of God and God’s creation, with a focus on the believer, the

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<sup>53</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers,” reprinted in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* by Beverly Wildung Harrison, edited by Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 18.

<sup>54</sup> Kathlyn Breazeale, *Mutual Empowerment: A Theology of Marriage, Intimacy, and Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 49.

<sup>55</sup> Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney, “The Myth of Equality,” *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 45.

sufferer, and practices of lived religion.<sup>56</sup> Among many things it does in particular, feminist and womanist pastoral theology honors subjectivity, seeks to build trust, and analyzes power.<sup>57</sup> Pastoral theology in its multicultural, postmodern paradigm pays attention to the everyday, makes room for the fluid, and seeks practical enactment. As such, it has according to postmodern feminist pastoral theologian Elaine Graham, “a bias toward alterity, diversity and inclusivity.”<sup>58</sup> Graham writes that in a world rife with complexity and change, the pastoral task similarly morphs from deductive application of Christian values to something more wide-ranging and fluid. She writes, “The task of care is thus to equip individuals and communities with the resources by which they might be able to respond to such complexity –be it in the form of changing conditions of work, citizenship, and relationships or gender roles.”<sup>59</sup> Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern note that as a field of study, pastoral theology, has always been always been wide-ranging, at least in aspiration. It has been an interdisciplinary, bridge-building discipline, putting disparate fields in common conversation to address a wound in the world.<sup>60</sup>

The wound I see is the church neglecting to see intimate relationships as generative sites for love, justice, and moral growth simply because they are informal and uncodified. The epistemological salve that I propose is a democratic dissemination of a program of moral autobiographical reflection, ethical deliberation, and couples counseling strategies that I believe can be put into the hands of non-experts.<sup>61</sup> Non-experts having the tools with which to think and engage their relationships differently under the auspices of ethical engagement, which will in turn aid in changing cultural expectations about the relevance of love and justice to relationships.

In this same volume, pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring finds it exigent for the field to face postmodernism well by developing third-order criteria by which to propose and evaluate its norms, authorities, and methodologies and to assess a system for adjudicating conflict between

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<sup>56</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L Gill-Austern, “Preface,” *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>57</sup> Marsha Foster Boyd and Carolyn Stahl Bohler, “Womanist-Feminist Alliances: Meeting on the Bridge,” *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L Gill-Austern (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 193, 194, 196.

<sup>58</sup> Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996), 9.

<sup>59</sup> Graham, 52.

<sup>60</sup> Miller-McLemore and Gill-Austern, “Preface,” 10.

<sup>61</sup> Graham, 99, 102.

them.<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere, Doehring articulates such postmodern criteria as supporting a process which aids one in moving from an embedded theology of inherited beliefs and practices (which have unconscious influence upon one's life) to an intentional theology. Theology becomes intentional when embedded theology has been examined for its life-giving or life-denying qualities.<sup>63</sup> Whether theologies are life-giving or life-denying depends on how they allow one to feel self-compassion as well as connection to the love of God, self, and community, received and given.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore along the lines of criteria and norms, in *Christian Theology in Practice*, Miller-McLemore writes that among the world-facing tasks of pastoral theology is "articulating alternative public norms derived from the Christian tradition."<sup>65</sup> In responding to these two foremothers of mine, like a proper queer theorist, I leave the outcome of how people will define issues of love and justice in their own personal lives to themselves. Yet I have some general bounds and offer many initial questions with which to aid in launching this discernment. From the position of providing pastoral care, I suggest that people question sacrifice, but demand measurement and generativity. I encourage them to assess whether they are being as intimate with themselves and their partner as they can be, and figure out if this balance requires them personally giving or receiving more. From the position of being a pastoral theologian reflecting upon and researching these issues, some of my guiding principles have been to pay as close attention to the needs and self-reports of the people I seek to help, to believe in their own ability to be involved in the solution, and to wrestle the tradition for a blessing of its wisdom for today through a form of revised critical method applied to theological ethics.<sup>66</sup> Following Graham, I suggest that whatever gives women more chance for greater generativity in tandem with those they love is our best subjective measuring stick of liberation, flourishing, and success.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Carrie Doehring, "A Method of Feminist Pastoral Theology," *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 100-105; Graham, 127-128.

<sup>63</sup> Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach*, revised and expanded edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 19.

<sup>64</sup> Doehring, *Practice*, 10.

<sup>65</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 87.

<sup>66</sup> As Don Browning puts it in *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, "[T]he revised correlational method as applied to a practical moral theology means a critical correlation between such norms for human action and fulfillment as are revealed in interpretations of the Christian witness and those norms for human action and fulfillment that are implicit in various interpretations of ordinary human experience," Don Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 50.

<sup>67</sup> Graham, 128, 173.



### Three major methodological branches

As an interdisciplinary project, I employ three main branches of methodological foci for guiding my work and bolstering my claim that my study achieves a more accurate look at the worldview and intimate lives of young adults compared to the studies of others. These foci and methods of engagement run throughout the whole project and interweave with each other. They are: 1) *Lo cotidiano* (a focus on the realness and import of the everyday), 2) feminist methodologies of solidarity, relationality, and reflexivity, and 3) a postmodern, queering lens that disrupts and destabilizes in order to make space for the new and the possibly more real.

#### *Lo cotidiano*

The first, known in mestizo circles as *Lo cotidiano*, includes a postmodern and feminist ethics from the margins focus on the everyday.<sup>68</sup> *Lo cotidiano* as a subject of inspection has ethical, epistemological, and psychological implications. It looks at how the everyday, what we actually do, not just what we say, speaks to what we think is salient for our lives.<sup>69</sup> In psychological terms, the everyday is what creates the patterning of what we expect, which in turn affects what we desire and think is possible in our lives.<sup>70</sup> Graham suggests that it is in fact what we do, that articulates and shapes our theology, more than what we say. Yet scholarship and theological ethics traditionally and routinely privileges articulation over declaring observation of action as more accurate to what we believe or value.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> I intentionally do not set non-English words in italics as part of my commitment to an academic practice of decolonizing the way in which English speakers approach other subjects. Gloria Anzaldúa describes herself as a *chicana tejana*, a Texan of Chicana ethnicity, meaning she is of mixed ancestry which is partially indigenous to Texas. The broadest term describing her audience as well as her own identity is *Mestizo*, a mixture of Indigenous American and European American ancestry.

<sup>69</sup> This is close to Elaine Graham's idea of our truest theology being whatever we practice. However, I believe Graham collapses *what is* with *the ideal* in a way that leaves no room for transcendence and growth. Ideas of saliency, however, are a more accurate and worthwhile result of examining *Lo cotidiano*. Ethicist Willis Jenkins notes that the main difference between what he sees as "basic" and "disruptive" forms of ethics has to do with the value given to everyday life. In Willis Jenkins, "Doing Theological Ethics with Incompetent Christians: Social Problems and Religious Creativity," *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, ed. Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 55.

<sup>70</sup> Ethicist Ellen Ott Marshall notes that feminist ethics does not have a monopoly on the focus of the everyday, nor did it necessarily found it, but rather feminism is an instance where "such attention has been advanced and defended," Ellen Ott Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Conflict, Faith, and Human Life*, first edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 129.

<sup>71</sup> Graham, 10, 61, 88-91, 99-102.

*Feminist methodologies of solidarity, relationality, and reflexivity*

The second branch of methodological foci involves adhering to a number of feminist research principles, goals, and practices. First and foremost in importance, I follow the postcolonial “feminist solidarity” epistemological and interpersonal model articulated by Indian theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty. This model seeks to decenter privileged narratives that necessarily create margins for a more egalitarian model of exchange anchored by notions of “mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests.”<sup>72</sup> As such, it “assumes both distance and proximity” as well as struggles and points of resistance between all persons, rather than postulates a center in which marginalized persons are the unwitting victims of a distance from the ideal.<sup>73</sup> This is particularly difficult to pursue as a lens when researching a demographic that is primarily studied in college contexts, which creates a particular notion of a center based on education, cosmopolitanism, and life planning, despite all of the effort to research non-college attending young adults by researchers in this area.<sup>74</sup>

My project at first light may not seem like one of solidarity. While I feel I fall short on the enormous task of speaking to spaces of strength that people of intersectional oppressions have going on in their intimate lives, I do feel that my project attempts to explain to a primarily privileged, white, and often older audience as to why an uptick of anxiety and lack of resources comparative to generations past lead to different decisions by contemporary young adults. Scholars note that particularly on issues of gender and intimacy and the distinctiveness these cause for conceptualizing political agency, millennial women are more likely to identify with their generation than with their gender.<sup>75</sup> If I can make a case for how our default paradigms

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<sup>72</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through AntiCapitalist Struggles,” *A Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. Carole R. McCann (New York: Routledge, 2013), 548; see also Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity,” *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1-36.

<sup>73</sup> Mohanty, 548.

<sup>74</sup> Some of the cosmopolitanism of the generation comes not from education and advantage, but the sheer amount of diversity and hybridity by race and other factors in the generation at large. For instance, the generation is 43% non-white, Richard Fry, “Millennials Projected to Overtake Baby Boomers as America’s Largest Generation,” *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/01/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/>.

<sup>75</sup> Shelly Budgeon citing Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda : Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) in “The Contradictions of Successful Feminism: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and ‘New’ Femininities,” *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism,*

around relationship ethics are built on notions of permanence, privilege, stability that, by themselves without translation, do not serve well many people, younger or simply marginalized, I will have made a good start on an effort to interrogate what I see as the way religious values of commitment and steadfastness can be seen as mismatched or irrelevant to contemporary life.

Second within this feminist focus, the assumption that truly getting to know oneself and another person, leads to greater, more precise equality because people are known and respected better for their challenges, gifts, and desires drives much of my dissertation's argument on what relationally and intimately can be done about gender inequality. This knowledge of self and other should in turn provide motivation to engage in actions which uplifts each person's unique and inherent worth as a child of God. If it manages to do so, then it works toward the goal of feminist research and feminism as a whole, to "end gender and interrelated inequalities such as those that are race, class, and sexuality based."<sup>76</sup> Feminists such as myself theorize that these inequalities exist not because they are biologically determined, but because a capitalist, hierarchical culture promotes some human beings as worth more than others. This valuation and power differential leads to our being less intimate with ourselves and others than God desires.

Thus, it is a feminist project to focus on the subject of marginalization and seek to end the exclusion of the marginalized from systems of power and worth toward greater access and inclusion in determining the parameters of the system.<sup>77</sup> It is notable that many Millennials of color and of immigrant background, particularly Hispanics, do not define themselves as American, even if they have United States citizenship because of racial exclusions from an American identity that is still thought of as white, middle-class, and asset-owning.<sup>78</sup> For example, researcher and author of *Citizens but not Americans*, Nilda Flores-Gonzales describes Millennial Hispanics who are 2<sup>nd</sup> or third generation immigrants as automatically assumed or associated with illegality because "Latino" is associated with illegal immigration to so many

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*and Subjectivity*, edited by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Houndmills; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 280.

<sup>76</sup> Alison Dahl Crossley, *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>77</sup> Katy Mahraj, "Dis/locating the Margins: Gloria Anzaldúa and Dynamic Feminist Learning," *Feminist Teacher* 21 no. 1 (2011), 2.

<sup>78</sup> Nilda Flores-Gonzales, *Citizens but not Americans: Race among Latino Millennials* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 2.

privileged people.<sup>79</sup> Anecdotally, I know that many persons today feel marginalized in the sense that they are outside of a system not meant for them. While Millennials are the most educated generation ever, they are the first in many years to face a future of less material affluence than the generations that have come before, which bothers some people, but not others.

The third and final aspect of the feminist branch of the project is reflexivity. Writer and theorist of borderlands Gloria Anzaldúa calls the intentional method of growing one's own consciousness and simultaneously deepening connection to others "mestiza consciousness." This holistic, relational way of thinking, relating and acting focuses on including rather than excluding.<sup>80</sup> It links how personal and cultural reflexivity and self-authorship are necessary in order to develop the acceptance and embracing of hybridity and crossing of spaces. This crossing is necessary, according to many Chicana feminists, for the ethical to be actualized.<sup>81</sup> Anzaldúa notes that white progressives who do the same can be considered intellectual mestizas, a goal which I strive to work toward every day.<sup>82</sup> Anzaldúa considers those who research and reflect upon his or her or their own culture as doing spiritually valuable and ethically honest work.<sup>83</sup>

As a mid-thirties, white, middle-class, long-married Millennial who, in the course of this study aged out of the young adult demographic time frame I set, I nonetheless bring considerable recent experience and reflection to such a project. My experience of working with young adult in ministry and theological educational settings matches what I find in my formal literature review. I have spent years of personal life and academic study thinking about the incongruence of dominant relationship ethics focused stalwartly on the nature and bond of marriage in contrast to a focus on the needs of most people in a postindustrial culture. These people include those who

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<sup>79</sup> Flores-Gonzales, 7; She notes that her respondents are made to feel like trespassers in white spaces because their English proficiency and merit are constantly questioned, 31-32, 40, 47.

<sup>80</sup> AnaLouise Keating, "Introduction: Reading *Gloria Anzaldúa*, *Reading Ourselves*," *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, edited by AnaLouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>81</sup> Chéla Sandoval, "Mestizaje as a Method: Feminists of Color Challenge the Canon," *Living Chicana Theory*, edited by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, Calif.: Third Woman Press, 1998), 361.

<sup>82</sup> Keating, 12.

<sup>83</sup> "Insider" knowledge, as opposed to a scholar who studies a culture different from his or her own, is considered by feminist researchers to provide an upper-hand in gaining the reflexivity and careful analysis necessary to do accurate, thoughtful, and robust work. For more on self-reflexivity, see Rosanna Herz, ed., *Reflexivity and Voice* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997); Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ed., *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2007); Patricia Leavy and Michelle L. Yaiser, ed. *Feminist Perspectives on Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Julie Tilsen, *Therapeutic Conversations with Queer Youth: Transcending Homonormativity and Constructing Preferred Identities* (New York: Jason Aronson, 2013), 7; Doebring, *Practice*, 191.

are married but do not find the frame of longevity and unconditional support as sufficient guidance for addressing all the problems of everyday life. My research can directly help young people improve and sustain intimate relationships of justice and love.

### *Queering lens*

The third major branch of my overall interdisciplinary methodology involves engaging a queer lens. As counselor of queer youth Julie Tilsen describes it, “*Queer* is about exploding certainty and provoking questions.”<sup>84</sup> While it may not seem at first that contemporary young adults can be sympathetic with a queer lens, its postmodern worldview aligns with the way young adults of all orientations approach intimacy. Tilsen summarizes a queer orientation to life “is about fluidity rather than fixity, creating rather than consuming, truths rather than Truth, and imagining rather than replicating.”<sup>85</sup> Queerness for today’s youth has to do with a position of not fitting in bodily and emotionally that can be caused by any number of factors. As such, queerness is both something someone is forced into by normalizing social forces excluding particular bodies as well as something queer persons come to embrace /in?/ as a method of survival.<sup>86</sup> As a process involving reflection, queerness makes peace with natural human ambivalence as being honest. As queer tradition shows, in being honest, persons are more aware of power, and thus necessarily more open to what the future and change might bring.<sup>87</sup> Because of this, those engaging a queer lens are more committed to transparency and accountability than others.<sup>88</sup>

## **SIGNIFICANCE, SCOPE, AND LIMITATIONS**

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<sup>84</sup> Tilsen, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Tilsen, 2; For further elaboration on the notions of a queer orientation for straight people, see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2006); Mary Robertson, *Growing Up Queer: Kids and the Remaking of LGBTQ Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Mihee Kim Kort, *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness will Transform Your Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

<sup>86</sup> Robertson, 6.

<sup>87</sup> Robertson, 23.

<sup>88</sup> Tilsen, 6-7.

## **Significance**

My work builds upon substantial cultural shifts in recent generations that uphold mutual flourishing in relationships as justification for marriage rather than gender complementarity and procreation. This notion of mutual flourishing as an ultimate ethical ideal does much to lay the groundwork of intimacy—rather than commitment—as a primary ingredient and mechanism of evaluation for a relationship. Yet what it means to take actual, concrete steps toward improving /n/ mutual flourishing and to do so in primary intimate relationships is sparse in pastoral theological literature. I define “primary intimate relationships” for the purposes of this study as those with whom someone has an ongoing, romantic, psychological, and often sexual, adult partnership of intimacy and mutual support. I do not presume monogamy or permanence, but there is some sense in which some intimate relationships are more “primary” in terms of availability, frequency, duration, and other criteria of relevant engagement

I hope that this dissertation, and the books that will come out of it, can advance knowledge about intimate mutual flourishing on theoretical and practical levels. Tools to think more deeply and critically about the everyday ethics and interpersonal decisions that make up our lives will allow us to better connect life and faith. Thus my study can help the church strengthen the value it places on vocation of marriage—and on mutual relationships in general—by expanding its discussion of a valuable and fulfilling relationship, and how to achieve it.

## **Scope**

To paint a portrait of contemporary young adulthood and culture, I have relied on interviews and analysis from studies that often were extensive projects involving teams of researchers and numerous participants. Unfortunately, these studies were often indirectly related to my main concerns of intimacy and mutuality. Not being able to engage with subjects directly on my research questions is a weakness of the project. However, given the controversial discussion over the intimacy of young adults and the narrowness of subject involved in most academic investigations, it has been valuable to paint a broad picture of intimacy, psychology, and ethics which is more comprehensive and attuned to pastoral and psychological needs of young adults as they see them for themselves

Inherent methodological weaknesses to the project include the basic assumption that improving intimacy among persons will necessarily further respect and love. This is an issue of theological anthropology that cannot be definitively proven. Certainly psychological intimacy can be used *against* the aims of respect and love—when we know someone well we know how to hurt them, and rejection of them for whatever reason can increase the pain of such dismissal. My aim of mutuality as an amalgam of love and justice mixed together is similarly loose and assumptive. It can also be used erroneously to forestall efforts of love and respect by simply naming a relationship as equal when empirical observation by an outsider would lead to assessing the relationship as less equal than imagined or professed by those within it.

My treatment of religion is similarly diffuse. Given that I choose to focus on intimacy and gender, there is not time and space to discuss in any great detail how the various particularities of religion influence the expectations and behavior of young adults beyond the broad sketches I make about what they find to be spiritually meaningful outside of the confines of traditional religion.<sup>89</sup> Nor do I necessarily cover all aspects of intimacy, for the constraints of time, space, and focus.<sup>90</sup> Generally, the religious aspects of my project are the ethical. Ethics itself is a complex engagement of present and future. Tackling the interstices that I do endeavors me to think creatively about desire, vision and behavior. This necessarily involves some slippage between factors resulting in ambiguity, and yet this remains a valuable area of study.

## Limitations

Also regarding vagueness, I overlap many areas of study which could be distinctly researched in their own right. For instance, by studying young adults (ages 18-29), I am studying a wide time frame in which their behavior often changes as they age. This wide age range

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<sup>89</sup> In part, I do this because multiple studies have noted that time and again, material circumstances, rather than religion, have a much larger sway over what people do than religious scripts of right and wrong for all but the most devout in tight-knit, distinctive religious communities. For an example of research about religious impact upon intimate lives see W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage among African Americans and Latinos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>90</sup> One of the main areas of intimacy research that I leave out is relationship dissolution, with the exception of brief mentions of the specter of divorce and digital media “ghosting” (ceasing to continue to have a conversation) as a reason to take things slow and informally.

I also leave out domestic violence and abuse, although most feminists believe that abusive relationships are what can happen in a society that does not value mutuality, Yvette G. Flores-Ortiz “Voices from the Couch: The Co-Creation of a Chicana Psychology,” *Living Chicana Theory*, edited by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, Calif.: Third Woman Press, 1998), 110.

necessitates detailing the limitations to intimacy that contemporary young adults encounter initially, as well as the movements they make toward greater intimacy as they age (even though literature on this is mainly missing). As someone captivated by human development, my aims are to support people where they are right now developmentally in terms of a life phase position and also to provide vision and guidance for people to grow into the fullness of their being over the course of their life. Yet in studying Millennials as an example of contemporary young adults I do a number of other/s/ things as well. I attempt to study contemporary young adults as a position in the developmental life course of individuals, as I have mentioned, while also analyzing them as a generational cohort in a particular position of history.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, I also argue that Millennials as young adults serve as an exemplification of broader cultural moves toward greater singleness, egalitarianism, and fluidity in intimate life. Thus I alternately investigate relationships and gender so as to speak to and about Millennials as contemporary young adults and also to speak about these areas in terms of their implication for cultural life at large.

Another limitation is a lack of data on Millennials responding directly to my questions about gender, intimate gender equity, and mutuality. Little is known about what contemporary young adults think about gender, intimate gender roles, and feminism beyond a general belief in and expectation of intimate relationships which will contain greater egalitarianism and self-reliance than those of their parents' generation. While in Part Three of my project I propose mutuality as a better theological goal than notions of equity, researchers typically assess relationships in terms of a spectrum of complementarianism of a strict division of gender roles based on notions of essential, biological difference between men and women, and egalitarianism, which has more to do with shared responsibilities across different areas. For the purposes of setting a definitional standard, I will say that while my ethical goal is mutuality, feminist sociologist Kathleen Gerson's definitional note that "egalitarian" to most of her interviewees meant "a long-term commitment to equitable, flexible, and mutual support in domestic tasks and workplace ties" is a good operational standard with which to analyze intimate gender equity according to the research available.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> See Peter Hart-Brinson, *The Gay Marriage Generation: How the LGBTQ Movement Transformed American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 4, 15-17, 214-221.

<sup>92</sup> Kathleen Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107.



In my effort to assert that I do not believe that gender roles in the contemporary American scene are conducive to happiness and fulfillment in the neoliberal present or future, I nonetheless acknowledge that “gender-role eliminativism” as political science scholar Serene Khader calls it, has been accused of being a Western imperialist strategy that at points discounts and disrupts the survival strategies of minority groups.<sup>93</sup> I attempt to acknowledge places where non-white groups make their own patterns of interpersonal behavior and division of household responsibilities in a way that works for them. In particular, there is little research as to how Millennials’ views on gender and gender egalitarianism *affect* their expectations, aspirations, and behaviors. In addition, there are few studies that address the intersection of specific identity markers, young adulthood, and romance. I intend to address these gaps in future research.

## CHAPTERS OVERVIEW AND PROJECT SUMMARY

### Chapters overview

I consider this an exercise of practical theology, following Don Browning’s four movements of what he calls a fundamental practical theology, although I do not follow the sequential flow that he assumes (descriptive, historical, systematic, strategic), nor give equal treatment to all these movements.<sup>94</sup> Part One of this project is descriptive theology of what it means to focus on the needs and challenges of young adults today, covering relevant aspects of human development, neoliberal culture, the concept and challenge of intimacy, and approaches to gender and gender equality in intimate relationship. Thus, I label this part “Defining and Describing Major Themes.”

Part Two is a combination of historical, systematic and strategic movements of a fundamental practical theology. Chapter Six is a dip into Systematic Theology with its focus on Christian notions of love, justice, and the place of self as interrelated and foundational to shaping people’s particular beliefs and behaviors. Chapters Five and Seven are strategic practical theology in that they focus on how to be reflective and reflexive in ways that develop self and

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<sup>93</sup> Serene J. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>94</sup> Don Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 47-55.

interpersonal knowledge toward personal and mutual ends. In following my initial research questions about contemporary young adult intimacy, Part Two of my project ends up asking large questions such as: *What constitutes an ethic or morality? What is mutuality? Love? Justice? What is it that keeps us from these things?*

My first chapter, entitled “Defining and Describing Contemporary Young Adulthood” outlines the perennial developmental challenges of young adulthood and some of the behaviors that come from being a young adult in the middle of identity exploration and preparation for adult life. In particular, these developmental challenges involve gaining maturity through exploration and development of identity, engaging in complexity, and fostering intimate connection.<sup>95</sup> This chapter also focuses on how neoliberal and postmodern culture have influenced the subject at hand by making young adults particularly anxious because of a strong cultural bent toward personal responsibility and self-reliance. Yet in some cases this personal focus ends up having positive social outcomes. In particular, I end this chapter by focusing on how the individual as a form of authority has led to changed notions of young adulthood, self-fulfillment, and religious experience.

In Chapter Two on “Theorizing Intimacy,” I outline intimacy as a psychosocial and interpersonal concept, necessarily rooted in a cohesive sense of identity, and deeply tied to the development and constitutive of personal and communal identity. While I use a variety of authors to describe intimacy as interpersonal, I then switch to developmental theorists such as Erik Erikson and Robert Kegan who both identify intimacy as the psycho-developmental challenge to meet successfully in early adulthood. After reviewing their theories of development, stages, and challenges, I sum up this capacity further in the descriptions of self-authorship provided by Dan McAdams and *conocimiento* of Gloria Anzaldúa.

I start Chapter Three on “Contemporary Intimacy in Practice and Expectation,” by reviewing the salient contributions of two sociologists who have provided theories around intimacy in late modernity. The first is Anthony Giddens, who waxed quixotically about the potentials of the “pure relationship” of affinity and agreement, followed by Eva Illouz, who believes that modern culture is not leading to an indulgence of hedonism as so often believed by

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<sup>95</sup> Even though intimacy and mutuality are my main research concerns, a developmental lens and a respect for subjects as the start and leaders of inquiry require that this chapter on the developmental challenges of achieving adulthood go first.

critics of young adults, but rather one in which the motivation is fear and lack of confidence. In the bulk of the chapter, I describe in broad detail how contemporary young adults approach intimacy in terms of dating, seeking and evaluating partners at different stages of intimacy, and how they engage cohabitating and thinking about larger commitments like marriage.

Since one of my larger lens of concern has to do with mutuality of relationship across gender, in Chapter Four on “Gender, Feminism, and Inequity in Contemporary Intimacy,” I spend time articulating how Millennials see gender as an open concept theoretically, and yet for reasons of lack of politicism and imagination in pioneering a more mutual path forward, find themselves living within more traditionally gendered patterns of behavior than their attitudinal politics would otherwise indicate. In short, they are often reluctant to consider themselves feminist. To fill out this picture beyond what Millennials see as possible within their own gender identities to how gender in their own relationship might factor into issues of equity and mutuality, I draw on sociologists writing slightly before Millennials came of age, but for which the cultural lag between desire for equity and practice of equity remains.

Part Two of my dissertation is entitled “Why ‘Toward Mutuality’ on the ‘Oregon Trail Redux:’ Disrupting Norms, Pursuing Love and Justice, and Engaging in Mutual Recognition,” in reference to millennial minister Eric Acheson describing his generation as one engaging “Oregon Trail Theology” of a purposeful, if open-ended, frontier. In this second part, I make a construction turn from primarily theoretical and sociological description (although this division is never clear cut) to investigations of praxis. As part of this interrogatory turn, I seek to expose how the gendered norms of the family are social constructs created by the privileged for their service yet cast as universal spiritual and moral forms. I look into the ways in which cultural gendered norms of the Western family can be practiced rigidly without personal reflection, leading to a dampening of the full flexibility and wholeness of the family. To do so, I identify theoretical and practical tools to help contemporary persons, should they choose to do so, move the barometer of their intimate relationships toward greater gender equality and mutuality.

Thus, in Chapter Five “Neplanterismo: Disrupting norms and Discerning Morality,” I center an exploration of ethics from the margins on the works of queer black ethicist Thelathia Young, Hispanic sociologist Katie Acosta, and Episcopal priest Elizabeth Edman. I describe these as efforts of “neplanterismo” in which one makes and claims a new form of morality from a place of being in-between. In particular in her own work, Young explores what it means for

black queers to come up with new meanings of family which are more just and loving than the gendered ones of heterosexuality. Black queers gain this knowledge through a reflection upon their lives and values which Young matches up to major moves of self and social interrogation germane to queer theory. Life lived on the material and social margins lends the possibility of a particular clarity around how social norms can constrict persons from being their truest and most moral selves. Young and others argue that queer theory usefully offers a methodology of reflective power analysis and destabilization that can be used by people of any social identity seeking to develop relationships that are more flexible and rewarding.

In Chapter Six, labeled “Pursuing Love, Justice, and Self in Theological Ethics,” I propose that scholars and representatives of religion should promote ethics as the lived, improvisational, and dynamical relevant process that it can be. I then focus on Don Browning and his fellow researchers’ concept of an equal regard relationship, a particularly relevant construct to the family in late modern times because of its inherent intimacy, flexibility, and commitment to duration over time that can be nonetheless loosely defined. Equal regards sounds like it is about mutuality, but Browning’s interpretation of love is defined almost solely as self-giving, bestowing short shrift to justice as a theological concept. I interpret his concept of equal regard as a balance of love and justice, even though he did not. I end the chapter with how feminist ethicists and theologians, and Millennials, are skeptical if not adamant that traditional notions of sacrifice based in self-emptying and self-transcendence do not actually serve the aims of mutuality. Instead, I put forth sage feminist meditations on aspects of Christian tradition that can help with an interpretation that true equal regard is a balance of love and justice, in which the self and other flourish in tandem.

In the seventh and final chapter of my project, I conclude that mutuality is not a relational possibility without persons engaging each other from the stance of a certain type of psychological state. Thus, in “Mutuality as Psychological Recognition,” I explore feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin’s claim that any type of psychological relationship between two persons that is not mutual is a form of less-than-perfect, less-than-possible love. Following Benjamin, I assert that persons deserve—and seek—mutual recognition. Benjamin usefully outlines the process of recognition and the inherent struggle to keep this process a robust two-way street. Yet she does so theoretically.

To put her ideas into closer engagement with the lives of actual young people, I take space in this chapter to outline the major themes and processes of psychodynamic couples' therapy, as well as the particular strategies feminist counselors have come up with for using psychoanalytic attunement practices to investigate and redirect practices of gender inequality toward greater mutuality. While I put forward some concrete ideas here and through Part Two about how to do this, it remains an immense structural challenge to translate counseling ideas into visions and practices that everyday people can engage in their intimate lives without significant training or actual counseling support (for reasons of time, cost, access). Given the researchers whom I cite who indicate the level of this challenge for the marginalized and impermanency-affected persons whose lives I hope to impact, I struggle with the sufficiency of my response to promoting intimacy and self-reflection skills as a general rule for all people in the face of addressing the yawning gap of resources that would help enable people to meet my proscription.<sup>96</sup>

### **Project summary**

In sum, this project points toward a proscriptive meditation on how the future of neoliberalism requires a self and a family structure which can somehow counteract the destabilizing of this system by retaining some semblance of love and justice in family and society through flexibility of work-life engagement over the life course and between partners in an enduring relationship. In the first part, it reviews the life development, cultural influences, anxieties, pressures, expectations, and desires of contemporary young adults around intimacy and gender equality. In the second half, I draw together marginal and liberation-oriented perspectives in ethics and psychology that can provide entry points for scholars of religion and young people themselves to develop psychological resilience and authorship of their own personal stories, goals, and beliefs. Throughout these pages, I point to a history of encouraging women's self-sacrifice and men's immunity to influence. In response, I offer concrete practices reflexivity which will facilitate change from unconscious rigidity around gender roles to a greater

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<sup>96</sup> These include Sharon Sassler and Amanda Jayne Miller, *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2017); Silva, 45-46; Williams, 163-191, and throughout Pugh's edited collection, *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

embracing of the wilderness of the spirit in which change toward greater gender equity will occur.

I suggest that a more egalitarian family structure, rather than other options, offers the best chance of resiliency given the challenges at present and still ahead, yet, in the fashion of an equal regard construct, I leave how this might be defined over a couple's life course and interaction with the financial means for sustenance up to determination of couples in their own particular situations. I hope that my analysis has argued persuasively that working "toward mutuality" in interpersonal intimacy is a need and also a challenge that can be met.

## **Part One: Defining and Describing Major Themes**

## I.

### Defining and Describing Contemporary Young Adulthood

*Judgement is important because none of the answers to the questions that really move us can be found by following a rule. [...] courage is required to live with the rift that will run through our lives, however good they may be: ideals of reason tell us how the world should be; experience tells us that it rarely is. Growing up requires confronting the gap between the two—without giving up on either one.*<sup>97</sup>

Philosopher Susan Neiman

*Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age*

#### INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to become an adult? Is it a better, more advanced state than the strength and passion of youth, or a marker of decline in vigor and freedom? Psychosocial developmental theorists such as Erik Erikson and Robert Kegan, drawing upon cognitive theorists like Jean Piaget before them, evaluated adulthood as an improvement over youth. They described adulthood as obtaining the capacity to think and relate complexly, which they called “intimacy.” While Erikson believed that psychosocial development chugged along without pause or detour because of its basis in biology, Kegan believed that the level of psychological adulthood he described was something only a third of the adult population—by legal definition—actually managed to achieve.<sup>98</sup> For Kegan, culture was what advanced adulthood, and often the situations of culture did not train up persons to develop this advanced capacity. Today such psychological definitions of adulthood contribute to the raging social debate over what it means to be an adult, what should be achieved in adulthood, and if it is possible—and even in some cases preferable—not to ever reach such a status.

In a post-industrial neoliberal culture that commodifies and infantilizes at the same time that it loads an ever increasing burden on the capacity of the individual, no wonder there is a debate about both what it means to grow up and whether young people want to do so. Young adults are reacting to what I call a “predictive horizon of impermanence” in which their lives will undergo constant change and responsibility in a variety of ways. They are alternately fearful and optimistic, revising what it means to be an adult, and also delaying their approach to it because

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<sup>97</sup> Susan Neiman, *Why Grow Up? Subversive Thoughts for an Infantile Age* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 11-12.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Kegan, *Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 335.



of continuing adherence to standards of economic self-sufficiency. They train and prepare intensely in terms of developing skills that they feel will have some staying power in supporting them through life's unpredictability, but, given this very horizon, they feel that preparation at any one point will only be so useful.<sup>99</sup> Primarily, contemporary young adults try to find some integrity in remaining loose and flexible. In particular, they embrace provisional and eclectic forms of meaning and relationship in this period of their life as they hope for something more permanent.

In this chapter, following the spirit of Erikson and Kegan, I describe young adulthood primarily through a psychosocial lens of developing capacities for discernment of faith claims and commitments, complexity of relationship and engagement, and connection with self and others. I argue, following these developmental theorists, that these capacities of complexity and connection take time to develop. Thus, if the higher levels of intimacy are to be accomplished as Kegan envisions them possible, it is of social benefit that we give this development the time it needs. More development of the person in terms of capacity to relate to and reflect upon one's self and experience, and then do this in engagement with others, ideally leads to more accomplished, even more ethical, people.

In the first half of this chapter, I will draw together developmental theorists and theologians to paint a portrait of the psychological challenges of young adulthood and becoming an adult. Yet not everyone agrees that these capacities of complexity of relationship are possible, probable, or good in today's young adults. Critics of young adults decry them as narcissistic or morally relativist precisely because contemporary young adults declare responsibility and judgement as for themselves and themselves alone at this stage in their lives.<sup>100</sup>

Such critics do not understand, nor empathize, with the anxiety and pressure which neoliberal culture enacts upon denizens who have known nothing else. So, in the second section of this chapter, I describe how economic pressure and a rationalist and consumerist mindset shapes the values and worldviews of contemporary young adult to help explain the pressures

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<sup>99</sup> Varda Konstam notes that if Emerging Adults felt like they could prepare for and know the future, they would readily take the advantage. They are not nihilists in the least, but deeply postmodern in their sense that all of life is change and fluidity, Varda Konstam, *The Romantic Lives of Emerging Young Adults*, Emerging Adulthood, ed. Larry Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 322.

<sup>100</sup> The most well-known of these critics to the general public is psychologist Jean Twenge and her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, and Entitled—and more Miserable than ever Before*, 2nd ed. (New York: Atria, 2014), xi.

under which young adults act. While critics of young adults interpret them as acting out of diffusion and confusion, in the third section, I highlight how and why young adults psychologize what it means to be an adult, and out of this sense, defend the role of the self both in becoming an adult and being spiritual as more personally authentic, relevant, and meaningful than older perspectives embedded in certain notions of social responsibility. Despite the naysayers, there is much recent literature which reveals that contemporary young adults are often finding creative ways to be true to themselves even if this authenticity seems scattered, self-reliant, and strange to those who have found meaning in different ways.

### **SECTION ONE: PERENNIAL DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES OF YOUNG ADULTHOOD**

In this section, I discuss what I mean by young adulthood as a term and why I choose it among a variety of alternatives. I outline that young adulthood is commonly thought of by psychologists, counselors, and developmental theorists as a period of working toward mature judgement in which one is able to reflect upon one's inherited faith, discern revisions to this faith, and articulate and defend it as a guide for making life decisions of career, education, and family. This necessarily involves a period of exploration of identity, personality, and talents, and experience with increasing responsibility, seriousness of relationships, and complexity of personal engagement and work-life integration.

While many people question the way contemporary young adults are going about their development in this period, I argue against the critics that from a psychological and developmental point of view, the long, subjective path to adulthood is one we as scholars of religion should be championing and celebrating. Part and parcel of convincing my readers not to fear or deride this new, slower journey is showing those who wish to be guides to young adults the logic behind this process; although I allude to it indirectly by the time we get there, in the second half of this dissertation I offer greater detail on how scholars of religion can use this developmental reality to fashion strategies for elaborating and deepening the ethical creativity of young adults.

#### **Scoping young adulthood**

Most human development theorists frame the period of young adulthood by age, often ranging from 18-29 or 18-35. Most agree that having children or other substantial life

experiences which create an orientation toward others can propel persons into adulthood well before the end of this range. Given my interest in making statements of general sociological applicability, and acknowledging that any age range has a great deal of theoretical variability within it, I define young adulthood as Jeffrey Jensen Arnett defines “Emerging Adulthood,” in terms of spanning 18-29 years of age. I do so in part because, if marriage and parenthood are still indicators of having achieved some modicum of adulthood, 29 is a good cut off year, as Arnett notes that by 30 years of age 75% of Americans have married and had at least one child.<sup>101</sup>

While I find Arnett’s idea of Emerging Adulthood (EA) fascinating and his constellations of theorists postulating this idea to be useful interlocutors, I intentionally use the term “young adulthood” as my lens.<sup>102</sup> The use of the term young adulthood, in my mind, removes this stage from such culturally specific implications without disputing the veracity of Arnett’s descriptions of EA as a period of unstable identity. While much of my dissertation speaks to the informality, ambiguity, and impermanence of intimacy in young adult life, pre-disposing the phase as unstable works somewhat against my aim of investigating what it means to help young adults along and through this period toward increasing maturity and settling.

Coining my demographic as “young adults” allows me to touch upon the various debates about what it means to be mature, as well as what it means to develop and use the capacity of maturity toward the ethical ends of connection, recognition, and love which I focus on in latter part of my dissertation. Drawing on the work of relational psychologists, I define maturity as using skills and sense of self to connect with others.<sup>103</sup> Yet legally in the United States, one becomes mature by reaching the age of majority at 18 years of age. As I have alluded to, in this sense reaching adulthood is automatic with age and does not require any further achievement of standards. Contrasting either of these psychological or legal definitions, some would define adulthood more pragmatically or sociologically as adulthood having been achieved through

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<sup>101</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2004, 2014), 12.

<sup>102</sup> Some developmental theorists, studying adulthood in particular, use the term “early adulthood” and break adulthood into early, middle, and late, each phase totaling 20 years.

<sup>103</sup> This definition stands in contrast to the more classic Freudian notions of maturity as autonomy and distance from dependent interaction. Emily Souvaine, Lisa L. Lahey, and Robert Kegan note that the notion of development beyond autonomy is not new, yet I find that the classic notion of the goal of human development as autonomy still lingers and has ill effect, “Life after Formal Operations: Implications for a Psychology of the Self,” *Higher Stages of Human Development: Perspectives on Adult Growth*, ed. Charles N. Alexander and Ellen J. Langer (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 235.

securing a measure of sufficient employment leading to financial independence, responsibility for others through marriage or children, and/or shift in primary responsibility for one's decisions. Contemporary young adults' entrenchment in individualism makes such growth in psychological capacity a germane, if not frustratingly difficult to measure and observe, way of describing to them something which is a profound personal achievement.

Despite these difficulties, I nonetheless advocate for moving from a cultural definition of adulthood as defined by external markers of structured relationship such as marriage and children, to defining it as a psychological achievement in which one exhibits in their everyday life a level of complex engagement with ideas, self, and other people. I do this for two main reasons. The first is for the sake of bridging prior notions of adulthood to young adults' own notions of what it means to be an adult today. The second is to intentionally outline expectations and steps toward this level of what psychologists call intersubjective "self-authorship," an psychological ability to direct one's own personal story, so to speak, so that with this in hand, scholars and practitioners of religion have a road map for it. I argue this out of a firm belief that people with greater inter- and intrapersonal capacity are better able to reflect upon the moral knowledge of their experiences such that they can also integrate this with religious traditions of practice and wisdom situationally.

#### *Maturing as needing resources, exposure, experience*

All developmental theorists concur that developing self-authorship takes a while, for it takes resources, mentorship, and experience.<sup>104</sup> Many, such as Erikson himself, argue that substantial amounts of exploration are necessary for young adults to master these tasks. Thus, many contemporary developmental theorists caution against expecting that adulthood can automatically be achieved at the legal age of maturity of 18, for both biological and socio-cognitive reasons. For one thing, as religious educator Katherine Turpin contends, the ability to move through human development stages depends on the resources to do so. It is also the case that contemporary social and economic conditions can make "novice navigation of life" a tough

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<sup>104</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 8, 54; James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns: The Psychological Challenges and Religious Invitations of Adult Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 41.

process.<sup>105</sup> Turpin agrees with theorists like Kegan who suggest that changes to environment, not just biological progression, are necessary in order to develop greater capacity for complex thinking and intricate interpersonal skills.<sup>106</sup> Turpin does not discount biology, but rather uses it to further make her case. She notes that complex decision making and appropriate risk assessment typically become possible as much as a decade after the biological maturity of puberty.<sup>107</sup> Kegan adds a flourish that even in our 30s we are still seeking mastery, promotion, recognition, and credentials to give us confidence and identity.<sup>108</sup>

Following Kegan and others Turpin suggests that as a culture we should realize that full adulthood cannot happen at least until young people move out of structured environments such as a parent's home, college, or the military.<sup>109</sup> This environmental independence is what allows young adults to take the risks and make the decisions they need to make to differentiate from too easily giving into or isolating from the normative structures around them. Others, such as Neiman, believe that exposure to substantive difference, which can occur through travel, education, or learning about others through reading or interaction, is crucial for maturity, but not sufficient for it.<sup>110</sup> This is because travel, environmental independence, or whatever one wants to call it, is substantively different from what came before in that the structural assumptions of this new location are different. Difference must be grappled with on a personal and systemic level such that this new information is integrated into the person.

Developing this capacity over time often requires a moratorium on major responsibility within a community, a fact which many cultures, such as the restrictive Amish, recognize as necessary for an adult claiming of the faith and life of the community.<sup>111</sup> Yet moratorium as a

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<sup>105</sup> Katherine Turpin, "Younger Adulthood: Exploring Callings in the Midst of Uncertainty," *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2017), 95-96.

<sup>106</sup> Turpin, 99.

<sup>107</sup> Turpin, 97.

<sup>108</sup> Robert Kegan, *In Over our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 180.

<sup>109</sup> Turpin, 97.

<sup>110</sup> Neiman, 17.

<sup>111</sup> Erikson postulated that this passage between adolescence and adulthood often involved a psychosocial moratorium in which one intentionally put off solidifying personal notions of identity in order to delay its concomitant responsibilities. Social psychologists Michael W. Pratt and M. Kyle Matsuba note that theorist James Marcia (1966) took Erikson's idea of a moratorium and created a four-dimension chart to further detail differences of identity statuses: identity diffusion (low exploration, low commitment), identity foreclosure (low, high), identity

facet of young adulthood nonetheless remains a subject of some controversy, as some believe an abeyance of responsibility is not to be encouraged. While this need for exploration in young adulthood has been postulated as the case for many years, some religion researchers like Christian Smith and Patrician Snell and psychologists like Jean Twenge interpret contemporary incidences of experimentation as a foolish wandering in the wilderness and nothing more. I argue that such inference lacks much understanding of human development in general, and in particular what it means to learn and respond to circumstances. On the researchers' end, I believe it involves a curious deficiency of empathy.

### **Working toward maturity: Discerning what to stand for and how to live**

#### *Maturity: Theoretical definitions*

Gaining maturity for young adults involves exploration and openness, which in turn provide the necessary conditions to be able to cognitively and interpersonally engage on a complex level. One of the few theorists to write entire books specifically on adulthood from a psychoanalytic human development perspective, Calvin Colarusso notes that the aim of reaching adulthood, psychosocially, is achieving maturity. He defines maturity as:

Maturity refers to that mental state found in healthy adults which is characterized by a detailed knowledge of the parameters of human existence; a sophisticated level of self-awareness based on an honest appraisal of one's own experience within those basic parameters; and the ability to use this intellectual and emotional knowledge and insight caringly in relationship to oneself and others.<sup>112</sup>

While psychodynamic practitioners like Colarusso must determine a picture of maturity or health as a goal for which to work toward with their clients, Colarusso is somewhat unique as a psychoanalyst in his extensive outlining of definitions of maturity that one might more readily expect to see coming from psychosocial developmental theorists. Yet there is a lot of common

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moratorium (high, low), identity achievement (high, high). Moratorium was actually a status closer to identity achievement than its opposite, identity diffusion, but moratorium receives the greatest focus in analytic literature about young adulthood, Michael W. Pratt and M. Kyle Matsuba, *The Life Story, Domains of Identity, and Personality Development in Emerging Adulthood: Integrating Narrative and Traditional Approaches*, Emerging Adulthood, ed. Larry J. Nelson (New York; London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10-11.

<sup>112</sup> Calvin A. Colarusso, *Fulfillment in Adulthood: Paths to the Pinnacle of Life* (New York; London: Plenum Press, 1984), 2, 5.

ground in this arena, as psychological maturity involves a certain level of psychological stability, the primary concern of psychoanalysts. For instance, licensed social worker Bonnie Cushing and family therapist Monica McGoldrick draw primarily on family systems theory to note that this period of developing maturity is observable in young adults' solidifying relationship to money and becoming successful at business and family management, all tasks that require good judgment.<sup>113</sup> As family systems theorists, they are primarily concerned and focused upon how young adult development affects their place in the social system and the observable, concrete tasks that are required of young adults as they grow in maturity and responsibility.

Developmental psychologist Fran C. Blumberg and counseling psychologist Melissa Shuman Zarin comment that developing maturity involves learning to deal with uncertainty and different situations, to recognize and accept that people live by different ideals, and to accept a certain degree of relativism and need to engage the contextual nature of decision-making. This involves gaining emotional regulation, such as greater control over negative moods, the ability to redirect attention and expression of emotions, and the ability to change one's response.<sup>114</sup> Colarusso articulates that the developmental tasks of young adulthood also include learning to consistently control impulses, delay gratification, limit and control aggression, and channel energy into work or other sublimated activities.<sup>115</sup> In another text focusing more on stages of human development throughout a life-course, Colarusso puts the goal of maturity in tandem with young adulthood as a phase by indicating how much maturity is reasonable within such a nascent stage of adulthood. What is reasonable, he and other theorists conclude, is enough psychosocial ability to begin to take substantive action in one's life.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Bonnie Cushing and Monica McGoldrick, "The Differentiation of Self and Faith in Young Adulthood: Launching, Coupling, and Becoming Parents," *Human Development and Faith: Lifecycle Stages of Body, Mind, and Soul*, ed. Felicity Kelcourse (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2015), 246-252.

<sup>114</sup> Fran C. Blumberg and Melissa Shuman Zarin, "Development during Adulthood: 'The Best is yet to Come,'" *Handbook of Counseling Women*, 1st ed., ed. Mary Kopala and Merle A. Keitel (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2003), 106-116, 111.

<sup>115</sup> Calvin A. Colarusso, *Child and Adult Development: A Psychoanalytic Introduction for Clinicians* (New York; London: MD Plenum Press, 1992), 145.

<sup>116</sup> See also Helen Haste, Klaus Helkama, and Diomedes Markoulis, "Morality, Wisdom, and the Life-Span," *Lifespan Developmental Psychology*, ed. Andreas Demetriou, Willem Doise, and Cornelis van Lieshout (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1998), 341.

*Maturity as faith development: Toward connected, autonomous thought*

My thoughts on the developmental challenges of young adults are guided by the leading contemporary developmental theorist on young adults, Sharon Daloz Parks, and her idea that young adulthood is about developing enough identity and gaining sufficient experience to make courageous judgments.<sup>117</sup> In particular, one is making judgements about what parts of inherited beliefs, practices, and scripts one can continue to live by and what one must do differently in new circumstances in order to live a life of integrity and satisfaction. As part of this, other developmental scholars note that key subskills that help constitute such courageous judgments involve making psychological peace with the idea of commitment as well as acceptance of vulnerability as a human condition.<sup>118</sup> Parks sees coming to maturity in faith as a significant journey, perhaps the biggest journey a person can make at any point in his or her life course. While this journey can begin in young adulthood, it is important to recognize that how this discernment of faith is undertaken and what beliefs and behaviors it results in will have significant repercussions on the rest of a person's life. How faith is engaged in young adulthood can prolong a grappling with faith, incite a settling, or encourage moving forward.

Parks describes the journey as one traversing from passive reception of values and epistemology to a tested, personally claimed version with progress. Turpin, in her own treatise on young adulthood quotes Parks as writing, ““To become a young adult in faith is to discover in a critically aware, self-conscious manner the limits of inherited or otherwise socially received assumptions about how life works—what is ultimately true and trustworthy, and what counts—and to recompose meaning and faith on the other side of that discovery.””<sup>119</sup> Neiman comments that this development of a middle ground between ideals, dogma, and reality is a difficult one to achieve, because it is so much easier to slide into either refutation that reality does not meet one's cherished hopes or abandonment of ideals that only result in disappoint and shame.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> I note that my three leading developmental theorists (Erikson, Kegan, and Parks) for this chapter have all taught in, or been educated by, various departments at Harvard University in the course of their careers. In this regard, Harvard has been on the cutting edge of human capacity theory such that it is no surprise that my main authors come from the same general school of thought and stand in contrast to more conservative, static notions of development.

<sup>118</sup> Konstam, 23; Donna Freitas, *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a New Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), xv.

<sup>119</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 7, quoted by Katherine Turpin, “Younger Adulthood: Exploring Callings in the Midst of Uncertainty,” *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life's Seasons*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2017), 109.

<sup>120</sup> Neiman, 12.



### *Developing maturity as testing and exploration*

Development theorists agree that testing, of abilities, boundaries, and commitments and other things, is an important part of developing robust psychosocial abilities and claiming one's life as self-authored. Parks distinguishes the journey of coming to a claimed faith as marked by two different forms of commitment on either end of the passage. The first, *probing commitment*, explores many possible forms of truth, roles, relationships, and lifestyles in an effort to assess what will fit oneself best.<sup>121</sup> *Tested commitment*, on the other hand, is that of a full adult. It involves "a sense of fittingness, a recognition that one is willing to make one's peace and to affirm one's place in the scheme of things (though not uncritically)."<sup>122</sup> This sense of fittingness helps one discern choices that facilitate being able to contribute and commit socially at a variety of levels.

Colarusso also writes that exploration crucially involves psychological reality testing in which young people test the limits of their strength and capacity, often through risk.<sup>123</sup> They do not yet have enough experience and are so rapidly changing that they do not know what of themselves and their world is physically reliable, in a meta-theoretical sense. Along the same lines of young adults not being sure of what they can depend on, family therapist Richard Fulmer observes that young adults try to primarily guide themselves by values out of a lack of having much life experience to draw from as of yet. He states that this imbalance of values as navigational weight in comparison to experience in part explains why young adults as a particular life position represent idealism for many people.<sup>124</sup> Experience and reality testing, then, helpfully results in less of a tendency to distort external stimuli because there is more experience with living, a sense of an inner world, and an increased ability to think and integrate material.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Parks, 88.

<sup>122</sup> Parks, 91-92.

<sup>123</sup> Colarusso, *Child and Adult Development*, 147.

<sup>124</sup> Richard Fulmer, "Becoming an Adult: Leaving Home and Staying Connected," *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives*, 3rd ed., ed. Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 217.

<sup>125</sup> Colarusso, *Child and Adult Development*, 147.

*Dealing with stress: A part of the phase*

Given all that contemporary young adults feel they need to prepare for and juggle, they experience considerable stress for their age. Since the predictive horizon of demands mentioned in the Introduction begins to set in as young adults prepare for a career through education or vocational training, psychological stress impinges upon their lives to considerable degrees even before they take on much responsibility. In anticipation of a mundane future of adult responsibility and struggle and the real-time pressures of preparing for a career that will provide the best chances for happiness and economic sufficiency, research shows that college students engage in all sorts of measures to reduce and deal with stress, among which are engaging in extensive partying.<sup>126</sup>

Although college students have always partied and drunk, young adults in college these days often turn to excessive drinking and partying, as well as casual sex, to deal with the stress in increasingly dissociative ways.<sup>127</sup> Christian ethicist Jennifer Beste and her students finds that their peers often believe that drinking relieves some of accountability or responsibility for their behavior, particularly sexual behavior. Whether or not they think about this in terms of assault, they generally indulge in alcohol precisely for an insinuation of lack of culpability; if they are or a peer are drunk there is some sense that they can then escape full judgment of their actions.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to partying, one of the ways to deal with this stress is to delay serious engagement in something that might cause someone to lose control and make choices that might interfere with their self-sufficiency, such as becoming intimate with someone and falling in love. Sociologist Jennifer Silva notes that, at least for her working-class demographic of young people whom she studied, “the only way to survive in such a competitive and bewildering labor market is to become highly elastic and unencumbered by other obligations—including their own

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<sup>126</sup> According to some studies, Millennial women drink nearly as much as their male counterparts, a significant generational change from the past when irrespective of age group, men were much more likely to drink more than women. Despite this approximate contemporary parity in consumption, men are still twice likely to die from alcohol as women, “Millennial Women Close Historic Drinking Gap,” *UWireText*, 31 Oct. 2016. *General One File*.

<sup>127</sup> Jennifer Erin Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 43.

<sup>128</sup> Beste, 66; Participatory action research is a style of investigation and research design in which those being studied help design, ask, and analyze the answers to the questions in the study.

families.”<sup>129</sup> Yet sociologist Alison Pugh finds this elasticity of commitment to be a more common phenomenon across socioeconomic class than just the working-class.<sup>130</sup>

Arnett agrees that young adulthood is a period of life when anxiety is likely to be high because of the stress of needing to accomplish so much.<sup>131</sup> Despite this, Arnett notes that rates of risk behavior such as unsafe sex and drug use during the phase of young adulthood have been going down for generations.<sup>132</sup> The current generation as a whole, while willing to sacrifice some things to explore what would make them happy in terms of a career, are nonetheless noted for caution in their financial and personal commitments because of the difficulty of juggling so many components at once.

#### *Decentering family and intimate commitments for a focus on work, education*

Turpin finds young adults spending a significant amount of time devoted to work spending time with friends, as they are doing, developmentally appropriate. She writes, “Work that gives younger adults a chance for taking risks, for being in charge of decisions that matter, and for making a contribution to something bigger than themselves is essential to the process of discernment of vocation.”<sup>133</sup> While she is rather optimistic about the potential spiritual and moral outcomes of work, other theorists like Fulmer acknowledge that learning how to work at something for which others will pay is a primary task of young adulthood that is not always easy or automatic.<sup>134</sup> Arnett and many others who write about the current generation acknowledge that young adults today have high expectations for work to be fulfilling. For them, employment is about more than making money.<sup>135</sup> Many young adults look for a job that “clicks with their

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<sup>129</sup> Jennifer Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 31.

<sup>130</sup> See Allison Pugh, *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity* (New York: Oxford, 2015) and Allison J. Pugh, ed., *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>131</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, “The Evidence for Generation We and Against Generation Me,” *Emerging Adulthood* 1 no. 1 (2013), 7.

<sup>132</sup> Arnett, “The Evidence for Generation We,” 8.

<sup>133</sup> Turpin, 107; also Colarusso, *Child and Adult Development*, 144.

<sup>134</sup> Fulmer, 216.

<sup>135</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 143.

developing identity,” though others find the need to prioritize things such as paying the bills.<sup>136</sup> Arnett and others note that, especially today, many of the jobs young adults are able to get in their early 20s tend to be low-level and temporary.<sup>137</sup> Thus, finding employment that is fulfilling, sustaining, and helps one develop positively and substantially in identity may be hard to find for the majority of young adults. If identity in work is a prerequisite or concomitant requirement to developing romantic intimacy, then no wonder intimacy is treated as a capstone by contemporary young adults.

### *Complexity of the oedipal complex, revisited anew*

Erikson believed that young adulthood was the period in life when persons first had the opportunity for significant intimacy in their lives because of this very ability to handle substantially new information that comes from having experienced close, deep, and different contact with others at increasing levels of intensity. Cushing and McGoldrick mention that, in psychological language, young adulthood involves differentiation of self by which the person reaches a state of self-knowledge and definition that does not rely upon acceptance or rejection of others while still being well involved with them.<sup>138</sup> They write, “We may think of a core spiritual task of the young adult life-cycle phase as involving making room for the ‘Other,’” be it a partner, children, or diversity in community.<sup>139</sup> Meaningfully “making room for the other” requires a complexity of thinking that can be a euphemism for all manner of new contests of relating and responsibility at the brink of adulthood. This is inclusive of intimate partnership but also goes beyond it. Cushing, McGoldrick, and others believe that failing to develop well in this regard results in a situation of isolation rather than intimacy.

As part of this development toward a healthy sense of self in relation to others, Cushing and McGoldrick emphasize that one of the key issues for young adult development is the need to be able to shift from ideal love, either in concept or initial relationship, to accepting and working with the actual person who is available before them.<sup>140</sup> Fulmer also writes that persons are

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<sup>136</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 145.

<sup>137</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 10.

<sup>138</sup> Cushing and McGoldrick, 245.

<sup>139</sup> Cushing and McGoldrick, 246.

<sup>140</sup> Cushing and McGoldrick, 246.

tempted to stay infatuated with the ideal love because such perfection allows one to avoid the negative or conflicted feelings, concomitant with imperfection, which necessarily come with a balanced life.<sup>141</sup> Thus, to transform a young romantic relationship into a mature one, the counselors remark that couples must address family of origin triangles, multigenerational family relationship patterns and taboos, and unresolved issues in attempts to couple and marry.<sup>142</sup> As members of a couple young adults must also renegotiate many issues they had previously defined for themselves individually.<sup>143</sup> Cushing and McGoldrick further note that differences in class and economic status between partners emerge at this level of complexity and enmeshment. These must also be negotiated, or underlying conflict will remain.<sup>144</sup>

Colarusso remarks that psychoanalytic learning about self from a significant Other is often solidified and increased by sex. He writes:

The achievement of adult sexual intimacy produces significant intrapsychic change. Through the repeated fusion of sex and love, the self is increasingly identified with the partner. The superego may become more flexible and tolerant as sexual thoughts, feelings and practices are repeated in relation to the esteemed partner. Feminine or masculine aspects of the self are projected onto and accepted and loved in the partner. The ego ideal is altered by the inclusion of the partner's aspirations for the couple's future, particularly in regard to the major aspects of young adult life.<sup>145</sup>

In short, Colarusso is describing how the experience of sexual intimacy offers young adults a particular type of affirmation and identification—and with it gentle challenge—with their sexual partner that is distinct from relationships that have come before. In some ways, healthy sexual experience allows for a person to become more flexible and tolerant with him or herself and others. Relative to my focus on how this experience teaches people to become partners, the type of capacity developed by sexual experience involves being able to shift from self-involvement to beginning to think like a householder.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Fulmer, 217.

<sup>142</sup> Cushing and McGoldrick, 246-252, 256.

<sup>143</sup> Cushing and McGoldrick, 253.

<sup>144</sup> Cushing and McGoldrick, 254.

<sup>145</sup> Colarusso, *Child and Adult Development*, 137.

<sup>146</sup> Fulmer, 218.

McGoldrick, in her own writing, highlights that marriage is often seen as a way to attempt to assure the achievement of relational complexity when confronted with the need to engage on a complex level called for by intimate closeness. She writes:

Marriage, more than any other life transition, is viewed as the solution to life's problems such as loneliness, work/career uncertainty, or extended family difficulties. [...] Marriage requires that two people renegotiate a great many issues they have previously defined individually or in their families of origin, such as when and how to eat, sleep, talk, have sex, fight, work, and relax.<sup>147</sup>

Human development theorists James and Evelyn Whitehead caution that while marriage stands culturally as an archetype of “mutual regulation of complicated patterns” and thus of having the psychological resources of intimacy, this equivalency is not always accurate in reality. In fact, marriage at a young age likely often has more to do with issues of identity than with those of intimacy.<sup>148</sup> They presciently suggest that contemporary young people might need considerable time to figure out who they are and if marriage fits into their life picture.<sup>149</sup>

Psychologist Christina Doherty notes that there is still a cultural expectation that women want to have children and relationships as part of their vision of a mature, whole life.<sup>150</sup> Contrastingly, Fulmer remarks that culturally, men must be seen as courageous and independent in order to feel that they have come of age.<sup>151</sup> Sociologist Michael Kimmel seconds this, yet provides a word of caution in his book *Guyland* that young men have difficulty transitioning after college.<sup>152</sup> Men stay in a holding pattern of not seeking to mature and prepare for adult life right away, claims Kimmel.<sup>153</sup> He notes that there is “nary a word about gender” in Arnett and

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<sup>147</sup> Monica McGoldrick, “Becoming a Couple,” *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives*, 3rd ed., ed. Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 232-233.

<sup>148</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 79.

<sup>149</sup> Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Marrying Well: Possibilities in Christian Marriage Today* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 196.

<sup>150</sup> Christina Doherty, “Counseling Young Adult Women (25-39),” *Handbook of Counseling Women*, 2nd ed., ed. Mary Kopala and Merle A. Keitel (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2017), 183.

<sup>151</sup> Fulmer, 222.

<sup>152</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 192, cited in Alan Reifman, “Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood: Conceptual Foundations,” *Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Frank D. Fincham and Ming Cui (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>153</sup> Kimmel, 259.

his companions' work, yet Kimmel states that young adulthood is arguably the most gendered stage of all the stages of human development.<sup>154</sup>

Whether or not one agrees with the claim that young adulthood is the most gendered state of development, it is clear that the conflicting development of men and women at this time results in making balancing work and family a challenge of young adulthood particularly felt by young women. In addition to expectation, empirical data reveals consistently that women today are still doing more "second shift" work than men in terms of having a larger responsibility for care work and household management in addition to their paid work. Cushing and McGoldrick note that, traditionally, once young adults become parents, whatever values of egalitarianism they may or may not have espoused and practiced earlier, raising children shifts couples back to more traditional divisions of labor, with women typically taking on more hours per week of responsibilities than men.<sup>155</sup> Some young adults, particularly women, find this to be a challenge to their ideals, whereas others expect it. Yet egalitarianism is not the only challenge to ideals that young adults encounter in the pressure cooker that is neoliberalism. In the final two sections of this chapter I meditate on the interactions between culture and understandings of millennial agency writ large, and the outcomes of this cultural influence, before transitioning to a longer engagement with the concept of intimacy.

#### *Making choices and commitments that winnow options*

Colarusso writes that, while the beginning of young adulthood involves the loosening of restrictions through steady exploration, maturing through the phase of young adulthood, involves making choices among options that then narrows the realm of possibilities what any particular life will probably entail in terms of careers, family, and resources. He describes this process specifically as one of loss from a psychoanalytic perspective when he scribes, "The superego/ego ideal must also deal with the realistic need to narrow choices, abandoning many of the unattained goals from childhood and adolescence without undue guilt or excessive mourning while gratifying the self for successful choices made and achievements realized."<sup>156</sup> Pastoral theologian Jaco Hamman notes that this winnowing down by making choices enables one to be a

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<sup>154</sup> Kimmel, 22-23.

<sup>155</sup> Cushing and McGoldrick, 255.

<sup>156</sup> Colarusso, *Child and Adult Development*, 148.

responsible, caring, ethical person. However, Hamman counsels, this involves realizing one's limits around omnipotence and finitude in the face of eventual death.<sup>157</sup>

While choosing and acknowledging limits involves some amount of loss, with a narrowing of choices comes clarity. Arnett, positively, sees becoming an adult as knowing what one's priorities are.<sup>158</sup> In sum, Parks claims that the pervasive ambivalence for which many critiques malign contemporary young adults is not merely transitional, but rather a substantial—and valuable—part of emerging adulthood.<sup>159</sup> She sees an expansive challenge occurring at this life stage that entails much more than just learning to be intimate; it also includes a chance and need for young adults to fundamentally evaluate, reengineer, and claim their world view.

### **Embracing moratorium and ambivalence as developmentally helpful, appropriate**

Given how this depth of complexity requires that persons who were recently adolescents develop a whole new way of being, thinking, and relating, this often and understandably involves a keen period for self-involvement. In order to put sufficient energy into developing this new level of capacity in themselves, and to deal with the stress of the demands for preparing for adult life, young people often pull back from obligations to their families of origin and delay developing families of choice.<sup>160</sup> In their book *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, Smith and Snell describe this unsettled nature of contemporary young adults well. They write:

Except for those who have already settled down, the majority of emerging adults are very clear that their lives are not settled. The seemingly endless succession of life transitions they undergo highlights that fact. Rather than being settled, most of them understand themselves to be in a phase of life that is free, fluid, tentative, experimental, and relatively unbound. They want to enjoy it while it lasts.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Jaco J. Hamman, *Growing Down: Theology and Human Nature in the Virtual Age* (Waco, TX: Baylor University 2017), 10.

<sup>158</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 214.

<sup>159</sup> Parks, 87.

<sup>160</sup> Fulmer, 216.

<sup>161</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56.



Smith and Snell accurately report this as a theme of contemporary young adulthood, and acknowledge the socially constructed nature of human development through the life span,<sup>162</sup> as well as the enormity of the data they present in terms of understanding it all and figuring out its implications.<sup>163</sup> Yet for all the accuracy, depth, and thoughtful approaches they bring to their project sociologically, when it comes to some of the more interesting differences around young adults resistance to morally judge others, or come up with a moral articulation for their own lives, Smith and Snell stop being so sociologically generous. They insinuate such postmodern changes as having an edge of short-sightedness and move to rash judgment of their own rather than pursuing such difference with curiosity and compassion. While they provided the most comprehensive and in-depth book on the religious lives of contemporary young adults at the time, the fact that they did not pursue this avenue of investigation further is disappointing. It furthermore fails to do as much as it could to help young adults and those who support them. Without having had the time and space to do original research of my own with young adults, I nonetheless attempt to dig deeper into querying the moral aspects of their lives and how these can be further guided with the aid of psychological, ethical, and marginalized perspectives.

A moratorium on responsibility can make some people who feel life is best defined by responsibility feel uncomfortable,<sup>164</sup> so does the idea of ambiguity. While they are indirect about why they find the subjectivity and social delay of young adults incredulous, I assume that it has something to do with what Smith and Snell find as valuable to life, what they consider constitutive of morality, and how these factors shape a perspective on what it should mean to grow up. There is a lot of ambiguity in the lives of young adults. Thus, it is also important for scholars and practitioners of religion to understand, and not deride, the strategic, existential value of ambiguity as a concept. As double-edged of a coin as exploration, in terms of being valuable or detrimental depending on how it is used, ambiguity can be positively used in a cycle of epistemological hermeneutics as a form of openness and lack of predetermination in the service of searching for a deeper sense of realness and truth. I do not think that they would agree with most developmental theorists that an elongated young adulthood provides a situation and process

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<sup>162</sup> Smith and Snell, 6.

<sup>163</sup> Smith and Snell, 9.

<sup>164</sup> Sociologist Alison Pugh notes that notions of duty, honor, and obligation are moral orientation points amidst the chaos of contemporary insecurity, which some people bear down on in response to greater insecurity, Alison Pugh, *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity* (New York: Oxford, 2015), 14, 58.

which can generate a strong sense of self and the skills to live this self out productively and fruitfully in mid-life.

*Contra* Smith and Snell, as a representative of the human development field, Parks argues that not only should we embrace exploration for the sake of young adults, but also for the greater cultural conceptualization of what it means to be adult, as well as progress to deeper levels of being an adult and a person of faith. Parks hopes that seeing young adulthood as a massive journey toward self-knowledge and claimed value “may deepen our appreciation of the courage and cost of the journey toward a mature, adult faith, and encourage us to re-examine our assumptions about the formation of adulthood [...] and our own capacity to live meaningful adult lives.”<sup>165</sup> I agree, and furthermore believe that uplifting the magnitude and foundation of all that goes into becoming a successful adult is necessary theoretical support to coming to expect more development out of the adulthood periods on a cultural level.<sup>166</sup>

## **SECTION TWO: YOUNG ADULTHOOD IN NEOLIBERALISM**

### **The “guerilla” self: Response and resistance**

Young people today believe that they will spend their lives improvising their situation, goals, and desires in any given moment without much of an ability to predict or plan for the future because of the nature of the postmodern, neoliberal society in which they live. Multiple scholars such as Silva have made note of the impact of constant change and precariousness in contemporary times and how this requires a constant remaking of the self, or at least a self which

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<sup>165</sup> Parks, *Big Questions*, 10; this discernment of a well-developed conscience is not just noted by optimistic developmental theorists, but by ethicists too. Ethicist Paul Wadell notes that a well-developed conscience requires the courage to be one’s own person rather than a child who submits only to the authority of others, Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Landham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 196.

<sup>166</sup> Adulthood as a developmental concept is undertheorized because we as a human society have only recently had a critical mass of adults who were able to live long enough to be generative beyond procreation, so there is much yet to be done in this area of research. See Carol Hren Hoare, *Erikson on Development in Adulthood: New Insights from the Unpublished Papers* (Oxford University Press, 2002) for the reasons behind this, and for what has been developed in theory since, Jack Demick and Carrie Andreoletti, ed., *Handbook of Adult Development* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2003).

is open to being refashioned and modified. However, few have delved into just what it means to improvise and respond as an ethical strategy and a psychological reality.<sup>167</sup>

Two of the only scholars to do so, social theorists Luke Howie and Perri Campbell, have deemed the self of contemporary young people as a “guerilla self,” a form of fighting back against a system organized against them through using the terms of the system against itself to eke out some space for substantive living.<sup>168</sup> Howie and Campbell elaborate:

Guerrilla selfhood is a term used to designate types of identity that require participation *through* resistance, institutionalization *through* the appearance of not being institutionalized and individualism *in the midst of* a failure of individualism. In building this concept we draw a literature where the guerrilla metaphor has been deployed to signify moments where *the weapons of the system are turned upon themselves*. It is, we argue, a style of thinking the exercises imagination and resists attempts to exterminate ambivalence [...] The guerrilla self is ravaged by uncertainty and doubt. But it is hopeful.<sup>169</sup>

The common practice of contemporary young adults re-appropriating negative terms toward the positive, such as hearty interest among many for reclaiming the homophobic slur “queer,” is an example of such resistance that may appear no different from dominant modes of production, but actually is a form of resistance by serving to open up spaces for exploration and freedom from constriction.<sup>170</sup> Both the hopeful and the agential elements of contemporary young adults growing up in neoliberalism is particularly important for scholars of religion to understand. Such nuanced form of action can often seem like inaction or apathy, writes scholar of millennials and media Alison Novak.<sup>171</sup> Contemporary young adults are often cynical about the world, but somewhat optimistic about their own capacity without reasons given for why.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> For scholars who research people’s work-life responses to such change, see Joan C. Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>168</sup> Luke Howie and Perri Campbell, *Crisis and Terror in the Age of Anxiety: 9/11 and the Global Financial Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 76.

<sup>169</sup> Howie and Campbell, 76.

<sup>170</sup> Shelly Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Feminism: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and ‘New’ Femininities,” *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, edited by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Houndmills; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 280.

<sup>171</sup> Alison Novak notes that millennials are frustrated in negotiating the contemporary media environment, viewing it as overly and problematically simplistic, Alison N. Novak, *Meaning, Millennials, and Politics: The Coming of Age of the Next Political Generation* (New York: Lexington, 2016), 135.

<sup>172</sup> Novak notes that millennials, raised in a data age, are very critical of polls and representation and view presentation of statistics in media as often deceiving, Novak, 115.

At first glance, contemporary young adults making their own rules through de-institutionalization rather than outright, organized resistance can seem like giving into the system of over preening individualism. They are not rebels, as editorialist Laura Marsh points out. Rather, they do things differently than those who were more affluent because of their status of economic standing. Marsh writes,

Do we use Zipcar because we are ideologically committed to sharing, or because car ownership is still out of reach for a lot of people and renting piecemeal is the next best thing? Does a married couple decide to live with roommates because of their ‘openness to communal living’ or because people in New York face impossible rents?<sup>173</sup>

The distinguishing line between capitulation to the pressures and tweaking them to find breathing room for hope is hard to see clearly. Yet it is there. This is an interesting paradox that befuddles researchers to such a degree that it shows up the titles of their books.<sup>174</sup>

It is hard to grasp how Millennials view the world, what they prioritize, what they consider possible and probable, and what they actually end up doing with their lives without understanding the extent to which Millennials are a product of their material and psychological environment. In this second section, I focus on how the material and political environment of neoliberalism shapes the millennial generation as contemporary young adults.<sup>175</sup> An environment of neoliberalism and its accompanying culture of postmodernism primarily results in two main drives for contemporary young adults of pursuing and valuing self-reliance and authenticity to a distinct degree.<sup>176</sup> I intentionally use the concept of self-reliance rather than the more commonly used notion of individualism because self-reliance is affiliated with where one draws a sense of security. Out of a similar sense, Howie and Campbell describe the political agency of

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<sup>173</sup> Laura Marsh, “The Myth of the Millennial as a Cultural Rebel,” *New Republic*, August 30, 2016, 9, <https://newrepublic.com/article/136415/myth-millennial-cultural-rebel>, cited by Stephanie Yuhas, “Losing My Religion: Why Millennials are Leaving the Church,” *The Emerging Church, Millennials, and Religion: Vol. One Prospects and Problems*, ed. Randall Reed and G. Michael Zbaraschuk, (Eugene, Ore: Cascade, 2018), 144-45.

<sup>174</sup> See Brian Willoughby and Spencer James, *The Marriage Paradox: Why Emerging Adults Love Marriage Yet Push it Aside*, Emerging Adulthood (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>175</sup> Peter Hart-Brinson offers a splicing of the notion of generations and generational change which helps explain what can be described as a “generation” and “generational change.” Often when generation terminology is used, it actually means “cohort,” which refers to those going through the same experience at the same time, Peter Hart-Brinson, *The Gay Marriage Generation: How the LGBTQ Movement Transformed American Culture* (New York University Press, 2018), 15.

<sup>176</sup> I describe drive like that of Dan McAdams, who calls it synonymously instinct, need, motivation, all summed up like a preference, Dan P. McAdams, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988), 72.

contemporary young adults as enacting the “guerilla self” which responds to the constrictions of intense privatization and personal responsibility in a hyper-capitalist society by using that very individualism turned in on itself to hopeful ends.

### **Neoliberalism’s shaping factors**

Millennials have never known an economic-cultural system other than neoliberalism. Cultural historians such as David Harvey identify the era of neoliberalism as an economic and cultural shift toward ever greater deregulation and privatization, commodification by putting things into ever greater financial terms, and globalization through advances in technology which began in 1979, kicked off by Ronald Regan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Britain.<sup>177</sup> 1979 is the year before the first of the Millennials were born. Therefore, the millennial generation is more likely than previous generations to naturalize neoliberal values and patterns as simply “the way life is.”<sup>178</sup> It is a system in which national borders no longer matter with the advent of global companies and global flow of capital. Scholars often call this a “post-Westphalian time” in which the fluidity of previous borders and systems of order no longer apply, including the rules of war and who is considered an enemy and friend.<sup>179</sup>

Suzanne Leonard, writing about how neoliberalism and notions of marriage have developed together sums up neoliberalism as a cultural and economic system which “prioritizes the belief that people are actualized agents who should act in their own self-interest, exercise free choice, and accept personal responsibility for their decisions and behaviors.”<sup>180</sup> These values make the idea of romance and committed interpersonal relationship into something which has a particularly strong ideological hold over people and how they evaluate their own sense of agency and choice. As others who research gender and neoliberalism also note, as the world appears

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<sup>177</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University, 2007), 1.

<sup>178</sup> Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, *New Approaches to Religion and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.

<sup>179</sup> Laurie Essig, *Love, Inc.: Dating Apps, the Big White Wedding, and Chasing the Happily Everafter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 17.

<sup>180</sup> Suzanne Leonard, *Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-first Century* (New York University Press, 2018), 11.

ever harsher, persons are all the more interested in the idealism of romance as a reason to be hopeful about the future.<sup>181</sup>

### *Self-reliance and the “mood economy”*

Silva describes this life for young adults as one in which they pursue and participate in a “mood economy” to distract and psychologically insulate themselves from all of the dangers of which sociologist of modernity Ulrich Beck coined in the mid-1980s as a “risk society.” A risk society is a particular way of assigning responsibility of risk to individuals, making them need to plan and prepare for the numerous risks of falling behind or not succeeding that can exist in a society with limited to non-existent communal supports for workforce preparation and healthcare.<sup>182</sup> Silva writes, “the mood economy generates a particular sense of dignity, wellbeing, and progress that shores up the culture of competition, self-reliance, and self-blame that they are growing up in.”<sup>183</sup> Other writers have described the worldwide economy that contributes to this mood economy as harsh and unstable.<sup>184</sup> This is the environment that creates and defines the “guerilla self.”

Silva notes that today self-reliance is bolstered and defined by an idea that one can, and should, achieve maturity psychologically through individualistic, therapeutic means. She remarks that 70% of her respondents viewed themselves as their greatest risk and potential pitfall in life.<sup>185</sup> Thus, getting oneself right psychologically is particularly important, since, in the minds of Millennials, psychological immaturity serves as the leading factor in keeping one from surviving and thriving. Silva writes, “In teaching young people that they alone can manage their emotions and heal their wounded psyches, the therapeutic ethos dovetails with neoliberal ideology in such a way as to make powerless working-class young adults feel responsible for their own happiness.”<sup>186</sup> Silva remarks that her respondents report that they are not willing to help others who are in need. Silva writes, “Over and over again, the men and women I interviewed told me

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<sup>181</sup> Essig, 1-2.

<sup>182</sup> Silva, 1-7; Pugh in her work alternatively calls this same phenomenon “a tumbleweed society” in which everything is barren.

<sup>183</sup> Silva, 12.

<sup>184</sup> Konstam, 2.

<sup>185</sup> Silva, 138.

<sup>186</sup> Silva, 138, 17.

that growing up means learning not to expect anything from anyone.”<sup>187</sup> As young people feel betrayed and overwhelmed by institutions, they are particularly afraid of the financial costs of reaching out.<sup>188</sup> Silva notes that of course, educational and social capital obtainment help many working class young adults feel self-sufficient and mature, but these methods of obtaining self-reliance are often not as compelling and alluring as processes of working through both earlier issues of dysfunction with family of origin and issues of personal temperament, coping with stress, and surviving addiction.<sup>189</sup> Other scholars of Millennials also note that contemporary young adults are more likely to rely upon individualized, personal safety nets of themselves, friends, and family rather than institutions such as churches which used to be used as social safety nets.<sup>190</sup> For those who do not have access to educational and social capital, the dignity one must gain through psychological and characterological improvement therefore only intensifies.

In his book *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, pastoral theologian and counselor Bruce Rogers-Vaughn identifies neoliberalism as the main factor in “shaping how, why, and to what degree individuals suffer” by encouraging people to seek “symptom relief and personal responsibility rather than communion, wholeness, and meaning-making.”<sup>191</sup> Millennials exhibit this encouragement, often living lives turned inward and toward escape. While this assessment of human suffering is considered “sweeping” by other members of the pastoral care field such as Mary Clark Moschella, its ability to name concisely and directly how neoliberalism can negatively affect behavior is helpful for gaining a better understanding of the basic worldview of the Millennial generation.<sup>192</sup>

#### *Privatization of suffering, education, work, debt, responsibility, care*

In addition to encouraging self-reliance as a value, neoliberalism is also marked by increased financialization through greater stock market fortunes tied up in a lightning-fast global market. This financialization-as-world-view results in Millennials not only treating life,

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<sup>187</sup> Silva, 83.

<sup>188</sup> Silva, 140, 88-93.

<sup>189</sup> Silva, 10.

<sup>190</sup> Yuhas, 145; Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Heron, VA: Alban Institute, 2007).

<sup>191</sup> Rogers-Vaughn, 16.

<sup>192</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, “Review of *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*,” *Pastoral Psychology* 66 (2017), 855.

particularly the dating life, as if it is a market, but also to think of things in terms of financial assets more than ever before.<sup>193</sup> This greater focus on assets, but not necessarily status, is in part because Millennials have taken on greater levels of debt at earlier ages, especially in comparison to earning power, than any previous generation.<sup>194</sup>

The amount of student loan debt students have needed to take on in order to graduate with their degrees has doubled just since 2007,<sup>195</sup> with the average undergraduate receiving their diploma after taking on \$30,000 in debt.<sup>196</sup> This would be less problematic if debt incurred through earning a bachelor's degree guaranteed a more secure footing in the workplace, but it often does not for a variety of reasons, including low entry level pay, a high cost of living and mobility, lack of networking skills and social capital, and lack of meaningful advancement. Millennial author Anya Kamentez writes in her book *Generation Debt* that "The-life-as-quest approach can have costly consequences when it involves student loan debt."<sup>197</sup> This is particularly true in an environment like today in which 30% of American workers fall into various alternative work arrangements that do not involve steady, full-time work with regular hours.<sup>198</sup>

In addition to the instability of work, the unparalleled influence and expectation of higher education upon contemporary young adults is perhaps one of the most formative factors of this generation distinct from those who came before.<sup>199</sup> Scholar of young adults Joanna Wyn notes that, over the past three decades in Western countries, people have begun to leverage education

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<sup>193</sup> Even in matrimony, Millennials desire to remain individually responsible over debt, Megan Walsh, "In Sickness and in Health ... but Not in Debt," *Acumen*, January 5, 2015.

<sup>194</sup> Silva, 36, 40; Lauren Messman notes that Millennials make 20% less in the same early adult age range as the Baby Boomers did, adjusted for inflation, Lauren Messman, "Millennials Are Way Poorer than Boomers Ever Were," *Vice*, January 13, 2017, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/8qq43g/millennials-are-way-poorer-than-boomers-ever-were?utm\\_campaign=site&utm\\_source=vicefbusads](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8qq43g/millennials-are-way-poorer-than-boomers-ever-were?utm_campaign=site&utm_source=vicefbusads).

<sup>195</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 162.

<sup>196</sup> Institute for College Access and Success, "Project on Student Debt: State by State Data 2015," <https://ticas.org/posd/state-state-data-2015>.

<sup>197</sup> Anya Kamentez, *Generation Debt: Why Now is a Terrible Time to be Young* (New York: Riverhead Books/Penguin, 2006), 120.

<sup>198</sup> Kamentez, 99.

<sup>199</sup> Richard Settersten Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Ruben G. Rumbaut, ed., *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 2005), 17.



to negotiate the uncertainty of both personal transitions and wider social change.<sup>200</sup> In this way, formal education is now more central to the possibility of future success and security, and yet also more marginal as Millennials think more broadly about education and training over the course of their lives.<sup>201</sup> Yet while some are leveraging education for skill building, Silva notes that many working-class persons feel that education helps them prepare for a good job, rather than good skills, and that they themselves are to blame if this equation does not turn out successfully for them.<sup>202</sup> While now more than one in three people between ages of 25 and 39 have a college degree,<sup>203</sup> community college and associates degrees help boost these numbers. This means that many young adults are “between-college youth” who move in and out of employment and school for various reasons.<sup>204</sup> Many never finish, and even those who do often find it difficult to leverage a community college degree toward better working conditions.<sup>205</sup>

My thesis of self-reliance and authenticity as two primary drives for young adults stems from the way in which Silva connects various neoliberal influences to the value outcomes among the young adults she studies. Having discussed self-reliance and financialization, I now turn to how Silva connects self-reliance and authenticity, which I find integral to understanding Millennial behaviors, worldviews, and values. Silva identifies the contemporary trends of unpredictability and risk as contributing to young adults’ search for authenticity. She writes of her generation, “the more our futures seem uncertain and unknowable, and the more individualistic we are forced to become, the greater our need to find and express our authentic selves.”<sup>206</sup> Thus, organized religion through churches and denominations, relationship frames such as marriage, and labels in general are all forms of larger association which Millennials actively reject or evade.

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<sup>200</sup> Johanna Wyn, “Educating for Late Modernity,” *Handbook of Youth and Young Adulthood: New Perspectives and Agendas*, ed. Andy Furlong (New York: Routledge, 2009), 103.

<sup>201</sup> Wyn, 103, 98.

<sup>202</sup> Silva, 48.

<sup>203</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 162.

<sup>204</sup> Kamentz, 7.

<sup>205</sup> Historian Steven Mintz strikingly notes, “According to some measures, nearly half of undergraduates demonstrate no significant improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills during their first two years,” *The Prime of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 42.

<sup>206</sup> Silva, 74.

### *Seeking postmodern “authenticity”*

Secularism scholars Joseph O. Baker and G. Smith Buster describe contemporary culture at large as moving toward “personal authenticity,”<sup>207</sup> yet what this buzzword means needs to be unpacked. When used by befuddled members of older generations, authenticity is ridiculed as some sought after but evasive and ambiguous level of truth. However, authenticity can and does mean more than “truth.” Its etymology and Millennial usage point to this. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the adjective “authentic” means worthy of acceptance as truthful. Yet I find it important to note that an antonym of authentic is obsolete.<sup>208</sup> Authentic is what is relevant, as well as what is true.<sup>209</sup> Others, such as Jon Perrin, describe authenticity as pertaining a certain level of warmth,<sup>210</sup> a heat which might indicate back to a level of relevance.

Chenandoah Nieuwsma, commenting on the epistemology of Millennials, describes their quest for authenticity as a form of hyper-subjectivity. For them, something has to be personally believable to be compelling and thus true. In this realm of hyper-subjectivity, facts and rationality no longer matter to the degree that they used to, because personal experience can bump all other factors. In typical subjectivity, hearing data and analysis is filtered through personal points of reference, Nieuwsma notes, but this new form of hyper-subjectivity is about filtering something through personal reference not just to draw personal connections to it but rather to evaluate and draw a verdict on its utter veracity.<sup>211</sup> Nieuwsma notes that while weak hyper-subjectivity leads to a resistance to judge which results in toleration, strong hyper-subjectivity leads to difficulty finding common ground between people and their claims because rationality cannot be appealed to.<sup>212</sup> When the term authentic is used by and about Millennials, it

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<sup>207</sup> Joseph O. Baker and G. Smith Buster, *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems, Religion and Social Transformation* (New York University Press, 2015), 67.

<sup>208</sup> “Authentic,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authentic>.

<sup>209</sup> Beste, in working with her students around their avoidance of and attraction to ideas of authenticity, sees authenticity as indicating holism in embodiment. As such, it involves feeling and expressing the full range of emotions, something which, though perhaps desired, is frequently avoided at the college level because it is culturally associated with weakness, Beste, 197.

<sup>210</sup> Jon Perrin, *The Coming Post-Christian Tsunami: Connecting with the Increasingly Unchurched Culture* (Lexington, KY: Jon Perrin, 2016), 40.

<sup>211</sup> Chenandoah Nieuwsma, “Certain of the Uncertain: Reflections on Millennial Epistemology and the Emerging Church,” *Emerging Church, Millennials, and Religion: Vol. One Prospects and Problems*, ed. Randall Reed and G. Michael Zbaraschuk (Eugene, Ore: Cascade, 2018), 6.

<sup>212</sup> Nieuwsma, 7.

indicates a certain intensity of connection inductively determined through first-hand, eclectically sourced, embodied experience. This helps explain why some behaviors and ways of being are more meaningful to Millennials than to others.

Spiritual director and author of *Hungry Souls, Holy Companions: Mentoring a New Generation of Christians* Patricia Hendricks writes that contemporary young adults are thoroughly postmodern in their expectations and behavior. As such, they value personal experience as authoritative over abstract belief. She notes, “the postmodern thinker is more open to learning about religion through stories and experience rather than theological constructs.”<sup>213</sup> He or she is also skeptical of authority.<sup>214</sup> Therapist Julie Tilsen notes in her book *Therapeutic Conversations with Queer Youth*, that taking a queer, postmodern approach to her clients and their development of identity and agency involves recognizing that self and the process to knowledge cannot, contra Kant, be separated from the knowledge itself, which is why young adults, particularly ones with queer orientations, feel like they must experience something through trial and error, in order to know anything.<sup>215</sup> These characteristics of postmodernism undergird Millennials’ distaste for labels, institutions, and predetermined frameworks precisely because they are impersonal. In a nutshell, a quest for authenticity that can only be defined personally and through experience makes structures and forms that are not created through personal experience no longer matter for Millennials.<sup>216</sup>

This postmodern worldview which questions the solidity of grand narratives and grand promises is bolstered in part by the experiences of intimate love they saw modeled by their parents. Raised in a generation in which parental divorce was among the highest rates ever at around 30-40%, the specter of divorce greatly influences how Millennials approach marriage and intimate enmeshment.<sup>217</sup> In general, it makes them feel as if nothing is permanent and adult

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<sup>213</sup> Patricia Hendricks, *Holy Souls, Holy Companions: Mentoring a New Generation of Christians* (Harrisburg, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 2.

<sup>214</sup> Hendricks, 3.

<sup>215</sup> Julie Tilsen, *Therapeutic Conversations with Queer Youth: Transcending Homonormativity and Constructing Preferred Identities* (New York: Jason Aronson, 2013), xxvi.

<sup>216</sup> Charles Taylor famously writes about *The Ethics of Authenticity* a generation ago, warning that such a driving value has ethical and enchantment limitations, Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>217</sup> Pew Research Forum, “Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next,” February 2010, 53.

relationships ultimately cost too much, either to themselves, their partners, or to the children.<sup>218</sup> Silva finds amongst her respondents that even if couples do get married, they do not find stability, but constant negotiation.<sup>219</sup> They may feel that, given this, formal marriage provides no greater stability in terms of foregone agreement which would ward off the need for constant negotiation. Yet constant negotiation is a fact of life in any vital relationship, as I argue throughout this dissertation. Some of this constant, postmodern negotiation for something to be relevant and worthwhile, while not particularly conscious or explicit, is occurring in how young adults are doing things differently in terms of defining adulthood, asserting and providing for the value of the self, and seeking embodied spiritual connection wherever they can find it. We turn to this now.

### **SECTION THREE: YOUNG ADULTS TODAY DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY**

In this concluding section of the chapter, I survey three salient ways in which contemporary young adults are breaking with definitions and practices of the past in terms of: 1) defining adulthood (and arguably reaching it), 2) articulating the place of self-focus and self-assertion in the areas of adulthood and ethics (which some negatively call narcissism and entitlement), and 3) seeking an intensely personal, embodied, and experiential religious experience (and flatly refusing engagement with drier, less personal forms of religious involvement). This provides a beginning portraiture of what they are doing differently in their young adult lives that can largely be interpreted as positive, although there is still some, largely unfounded, debate about this evaluation. Across these three areas of life contemporary young adults are continuing the themes of self-reliance and authenticity I picked up in the previous section, yet the story of what it means to do things differently is so much richer, more complex, and positive than these distillations. Each of these areas deserves much longer engagement.

#### **Reworked values of adulthood, selfhood**

In Arnett's seminal 2004 book *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, he proposes that the material conditions of postindustrial societies

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<sup>218</sup> Silva, 65-70.

<sup>219</sup> Silva, 69.

like the United States lead to the cultural development of a life course period that is neither adolescence nor adulthood, but rather “emerging adulthood.” This developmental position usually takes place during 18-29 years of age, and is most intense before year 25. Emerging Adulthood, according to Arnett, has five main features: 1) identity exploration, particularly in love and work, 2) instability, 3) self-focus, 4) a constant feeling of being in-between, 5) a feeling of an exploratory age of possibilities.<sup>220</sup> Thus, Emerging Adulthood is largely defined by the feelings and perspectives its denizens experience, and can be described as a generation along the lines of sharing several commonalities as sociologist Peter Hart-Brinson defines it.<sup>221</sup> Arnett defines Emerging Adulthood as occurring for those young people who experience an instability of the self in terms of commitment and identity, a time of exploration which can involve flourishing or floundering at extreme levels.<sup>222</sup>

In part, Emerging Adulthood being able to be postulated as a new life phase is the result of the psychological effect of a group of people coming of age in what one projects will be an instable society, magnifying the cumulative impact of these changes upon the psyche of a young adult who is trying to prepare himself or herself for an seemingly impossibly fluid future. For instance, on average contemporary young adults will change jobs eleven times between the ages of 18 and 44; seven to eight of those switches will occur between the ages of 18 to 27.<sup>223</sup> Other numerous changes which young adults can envision on the horizon include geography, partners, family configurations, and personal life statuses, to name only a few. Researcher of Millennials David Burstein remarks that millennials have come to rely on change, misinformation, and complexity as constant, perhaps priming millennials to have difficulty conceptualizing steadfastness and reliability over time.<sup>224</sup> Given all that is on the horizon, Arnett notes that the catch phrase of this developmental time period might be pithily summed up as young adults constantly saying “yes, but not yet” to all manner of things.<sup>225</sup> He stresses that the instability of

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<sup>220</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 8.

<sup>221</sup> Hart-Brinson, 15-16.

<sup>222</sup> Moin Syed and Lauren L. Mitchell, “How Race And Ethnicity Shape Emerging Adulthood,” *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 90.

<sup>223</sup> According to the United States Bureau of the Census 2012, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States: 2012*, Washington, D.C., cited in Syed and Mitchell, 90.

<sup>224</sup> David Burstein, *Fast Future: How the Millennial Generation is Shaping our World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), 25-31.

<sup>225</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 3-4.

changing work, education, lovers, homes, coupled with low-level and temporary jobs, particularly in the early 20s, leaves a sense of adulthood far off for some young people.

While scholars note that it has been difficult to ever define adulthood,<sup>226</sup> it is typically assumed to have been reached when some, if not all, sociological markers of financial independence from parents, and chosen family by marriage and reproduction have been secured. Many traditionalists today still hold to the sociological definition that adulthood is a status one has either achieved or not achieved, defined by the end of schooling, the achievement of a stable job, the development of a career and financial independence, and the creation of a family.<sup>227</sup>

Some researchers who inquire about concepts of success and adulthood argue that such an extensive list of requirements to be viewed as an adult is a definition highly defined by a European-American perspective rather than one that resonates across differences of ethnicity. For instance, other racial and ethnic groups are much more likely to define “making it” as an adult by financial stability alone.<sup>228</sup> Yet according to surveys, Americans as a whole generally believe that these tasks should be taken on between ages 21 and 27 (between beginning to live on one’s own and having children).<sup>229</sup> Silva points out that today, many fewer people believe that you have to be married or have children to be considered an adult.<sup>230</sup> Her working-class respondents still maintain that “traditional” markers of American adulthood are valid and possible,<sup>231</sup> despite the fact that many of them report to her that they do not yet feel “grown up.”<sup>232</sup> Arnett’s respondent population felt the same.

Psychologists and human development theorists often associate with the term Emerging Adulthood specifically because they believe adulthood has *not* been reached by contemporary young adults, by and large.<sup>233</sup> Yet the gravity Arnett gives to the instability of his phase can be

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<sup>226</sup> Neiman, 123.

<sup>227</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 5.

<sup>228</sup> John Mollekopf, Mary C. Waters, Jennifer Holdaway, and Philip Kasinitz, “The Ever Winding Path: Ethnic and Racial Diversity in the Transition to Adulthood,” *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, ed. Richard Settersten Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Ruben G. Rumbaut (Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 2005), 468, 472.

<sup>229</sup> Turpin, 101.

<sup>230</sup> Silva, 58.

<sup>231</sup> Silva, 5-6.

<sup>232</sup> Silva, 6-7.

<sup>233</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 18.

exaggerated. Other studies find that less than 5% of respondents reported feeling “not like an adult at all,” but rather that adulthood is experienced in some parts of life more than others, like in work or emotional maturity, where other aspects remain underdeveloped.<sup>234</sup> Arnett grants that young people who make commitments to certain identity markers via marriage, parenting or career, regardless of age, begin to transition themselves out of this cultural position since it is inherently defined by instability and exploratory identity. Yet he would call this a general cultural position nonetheless because instability defines and explains a vast majority of contemporary young adults. Like other optimistic contemporary developmental theorists such as Kegan, Parks, and Richard Settersten Jr., Arnett argues that this intensified and elongated period of exploration, although full of uncertainty, is necessary to develop the resources of the self for a postindustrial age.<sup>235</sup> Thus adulthood itself as a goal of young adults is seen increasingly as a dubious honor compared to the past, with its connotations of settling, compromising, no longer exploring at such lengths as before.<sup>236</sup> Neiman notes that culturally, adulthood sounds boring and resigned.<sup>237</sup> Modern slang reflects this fact. The term “adulthood,” has come into the colloquial lexicon of young people, particularly those who feel they are having difficulty with the challenges and mundanity of adulthood.<sup>238</sup> In previous years, “adulthood,” in part, is what would have been called “householding.” The difference now is that it is seen as optional.

In 2016, Nashvillian Kelly Williams Brown made the New York Times Best Seller list with her book, *Adulthood: How to Become a Grown up in 486 Easy(ish) Steps*. The first chapter starts the subject off with “Gett[ing] Your Mind Right.” The book also includes chapters ranging from domesticity and maintenance to resiliency and new relationships to families. There is an

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<sup>234</sup> Michael J. Shanahan, Erik J. Porfeli, Jylan T. Mortimer, and Lance D. Erickson, “Subjective Age Identity in the Transition to Adulthood: When Do Adolescents Become Adults?” *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, ed. Richard Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Ruben G. Rumbaut (Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 2005), 223.

<sup>235</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 3rd ed. (New York: Vintage, 2000). While this book mainly focuses on Millennials as a generational cohort, Howe and Strauss would say that the level of exploration possible in this generation as young adults is part of their perceived recipe for greatness.

<sup>236</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 11, 10, 218.

<sup>237</sup> Neiman, 4.

<sup>238</sup> The open-source, multiply-authored and internet-based *Urban Dictionary*'s top definition of “adulthood” defines the term as a verb, meaning “to carry out one of more of the duties and responsibilities of fully developed individuals (paying off that credit card debt, settling disputes without engaging in blasts a about the dispute over social media, etc.). Exclusively used by those who adult less than 50% of the time,” “Adulthood,” *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Adulthood>.

entire chapter on “fake it until you make it” in which Brown discusses the importance of presentation, knowing about world events, how to not be intimidated but rather gain confidence through developing polite interpersonal skills. Each chapter, true to the participatory and reflective inclinations of Millennials, has a discussion questions section. The book is comedic, ironic, and illustrative of the mindset of a young adult living away from the community he or she was raised in and trying to figure out how to make it in a world beyond college.<sup>239</sup>

Describing and defining the import of contemporary young adulthood, and even naming and framing the field, is one fraught with contention because of the implications of how we describe and codify reality. The debate ranges over various classifications of stability, instability, age range, objective and subjective markers, interpretation of the reasons and causes of marriage delay and non-marriage. As I have alluded to, scholars note that even the concept of adulthood as a field of study has only crystallized in this century. Prior to this, adulthood was considered to be more of a sociological status than a process of meeting ever increasing developmental challenge.<sup>240</sup>

### **Accusations of narcissism and entitlement**

Psychologist Jean Twenge is one of the leading persons bemoaning the dual shift both away from meeting the traditional markers of adulthood quickly and also toward replacing these traditional, externally observable markers with a more subjective notion of inner maturity. First and foremost, in her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans are More Confident, Assertive, and Entitled—and more Miserable than ever Before*, Twenge predicted in 2004 and then again still in 2014 that the Millennial generation would find the transition to (traditional) adulthood difficult because of their optimism and high expectations. In particular, she believed that the group as a whole would not know how to get a job and pay off loans,<sup>241</sup> and that their hyper-individualism and narcissism would make them horrible relationship partners.<sup>242</sup> Much of

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<sup>239</sup> Kelly Williams Brown, *Adulting: How to Become a Grown up in 486 Easy(ish) Steps* (New York; Boston: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 59-84.

<sup>240</sup> M. Carolyn Clark and Rosemary S. Caffarella, “Theorizing Adult Development,” *Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* no. 84 (Winter 1999), ed. M. Carolyn Clark and Rosemary S. Caffarella (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 3.

<sup>241</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, xi.

<sup>242</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 65.



her charge of the generation as highly narcissistic comes from a college test revealing at least 50% more college students to rank problematically high in narcissism compared to what college students in the 1950s were assessed.<sup>243</sup> She attributes these generational characteristics to the manifestation of cultural change brought about by how these young adults were parented and encouraged to support some behaviors over others.<sup>244</sup>

While few people disagree that the generation is more self-focused, what is controversial about Twenge and the many older adults who are on her side are their points about the value and implications of this self-focus. Twenge contends that the belief young adults ardently hold that one must love oneself before one can love others is now a commonly adhered to cultural truism, yet she argues against this, asserting that in her opinion, insecure people do not in fact have worse relationships.<sup>245</sup> She recommends that parents should “junk the self-esteem emphasis and teach self-control and good behavior.”<sup>246</sup> Twenge links this over-inflated sense of self to increased rates of anxiety and depression in the Millennial Generation. Yet other scholars dispute the veracity of both the rates and the linkage Twenge puts forth.<sup>247</sup>

Arnett believes Twenge’s primary critique, of unusually high narcissism in the generation, does not actually measure narcissism nor does it represent all young adults. The leading researchers disproving Twenge’s data note that levels of narcissism and self-esteem have stayed essentially flat over recent generations. What the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) does show in terms of generational change, Arnett argues, is women have become more confident and assertive in recent decades. Therefore, this positive change in culture is partially responsible for the slight bump in overall scores across generations.<sup>248</sup> Scholars find that a bump in narcissism using the NPI, if there is one at all, is also understandably more likely to occur in young adulthood, and then settle down for all generations as they transition out of that phase.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, xvi.

<sup>244</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 2, 70.

<sup>245</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 129, 131.

<sup>246</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 305.

<sup>247</sup> Arnett, “The Evidence for Generation We,” 7; numerous other scholars have also criticized Twenge’s methodology, her claims of correlation and causation between factors, and her generalizations.

<sup>248</sup> Arnett, “The Evidence for Generation We,” 6.

<sup>249</sup> See B. W. Roberts, G. Edmunds, and E. Grijalva, “It’s Developmental Me, Not Generation Me: Developmental Changes are more important than Generational Changes in Narcissism. Commentary on Trzesniewski & Donnellan (2010),” *Perspectives in Psychological Science* 5 (2010): 97-102, quoted in Arnett, “Evidence,” 7.

Twenge, however, holds steadfast against this criticism, believing she sees declines in empathy, as well as dropping care for others, civics, and the environment.<sup>250</sup>

Twenge and Arnett have debated each other directly in a special edition of the *Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood* journal which Arnett founded nearly two decades ago. In this journal, Arnett applauded Twenge for encouraging the generation practice self-control, as he sees research backing up self-control, rather than self-esteem, as a more reliable indicator that a young adult will complete higher education and have lower drug use.<sup>251</sup> Given the combination of her assertions that contemporary young adults are wrongheaded with the dubiousness of her claims about the actuality of an increase of narcissism and its implications in the generation, I believe that an accurate read of what Twenge is doing when she critiques young adults today is that she simply disagrees with their shift in value-orientation and is thus using allegations of increase narcissism as a platform and wedge issue in the cultural debate about which values and cultural practices should guide us. While Twenge claims that Millennials are having a hard time reaching adulthood, I think a case can be made that contemporary young adults *are* reaching the fullness of adulthood if the criteria of judgements and choices for one's self and community are seen as necessarily entailing greater flexibility, complexity, and a longer duration of time in order to be fully fulfilled.

### **A renewed focus on experiential and embodied religion**

A reorientation to what we as scholars of religion mean by religion, spirituality, and connection must also occur in order to gain a more accurate and theoretically generative read on spirituality and meaning-making for young adults today. For instance, young adults' adamant resistance to judge others often comes across as relativism to the uninformed and uncurious, yet several scholars I briefly include here show that qualitative interviews and sophisticated interviewers who can respond to their subjects in real time to ask better and deeper questions can

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<sup>250</sup> Jean Twenge, "The Evidence for Generation Me," *Emerging Adulthood* 1 no.1 (2013), 13; Twenge dubs the upcoming generation of young adults "iGen" for its members' use of personalized technology, feels similar pressures to let their young adulthood be a time of personal exploration rather than commitment, and that these two things are often diametrically opposed, Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super Connected Kids are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy, and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, Simon and Schuster, 2017); Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, and Ruth Igielnik, "Generation Z looks a lot like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues," *Pew Research Center*, January 17, 2019.

<sup>251</sup> Arnett, "The Evidence for Generation We," 5.

help scholars of religion to reveal and better interpret contemporary young adults' deep thoughts on morality and purpose. Today's young adults are in the process of "becoming" all the way through, experiencing their spirituality, by and large, as a frontier-less foray in which they as eclectic hunters and gatherers of meaning search for and evaluate value through the authoritative self. They are less likely to participate in formal religion for reasons of belief and institutionalism's lack of purchase with young adults because of its inherent values of hierarchy and tradition, yet they find worthwhile spiritual fodder in dinner groups, concerts, and lifetime experiences like travel and conferences to form and guide their senses of spirituality.

Millennials have made considerable press for the notoriety of being the least religious generation in recent memory. A full 35% of this demographic is described by researchers as either non-religious or non-affiliated, following substantial demographic trends toward greater religious agnosticism in culture at large.<sup>252</sup> While much has been written about attempts to keep Millennials in church during a life course phase in which persons are typically least likely to participate in organized religion, this focus on a deviation from a center has limited information to tell us about what *is* religiously salient and meaningful for this generation. As pastoral theologian Jaco Hamman notes in his book on Millennials, "*who would prefer to be called a 'none?'*" for such a question and label insinuate nonsensically that there are categories of persons who are, as Hamman puts it, "lacking the essential qualities of recognition and belonging."<sup>253</sup> Rather than believe they have lost capacity for meaning in general simply because they have left the church, I focus my short amount of space here on those edges and frontiers of how Millennials and the Spiritual but Not Religious are nudging the field of sociology of religion to rethink the categories of meaning.<sup>254</sup>

In the nostalgia-evoking title for any Millennial, *Oregon Trail Theology*, millennial-generation pastor Eric Atcheson observes "we are a generation unbounded, for better or

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<sup>252</sup> Pew Research Forum, "Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends," March 2014, 43.

<sup>253</sup> Jaco J. Hamman, *The Millennial Narrative: Sharing a Good Life with the Next Generation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), xi.

<sup>254</sup> My two favorite books on sympathetic engagement with institutional churches from the perspective of a pastor and a millennial respectively are: Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), and Erin Lane, *Lessons in Belonging from a Church Going Commitment-Phobe* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2015).

worse.”<sup>255</sup> He sees reliance on digital media and eclectic provisioning as preparing for a new religious frontier in which Millennials are packing as well as they can for a journey undergone outside of a Sunday morning in church. While Atcheson believes that the traditional church holds “truth, goodness, and meaning,” he says Millennials rightfully find these values more often out on the frontier than within the traditional boundaries.<sup>256</sup> Atcheson notes that an ordering of priorities and the magnitude of needing to consider finances plays a role in Millennial spirituality.<sup>257</sup> He describes them as “purposeful nomads” while noting that the generational cohort actually physically relocates less than most recent previous generations.<sup>258</sup> Yet he cautions that this movement of their religiosity should not be “construed as a fusillade against the virtues of continuity” but only against its “elevation [...] to a sacred calf.”<sup>259</sup> Contemporary young adults want to stay open to new developments, and to new visions of what it means to embrace and uphold persons. Millennials are widely known for feeling that institutional church is harmfully judgmental and exclusive, and are more than willing to leave over these issues in order to pursue these values, in a diffuse fashion if necessary, rather than not at all.

Smith and Snell create the term “morally therapeutic deism” in *Souls in Transition* to describe young people today, insinuating them as morally deficient. I believe that Smith and Snell’s coinage may capture a broad trend and be loosely accurate, yet I find much to criticize about the way they went about asking questions of young people and analyzing their answers. Predominately, Smith and Snell’s predetermined categories of what makes something moral predisposes contemporary young people to not meet their standards, and they fail to think creatively about where morality for young people might show up where the researchers are not looking for it. This in turn makes their central thesis of “morally therapeutic deism” a point of overreach. It involves a lack of nuance, and a failure—at places—to listen carefully enough to emerging adults to represent their real morality and their real concerns. Instead, it unequivocally insinuates that therapeutic and subjective worldviews are indisputably negative, brittle bricolage for ethical founding.

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<sup>255</sup> Eric Atcheson, *Oregon Trail Theology: The Frontier Millennial Christians will Face—and How we are Ready* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), xi.

<sup>256</sup> Atcheson, xii.

<sup>257</sup> Atcheson, xiii.

<sup>258</sup> Atcheson, 46.

<sup>259</sup> Atcheson, 49.

On the face of it, what respondents say to Smith and Snell does seem rather plainly self-absorbed. They note, that when asked, “The majority of those interviewed stated [...]—that nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people.”<sup>260</sup> On the issue of moral obligation, Smith and Snell go on to summarize that young adults as a whole feel:

Nobody can blame people who won’t help others. They are innocent of any guilt, respondents said, if they ignore other people who are in need....Again, any notion of the responsibilities of a common humanity, a transcendent call to protect the life and dignity of one’s neighbor, or a moral responsibility to seek the common good was almost entirely absent among the respondents. In the end, each individual does what he or she wants and nobody has any moral leverage to persuade or compel him or her to do otherwise.<sup>261</sup>

Smith and Snell find that a sizeable minority of contemporary young adults feel that people are responsible for each other, and some of this perspective can be directly traced to religious teachings.<sup>262</sup>

In general, Smith and Snell found that morality for young adults did not involve much deliberation. They poignantly write, “The majority of emerging adults interviewed had difficulty thinking of even one example of a situation recently when they had some trouble deciding what was the morally right or wrong thing to do.”<sup>263</sup> Morality also did not involve any large reference to an external framework, be it God, utilitarian principles or anything else beyond a general sense of “do no harm” to others, and the loose idea that karma, the notion that how one lives comes back to reward or haunt a person.<sup>264</sup> Interestingly, Smith and Snell also queried young adults about regret. Young adults, for all their supposed valuing of growth, often “explicitly denied feeling any regrets about any of their past decisions, behaviors, or problems [...] that they would not change a thing even if they could, that what’s happened is part of who they have become, and that they have no regrets about anything at all.”<sup>265</sup> Smith and Snell see this as proof

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<sup>260</sup> Smith and Snell, 68.

<sup>261</sup> Smith and Snell, 68.

<sup>262</sup> Smith and Snell, 68.

<sup>263</sup> Smith and Snell, 46.

<sup>264</sup> Smith and Snell, 47, 49.

<sup>265</sup> Smith and Snell, 41.

that “self is central,” and thus, ultimately, the centrality of the self which necessitates that it must never be considered in error or to have made a mistake.<sup>266</sup>

Other researchers, who take a more generous evaluative approach to these developments around contemporary morality of young adults, agree with this general “do no harm” base line of morality, but would attribute it to a sense of cosmopolitanism that can also be seen as a positive force for tolerance and supportive engagement with others. Young adults may be unwilling to judge the actions of others, yet this does not automatically equate to mean that young adults cannot make decisions for themselves and have no guiding values.<sup>267</sup> They are simply content to make their own choices without dictating that others act the same way, notes Konstam.<sup>268</sup> This can be seen as an orientation of respect and egalitarianism, rather than relativism. As religion scholars Julian Gallette and Jaco Hamman put it, Millennials believe strongly in the “priesthood of all believers,” that all persons should have access to the divine and be able to facilitate this for others, regardless of official ordination and training.<sup>269</sup> Scholar of leadership Jolene Erlacher notes that for Millennials in traditional institutional ministry, their sense of connectedness is facilitated through social media and Internet. This connection is real to them. Such new ways of networking goes hand in hand with the generational appreciation for collaboration and teamwork in a commitment to social justice and change.<sup>270</sup>

Elizabeth Drescher, author of *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Life of America’s Nones* is another one of these researchers. She writes, “People today are less traditionally religious because, in terms of personal authority and the time to enact authority with regard to religion and spirituality, *they can be.*”<sup>271</sup> She goes on to write, “institutional affiliation is now but

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<sup>266</sup> Smith and Snell, 41.

<sup>267</sup> This lack of willingness to pass judgment on others, however, may lead to contemporary young adults having difficulty engaging in civil discourse in which democratic citizens who must ultimately pass judgements upon others, even if these judgments are to some degree consensual, to live in communal society.

<sup>268</sup> Konstam, 323.

<sup>269</sup> Julian Gallette and Jaco Hamman, “Practicing Table Fellowship for Spiritual Nurture,” *Millennial Narrative: Sharing a Good Life with the Next Generation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 44.

<sup>270</sup> Jolene Cassellius Erlacher, *Millennials in Ministry*, fwd. Molly T. Marshall (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 2014), 76-77; Carol Howard Merritt, also notes that one of the characteristics of ministry that meets the needs of contemporary young adults is that it is relational. It is not person nor program driven, thus not interested in hierarchy, trends, or labels, but rather responds to whomever makes up the group in the moment, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon, Va.: Alban Institute, 2007), 9.

<sup>271</sup> Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Life of America’s Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63.

one resource that might shape the story of the self-as-spiritual.”<sup>272</sup> Former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has described contemporary affiliation to religion as increasingly one of “patrons” rather than “subscribers,” and this describes young people well. He notes that this is a shift of a balance of power and loyalty, much like having a brand loyalty that we change when we are no longer satisfied or we find novelty elsewhere.<sup>273</sup> Notions of authority are undercut with this move, but for Millennials and other postmodern persons, the idea that the church should or can hold authority without the power given to it through its participants is a ridiculous notion.

Researchers of secularism and religious change in the United States note that there has been a rapid increase in the population as a whole since the 1990s of those who would identify as nonaffiliated or secular.<sup>274</sup> In fact, scholar of those who consider themselves Spiritual but Not Religious (SBNR), Linda Mercadante finds among this group a strong impulse to “de-tradition,” that whatever practices of spirituality and belief they do adhere to, they intentionally and explicitly in their mind “unhook” from a religious tradition.<sup>275</sup> She finds this to be a mentality even among clergy.<sup>276</sup> This deliberate distancing from a framework that has come before is similar to the millennial generational outright resistance to labels in general.<sup>277</sup>

Drescher describes contemporary religious perspectives as involving a rise of “nones,” those who fully don’t affiliate with any religion, and “somes,” which partially do but would not be considered traditionally religious by themselves or others. Both groups loosely engage in “ethical strategies grounded first in experiences of human goodness.”<sup>278</sup> In line with what I argue in the introduction to my dissertation about getting a deeper sense of what is going on from observing practices and watching for “insider” terms which may or may not be well articulated, Drescher notes that people on the edge of religiosity were much more likely to act out an ethics

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<sup>272</sup> Drescher, 63.

<sup>273</sup> Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>274</sup> Baker and Buster, 86-87.

<sup>275</sup> Mercadante, 78.

<sup>276</sup> Mercadante, 17.

<sup>277</sup> Pew Research Center, “Most Millennials Resist the ‘Millennial’ Label,” September 2015.

<sup>278</sup> Drescher, 216.

of care than to talk about it directly in an interview.<sup>279</sup> Mercadante notes that many SBNR are not bothered by the fact that they put together what many would consider an inconsistent internal schema.<sup>280</sup> In fact, they valorize their constellation of values and practices as highly as they do precisely because it is what they themselves have put together. Insinuations that their practices might involve a negative hybridity, syncretism, or “poaching” from other cultures struck many of Mercadante’s interviewees as absurd.<sup>281</sup> Scholar of religion Michelle Voss Roberts describes postmodern notions of religion in general following models of multiplicity of form and authority. These models are best described as hybrids, rhizomes, and fluids, in terms of influence and authority in how meaning is created. They are not consistent, singular, self-contained systems.<sup>282</sup>

What contemporary SBNR value most intensely, Drescher identifies, is deeply personal and close, which can be summed up in the four Fs of Family, Friends, Food, and Fido.<sup>283</sup> She notes that “‘spirituality,’ as it is variously articulated, moves through the lives of the Nones as they craft stories that 1) are embedded in everyday life; 2) center primarily on relationships rather than individualistic pursuits or institutionalized rituals; and 3) are composed of practices focused on the integration of body, mind, and spirit.”<sup>284</sup> Drescher makes sociological comments about how traditional scholars of religion have missed much of the story of contemporary religion because of how they codify religion. She writes, “The unaffiliated do indeed affiliate, just not in the ways that look like demographers count.”<sup>285</sup> It is hard for religious identity, or religious practice to be quantified, particularly in survey data because today “affiliations are looser, more provisional, shifting across social settings depending on changing norms.”<sup>286</sup> Rather, momentary experiences of music such as concerts, education, and media interaction were seen by her respondents as spiritually significant and often had long-term impact upon

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<sup>279</sup> Drescher, 250.

<sup>280</sup> Mercadante, 72.

<sup>281</sup> Mercadante, 85.

<sup>282</sup> Michelle Voss Roberts, “Religious Belonging and the Multiple,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 43-62, 59, cited in Yuhas, 147.

<sup>283</sup> Drescher, 43; This “sacred sensuality” is well described in Hamman and Galette, 40-51.

<sup>284</sup> Drescher, 51.

<sup>285</sup> Drescher, 98.

<sup>286</sup> Drescher, 98.



participants' feelings of connectivity or insight, even though they might be sporadic or even one-time events.<sup>287</sup>

Beste writes that engaging her students as researchers helped everyone involved begin to figure out for themselves what they could positively articulate as a Christian ethic and match it up against everyday college practice.<sup>288</sup> She offers the only model I know of an ethicist so actively engaging her subjects in their own question-making rather than sticking to lecturing at them with predetermined knowledge, questions, and frames. While she cautions to her book's reader that her involvement in analysis of the research as someone outside of the generation in question may prevent an entirely accurate interpretation of the findings, she also hopes that over a thousand young people's involvement in the project at various steps have adequately adjusted for researcher error.<sup>289</sup>

In summarizing the content of the project itself, Beste notes that the contemporary young adults who have been in her classroom over the past ten years long for more than the simplistic advice and judgment around sex and relationships that society and Christian culture have offered them.<sup>290</sup> They often have little idea of where to start,<sup>291</sup> but are hungry for more interactive guidance and frameworks that open-endedly relate better to their experiences as young adults. In the second half of her book, Beste engages the findings of her students about the clear lack of mutuality and intimacy occurring during college parties with Christian ethical concepts about relationship transparency, mutuality and justice outlined by Roman Catholic feminist ethicist Margaret Farley in *Just Love*, as well as the concept of human flourishing and poverty of spirit articulated by Roman Catholic theologian Johan Metz.<sup>292</sup> Beste finds that students are largely interested in what it means to love and treat others justly in the context of sexual relationships, but often have never been asked to consider such things.<sup>293</sup> Instead, they receive their models for how to act as young men and women with each other sexually and romantically predominately

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<sup>287</sup> Drescher, 99-111.

<sup>288</sup> Beste, 2.

<sup>289</sup> Beste, 6.

<sup>290</sup> Beste, 4.

<sup>291</sup> Beste, 61.

<sup>292</sup> Beste, 10, 217.

<sup>293</sup> Beste, 10.

from TV and other forms of media.<sup>294</sup> Students report that these models are frequently degrading to women and valorizing of male power, particularly rap.<sup>295</sup> In college party spaces, Beste and her students find that both male and female young adults who may act differently or know better when sober, revert to this lowest common denominator pattern of male dominance and female submission in an attempt to let loose when everything else in their lives feels so tight.

### **CONCLUSION: RETHINKING ADULTHOOD AND MORALITY**

In this chapter I have entertained various social scientific and theological perspectives on the developmental challenges of young adulthood and how contemporary young adults have grown up with the pressures of a neoliberal environment which has encouraged self-reliance and the pursuit of an elusive yet tantalizing authenticity. I have motioned toward the idea that today's young adults operate as "guerilla" selves, to borrow a term from Luke Perri and Howie Campbell, with sporadic and ironic forms of resistance against oppressive forces that seek to box them in for the sake of production and consumerism. I then conclude this introductory chapter by meditating briefly on three instances in which young adults are doing things differently regarding adulthood, selfhood, and spirituality out of a demanding search for embodied, experiential connection. Select scholars of religion and psychology are not exactly salutatory about these shifts, yet I and others believe that their vein of criticism stems from a lack of creative imagination about what maturity, morality, and spirituality can and should mean.

Psychologist Jacob A. Paulsen and his colleagues who work with Arnett distinguish the main issue of contention over the morality of young adults as being a perspective on what is considered to be morality in the first place and how it relates to social rules played out generationally.<sup>296</sup> They write:

It is not clear, however, how anyone could actually know whether today's youth are lost when it comes to marriage, given that the oldest members of the so-called generation are just barely 30 [...] It seems we are faced with a situation in which 'they' are not following 'our' rules and therefore they are doing it wrong. Worse,

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<sup>294</sup> Beste, 49.

<sup>295</sup> Beste, 51.

<sup>296</sup> Hamman notes that much of the criticism against Millennials in terms of church life "exposes a spirit of moral judgment, of being threatened, and of seeking control," Hamman, *Millennial*, xii.

some of these accounts lack a long-term historical perspective regarding the timing of major events like marriage.<sup>297</sup>

Paulsen is referring to the fact that historically marriage in one's late 20s is not at all usual, but rather typical of eras involving challenging economic times. Marriage "delay," if it can be called that, is only "delay" in comparison to the Golden era of financial affluence in the 1950s and 60s in which young adults were able to foresee financial stability in their lives at an early age. The true change of culture is not so much one of marriage delay per se, but how intimacy, and gender equity within in, is or is not occurring in a culture of neoliberal financialization and individualization. We now to turn to these subjects in greater depth in Chapters Two, Three, and Four.

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<sup>297</sup> Jacob A. Paulsen, Moin Syed, Kali H. Trzesniewski, and M. Brent Donnellan, "Generational Perspectives on Emerging Adulthood: A Focus on Narcissism," *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27.

## II.

### Toward Self-authorship in Identity, Intimacy, and Change

*Intimacy is just a look; it's just a knowing thing. To me intimacy is when that person has your back no matter what. When you've reached a point where they know what you're about; they know the essence of you.*

Respondent Sarita in Tricia Rose Farrar's  
*Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy*<sup>298</sup>

*Intimacy requires a model of a relationship based on equality, one that promotes the equal status and well-being of each partner and encourages both of them to attend to and accommodate the other.*

Feminist counselors Anne Rankin Mahoney and Carmen Knudson-Martin<sup>299</sup>

Much of the literature around young adulthood, and even conferences on young adult ministry, speak of young adults needing to navigate rocky waters of uncharted postmodern territory. They highlight this life stage's exigent challenges of making choices and of evaluating inheritance from family and culture such that one comes to claim an identity and use this mooring to explore one's capacity for intimacy and psychosocial development.<sup>300</sup> Building upon what I outlined in the last chapter around what it means to achieve adulthood psychologically, and how to encourage this postmodern process to actually happen, in this chapter I take a deeper dive into the human developmental literature to explicate a series of views on what it means to progress enough in human development to make one's own navigational charts, a capacity which human development theorist Robert Kegan and others call "self-authorship."<sup>301</sup> In order to sufficiently explicate this axial idea of Self-authorship, I outline how notions of identity, intimacy, and human growth are constituent of and lead to a capacity for self-reasoning and self-action, the two components of self-authorship.

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<sup>298</sup> Tricia Rose Farrar, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 2003), 38-39.

<sup>299</sup> Anne Rankin Mahoney and Carmen Knudson-Martin, "Gender Equality in Intimate Relationships," *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 9.

<sup>300</sup> "Uncharted Conference," Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and The Episcopal Church Young Adult Ministries, Boston University, June 18-22, 2019.

<sup>301</sup> The self as tied to storyline is something Charles Gerkin also argued in his own work, see *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Care in a Hermeneutic Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984).

In this chapter, I first attempt to outline the human developmental late modern goal of Self-authorship, an idea based in Kegan's research but akin to ideas taken up by other theorists before and after. I outline why self-authorship is needed, what it is, and why it is so difficult for most adults today to achieve. To further explore what it means to develop such a capacity, in the second section I then backtrack a bit to explain the theories of change in human development more broadly. I focus first on psychosocial, modernist stage theorist Erik Erikson before comparing and contrasting Erikson's work to postmodern human development theories in the work of constructive-developmental Kegan and Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa.

In the third section of this chapter, I further connect my dissertation's focus on intimacy to the project of self-authorship, as intimacy from a psychosocial angle makes up two of the three dimensions of self-authorship, the interpersonal and intrapersonal.<sup>302</sup> While a distinction between intra and interpersonal is ultimately false, I nonetheless heuristically attempt to detail in brief what intimacy means in terms of qualities and skills at the levels of the interpersonal (dynamic relationship of exchange of the inner-self and its associated life-worlds with those of another) and intrapersonal (personal identity, communication, and empathy). In the fourth and concluding section, I draw on Kegan's later writings as to why personal and institutional change is so hard to accomplish and, following his general theories about environments that facilitative transformative change, suggest that opportunities for play and pilgrimage are two situations that offer the transformation necessary for qualitative growth.

## **SECTION ONE: SETTING SIGHTS ON SELF-AUTHORSHIP**

### **The late modern need for higher rates of self-authorship**

Human developmental theorists who ascribe to the constructive-developmental paradigm of growth such as Kegan argue that in a late modern society it is imperative that educators and other cultural guides help people progress in developmental stages to at least the self-authorship stage, if not beyond, for the sake of having the capacity to be good democratic citizens<sup>303</sup> and

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<sup>302</sup> The first dimension of the cognitive will have already been discussed at sufficient length in outlining the basis for Kegan's work, as it is not the primary purpose of a project advocating for the further use of a psychological lens.

<sup>303</sup> Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts for Learning and Self-authorship: Constructive-Developmental Pedagogy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 9.

having a competitive edge in an economy ever headed toward increasing automation.<sup>304</sup> Yet it is the case of social development that the levels of psychological organization societies need of their people often lags behind the fulfillment of that need. Any particular society needs to retool how it socializes and educates people in order for them to develop the levels of capacity they do not otherwise develop in the extant system.

A concrete example of this was given in the last chapter. The contemporary debate of what it means to be an adult in terms of whether or not adulthood is defined by externally observable sociological markers like marriage or homeownership or internal standards of self-identity and cohesion is an issue of whether or not as a society to mainly adhere to certain levels of organization which are more simplistic and externally observable, or more complicated and individually and internally defined. The same types of organizing debates also apply to intimate relationships, asking the question: “is it better to define intimate relationships by external markers like marriage, or internal markers like felt closeness and interaction?” I argue, for the reasons of economic and social survival of late modern society that it is better than we begin to move toward believing in the goodness of the latter. Many developmental and generational theorists would wager to suggest that perhaps society itself is in a transitional period of deciding and re-envisioning what it means to be both intimate and mature. Whether changes in intimacy and epistemology are transitional toward something better or worse remains to be seen.

Researchers estimate that 75% of college-aged students are at the Interpersonal Stage Three of development. This is logical, as most schooling involves socializing students to accept authority and conventional knowledge.<sup>305</sup> Stage Three involves being able to interact with people and information well, but not have a sufficient frame of personal reference with which to self-

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<sup>304</sup> In an age of automation, sophisticated problem solving is necessary for the entire population to have in order to have value that cannot easily be replaced by a machine, Deborah Helsing, Annie Howell, Robert Kegan, and Lisa Lahey, “Putting the ‘Developing’ in Professional Development: Understanding and Overturning Educational Leaders’ Immunities to Change,” *Harvard Educational Review* 78, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 438; Human development scholars have tracked developmental stages of individuals onto social epochs by which society has organized itself. Thus, the Stage Three Interpersonal Stage is known as “Romantic,” the Institutional Stage Four has been labeled “Modernism,” and the Stage Five of the Inter-Individual is how healthy Postmodern people operate, Karen Eriksen, “‘Interpersonal’ Clients, Students, and Supervisees: Translating Robert Kegan,” *Counselor Education and Supervision* 47 (June 2008): 235; Baxter Magolda notes that many scholars ruminate that self-authorship is necessary for liberation, Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 19.

<sup>305</sup> Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 7.

author. Self-authorship begins at what is called the fourth developmental stage in Kegan's thought, the Institutional Stage.<sup>306</sup>

Self-authorship is often *not* achievable in college, according to scholars, because of the depth of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills it takes to engage in both the self-reasoning and self-action which constitute full self-authorship.<sup>307</sup> College students may achieve the cognitive skills necessary for complex thought, but need to have sufficient sense of identity and interaction with others to then use complex thought effectively in decision making and personal valuing.<sup>308</sup> Thus, it makes sense, given all that it takes to achieve self-authorship, for researchers to indicate that only 20% to 30% of adults *ever* reach the Institutional Stage.<sup>309</sup>

Since most adults operate at the Interpersonal Stage, it makes sense for them to be wary about the organizing principles of more advanced stages. This manifests as a fear of and distaste for complexity as well as a worry that the self being an arbiter of standards and truth will cause chaos, in which the new standard is "anything goes." Yet the self-in-relation of the self-authorship stages is not an anything goes situation even though the mutability of facts and knowledge takes on a more complex resonance at these stages.<sup>310</sup> A satisfactory self-author must learn the reasons and facts of his or her environment, which some scholars call "the community language," in order to understand enough to participate in the discussion with one's own views in a way that actually communicates.<sup>311</sup> These personal views are created in light of existing evidence, not in opposition to it.<sup>312</sup> This interpersonal dimension of self-authorship is non-negotiable; it keeps a person tied into a community, albeit in different ways as their idea of what it means to be a self in relations to others evolves. While there is a mythos promulgated by those on lower levels of psychological organization that self-authorship dismisses the need for

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<sup>306</sup> K.P. Eriksen and G.J. McAuliffe, "Adult Development and Counselor Competence," *Counselor Education and Supervision* 45: 180-192, cited by Eriksen, 234.

<sup>307</sup> Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 7.

<sup>308</sup> Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 12.

<sup>309</sup> Eriksen, 234.

<sup>310</sup> Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 8.

<sup>311</sup> Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 16.

<sup>312</sup> Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 14.

community connection, this is not true. It actually, when most fully present in a person involves three main dimensions: cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal.<sup>313</sup>

### **The goal of self-authorship**

Self-authorship is a way of knowing originally described by Kegan 1994. It involves a person understanding knowledge as contextually bound and also being able to make decisions and take actions based on beliefs about the relevance of this knowledge to the self.<sup>314</sup> By the thinkers I engage in this chapter, it is alternatively described as “complex postformal thought” (psychologist Jan Sinnott),<sup>315</sup> “advanced intimacy” (my paraphrase of Kegan), and the Institutional Self, and even better, the Inter-Individual Self (Kegan’s actual labels for his Stage Four and Stage Five forms of organizing). This concept of self-authorship echoes the adult faith process of questioning, clarifying, and acting upon beliefs discussed most prominently by Sharon Daloz Parks in the last chapter.

Scholar Jane Elizabeth Pizzolato identifies this three-part process: first, coming to a crossroads in which existing beliefs must be examined, second, claiming beliefs and identity through clarification and articulation after they have been examined, and third, taking action based upon internal foundations of the first two steps in the process.<sup>316</sup> Thus, a key part of developmental process is gaining criteria with which to judge and evaluate information,<sup>317</sup> but the most preliminary step prior to interpretation is gathering information in the first place.<sup>318</sup> Then it will be cumulatively possible to reason and act upon that information through evaluation itself as well as actions which spring forth from evaluation. This is what Parks meant in the last chapter about developing the capacity for meaning making which can only occur with

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<sup>313</sup> Jane Elizabeth Pizzolato, “Assessing Self-authorship,” *Self-authorship: Advancing Students’ Intellectual Growth*, edited by Peggy S. Meszaros (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 34.

<sup>314</sup> Pizzolato, 31.

<sup>315</sup> Jan D. Sinnott, *Adult Development: Cognitive Aspects of Thriving Close Relationships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), x.

<sup>316</sup> Pizzolato, 32.

<sup>317</sup> Anne Laughlin and Elizabeth G. Creamer, “Engaging Differences: Self-authorship and the Decision-Making Process,” *Self-authorship: Advancing Students’ Intellectual Growth*, edited by Peggy S. Meszaros (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 50.

<sup>318</sup> Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, “Developing Self-authorship in Young Adult Life,” *Journal of College Student Development* 39, no. 2 (1998): 143, cited by Laughlin and Creamer, 44.



information, interpretation, and then evaluative action based on information and its interpretation.<sup>319</sup>

Thus, while self-authorship is a three-part process, it consists of two main components which both must be present in a person's life to be described as full self-authorship. The first is *self-authored reasoning*, and the second is *self-authored acting* based upon that reasoning.<sup>320</sup> It is often the case that persons, particularly in college, can develop self-reasoning, but are not in a position yet to act upon that reasoning in a truly self-authored way. This lack of completion on the follow through to action is caused by a variety of external and internal factors, such as knowing what one wants, but being unwilling to pay the cost of living out that desire. An example of this is a college student desiring to study for a career that they would like, but the parents, who are paying for college, do not desire for their child. The child, caught between the having self-reasoning but not yet sufficient in self-action, is not fully self-authored, as he or she declines to take the action necessary to break from the desires of the parent and thus fully choose his or her own career path.

### *Self-reference*

To engage in self-reasoning and self-action one must have a good frame of self-reference. One must be able to answer questions of “who am I?”, “what do I value, and why?” Asking and answering these questions shows how at this stage of complex psychosocial development one's specific identity impacts epistemology. Reflection upon the self to a certain degree of depth at the appropriate time allows for moving from relying upon others for self-definition, direction, and beliefs to being able to choose for oneself. This then enables someone to be influenced by others but not unduly, because he or she also has an internal frame of reference from which to draw.<sup>321</sup> To connect self to socialized knowledge, however, persons must intentionally and consciously connect what they are learning with their lived experience.<sup>322</sup> This is not often asked

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<sup>319</sup> Marcia B. Baxter Magolda, “Evolution of a Constructivist Conceptualization of Epistemological Reflection,” *Educational Psychologist* 39, no. 1 (2004): 31, cited by Anne Laughlin and Elizabeth G. Creamer, “Engaging Differences: Self-authorship and the Decision-Making Process,” *Self-authorship: Advancing Students' Intellectual Growth*, edited by Peggy S. Meszaros (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 44.

<sup>320</sup> Pizzolato, 38.

<sup>321</sup> Pizzolato, 34; Hesling et al., 439.

<sup>322</sup> Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 12.

of them in more rudimentary forms of education like community college, which is based on epistemologies in which information is objective and therefore not fungible when examined in relationship to the self.<sup>323</sup>

A person who has sound self-reasoning has a good balance between self and other; they are able to honor others, and yet know and value their own ideas, abilities, potentials.<sup>324</sup>

Psychologists who do not engage in stage theory specifically, but nonetheless have an ideal set of parameters for self-in-relation call this “self-differentiation.” In earlier stages of development people prior to self-differentiation, persons seek authority, advice, and interpretation from others and cannot adequately develop from this a sense of internal standard which can stand in distinction to external values. Since in this stage a person receives standards from external sources, it is sometimes called the “Socialized Stage.”<sup>325</sup>

### *The complex interaction of self-reasoning and self-action*

Although self-authorship can be defined by its qualities and the process of obtaining such a quality of life can be scoped, it is nonetheless hard to definitively identify someone as possessing and acting upon self-authorship. For instance, a person might show self-authored reasoning, but then not immediately follow up with the expected self-authored action.

There are two main ways to explain this inconsistency. The first has been mentioned earlier, of a developing capacity for self-authorship in which self-reasoning is present, but for understandable reasons, one is not following through with self-action because one is not yet willing to absorb the high costs that might be associated with such self-action. This is particularly the case if such self-action stands in opposition to what other people want for that person. The other primary way to explain seeming inconsistency between reasoning and action has to do with context and frame. In this case, the parameter of time in which one is applying self-authored reasoning may involve a different action in the moment that, while possibly judged as inconsistent with reasoning in the context of the moment, in fact contributes to self-authored action if a larger view

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<sup>323</sup> It was my experience serving as the Vanderbilt Divinity School Writing Tutor that students often had a hard time developing the skills of articulating how personal perspective affects the subjective value of information until they were carefully guided in the process of doing so by several tutoring sessions with me. As the scholars I draw on in this chapter note, this level of thinking is often required at the graduate level of any subject, but sometimes actively discouraged at earlier levels of education.

<sup>324</sup> Pizzolato, 34; Laughlin and Creamer, 45; Hesling et al., 443.

<sup>325</sup> Hesling et al., 443.

of time and trajectory of one's life is considered.<sup>326</sup> For example, deciding to cohabit and also possibly delay marriage may seem inconsistent to one's ultimate desires for companionship and family, yet the benefits of this delay, as much as it might be personally painful in the moment, involves having more resources later on with which to engage in partnership. Young people are ensconced in their predictive horizons as they set the educational and professional foundations of their lives in such a way that while they seem penny wise and pound foolish in the moment, they are in some ways planning ahead.

## **SECTION TWO: HOW HUMANS DEVELOP PSYCHOLOGICALLY AND WHY IT MATTERS**

### **Overview of human development**

For the purposes of this chapter, I will entertain two main ideas of how human beings develop psychologically, a *phasic idea of biological-social development* represented here by Erik Erikson, and a *constructive-developmental model* represented by Kegan, McAdams, and Anzaldúa.<sup>327</sup> Within the psychosocial realm in which these two main theories operate, all stages are about a certain organizing principle of how subject and object relate.<sup>328</sup> According to either main type of theory, the ways in which subject and object relate, called meaning, shifts from being rigid and simple to being more complex and open-ended as one progresses.<sup>329</sup> Psychoanalytic psychologist Calvin Colarusso defines psychosocial development as “not synonymous to physical growth or aging, but rather how conditions of body, mind and environment interrelate.”<sup>330</sup> Thus, in a moral sense, this relationship between subject and object as it progresses can also be explained as a subject progressing in responsibility for themselves in the world as subjects who respond to and reflect upon objects.<sup>331</sup> Yet this level of cumulative complexity can be clearest described in spatial terms. In a spatial analogy, later stages of

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<sup>326</sup> Pizzolato, 38-29.

<sup>327</sup> Erikson distinguishes *phasic* versus *constructive-developmental* notions of development in this way, Erikson, 233.

<sup>328</sup> Hesling et al., 446.

<sup>329</sup> Erikson, 235.

<sup>330</sup> Calvin A. Colarusso, *Fulfillment in Adulthood: Paths to the Pinnacle of Life* (New York; London: Plenum Press, 1984), 2.

<sup>331</sup> Erikson, 235; A close identification of subject and object is considered in a Western lens to be an issue of fusion and underdevelopment relative to other stages of organization, Erikson, 235.

development involve more dimensions; the previous dimensions are not eclipsed, but simply added onto.<sup>332</sup>

I argue that theories of development, including older stage theories such as Erik Erikson's epigenetic lifecycle theory, can offer scholars of religion and practitioners a way to see stages of development as particular sets of tools and worldviews with which people within these stages interact with the world. Stages should be loosely and operationally thought of as a set of tools, worldviews, and challenges, rather than as the terribly restrictive, predetermined boxes as they are often been accused of being. If this can be done, it is possible for developmental stages as theories about the human condition to help us—in a way that has relational and counseling repercussions—with our general knowledge and empathy of where a person might be psychologically.

### **Phasic stage theory: Erik Erikson**

The most famous and enduring psychosocial stage theory, of eight stages strung out over a life, was outlined by Erik Erikson in his idea of cogwheeling stages first in his 1950 book *Childhood and Society* and then ruminated upon further in his 1959 *Identity and the Lifecycle*.<sup>333</sup> A cogwheel meant that socially, one person's position in the lifecycle allowed them to look backwards and forwards to that of others, and in doing so, feed into their development through relationships. Erikson was building upon the ideas of founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, and thus his ideas are often described as extensions of Freudian developmental theory. Like most developmental theorists, Erikson's three-part model gave equal weight to body/soma, ego/person, and ethos/culture. Both Erikson and Freud were also heavily influenced by Charles Darwin's notion of the biological evolution of species and applied such ideas of a biological imperative to growth and evolution to explain the process of progressing through the lifespan of an individual. Erikson added to Freudian theory by elaborating upon the ideas of ethos and culture he had seen as nascent in Freud's work.

Coming after Freud who saw human development as a necessary outgrowth of both the tension internal to the individual body, and the tension between the individual and society which

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<sup>332</sup> Eriksen, 235.

<sup>333</sup> See Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, Second edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963, 150, and *Identity and the Lifecycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959).

necessarily constrained the individual for the sake of the whole, Erikson was first person trained as a psychologist to articulate a biologically-based schedule of psychosocial development that was centered on strength, health, and interdependence. Erikson theorized this schedule based on his observations of children and how families and social influences affected them. His chart of cumulative developmental challenges spanned from pre-ego infancy to old age. Five of the eight stages involved childhood up through adolescence, while adulthood was divided into three phases of young, middle and older adulthood. None of Erikson's stages receive an age range, but are rather defined in part by a certain amount of biological achievement and in part by the sequence of phases in terms of what has already been achieved and what is yet to come. All of Erikson's stages, which serve as opportunities to gain psychological resources and strength, give rise to new relational modes and roles (and with it, an evolution of morality).

For Erikson, like most stage theorists, a stage is defined by a particular set of tools and worldviews allowing a person to function and thrive. This is called an equilibrium, and it describes a person living well in that stage. As capacities at a particular stage start to fail persons in addressing new situations or questions adequately, people undergo stage change, in which they experience life less smoothly as they search for and develop what it takes to address the situation before them. Once they have achieved these new skills and perspectives, which may take years, they find equilibrium at a new level of capacity and functioning, which is defined as a new stage.<sup>334</sup> Each stage is marked by a challenge/crisis, as well as a virtue and a vice which epitomizes the extremities of the challenge. Like in the case of most stage theories, each crisis occurs when the way of being in the current stage no longer fits the circumstances and its solutions no longer work for what the person is currently encountering. Higher levels of achievement at earlier phases lay the groundwork for higher levels of achievement in later stages, so doing well early on in life has significance for the rest of it.<sup>335</sup>

In addition to articulating the first, and perhaps longest-lasting of psychosocial stage theories, Erikson is also noted for having given new humanistic meanings to terms such as

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<sup>334</sup> Scholar of religion James Fowler notes three types of change that are helpful: 1) developmental change -- maturation formation of the self, 2) reconstructive change: rebuilding, restoring, healing, conversion, and transformation, 3) change as a response to intrusive events, James Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, Theology and Pastoral Care, ed. Don S. Browning (Philadelphia; Fortress Press, 1987), 101.

<sup>335</sup> Pratt and Matsuba, 51.

mutuality, actuality, and adaptation.<sup>336</sup> Erikson saw children and families as interdependent upon one another. He famously theorized that the ultimate goal of his cogwheeling cycle of life is to live into the middle adult stage of generativity in which one cares for and invests in the Other, whether that be a legacy of children or one's intellectual and social work.<sup>337</sup> This was a significant departure from Freudian thought, but it jelled with the golden era of affluence and family-focus in which Erikson lived. Thus, according to Erikson in the late 1950s, the epitome of human development is to become an altruistic, invested producer.

Many commentators on Erikson, particularly feminists such as Bonnie Miller-McLemore in *Also a Mother*, have taken Erikson to task for declaring this generativity to be located in middle age, when the human reproduction that women do is much more likely to occur in younger adulthood.<sup>338</sup> Such scholars see this as symptomatic of Erikson's general blind spots on defining the experiences of women in his theorizing in traditional, stereotypical ways and thus universalizing the experiences of men.<sup>339</sup> Miller-McLemore notes that Erikson saw great value in relationality and did not divide generativity by gender, but still assumed that men had greater responsibilities for paid work (generativity as productivity) and women for domestic labor (generativity as procreation). For instance, Erikson assumes marriage is a turning point in the maturity of a woman, in which regardless of employment or career, a woman goes from one receiving care to one giving, or expected to give, care to husband and children. He does not say the same about men.<sup>340</sup> As Miller-McLemore notes, the assumptions about gender essentialism and difference in developmental theory require "a second reading" of what generativity can mean as well as when and how it takes place.<sup>341</sup> Generativity, as theorized by Erikson, Miller-McLemore argues, cannot be read without understanding how the Industrial Revolution domesticated women and devalued their contributions in comparison to men by theorizing

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<sup>336</sup> Carol Hren Hoare, *Erikson on Development in Adulthood: New Insights from the Unpublished Papers* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 207.

<sup>337</sup> Hoare writes that it is unclear whether Erikson's ideology or his psychology came first in his theorizing and that likely it often went back and forth, 213.

<sup>338</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); also in Fran C. Blumberg and Melissa Shuman Zarin, "Development During Adulthood: 'The Best is Yet to Come,'" *Handbook of Counseling Women*, 1st ed., ed. Mary Kopala and Merle A. Keitel (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage 2003), 107.

<sup>339</sup> Hoare, 200-222.

<sup>340</sup> Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 265, cited by Lee, 67.

<sup>341</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 43.

whatever was male as normative and therefore whatever was female as derivative and thus non-normative.<sup>342</sup> Following Don Browning in *Generative Man*, Miller-McLemore argues that generativity is a moral goal worthy of not being restricted to a developmental phase.<sup>343</sup> She sees Erikson as advocating for a culture and ethic of care for both sexes, even though she concludes that he was hardly a feminist.<sup>344</sup> Miller-McLemore argues for a return to Eriksonian impetus to care, noting that his ideas around generativity have retained, if not improved, their masculine bent toward being synonymous with productivity rather than nurturance.<sup>345</sup> This is a trend which theorists of postfeminist neoliberalism would claim has only been exacerbated since. A turnaround back to care as a moral apex involves further understanding and implementation of human development theories, so we now turn from Erikson to Robert Kegan, writing a generation later.

### **Constructivist-developmental theory: Robert Kegan**

Robert Kegan first put his Constructive-Developmental theory to publication in his 1981 book entitled *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*. Related to the nod to evolution in the title, Kegan theorizes that humans develop primarily by an inherent drive to grow. Since this drive is not based on biological growth, Kegan postulates that development can continue in adulthood with the same ferocity as childhood depending on the level of environmental support available to facilitate growing in increasing complexity. The developmental support is facilitated by increasingly deep levels of intimacy, which Kegan sees as the apex of development. Intimacy begins to be possible in the second to last Stage of five stages, and comes to its culmination in the last stage. This goal of intimacy and its placement as the last stage of human development in Kegan's theory is in contrast to Erikson, who believed that Generativity was the apex of development. Even though his final stage of Wisdom in late adulthood was "progression" beyond middle adulthood's Generativity, I understand Erikson's last stage as one of growth through retrospection rather than pure advancement in capacity.

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<sup>342</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 43-46.

<sup>343</sup> This is something which Browning sees in Erikson's text, even though Erikson himself is less explicit about it, Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 49.

<sup>344</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 50.

<sup>345</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 51-52.

Kegan's constructivist theory of development is a hodgepodge of theories thrown together. He was inspired by Erikson's epigenic notions, and he also believed that human potential theorist and counselor Carl Rogers' "unconditional regard" was important to facilitating growth in persons therapeutically. Yet Kegan acknowledges finding himself building primarily off of Jean Piaget's human development theories because he believes them to be more empirically traceable.<sup>346</sup> Piaget, as a scientist, believed that cognition was fundamental to experiencing the world and making meaning of it in a cumulative, evolving way, whereas Kegan believes that the same staging can be described as a cumulative series of "relatednesses."<sup>347</sup> Because Kegan relies so much on Piaget's thought, it deserves some more elaboration before continuing on with Kegan.

According to Piaget, there are four main categories of qualitatively different thinking, even though the fourth advances into subsets of further growth. They are: 1) sensorimotor intelligence (roughly 0-2 years of age), 2) symbolic, intuitive, and pre-logical thought (ages 2-5), 3) durable categories or concrete operational thought (6-10 years of age), 3) cross-categorical thinking (which develops in complexity and capacity with age and interaction). Cross categorical thinking only begins to develop out of durable categories slowly, between the ages of 11 and 20.<sup>348</sup> Cross-categorical thinking is also called "formal operations," harkening to mathematical nomenclature. Piaget theorized that given appropriate environmental experience, competence in formal operations can be achieved in adolescence based on having developed the biological necessities for such cognition. He also theorized that, depending on environment, formal operations in a particular person may never develop even in adulthood.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 3-8.

<sup>347</sup> Piaget's model consistently balanced internal biology/external environment factors as facilitators of development, yet the cognition that manifested out of this growth, rather than psychosocial interaction, was his main concern.

<sup>348</sup> Chart from Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan, "The Adolescent as a Philosopher," *Twelve to Sixteen: Early Adolescence*, ed. J. Kagan and R. Coles (New York: Norton, 1972), n. p., reproduced in Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 34.

<sup>349</sup> Charles N. Alexander, Steven M. Druker, and Ellen J. Langer, "Introduction: Major Issues in the Exploration of Adult Growth," *Higher Stages of Human Development: Perspectives on Adult Growth*, ed. Charles N. Alexander and Ellen J. Langer (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5. Piaget recognized a variety of factors influencing development, but did not give them due emphasis, in Alexander et al., 8; Many commentators have since criticized the theory of formal operations focusing too narrowly on human cognition, whereas a fuller understanding of mature intelligence involves contextual and affective development. Piaget indicated no stage past formal operations, which also drew censure for indicating what others would later say was a "premature termination point of human growth, in Alexander et al., 8. He also was later denounced for having hierarchical views of stage growth, something which Kegan keeps although he considers these stages to be relationally, rather than strictly cognitively based, in Alexander et al., 9, 10.



By his own admission, Kegan's theory can also be considered a creative extension of object relations theory (ORT) since he believes it is the activity of relating that grows the self. Yet Kegan finds the writings of object relations theory short-sighted, if not woefully inaccurate, in stipulating that relational patterns of meaning making are made and set most solidly in the first two years of life and then not significantly changed thereafter. He does not see why this would be the case. While I concur with Kegan that meaning making and capacity can continue to grow throughout life with proper challenge, Kegan's blindness to the formative weight that security of attachment and relating which occurs when one is most powerless as an infant indicates a worrisome level of ignorance to the role power and vulnerability play in forming and challenging people, for both good and bad.

Nonetheless, Kegan agrees with object relations theorists that healthy relating, what D.W. Winnicott calls a "holding environment," leads to the positive development of the self. Kegan simply adapts this idea to postulate that there are a series of them throughout life.<sup>350</sup> These stages of environments Kegan calls alternatively "cultures of embeddedness," "consciousness thresholds," and triumphs of "relationship to."<sup>351</sup> Calling them relational stages contrasts his model against more classic theories of growth and relating, which sees stages as growing in a trajectory of ever greater autonomy, a holdover ideal from Freudian thought. Kegan, instead, seeing growth as an issue of connection and relating through new versions of selves rather than the distancing of autonomy. Kegan writes, "growth itself is not an alone a matter of separation repudiation, of killing off the past. This is more a matter of transition. Growth involves as well the reconciliation, the recovery, and the recognition of that which before was confused with the self."<sup>352</sup> This form of constantly creating new forms of relating which break the old forms to make room for the new, more complex form. Otherwise in sum, the Eriksonian notion of stage equilibrium, and how persons begin to progress through stages when organizing principles of their current stage fail to meet the challenges of new environments, applies equally to Kegan's theory.

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<sup>350</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 116.

<sup>351</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 77.

<sup>352</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 129.

*Kegan's stages and evolving through them*

Kegan's evolving self operates in a spiral through an increasingly complexity of stages, in which subject and object, as well as the stages themselves, come closer and then farther apart in relationship with others as one integrates and reintegrates as one progresses through the stages.<sup>353</sup> Thus, while always growing in capacity toward complex, intersubjective thought, every other stage appears more intimate than the stages that come in between because the spiral turns back on itself, garnering proximity to aspects of earlier locations. Higher levels of consciousness can be seen as better, depending on the complexity of the circumstances. He describes the difference between two stages as someone who knows how to drive the more complicated stick shift car also knows how to drive an automatic by understanding all cars better.<sup>354</sup>

Kegan theorizes that there are five dialectic stages of the self, although there is are six since the first stage is considered a non-numerical level. I will quickly move through the first half of the stages in order to spend more time on the stages more likely to be engaged in through adulthood. The zero-level stage is a pre-stage in which the infant self, labeled as the Incorporative Self, gets to know his or her reflexes. According to his culture taxonomy, Kegan labels this pre-stage the Mothering Culture. Stage One is the Impulsive Self and the Parenting Culture. Here the self has become more than just reflexes and has developed a beginning differentiation of self and other. The self still greatly needs others to serve as Parents for guidance, need fulfillment, and modeling. Stage Two is described as the Imperial Self in which one begins to take command of one's impulses and thus develop a sense of agency. This involves the role-recognizing culture of School and Family.<sup>355</sup>

Kegan notes that Stage Three, labeled the Interpersonal Balance, involves the first kind of relationship he would describe as resembling mutuality. As inferred earlier, this is where most people over the age of 18 years of maturity stay for the course of their lives. This stage involves a culture of rudimentary reciprocity in relationships. People in this stage are most concerned about whether not the people they are in relationship with like them, drawing them closer to each

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<sup>353</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 134-135.

<sup>354</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 101.

<sup>355</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 89.

other through comparing themselves to the world around them.<sup>356</sup> They work more through unexamined intuition than clear logic.<sup>357</sup> Thus, persons at this third level can reflect upon the world and own their own subjectivity to a degree but cannot subject their inferences to systematic evaluation or critique in order to gain a sense of the more complex whole.<sup>358</sup> Socially speaking, a person at this level is capable of socialization and civic responsibility,<sup>359</sup> yet it is Kegan's Fourth Stage of Institutional Balance where a person gains a certain level of intersubjective capacity in which self and objects can be reflectively evaluated at such a distance that both self and system can continue to grow qualitatively. While bridging Stage Three and Stage Four is not necessarily more significant of a qualitative shift than the previous shifts, it is this capacity of reflective distance between self and society, and action taken upon this knowledge, which allows for full self-authorship.<sup>360</sup>

The Fourth Stage, known as the Institutional Self according to Kegan, requires achieving an identity defined through self-dependence and self-ownership which creates the ability to judge and take action from the basis of an internal standard. Yet as this self-knowledge consolidates, there remains a coherence across the shared psychological space between self and society at large.<sup>361</sup> The Institutional Self has considerable capacity, since it can self-regulate, set limits, take responsibility, and control its psychological state.<sup>362</sup> However, it requires identifying with an internal organization system for this order; it cannot effectively reflect upon its own goals as self-constructed, and therefore changeable.<sup>363</sup> Thus, at this stage, the Self is an administrator who can operate on more dimensions than the primarily dyadic Interpersonal Self. Nonetheless, the newfound capacity of the Self for regulation at the Institutional Stage means that this Self is

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<sup>356</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 96-97, 253-254; People in the Interpersonal Stage are more likely to experience relationships as a quasi-intimacy of fusion rather than healthy interdependence, Eriksen, 237.

<sup>357</sup> Eriksen, 237.

<sup>358</sup> Kegan, *In Over our Heads*, 286.

<sup>359</sup> Kegan, *In Over our Heads*, 288.

<sup>360</sup> Eriksen, 237.

<sup>361</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 100.

<sup>362</sup> Eriksen, 238.

<sup>363</sup> Emily Souvaine, Lisa L. Lahey, and Robert Kegan, "Life after Formal Operations: Implications for a Psychology of the Self," *Higher Stages of Human Development: Perspectives on Adult Growth*, ed. Charles N. Alexander and Ellen J. Langer (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 238.

“inevitably ideological.” He or she is focused on developing systemic knowledge and strategies for life rather than exploring the greater messiness of relational mutuality.<sup>364</sup>

Kegan defines his final, Fifth Stage as one of Inter-Individual balance, in which there is fluid, competent, generative interaction of the Inter-Individual Self between and amongst Self, System, and Others. This Fifth Stage coincides with a Culture of Intimacy. Intimacy involves a considerable knowledge of and respect for Self, Other, and System (relationship) which requires a core sense of self and good interpersonal skills. Sinnott, in her book *Adult Development: Cognitive Aspects of Thriving Close Relationships*, encourages efforts to advance to such final stages of development. She argues that complex problem solvers are, at least theoretically, more likely to be happy in their relationships if they can problem solve their way out of problems, such as several methods to an outcome, several reasonable and worthwhile outcomes or goals.<sup>365</sup>

Persons at the Inter-Individual State are freed from adhering to the values of institutions as ends in themselves because they have gained the skills to engage creatively and complexly beyond what already exists without losing connection.<sup>366</sup> Thus, people at the Inter-Individual stage are a certain kind of forward-thinking leader who is creative, yet will be at such a pace ahead of most people that they will often feel alone in their thinking unless they surround themselves with others who are this stage of consciousness. Kegan explains that persons at stage five are “value-originating, system-generating, history-making individuals.”<sup>367</sup> They are the ones who can truly create a community of give and take, of robust interdependence which can critique a system even as it participates in it.

A further iteration of the creative psychosocial potential of the Inter-Individual Stage relative to intimacy and progression of intimacy toward greater gender equity in intimate relationships involves the ability to healthily distance oneself from guilt such that one can both own the guilt, but own it as an object which is not core to the self. Kegan writes that this distance of the Inter-Individual Self allows one to get close to an experience without conflation of self and guilt with what the other is going through, whereas at the prior Interpersonal Stage, to be close to

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<sup>364</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 101-102.

<sup>365</sup> Sinnott, 9-10.

<sup>366</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 103-105.

<sup>367</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 104.

and understanding of someone means one must identify with them.<sup>368</sup> This is the difference between sympathy and empathy, between fusion and self-differentiation. As to how this difference of subject-object relationship matters to how one does or does not take responsibility for causing harm to another, repairing it, and moving on, Kegan writes, “When we see that we are not made up by the other’s experience, we then have the capacity not to take responsibility for what is now genuinely and for the first time not ours. And as a result, we can get just as close to the others experience as we might like [...] Without any need to react defensively to it or be guiltily compliant with it.”<sup>369</sup> As I will note in the final chapter of this dissertation, this lack of being ensconced in guilt and defense becomes crucial for interpersonal repair.<sup>370</sup>

### **Borderlands conscientization: Gloria Anzaldúa**

Many literary commentators have noted that Hispanic lesbian Gloria Anzaldúa, while not trained as a psychologist, nonetheless offers much to say about processes of coming to consciousness about one’s own identity through theorizing about what being personally situated at the interstices of borders does for identity development, theories of epistemology, and political responsibility. Born in South Texas in 1942, she mixed writing styles in order for her form to match the message of her content. Her most well-known book, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, written in 1987, more than fifteen years after earning her master’s degree in English, “explores identity formation as a process of life-long learning shaped by diverse influences.”<sup>371</sup> She wanted people to theorize about and embrace the special knowledge that came from hybridity as way of developing an ever-evolving ethical consciousness. She went on to write many more books after *Borderlands*, taught at the university level, and was awarded a posthumous PhD in literature

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<sup>368</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 127.

<sup>369</sup> Robert Kegan, *In Over our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 127.

<sup>370</sup> As Emily Souvaine and Lisa L. Lahey write with Kegan, in the inter-individual phase, negative emotions which cannot be transformed are nonetheless no longer threats to the self because it no longer solely identifies with its psychological system of which these negative emotions are a part. This is part of what allows the inter-individual self to have the appropriate distance to creatively engage with that which causes pain and threatens psychological annihilation through negative emotions. Also helpful to flexible thinking, they write that “the interindividual self can see in the obstacles to meeting goals a reminder of the need to question continually the goals themselves,” Souvaine et al., 253-256.

<sup>371</sup> Katy Mahraj, “Dis/locating the Margins: Gloria Anzaldúa and Dynamic Feminist Learning,” *Feminist Teacher* 21, no. 1 (2011): 5.

from University of Santa Cruz even though she never finished her dissertation. While no one has labeled Anzaldúa a feminist developmental psychologist, commentator Kelli Zaytoun writes that Anzaldúa could be given such a title because of how she theorizes connection, contextualization, and acknowledgement of how the influence of male power affects everything else.<sup>372</sup> I explicitly add her to my review of Erikson and Kegan because her language about the multiplicity of identity and how knowledge of identity necessarily leads to commitments to engaging in actions which further social justice, a point Erikson and Kegan do not address.

In the postmodern sense of Anzaldúa, identity is not so much a stage that one arrives at, so much as a constant process that has points of acceleration and a greater integration of information, and periods of theoretically less action. Feminist pedagogue Katy Mahraj, writing about how to use Anzaldúa's work to teach feminist epistemology, notes that identity is a product of multiple vectors according to Anzaldúa.<sup>373</sup> Mahraj outlines Anzaldúa's notion of identity formation as involving seven developmental stages which occur over and over again in rotation: *praxis, awareness, diversification, creativity, negotiation, reformation, and responsibility*.<sup>374</sup> It is accurate to describe these stages as interwoven, simultaneous, and expressed in engagement and reflection.<sup>375</sup> Rather than ever reach a point of equilibrium and comfort, postmodern identity formation is a constant process of reflection, interpretation and discovery.<sup>376</sup> Anzaldúa sees all sources feeding into identity as positioned in, rather than somehow outside of, time and space.<sup>377</sup> The goal of this feminist identity formation is to "produce a reformed self that maintains the potential for growth."<sup>378</sup> Anzaldúa, like Kegan, are distinctive among human developmental theorists by putting forth ideas on what actually produces moral growth.

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<sup>372</sup> Kelli Zaytoun, "New Pathways toward Understanding Self-in-Relation: Anzaldúan (Re)Visions for Developmental Psychology," *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria Anzaldúa*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Houndmills, Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 150-152.

<sup>373</sup> Mahraj, 8.

<sup>374</sup> Mahraj, 9.

<sup>375</sup> Mahraj, 15.

<sup>376</sup> Mahraj, 10.

<sup>377</sup> Mahraj, 12.

<sup>378</sup> Mahraj, 14.

In exploring Anzaldúa's thought, Mahraj specifically describes a few of the key stages worthy of elucidation. For instance, "diversification [...] means expanding and complicating the range of perspectives and mediums of expression incorporated into daily curriculum."<sup>379</sup> Next up in the rotation of stages of formation, creativity involves "knowledge that was earlier hidden from view [which] can cause pain and uncertainty."<sup>380</sup> It demands balancing multiple, sometimes contradictory answers when one wants certainty and simplicity.<sup>381</sup> As the final stage before repeating the spiral, negotiation is about an agential, moral form of learning and engagement. Mahraj writes, "Negotiation moves us from the absorption of information toward a critical stance, but more importantly, teaches us a process we can engage in time and again upon encountering new knowledge."<sup>382</sup> This idea connects to other Anzaldúan concepts such as *mestiza* and conscientization, as negotiation is described as a *mestiza* condition of perplexity, restlessness, and politicization.<sup>383</sup>

This growth of consciousness that remains open to new growth is something Anzaldúa calls "conocimiento," an epistemology that ties together all aspects of life, and serves as an awareness that keeps one from getting caught up in any particular identity or emotional state.<sup>384</sup> When one has gained capacity in *conocimiento*, identities within the self can be multiple without contradiction (and may involve different cognitive states). Zaytoun notes that this *conocimiento* is akin to Kegan's Fifth Stage.<sup>385</sup> *Conocimiento* is not strictly individual, but is also about how to connect to others. It serves as a path of social action since knowledge comes with responsibility and engagement.<sup>386</sup> Similar to identity formation, yet not entirely the same, there are seven stages of *conocimiento* which one cycles through constantly if one is progressing in *conocimiento*: rupture, inbetween, awareness and deep resistance to change, a calling out of this

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<sup>379</sup> Mahraj, 11.

<sup>380</sup> Mahraj, 12.

<sup>381</sup> Mahraj, 12.

<sup>382</sup> Mahraj, 13.

<sup>383</sup> Mahraj, 13.

<sup>384</sup> Zaytoun, 153.

<sup>385</sup> Zaytoun, 154; In the seven stages of a constant cycle of *conocimiento*, the final stage involves an energy and capacity to engage in spiritual activism, which sounds to me a lot like James Fowler's final level of faith development, Zaytoun, 157.

<sup>386</sup> Zaytoun, 155.

depression, constructing a new self, and sharing this with others.<sup>387</sup> I would argue that this strong capacity of *conocimiento* is what the Kegan's Interindividual Self is when its political and ethical dimensions are explored further than Kegan took them himself. For a greater exploration of how the Interindividual/*Conocimiento* Stage develops and makes use of intimacy, I turn now to the interpersonal and intrapersonal components of intimacy as a psychosocial quality.

### **SECTION THREE: INTIMACY AS THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECTS OF SELF-AUTHORSHIP**

#### **Overview of intimacy and self-authorship**

As I have stated in my dissertation introduction, intimacy as a psychosocial quality is a good goal and measurement of relationships today. It is our best hope, as it is one method of addressing all relationships across their spectrum of diversity and complexity in such a way that acknowledges and respects the relationships for what they are. From an ethics and religious leadership perspective, I argue that intimacy needs to be better understood as a challenge of the times. Intimacy is our contemporary task because our postmodern, neoliberal era requires that bonds be reformed with newer, more flexible and more creative material. As an evaluative construct, a focus on intimacy offers a way in which to meet people wherever they are relationally and personally and yet encourage them to grow further in capacity of depth of skill and finesse. While I point to the material that is tensile enough for the task throughout the dissertation, here I focus in particularly on the concrete capacities which construct intimacy.

In this section, I outline that intimacy as a psychosocial capacity requires self-knowledge and self-communication, as well as the coherency and flexibility to be interpersonally defined and influenced by others in a healthy, empathetic way. This is not easily achievable. It is furthermore even less facile to grasp in early adulthood, yet it remains an important goal for reasons of survival and thriving in a late modern society. In fact, I argue that these factors which make up "intimacy" ought to be postmodern stand-ins for other, more modern and less relevant measures of relationship such as commitment and vows of unconditional support. This stance, despite advancement of queer acceptability in contemporary society, still remains controversial compared to assessing the strength of relational ties by measures such as blood and legal bond.

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<sup>387</sup> Zaytoun, 156-157.



### *Erikson and Kegan on intimacy*

Relevant to my discussion of young adulthood, Erikson postulated that young adulthood involved the challenge of developing intimacy. As I have argued, intimacy builds upon a solid identity, which must be decently coherent, yet open, in order for engagement with others to occur.<sup>388</sup> Like with identity, theorists such as Orlofsky (1993) have partitioned this challenge into five intimacy statuses of most to least adapted defined by degrees of closeness and sharing: intimacy, pre-intimacy, pseudo-intimacy, stereotyped, and isolate, using language from Erikson's own commentary to develop the terms.<sup>389</sup> Intimates and pre-intimates hold a clear sense of closeness and trust with a romantic partner.<sup>390</sup> Pre-intimacy is close to intimacy, but is distinguished by the fact that those in this status have not attained or committed to a stable relationship. At the pseudo-intimate stage little depth or closeness is described or exhibited, and at the stereotyped there is much distance, with little closeness with friends, no romantic stable partnership.<sup>391</sup>

Following the theories of Erikson as well as Jean Piaget, most developmental scholars contend that intimacy as a developmental skill ripens at young adulthood when achievement of a certain level of biological and emotional development means that persons are able to think of self, other, and relationship as parts of an interrelated system.<sup>392</sup> Human development theorists James Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead write, "Intimacy is tested in friendship, with its invitation to let myself be known and influenced by someone I love. But intimacy in adult life goes beyond experiences of attraction and love. I come up close to other people in teamwork and

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<sup>388</sup> Pratt and Matsuba, 229.

<sup>389</sup> J. Kroger and J.E. Marcia, "The Identity Statures: Origins, Meanings, and Interpretations," *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, edited by S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, and V. Vignoles (New York: Springer, 2011): 31-54, cited by Pratt and Matsuba, 230; J.L. Orlofsky, "Intimacy Status: Theory and Research," *Ego Identity: A Handbook for Psychosocial Research*, edited by J.E. Marcia, A.S. Waterman, D.R. Matteson, S.L. Archer, and J.L. Orlofsky (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993), 111-133, cited by Pratt and Matsuba, 230; Pratt and Matsuba, 46; Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 135-136, cited by Pratt and Matsuba, 230.

<sup>390</sup> A. Årseth, J. Kroger, M. Martinussen, and J. Marcia, "Metanalytic Studies of Identity Status and the Relational Issues of Attachment and Intimacy," *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 9 (2009): 1-31, cited by Pratt and Matsuba, 46.

<sup>391</sup> Pratt and Matsuba, 231.

<sup>392</sup> Interpersonal psychologist Henry Stack Sullivan postulated first stage of real interpersonal intimacy was pre-adolescence when one begins to make substantial, often same-sex peer relationships of interdependence for basic exploration, shared experiences, and disclosure, McAdams, 76-7.

collaboration, in conflict and competition, in planning and negotiation.”<sup>393</sup> As such, intimacy fulfills the need to receive and give recognition that we all have. This need can be met by a variety of people, objects, or things.<sup>394</sup>

Kegan goes further than Erikson to boldly proclaim that intimacy is not only a challenge of young adulthood, but rather, intimacy is the ultimate and primary developmental challenge of *all* adulthood. Kegan identifies intimacy of relationship as representative of cross-referential thinking, a type of thinking that can continue to grow deeper and more complex with experience and challenge. He articulates that this capacity for cross-referential thinking is needed equally in relationships of love and friendship and in employment.<sup>395</sup> Thus, intimacy as a psychological quality is not strictly a facility of the romantic domain, but rather spans across all domains of interaction as a interpersonal and intrapersonal quality.

### **Intimacy as interpersonal quality**

#### *Personal and interpersonal*

Intimacy is typically defined as a quality of relationship made up of shared experiences over a variety of areas of life and over time.<sup>396</sup> At its core, intimacy is the ““wish to know another’s inner life along with the ability to share one’s own,”” writes sociologist Lillian Rubin.<sup>397</sup> This requires a certain degree of accuracy of knowing and receiving, as well as a flexibility around that knowing, since the subjects at hand are always evolving. Intimacy

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<sup>393</sup> James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Marrying Well: Possibilities in Christian Marriage Today* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 225-26.

<sup>394</sup> Self-psychologist Heinz Kohut and commentators on the work of D. W. Winnicott have commented that culture and art can provide reflection, safety and challenge for persons in certain circumstances, somewhat akin to what actual people can provide.

<sup>395</sup> Kegan, *Evolving Self*, 252.

<sup>396</sup> M.T. Schafer and D.H. Olson, “Assessing Intimacy: The PAIR Inventory,” *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*, 7 (1981): 47-60, cited by Jean-Philippe Laurenceau and Brigid M. Kleinman, “Intimacy in Personal Relationships,” *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, edited by Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 640.

<sup>397</sup> Lillian Rubin, *Intimate Strangers: Men and Women Together* (New York: Perennial Library, 1983), 79, quoted in Karla B. Hackstaff, *Marriage in the Culture of Divorce, Women in the Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 187.

involves feeling understood, validated, and cared for.<sup>398</sup> This is described as a warm, close interaction that can occur on a continuum in terms of degree.<sup>399</sup> In concrete measures, it can often casually be observed as a quality of interaction in terms of closeness of physical distance, eye contact, and smiling.<sup>400</sup> However, these signs of body language might also be considered simply affectionate familiarity.

When one digs to deeper levels of what intimacy can mean, scholars start to mention qualities such as engaging in ludic experience (the concept of being at play), providing a nonjudgement climate of knowledge and support,<sup>401</sup> and the willingness to, as feminist counselors Anne Rankin Mahoney and Carmen Knudson-Martin put it, “[adjust] the self in order to promote the relationship.”<sup>402</sup> They note that gendered power often gets in the way of selves being able to respond to the relationship effectively and easily. Mahoney and Knudson-Martin are among many feminist researchers who argue that true, dynamic intimacy is only possible if there is an equality of ontological status, well-being, and actual support for one another in the relationship. As psychologist Derek Layder outlines in his book *Intimacy and Power*, “mutually satisfying intimacy rests on the delicate balance of an array of tensions and forces such as that between individuality (personal space) and the need for togetherness.”<sup>403</sup> He goes on to write that mutual satisfaction also involves a dynamic relationship to power in terms of each partner getting to set direction and tone in the relationship at times. He cautions that this must be genuine, and based on open dialogue, rather than measured or set deliberately to enact equality.<sup>404</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Kathryn Greene, Valerian J. Derlega, and Alicia Mathews, “Self-disclosure in Personal Relationships,” *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, ed. Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 417.

<sup>399</sup> Laurenceau and Kleinman, 638; also in Dan P. McAdams, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988), 77.

<sup>400</sup> Laurenceau and Kleinman, 639.

<sup>401</sup> Couples psychologist Albert Brok describes “play” in this sense as a freedom of spontaneous expression without shame, Albert J. Brok, “Psychodynamic Couples Counseling,” *Behavioral, Humanistic–existential, and Psychodynamic Approaches to Couples Counseling*, edited by Michael D. Reiter and Ronald J. Chenail (New York: Routledge, 2017), 21.

<sup>402</sup> Anne Rankin Mahoney and Carmen Knudson-Martin, “Gender Equality in Intimate Relationships,” *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, ed. Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 9.

<sup>403</sup> Derek Layder, *Intimacy and Power: The Dynamics of Personal Relationships in Modern Society* (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 6.

<sup>404</sup> Layder, 6.

As an interpersonal, dyadic relationship, intimacy requires numerous capacities and skills of self, in terms of discernment and communication, and reception, in terms of listening and empathizing. Starting with the self, the ability to *share first one's own inner life* requires the psychological qualities of self-knowledge, self-coherence, and self-confidence. It also entails the communicative skills of self-disclosure and assertion. To desire to know *another's* inner life, one must first possess empathy. From this, empathy flows the listening, observational and communication skills necessary to accurately understand another. Inevitably, intimacy results in mutual influence of the selves in relationship upon each other, although the degree to which each person is influenced and to what end greatly determines the facilitation of power in the relationship.

Intimacy can develop in a variety of relational situations if these settings include, to some degree, a sense of connectedness among people, shared understandings, mutual responsiveness, self-disclosure, and interdependency.<sup>405</sup> There is no one accepted definition of intimacy, even though all definitions involve closeness, shared experiences, and knowledge of the other.<sup>406</sup> Intimacy scholars note, drawing on psychologists Henry Stack Sullivan and Abraham Maslow and Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, that intimacy consists of joy, mutual delight, contact, union, receptivity, perceived harmony, reciprocal dialogue, concern for the wellbeing of the other, surrender of manipulative control, and willingness for the relationship to be an end in itself.<sup>407</sup> Although any given interaction can be labeled as intimate, what is generally referred to as intimacy is a status born out of a process of cumulative, positive relationship interactions.<sup>408</sup>

Psychosocial intimacy is thus much broader and more present in one's life than the word's typical inference in usage to sexual closeness. In the case of this dissertation, I am generally talking about relationships in which sexual/romantic and psychosocial intimacy are taking place or should be, given the expectations of those involved and the frame of the relationship. My project, however, involves a focus on what this intimacy means psychologically

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<sup>405</sup> Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron, "Introduction," *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, ed. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 4.

<sup>406</sup> Karen J. Prager and Linda Roberts, "Deep Intimate Connection: The Self and Intimacy in Couple Relationships," *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, ed. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 45.

<sup>407</sup> McAdams, 76.

<sup>408</sup> Laurenceau and Kleinman, 642.

and ethically, rather than what it means sexually. I also focus, in part, on what it takes for a relationship of intimacy to be sustained and fulfilling over some meaningful length of time, even though thinking about intimacy on a spectrum in a broad sense means that intimate relationships can be high in intensity without being long in duration (which is particularly postulated in queer writings on the epistemology of intimacy).

As such, I am seeking to help relationships be ones of what Layder calls “dynamic intimacy.” While Layder creates typologies of a variety of intimacies and non-intimacies in order to present a well-rounded theory of the presence of a quality in all personal relationships, dynamic relationships are relationships of shared responsibility, positivity, initiation, disclosure, physical contact.<sup>409</sup> None one of these aspects can be adequately left to one member or the other of the relationship and be considered fully dynamic.<sup>410</sup> Layder argues that relationships of dynamic intimacy are a constant interplay because the persons in them are constantly developing and changing as they live their lives.<sup>411</sup> A dynamic relationship also has a protective alliance in which the members have prioritized taking care of each other. Without this alliance, relationships are likely to fail.<sup>412</sup>

*Relationship: Everyday, mundane interaction, duration*

A sense of time and duration is also involved as part of the system that constitutes an intimate relationship. I find particularly useful Karen Prager’s articulation in *The Psychology of Intimacy* that there are two main components to intimacy: 1) intimate interactions (dyadic communication exchanges), and 2) intimate relationships (history and anticipated future contact over time),<sup>413</sup> which involves mutual accumulated knowledge or understanding of the other. Relational intimacy varies as a function of the two factors of extensiveness of interacting and accuracy of understanding. High levels of relational intimacy require frequent interactions, significant personal disclosure, intense positive involvement, and extensive shared

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<sup>409</sup> Layder, 104.

<sup>410</sup> Layder, 105; also noted in Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 281-284.

<sup>411</sup> Layder, 104, 41.

<sup>412</sup> Layder, 14. Layder notes that couples planning together long-term must develop “affectionate regard” for each other for when limerence of intense romantic love wears off, 17.

<sup>413</sup> Karen J. Prager, *Psychology of Intimacy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995), 3.

understanding.<sup>414</sup> These standards for constituting intimacy make intimate relationships distinct from other relationships of affection or closeness such as family ties which may or may not meet the same criteria depending on the individual family relationship situation.<sup>415</sup> As referenced by Whitehead and Whitehead earlier, relationships of friendship and collegiality may meet these criteria and thus be deemed intimate relationships. As will be noted again later, *defining intimacy by something other than blood and sexual ties is highly controversial* because of the strong sway the heterosexual nuclear family has in determining the popular concept of what intimacy means.

Since according to Prager intimacy is based upon accumulated interactions and understanding, a long-term relationship can be greater in intimacy than a relationship of shorter duration.<sup>416</sup> Time itself, however, does not guarantee that interactions were frequent, positive, personally disclosing, and shared. As intimacy is an interactional entity, it can wax and wane in intensity as situations change. It is natural for intimate relationships to also go through the greater extremes of spirals of repair and brokenness.<sup>417</sup>

As much as intimacy is a complex, robust and demanding concept, contemporary intimate life researchers stress that intimacy is most created and sustained through mundane, everyday practices over time in terms of interaction and affect.<sup>418</sup> Intimacy scholars Jacqui Gabb and Janet Fink note “the most cherished acts and gestures are often comprised of minutiae and mundanities. It is rather that their value lies in the time and care habitually devoted to them. The thoughtful gesture of bringing a partner a cup of tea in bed builds into meaning full relationship work when it is undertaken as a regular, everyday practice.”<sup>419</sup> Small moments of time together, such as shopping, watching a TV series, or eating a family meal, if they disappear because of work or child care, is time “frequently mourned.”<sup>420</sup> Gabb and Fink also underscore the importance of the home or residence as a primary place where this intimacy occurs,<sup>421</sup> providing

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<sup>414</sup> Prager and Roberts, 46.

<sup>415</sup> Prager, 24.

<sup>416</sup> Prager and Roberts, 46.

<sup>417</sup> Layder, 14.

<sup>418</sup> Jacqui Gabb and Janet Fink, *Couple Relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Studies in Family and Intimate Life (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 17; Jacqui Gabb, *Researching Intimacy in Families*, Studies in Family and Intimate Life (Basingstroke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 119; Layder, 23-4.

<sup>419</sup> Gabb and Fink, 106.

<sup>420</sup> Gabb and Fink, 106, 107, 121.

<sup>421</sup> Gabb and Fink, 105.

a place to talk about the day, make plans for the future, and reminisce about a past. Emotionally, “home” serves as a space to share hopes, desires, needs, and anxieties, as well as let off steam by bickering about the day and sharing a joke or two.<sup>422</sup>

### **Intimacy as intrapersonal: Identity, communication, and empathy**

*Identity: Confidence and coherence of knowledge and of the morality of self-authorship*

Both intimacy and human development scholars argue that, heuristically, an accurate and somewhat coherent sense of self must first be developed within an individual in order for intimacy to occur. Object relations theorists would argue that describing it this way is overly simplistic because a sense of self only develops in interaction with others, so some version of shared experience and understanding, a sort of intimacy-lite is always occurring in any type of human interaction. Yet one can still talk about a sense of self that is socially defined in greater detail as one gains greater developmental ability to choose and prefer some things over others.

Whitehead and Whitehead articulate that identity involves:

gradually developing a sense of abilities and limits, the ambitions and apprehensions that make up my uniqueness. These strengths and ambitions describe me to myself and suggest ways I might live my life. The psychological strength of identity develops in a growing awareness that gives me some clarity about who I am and some enthusiasm for sharing myself with others. Clarity evolves as I can better recognize my own talents and limits, and can distinguish these from what others expect of me.<sup>423</sup>

Thus this self-awareness involves a basic grasp on how one personally, distinct from others, experiences, thinks, feels, needs, and wants.<sup>424</sup> It involves developing a sense of purpose to one’s own unique life, which then helps one be resilient in the face of adversity.<sup>425</sup> Scholars note that this sense of purpose must be decently developed by the point of adulthood, or else one is more

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<sup>422</sup> Gabb and Fink, 111.

<sup>423</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Marrying Well*, 198.

<sup>424</sup> Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, “Communication and Conflict,” *Perspectives on Marriage: A Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Kieran Scott and Michael Warren (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 262.

<sup>425</sup> Daniel Lapsley and Sam A. Hardy, “Identity Formation and Moral Development in Emerging Adulthood,” *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Laura M. Padilla-Walker and Larry J. Nelson, Emerging Adulthood (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16, 20.

likely to be still identified as an adolescent because it is the period of searching.<sup>426</sup> This is the case with scholars identifying Emerging Adulthood as a part of the identity-consolidating phase on a developmental timeline rather than as taking place in the phase of intimacy.<sup>427</sup>

McAdams notes that existential philosophers believe that identity is an issue of morality.<sup>428</sup> To have a unity and purpose in the world created through introspection requires asking “Who am I?” and “How do I fit into the adult world?”<sup>429</sup> One must have lived long enough and reflected long enough to have integrated experience, past, present, and an idea of the future.<sup>430</sup> This integration is known in psychological terms as an “achieved identity.” McAdams, contra psychoanalytic tradition, leverages and reinterprets Erikson’s significance given to generativity, calling what we anticipate doing in our future as much of an influence on our present as our past.<sup>431</sup> As such, generativity, like identity, weaves through each of our stages with greater weight than simply can be allotted to one particular stage, according to McAdams.<sup>432</sup>

Human development theorists have historically believed that this sense of self has most come about during adolescence when biological maturity in the teenage years allows for the capacity to understand abstract, symbolic thought. This is why the ability to consider more than one possibility for the self occurs in adolescence, as it coincides with a level of complexity Piaget calls formal operational thought. To be aware of one’s self takes a certain capacity for information filtering and prioritizing, information which can be “dense and ambiguous,”

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<sup>426</sup> Kendall Cotton Bronk and Rachel Baumsteiger, “The Role of Purpose among Emerging Adults,” *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Laura M. Padilla-Walker and Larry J. Nelson Emerging Adulthood (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 48.

<sup>427</sup> See Michael W. Pratt and M. Kyle Matsuba, *The Life Story, Domains of Identity, and Personality Development in Emerging Adulthood: Integrating Narrative and Traditional Approaches*, ed. Larry J. Nelson, Emerging Adulthood (New York; London: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>428</sup> McAdams, 5.

<sup>429</sup> McAdams, 8.

<sup>430</sup> McAdams, 1, 8.

<sup>431</sup> McAdams, 252; in pastoral theological literature see Andrew Lester, *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

<sup>432</sup> This argument is also made by Don Browning in his *Generative Man: Psychoanalytic Perspectives* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973) and also later in a multi-authored project by McAdams, Browning, Bonnie Miller-McLemore and others in *The Generative Society: Caring for Future Generations*, 1st ed., edited by Ed De St. Aubin, Dan P. McAdams, and T’ae-ch’ang Kim (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003).



Whitehead and Whitehead write.<sup>433</sup> The self must also be confident and positive about its qualities and talents, not disparaging or escapist.<sup>434</sup>

As was discussed in the previous chapter, late industrialism and the importance of a college education in a knowledge economy has shifted obtainment of key aspects of this sense of self in young adulthood. The number of choices available and the high financial stakes for success or failure make the consolidation of an identity in any timely fashion a considerable challenge. Remaining open to chances and changes, to some degree, encourages the maintenance of a diffuse identity rather than a solidified one.<sup>435</sup> The Whiteheads write:

A diffuse identity is not defined enough to remain intact in the intimacy encounter. Mutuality is impossible. If I come close to you, I will be overwhelmed. A too rigidly defined identity makes mutuality equally impossible. There is too little flexibility in my sense of who I am, too little openness to learning something new about myself.<sup>436</sup>

A person's identity needs the right amount of flexibility in order for someone to risk self in relationship with other.<sup>437</sup> Actual intimacy is not a casual matter, but a deeply intense, transformative experience. It is more than just the presence of a relationship.<sup>438</sup> The Whiteheads write, "Intimacy involves an overlapping of space, a willingness to be influenced, and openness to the possibility of change. Only a strong and flexible identity can move toward intimacy."<sup>439</sup> Young adults must ask themselves if they are sure enough of themselves to be known, loved, and changed by another.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, "Communication and Conflict," 263.

<sup>434</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, "Communication and Conflict," 263.

<sup>435</sup> There is a nuanced difference between a classical moratorium on identity that is recognizable by rates of apathy, anxiety and depression, and a searching moratorium, in which old values and truths are not nihilistically discarded while the person examines alternative options, Seth J. Schwartz, Byron L. Zamboanga, Koen Luyckx, Alan Meca, and Rachel A. Ritchie, "Identity in Emerging Adulthood: Reviewing the Field and Looking Forward," *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 2: 99.

<sup>436</sup> James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns: The Psychological Challenges and Religious Invitations of Adult Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 74.

<sup>437</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Marrying Well*, 198.

<sup>438</sup> Avidan Milevsky, Kristie Thudium, and Jillian Guldin, "The Transitory Nature of Parent, Sibling and Romantic Partner Relationships," *Emerging Adulthood Springer Briefs in Well-being and Quality of Life Research* (Cham: Springer, 2014), 38.

<sup>439</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 74.

<sup>440</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns*, 73.

*Communication: Self-disclosure, assertion, and gendered styles*

Intimacy also requires a number of communication skills, of openness, vulnerability, self-disclosure, articulation, listening, and empathy, to name a few. Scholars note that while there are many otherwise competing theories of communication theory, there is wide agreement that the basic properties of personal communication include interdependence, reflexivity, complexity, ambiguity, and indeterminacy.<sup>441</sup> In addition, most agree that there are levels of meaning to messages and that each message can have multiple levels of meaning. This creates some ambiguity and indeterminacy and can function as positive reinforcement, impression management, control, persuasion, and dominance.<sup>442</sup> Often being in a relationship involves creating mental shortcuts for meaning amongst the couple, in order to speed it up and make it function better, possibly deeper.<sup>443</sup> Communication is the means by which people secure and maintain closeness, yet scholars caution that it is hard to bracket relationship interaction as communication, because all interaction is communication.<sup>444</sup>

Self-disclosure is often considered by scholars as the most important aspect of intimate communication.<sup>445</sup> Often identified by “I feel” and “I think” language,<sup>446</sup> this personal sharing involves conveying information that persons would not do in less personal or impersonal situations.<sup>447</sup> Gabb outlines that in her study, “disclosing intimacy took many forms including intense conversations, impromptu chats, shared moments of silent intimacy, emotion exchanges that were facilitated through everyday routines such as mealtimes.”<sup>448</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead stress that it is important to be able to speak concretely in order to effectively self-disclose,<sup>449</sup> although other scholars note that self-disclosure can be nonverbal.<sup>450</sup> Self-disclosure is seen as

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<sup>441</sup> Alan L. Sillars and Anita L. Vangelisti, “Communication: Basic Properties and their Relevance to Relationship Research,” *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, edited by Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 332.

<sup>442</sup> Sillars and Vangelisti, 338.

<sup>443</sup> Sillars and Vangelisti, 339.

<sup>444</sup> Sillars and Vangelisti 331.

<sup>445</sup> Greene et al., 412-13.

<sup>446</sup> Greene et al., 411.

<sup>447</sup> Prager, 21; Greene et al., 411.

<sup>448</sup> Gabb, 123.

<sup>449</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, “Communication and Conflict,” 263.

<sup>450</sup> Laurenceau and Kleinman, 643-5; also noted in Whitehead and Whitehead, “Communication and Conflict,” 263.

highly important to intimacy as it is crucial to allowing others to validate self-worth and personal identity.<sup>451</sup> Self-disclosure does not get very far in validating self-worth in a person without the receiver of the self-disclosure being responsive. Response must involve acceptance, validation, and caring toward the one disclosing. It is both descriptive and evaluative,<sup>452</sup> addressing the needs, wants, or previous actions of the discloser.<sup>453</sup> To complicate matters, whether or not one is being responsive can be a matter of perception,<sup>454</sup> as much as any other aspect of communication.

Communication theorist Deborah Tannen believes her research shows that men and women regard personal relationships differently and that this is expressed in different conversational styles by gender.<sup>455</sup> In brief, her research indicates that men do not talk about fleeting thoughts or feelings because they do not value these bits of life as much as sports, politics, and news.<sup>456</sup> In addition, men do not feel the need to talk like women do. This lack of a robust back and forth can give women the impression that men are not listening to them when they really are because of the way they express listening.<sup>457</sup> According to Tannen, these differences may be the cause of misunderstanding between men and women.<sup>458</sup> Others who study conversational intimacy argue there is little evidence of fundamental differences in the way men and women communicate.<sup>459</sup> Layder criticizes Tannen for overlooking the importance of interpersonal control in making these claims about gender and communication by defining power as control over rather than control with.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>451</sup> Greene et al., 409.

<sup>452</sup> Laurenceau and Kleinman, 643.

<sup>453</sup> Laurenceau and Kleinman, 641.

<sup>454</sup> Laurenceau and Kleinman, 642.

<sup>455</sup> Layder, 67.

<sup>456</sup> Layder, 70; Sociologist Eva Illouz writes that there is “ample account of men’s evasion and their difficulty to enter strong emotional bonds,” but that the cultural forces around how this is constructed to be the case are hardly ever examined, Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Boston and Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 240.

<sup>457</sup> Layder, 71.

<sup>458</sup> Layder, 70.

<sup>459</sup> Layder, 63.

<sup>460</sup> Layder, 75.

### *Empathy: Listening, conflict, mutual influence*

To know how to respond well involves listening and empathy. Whitehead and Whitehead write, “To listen well is to listen actively, alert to the full context of the message---the words and the silences, the emotions and the ideas, the context in which our conversation takes place.”<sup>461</sup> The ability to paraphrase this information back respectfully and accurately in terms of the original frame of reference is part of what it means to be empathetic, they continue.<sup>462</sup> Layder comments that empathy can be about knowing and understanding the deep levels of motivation or passion in a partner.<sup>463</sup> Couples therapist Albert Brok remarks that in psychodynamic literature, to have empathy for another is to witness and recognize the otherness of the other person.<sup>464</sup> Ideally, this empathy involves psycho-dynamically discovering a person in a transformational way of truly knowing and validating them to the point that they can not only transition from one level of self and capacity to another on a rudimentary level, but truly transform.<sup>465</sup> Yet there are lots of reasons why people do not transform, even when they consciously aspire to undergo significant qualitative psychological change.

## **SECTION FOUR: TRANSITION-FACILITATING ENVIRONMENTS OVERCOME RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

### ***Kegan’s Evolving Self applied to the Mental Demands of Modern Life***

In Kegan’s second book *In Over our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (1995), he further theorizes that intimate, cross-referential thinking of the Fourth Stage, also known as the Institutional Self, has become particularly difficult and necessary in the contemporary era of a knowledge and services economy. This is a conundrum and a problem, for while education, travel, or changes in family circumstances *may* present Interpersonal Stage Three persons with challenges that encourage them to move up a stage, many people never advance from the Interpersonal Stage because nothing fundamentally challenges them to revise

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<sup>461</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, “Communication and Conflict,” 261.

<sup>462</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, “Communication and Conflict,” 262.

<sup>463</sup> Layder, 137.

<sup>464</sup> Brok, 21.

<sup>465</sup> Brok, 22-23.

their notions of truth and authority, major Objects with which each Subject must contend at each organizational Stage.

I agree with Kegan that we as a culture do not have sufficient length and depth of experience with individuals having as much autonomy and responsibility as we do in late modernity, so we fall short on having the socialization mechanisms necessary for individuals to learn how to be Institutional agents. Thus, Kegan argues that we as a society must be more intentional about creating age-appropriate “curriculum” which serve as bridges advance from one stage to the next. This can be addressed by understanding the main reasons why people are resistant to change and facilitating environments of immersive support and challenge that can meet them where they are and then guide them to where they need to be.

He argues specifically in *In Over Our Heads* that contemporary persons would benefit from management training, intentionally teaching a person to be self-evaluating and self-correcting through developing an internal understanding of standard and value rather than seeking it from outside (or from the boss).<sup>466</sup> Yet even he would likely say that there need to be more routes and processes to developing Institutional Stage engagement than simply management training.<sup>467</sup> In his later writings, Kegan wrote further about resistance to change and also what is necessary to create an environment or process that provides the right level of challenge and support to progress psychologically.

### **Resistance to change overcome with conscious support and examination**

In language reminiscent of Anzaldúa, educator Marcia Baxter Magolda writes that leaders and educators who want to facilitate substantial qualitative psychological change in other people need to be prepared to cross borders back and forth between stages of organizing.<sup>468</sup> They do so by journeying out of their stage to meet their student in a way that is meaningful to the

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<sup>466</sup> Kegan, *In Over our Heads*, 172, 293.

<sup>467</sup> Kegan would likely note that leadership training is the easiest situations in which to encourage movement from Interpersonal engagement to Institutional, as leaders must not ultimately be dependent upon the positive evaluation of others, or new ideas do not have the space they need to be created and may go further by even disappointing people. Another reasons why they ultimately need distance from caring about the regard of other people is that the leadership involved in challenging people to live up to their words and figure out a way for that to happen not only involves complex reasoning and acting, but will point out the hypocrisy and inconsistency of the status quo, Hesling et al., 439.

<sup>468</sup> It is assumed that it is common for students and educators (and I would say also scholars and respondents) to live in different qualitative worlds/Stages, Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 61, 63.

student's current organizing structure (their frame of reference and valuing) yet facilitative of opening up to new ways of organizing.<sup>469</sup> This is support and challenge, respectively.<sup>470</sup> Counselors and educators have found that Interpersonal Stage students can rise up to Institutional Stage expectations of self-direction and evaluation if given more instructions explaining the reasoning behind this request and if provided additional structure on how to go about self-directing.<sup>471</sup> The teacher going back to meet the student at their frame of reference is necessary for the student to make cognitive sense of what the teacher is trying to communicate. This support is also necessary psycho-emotionally because a process of change and transition will be experienced understandably as loss and anxiety-filled, even as what comes later is promised to be better.<sup>472</sup>

Kegan and other constructive-developmentalists like Baxter Magolda stress that enacting change is not just about putting one's mind to something, or being asked to do something differently and then following orders. If that were the case, change would happen much more naturally and quickly. Rather, Kegan and his co-authors of an article on "big assumptions" and their role in preventing change argue that someone can consciously committed to a stated goal, but if they fall through on achieving the change necessary to meet the goal, it is likely because unconscious commitments are competing with goal.<sup>473</sup> This disjuncture can easily occur because articulated goals are lofty, whereas unspoken and often unconscious competing commitments are ones people are reticent to talk about. These unconscious competing commitments are repressed from thought as "primitive, fearful, and sometimes self-serving."<sup>474</sup> Kegan and his co-authors write that skilled mentors can help bring these fears to the fore so that they can be evaluated

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<sup>469</sup> Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 61.

<sup>470</sup> This need to meet people in their own worldviews is what I allude to in my dissertation introduction, about needing to be more close to our subject matter in terms of their experiences so that we may provide the support that will then make someone feel comfortable about accepting the challenge to move along forward in terms of relating.

<sup>471</sup> Erikson, 243.

<sup>472</sup> Erikson, 236.

<sup>473</sup> Constance M. Bowe, Lisa Lahey, Elizabeth Armstrong, and Robert Kegan, "Questioning the 'Big Assumptions' Part I: Addressing Personal Contradictions that Impede Professional Development," *Medical Education* 37 (2003): 715-716.

<sup>474</sup> Bowe et al., 720.

consciously on the table with other commitments and goals in an environment of conscious support and affirmation.<sup>475</sup>

### **Specifics of transition-facilitating environments**

Kegan draws upon his object relations heritage as an educational psychologist to use Winnicottian language in articulating just what kind of environment facilitates the ability to embrace substantive psychological progression. He writes in *In Over our Heads*, that the right environment is best described as “a holding environment that provides both welcoming acknowledgement to exactly who the person is right now as he or she is, and fosters the person’s personal psychological evolution. As such, a holding environment is a tricky, transitional culture, an evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over.”<sup>476</sup> Baxter Magolda notes that educationally, teachers provide a sufficient holding environment in their classrooms by appreciating what students already know, such that when students learn something new, knowledge is associated with home. Then learning is a way of coming home and solidifying connection rather than going away from home and losing it.<sup>477</sup>

As moral philosopher Owen Flanagan writes in his book, *The Geography of Morals*, anything that encourages people to think and behave beyond convention will start someone toward having a wider outlook and capacity. Writing about moralities as ecological systems, he notes that most ecologies “encourage, reinforce, and expect people to be conventional.”<sup>478</sup> Thus, in order not be “imprisoned by one’s own upbringing,” as he calls it, persons must be able to encounter and engage with moral sources from other perspectives and cultures.<sup>479</sup> Flanagan argues that this engagement, however we come about it, “makes us aware of the space of possibility, and allows us to imaginatively envision how we might be if everything including ourselves were different, a bit different, or very different.”<sup>480</sup> In other words, we progress to

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<sup>475</sup> Bowe et al., 721; also in Hesling et al., 458.

<sup>476</sup> Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 43.

<sup>477</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson, *Peripheral Visions: Learning along the Way* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 205-206, cited by Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 62.

<sup>478</sup> Flanagan, 34.

<sup>479</sup> Flanagan, 11.

<sup>480</sup> Flanagan, 4.

further levels of developmental sophistication through expansion of the imagination.<sup>481</sup> Human developmental theorists and religious experts alike have known that pilgrimage expands the imagination. I will touch on this briefly to add a constructive, concrete bent to the conclusion of this chapter.

### *The immersion example of pilgrimage*

Christian educators recommend pilgrimage as a substantial and effect way to expose persons to different ways of being and believing in an immersive sense. Pastoral theologian Brita Gill-Austern writes about the transformative impact of pilgrimage for Christians to develop practices of solidarity with Other, those who are often oppressed. After an eloquent discussion of the ways in which affluent North American Christians engage in subtle habits of exclusion of the poor and the oppressed from their everyday lives and consideration she then proscribes three movements and three practices that provide the foundation for a self which can engage others with greater empathy, connection, and imagination than before.

Gill-Austern articulates that the first move toward greater solidarity and transformation is to “know home.”<sup>482</sup> This first movement matches what Baxter Magolda recommends for transformative classroom teaching. With this assessment of the familiar comes a practice of self-examination, confession and repentance about our own spiritual poverty and complicity with addictions to affluence and entitlement, according to Gill-Austern.<sup>483</sup> While I agree that in principle one should always start at the root, in my experience of aiding people in this type of cross-cultural experience and understanding, one does not know that one’s assumptions and “cultural baggage” are such until a person has something with which to compare it. Thus, I would suggest engaging Gill-Austern’s second move, “to make pilgrimage” first, and then go back to her first move and practice.

Pilgrimage, as Gill-Austern articulates it, involves de-habituation and displacement which “dislodges us from the known and familiar and allows us to see what has been inscribed

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<sup>481</sup> Flanagan, 43.

<sup>482</sup> Brita Gill-Austern, “Engaging Diversity and Difference: From Practice of Exclusion to Practices of Practical Solidarity,” *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*, ed. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 36.

<sup>483</sup> Gill-Austern, 37-39.



on our own body, mind, and heart by our own socialization and conditioning.”<sup>484</sup> Displacement itself does not result in a transformation of the organizing center of the self. It facilitates engagement with others and self-reflection, akin to what Anzaldúa and her commentators describe earlier in this chapter, in such a way that the self is no longer the sole entity at the center of the personal reality, but rather the center has become interpersonal and intersubjective.<sup>485</sup> It has begun to take into account the other as much as the self in terms of what it sees, how it acts, and how it values. As Gill-Austern describes it in her third move, “return [home] also means we may have to shift the arrangements of our allegiances.”<sup>486</sup> As it pertains to the self, the primary psychological allegiance shifts from a narcissistically-oriented one, to one that considers the main relationship to others as one of partnership, in which everyone is responsible for all parts of the relationship, from beginning to end.<sup>487</sup>

#### **CONCLUSION: FINAL WORDS ON SELF-AUTHORSHIP**

As I argue here and throughout the dissertation, this shifting of alliances must necessarily take place because, according to critical theorists and liberation theorists, extant borders and ways of organizing were created in systems of domination that cannot continue to be perpetuated if we desire a freer society with less domination.<sup>488</sup> The self-authorship that I have described as a late modern goal of human development throughout this chapter, and shown how we have arrived at it through the theories of Erikson, Kegan, and Anzaldúa, is the level of psychological adaptation that necessary to collect information and creatively respond to the new moment. This problem of adaptation, which I describe in greater detail at the start of Chapter Six, will require

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<sup>484</sup> Gill-Austern, 40.

<sup>485</sup> This creative engagement with others involves what psychologists call “play.” In play boundaries are not rigid, such that creative new forms of engagement can be developed through cross-category travel across these boundaries. See Erik H. Erikson, “The Meaning of Play,” *The Bulletin for the National Association of Nursery Education* 3 no. 2 (March 1, 1948): 37-38, Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), Jaco Hamman, *Becoming a Pastor: Forming Self and Soul for Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007, 2014), MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *God, Improv, and the Art of Living* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018), and Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004).

<sup>486</sup> Gill-Austern, 42.

<sup>487</sup> Gill-Austern, 43.

<sup>488</sup> Estella Mara Bensimon, “Culture, Knowledge, and Pedagogy: Rethinking Higher Education Programs,” Division J Vice Presidential Address, American Educational Research Association: New Orleans, April 1994, and Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992), both cited by Baxter Magolda, *Creating Contexts*, 61.

not only that individuals change qualitatively in their psychology, but also that the overall system of which individuals are a part undergo significant change.<sup>489</sup> In this chapter, I have outlined the intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities of intimacy which make up the bulk of this ability to self-author. Now I turn to a sociological survey of what levels of and types of intimacy are observable in young adult life today in order to compare theory to empirical reality. The gap herein prompts me to ask further questions of psychology and ethics as to how such bridge crossing between psychological developmental stages might be enacted and aided by feminist and queer thought in these disciplines.

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<sup>489</sup> Hesling et al., 438.

### III.

#### Contemporary Intimacy in Practice and Expectation

*Insecurity is a powerful force, for some eroding the capacity to commit, for others shoring it up; the experience of precariousness shapes what obligations people can even see, and what honorable paths seem available to meet them. People differ – by their exposure to insecurity and by the relative advantage – in their notions of what they owe each other as adults.*

Alison Pugh in *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity*<sup>490</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION

As economic stability becomes even more an issue of privilege in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it should be no surprise that many people today now take a “capstone” approach to marriage. Rather than use marriage to launch into adulthood and motivate economic advancement as previous generations have done, today people only feel ready to marry after they have already achieved psychological and financial stability through life experience. This is in part thanks to three main factors: the use of birth control, the engagement of sex with less stigma than in the past, and women’s increasing abilities to make a living and a career in the workforce. With longer life spans in addition, people are living singly—by dating, cohabitating, and being without romantic partners—for more of their life than occurred for generations past.<sup>491</sup> This all adds up to an individual’s life course having more impermanence and types of relationships, a fact that the field of Christian ethics has been slow to address.

By the very virtue of studying young adulthood, I am mainly studying dating, cohabitation, casual sexual encounters (CSEs), and expectations and planning for marriage, *not*

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<sup>490</sup> Allison Pugh, *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 157.

<sup>491</sup> For these reasons as well, people today are also much more likely to procreate and raise children outside of marriage, a subject highly relevant to intimacy and commitment and yet a topic too large to address here in sufficient detail. For more on this, see Rosanna Hertz, *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood without Marriage and Creating the New American Family* (New York: Oxford, 2006); Katrina Alcorn, “Millennials Want Children, But They’re Not Planning on them,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2014; Wendy Wang and Paul Taylor, “For Millennials Parenthood Trumps Marriage,” *Pew Research Forum*, 2011, 3; Psychologist Varda Konstam mentions something many scholars and reporters do: the fact that contemporary young adults feel it is much easier to enter and leave a relationship without children and have this in mind as they make and respond to life circumstances, Varda Konstam, *The Romantic Lives of Emerging Young Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 10.

so much marriage itself; yet so much of these typologies of relationship form in relation to—and in some cases stand against—what we mean by and expect of marriage, that exploring marriage remains a significant part of any descriptive inquiry into intimacy. I furthermore, although I save the bulk of this inquiry for the next chapter, study how these phenomena involve various levels of gendered inequality, as practiced, or expected in contemporary life, as well how they manifest new motifs of informality and ambiguity which represent the present era. Gendered inequality and new relationships of informality are intertwined in ways that respondents and scholars seldom articulate or consciously identify, yet the psychology-trained scholar that I am cannot help but wonder how these predictive and realized horizons of inequality figure into the motivations people have and the decisions they make.

In the course of this chapter, I have two primary sections, the first of which explores the cultural hopes and complications of intimacy in late modernity and the period leading up to it by highlighting two sociologists' perspectives on how the contemporary cultural milieu affects our expectations of intimacy and our behaviors within in, as well as how technology has impacted the pursuit of intimacy in terms of matching up with someone, dating, and maintaining intimacy once a relationship is engaged. In the second section, I start with an exploration of marriage, not to reify the paradigm which I am in fact explicitly against, but to review how ways in which intimate relations for contemporary young adults have—or do not have, in some cases—a predictive horizon of inequality that affects their early 20s as much as their late 20s and early 30s. I then address the perspectives and practices of avoidance, growth, and trial that are suffuse within intimacy at the college, dating, casual relationship, and cohabitation levels.

I argue that engaging topics of intimacy today requires that scholars and practitioners of religion develop a self-reflective relationship around their assumptions of how informality, ambiguity, and personalized “deals” do or do not promote agency, self-authorship and efforts at tailoring one's own possibilities through carving less-trod pathways. Sociologists of late modernity Anthony Giddens and Eva Illouz offer both optimism and pessimism, respectively, to this project. Much of how their fears and predictions do and do not pan out in any given contemporary adult life depends greatly on how we interpret and think about power and agency, and what it takes to overcome fear and anxiety, topics I bring up throughout this dissertation.

## SECTION ONE: THE CULTURAL HOPES—AND COMPLICATIONS— OF INTIMACY

### Anthony Giddens and the prospect of a “pure relationship”

The focus on intimacy as a paradigm in the fluidity and impermanence of postmodern times which I use throughout this dissertation can seem to harken back to sociologist Anthony Giddens’ sanguine postulation in the early 1990s of the possibilities of a “pure relationship” becoming an intimacy and partnership standard. In his book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Giddens defined a “pure relationship” as one of sexual and emotional equality, which would be, as he put it, “explosive in its connotations for preexisting forms of gender power.”<sup>492</sup> While previous circumstances in history had made intimate partnership a combination of emotional and sexual meeting of needs, such intimacy was also commonly an avenue of forming political alliance, consolidating financial holdings and inheritances, and providing for economic stability.<sup>493</sup> Giddens believed that modern American culture was on the horizon in which, most of these latter qualities being accessible through forms other than sexual and romantic intimacy, emotional and amorous ties alone would be sufficiently durable to bring and keep people together.<sup>494</sup>

Giddens postulated, accurately, I would say, that in this new form of pair-bonding, as it is commonly described in contemporary literature, “knowing the traits of the other is essential.”<sup>495</sup> This personalizes the love and attention to a depth necessary for intimacy alone to sustain and fulfill a partnership. He goes on to write, “In the pure relationship, trust has no external supports, and has to be developed on the basis of intimacy. Trust is a vesting of confidence in the other and also in the capacity of the mutual bond to withstand future traumas.”<sup>496</sup> In such a system, relationships would be subject to intermittent evaluation and appeals by either partner regarding situations of perceived unfairness, oppression, or obstacle in the relationship. Such evaluation

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<sup>492</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 1-2.

<sup>493</sup> Part of what Giddens saw as a crucial change that allowed for the prospect of the pure relationship was the development of what he called a “plastic sexuality” which he saw as “decentered...freed from the needs of reproduction,” 2.

<sup>494</sup> Giddens, 2.

<sup>495</sup> Giddens, 63.

<sup>496</sup> Giddens, 138.

might necessarily lead to dissolution of the relationship if situations are not satisfactorily addressed in a way that enables the relationship and its members to be put back on the path of balance and growth.<sup>497</sup>

Half-hypothesizing, half-describing, Giddens notes that “pure” bonds of affection and personal fulfillment would be more fragile than those previous relationships which had involved a more interlocking partnership of power, finances, and identity. This would lead to a more personal culture of rules and decision-making with which to guide relationships no longer bound in the same ways by tradition, gender, or material need.<sup>498</sup> Therefore such a project would require mutual disclosure and a reflective project of the self.<sup>499</sup> Thus, the transformation of intimacy that Giddens foresaw was to occur at both the intrapersonal, individual level, and on a sociological level as persons learned to interact differently with each other. He argued incisively that in the new world order, “Intimacy should not be understood as an interactional description, but as a cluster of prerogatives and responsibilities that define agendas of practical activity.”<sup>500</sup> This seems in concert with what I have discussed in my previous chapter on the mechanisms and demands of intimacy. It is also worthy of more ongoing discussion than to which I can currently attend.

Many scholars who have taken up the mantle of researching intimacy have remarked that Giddens failed to sufficiently address issues of power, macro-level social construction which reinforces gender rules and material needs, although he did identify that social construction of gender inequity in society at large kept relationships from being as fully “peer” relationships as they might otherwise be.<sup>501</sup> They also often note that the actualization of the democratization of intimacy that Giddens’ predicted has not occurred as more relationships became more and more

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<sup>497</sup> Giddens, 192.

<sup>498</sup> Derek Layder, *Intimacy and Power: The Dynamics of Personal Relationships in Modern Society* (Houndmills; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 11.

<sup>499</sup> Layder, 12; Also in Alan L. Sillars and Anita L. Vangelisti, “Communication: Basic Properties and their Relevance to Relationship Research,” *The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships*, edited by Anita L. Vangelisti and Daniel Perlman (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 336.

<sup>500</sup> Giddens, 190.

<sup>501</sup> Sociologist of the postmodern family, Deborah Chambers credits Giddens for this, even as she points out that he deserves further critique, Deborah Chambers, *The Sociology of Family Life: Change and Diversity and Intimate Relations* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2012), 53; also in Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Boston and Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 10.

“pure.”<sup>502</sup> Yet Giddens’ description named something that became foundational and groundbreaking in the sociological literature of the 1990s, perhaps having longer historical legs than it should for all of its blind spots and generalities.<sup>503</sup>

One of the most generative commentators on advancing the theoretical material on modern intimacy, Derek Layder comments in his book *Intimacy and Power*, “modern intimacy is a more inclusive, nuanced and complex phenomenon than suggested by the pure relationship. It is more accurate and realistic to portray it as a continuum of types [...] with their variable forms of disclosure, commitment, trust, satisfaction and so on.”<sup>504</sup> Sociologist Deborah Chambers remarks that a key part of what it means to be intimate today still involves a centrality of commitment and care. The allure of the freedom possible in the pure relationship compared to those of the past may have kept Giddens from providing as well rounded of a description as he could have otherwise.<sup>505</sup>

Certainly my project harkens back to, or at least echoes, Giddens’ conception of the pure relationship. Yet my feminist version for the twenty-first century attempts to be pragmatic and critical. It aims to admit that much of the glue of relationships that existed before does not exist, and yet the postmodern, informal relationship is hardly “pure” or necessarily fulfilling just because certain relational constraints have faded into the background, because others have risen up to take their place. It attempts to acknowledge the role of power and capacity in such relationships of affinity as far from “pure,” preferring terms like “interdependent” and flexible, and yet what this means when it comes to engaging young adults in the realities of their lives remains a significant challenge.

### **Eva Illouz and *Why Love Hurts***

Sociologist Eva Illouz puts forth in her *Why Love Hurts* (2012) a cultural psychodynamic theory that vast structural forces shape our unconscious individual desires around love and value. She offers this theory as an alternative explanation to the typical liberal feminist theory that

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<sup>502</sup> Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* (London; New York: Routledge, 2018), 278.

<sup>503</sup> Chambers, *Sociology*, 3.

<sup>504</sup> Layder, 168.

<sup>505</sup> Chambers, *Sociology*, 186-87.

romance is oppressive because it is patriarchal, critiquing such a premise as simplistic to the point of lacking any utility as a theory that can aid in change. Arguing that materialism has as much affect as gender stratification in shaping culture and behavior, while not at all ultimately dismissing feminist concerns, Illouz points out that greater information and mobility in a society typically provides greater choice for individuals.<sup>506</sup> Greater choice, research shows, generally results in a much more extensive and longer process of information gathering, a type of ramped up rationality around decision-making.<sup>507</sup> She concludes, and illustratively details throughout her book, that in today's culture of material abundance and numerous choices, choice and desire become warped by that very abundance.

Illouz notes in particular that today's marriage market has these characteristics. Today's ability to make contact with a wide variety of people compared to the limited exposure for numerous groups in the past makes deliberations in number and quality around marriage partners much more extensive.<sup>508</sup> As part of a culture of more choice and abundance, people become particularly enamored with and protective of their perception of having a "choice," and also with keeping options open as a route to engender "more" choice. Choices in romance are not entirely different from other choices in postindustrial society. People want to keep their options open for romantic partners so that they can subject such a choice to intensive scrutiny and comparison. In her piece entitled "21<sup>st</sup> Century Dating: Is Romance Dead?" Tamiera Vandegrift, puts into words what many Millennials feel about the dating market, particularly with the help of online profiles facilitating access to greater numbers of potential dates. She writes that access today through technology and mobility creates a "more fish in the sea mentality," which results negatively in people easily moving on from the person in front of them if conflict arises.<sup>509</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> This work on contemporary romance and desire is a modern day echo of Nancy Chodorow's 1976 *The Reproduction of Mothering* with Illouz claiming that our values and desires on a psychological level have already been shaped for us by the culture at large, resulting in a constrained realm of desire and reward. While Chodorow's mother behaves in ways highly dictated by values and assumptions related to gender and gender roles, both Chodorow and Illouz believe that these values and desires are deeply psychological, and thus somewhat beyond individual, conscious control to choose to do otherwise. Also, like Chodorow's claims about mothering, Illouz focuses on romance particularly because she believes it hurts women. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

<sup>507</sup> Illouz, 93; also noted in Jolene Cassellius Erlacher, *Millennials in Ministry*, fwd. Molly T. Marshall (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2014), 10-11.

<sup>508</sup> Illouz, 52.

<sup>509</sup> Tamiera Vandegrift, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Dating: Is Romance Dead?" *Left Swipes and Love: A Millennial's Guide to Hookups, Dating, and Tinder*, ed. Amanda Nachman, Daniel Kuhn (No location: College Magazine, 2016), 35.



Illouz is not the only person to argue this point of the effects of overabundance of choice. In the book *The Paradox of Choice*, commonly cited author Barry Schwartz emphasizes that overabundance of choice causes stress. He argues that people approach this overabundance through two main psychological strategies which he calls “maximizing” and “satisficing,” which respectively involve searching for the best possible solution versus the good enough solution which ends the search when standards have been met even if a better match to the standards might theoretically still exist.<sup>510</sup> He also notes that superfluous choice results in categories of “pickers” and “choosers.” According to Schwartz, pickers tend to focus on what they will pick based on the choices available. Choosers, on the other hand, make their selection based upon what coheres with their internal needs and desires relative to those choices.<sup>511</sup> This contrast is illustrative of how people respond to open choice, something integral to get people to think about when it comes to developing ethical frameworks amidst numerous, open-ended options.

Most importantly, Illouz argues that this greater choice has fundamentally altered romance at the psycho-cultural level. It has resulted in “a change in the structure of our romantic will, what we want and how we come to implement what we want with a sexual partner,” as well as how one experiences vulnerability, desire, and value.<sup>512</sup> Oversupply of anything typically reduces desire and value, while scarcity creates value.<sup>513</sup> Professors of Christian relationships Dwight and Kim Peterson see this picking market mentality of oversupply as coming to fruition in intimate relationships by the way in which their students relay to them that not holding out for the perfect person feels like “settling” for second best. The Petersons note that, in their view, the best moral decision at hand is to embrace the imperfection of yourself and others.<sup>514</sup> In a Christian lens, embrace of a full humanity is a value in itself, especially in comparison to alternatives such as commodification or objectification.

Because scarcity is what creates value, desire, Illouz notes, “has migrated to the realm of the imagination.” It has become both weaker (not backed up by will) and stronger (lived out in

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<sup>510</sup> Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), cited in Konstam, 109.

<sup>511</sup> Schwartz cited in Konstam, 109.

<sup>512</sup> Illouz, 6.

<sup>513</sup> Illouz, 85.

<sup>514</sup> Margaret Kim Peterson and Dwight Peterson, *Are you Waiting for “The One?” Cultivating Realistic, Positive Expectations for Christian Marriage* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 28-29.

vicarious and virtual relationships) in this new primary location of the imagination.<sup>515</sup> This altered functioning of desire has changed how people feel about commitment. While I would say that most people would attribute commitment phobia, particularly of young adults, to selfish hedonism, Illouz notes that there are two main ways of experiencing commitment phobia. The first form of commitment phobia, *hedonic*, is commitment “deferred by engaging in a pleasurable accumulation of relationships.” The second, *aboullic*, is defined by a reduced capacity to want relationships, and therefore enough reduced engagement to ever want commitment in those relationships.<sup>516</sup> While the first is likely a factor, and the second is actually more at play today, Illouz contends.<sup>517</sup>

Illouz believes that men have more sexual and emotional choice than women and this creates dominance of men over women in markets for sex and partnership.<sup>518</sup> She asserts that men continue to have the gendered advantage because of the convergence of economic and sexual power. They thus get to write the rules and moves of romantic relationships as a result of this power.<sup>519</sup> My own research on gender and intimacy proves this to be true. Men continue to have the advantage regarding relationship initiation and intensification in terms of initiating dates, sex, cohabitation, and marriage.

Wrapping up her argument, Illouz concludes that contemporary romance and partnership are not the “pure” relationships of affinity that Giddens predicted. They were “pure” in a sense because postindustrial conditions of affluence and women’s relative financial independence meant that romance no longer needed to involve an intense degree of extended family ties or economic or gender role interdependency. According to Giddens, matches, whatever the depth of connection, could be “simply” based on love and personal connection. Instead, Illouz argues, romance in postindustrial society is in fact *highly* economic. This, for her, explains some of the pressure around partnership continuing to be a high stakes game. Even in the age of no-fault

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<sup>515</sup> Illouz, 244.

<sup>516</sup> Illouz, 78.

<sup>517</sup> Illouz, 87.

<sup>518</sup> Illouz, 241.

<sup>519</sup> Illouz, 5.

divorce, the idea of union involves “conflicting pressures” of economics and a belief that romance should not involve economics.<sup>520</sup>

Suffering in modern love is properly modern, Illouz argues, because of the characteristics of a deregulated marriage market toward a greater role of affinity but with other considerations very much still in play. We are overly concerned with the modern characteristics of neutral language, symmetrical power relationships, procedural fairness, and explicit consent.<sup>521</sup> These modern concerns, utilized in the extreme, have led to the transformation of the architecture of choice of a mate, the overwhelming importance of love for the constitution of a social sense of worth, the rationalization of passion, and the ways in which romantic imagination is deployed all create romantic suffering and psychological tension.<sup>522</sup> To balance out, Illouz recommends that we become more comfortable with the characteristics of love and eroticism. This requires a greater ability to handle and creatively engage with ambiguity, intermittence, veiled language, playfulness, and transcendence.<sup>523</sup> In the following chapter, I will explore how young adults today in their intimacy practices engage in tendencies toward hyper-rationalization around their future, *aboulic* and *hedonic* commitment phobia, and strategic ambiguity. At times they are able to employ practices of intermittence, veiled language, and other remedies which Illouz recommends will benefit them. Yet research reveals that most often early young adulthood is not a time to transcend the vagaries of postindustrial culture. Before we turn to meditate on how this postmodern culture bears out in the practices and expectations of young adults in intimacy in the second section of this chapter, I will first outline major aspects of technology’s influence, and sometimes lack thereof, upon contemporary intimacy writ large.

### **Technology’s impact upon intimacy**

Contemporary young adults are in part marked as a cohort by those whose lives are saturated with interactive technology. As some who teach millennials in their classrooms note, “[Millennials] instinctively turn first to the Internet to communicate, understand, learn, find, and

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<sup>520</sup> Illouz, 10.

<sup>521</sup> Illouz, 192.

<sup>522</sup> Illouz, 16-17.

<sup>523</sup> Illouz, 191.

do many things.”<sup>524</sup> This makes sense, given that Millennials are always engaged with their electronic devices. Research indicates that 83% of Millennials have slept with their phones (including the author of this dissertation),<sup>525</sup> and that as a group, in 2015 they spent about 21 hours a week on them.<sup>526</sup> Recently, emerging adults averaged 1 to 2 hours per day on social networking sites.<sup>527</sup> Psychologist Varda Konstam cites a study that reports that emerging adults unlock their phones to check texts and social media 100 times a day.<sup>528</sup> To reiterate this point even further, scholar of religion Donna Freitas notes that in her book *The Happiness Effect* that contemporary young adults are keenly aware that their lives are constantly monitored by the ubiquitous presence of social media, via their own engagement habits and those of others.<sup>529</sup>

Thus, it is of little surprise that Konstam describes contemporary young adults as having a “cyberdominated” romantic arena.<sup>530</sup> In terms of engaging with technology for specifically romantic ends, this involves meeting online, but also communicating via social media and frequent text messages.<sup>531</sup> Researchers find that contemporary young adults hold an ambivalent stance about technology use in intimate relationships, even though it is normal and omnipresent.<sup>532</sup> Young adults report that it can be useful, but is often conducive to undesirable relationship outcomes.<sup>533</sup> They project that technology could bring out rudeness, lying and

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<sup>524</sup> Whitney Bauman, Joseph A. Marcha, Karline McLain, Maureen O’Connell, and Sara M. Patterson, “Teaching the Millennial Generation in the Religious and Theological Studies Classroom,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17, no. 4 (October 2014): 303.

<sup>525</sup> Chenandoah Nieuwsma, “Certain of the Uncertain: Reflections on Millennial Epistemology and the Emerging Church,” *The Emerging Church, Millennials, and Religion: Vol. One Prospects and Problems*, ed. Randall Reed and G. Michael Zbaraaschuk (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2018), 8.

<sup>526</sup> Nieuwsma, 8.

<sup>527</sup> Brianna L. Lane and Cameron W. Piercy, “Making Sense of Becoming Facebook Official: Implications for Identity in Time,” *The Impact of Social Media in Modern Romantic Relationships*, ed. Narissra M. Punyanun-Carter and Jason S. Wrench, *Studies in New Media* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 44.

<sup>528</sup> E. Hu, “New Numbers Back up our Obsession with Phones,” *National Public Radio*, October 10, 2013, retrieved by author at <http://www.npr.org>, cited in Konstam, 99.

<sup>529</sup> Donna Freitas, *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a New Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>530</sup> Konstam, xv.

<sup>531</sup> Konstam breaks some of these modern communication preferences down by gender. For instance, women prefer relational technologies like texting and phone whereas men prefer less direct communication like Facebook, whereas women are found to be more invested emotionally in social media-mediated declarations of commitment, 100.

<sup>532</sup> Cristen Dalessandro, “Internet Intimacy: Authenticity and Longing in the Relationships of Millennial Young Adults,” *Sociological Perspectives* 61, no. 4 (2018): 627, 632.

<sup>533</sup> Dalessandro, 627.

cheating, and that it can serve as a way of avoiding and misrepresenting the truth.<sup>534</sup> Young adult Eddie commented that “a LOT of people lie about their stats,” he found it better to engage in relationships offline where this is presumed to be less of an issue.<sup>535</sup>

Many scholars and young adults have observed that engagement with social media tends to objectify users and definitely lacks social etiquette rules.<sup>536</sup> As contemporary young adult Rachel Aldrich emphatically quips in an advice column, “If your Mom would cringe, don’t say it.”<sup>537</sup> This goes for the transmission of images, too. Former young adult and comedian turned researcher Aziz Ansari in his book *Modern Romance* notes how poorly his fellow men communicate; he states that in his opinion young men have abysmally low standards for polite and intelligent contact with women when it comes to any sphere outside of work.<sup>538</sup> Along the lines of social etiquette and moral responsibility, it is poignant and necessary to mention that in Ansari’s case, but which I think has bearing and meaning for contemporary young adults at large, that despite having researched and written a book on contemporary romance, he later made headlines and stirred considerable controversy for being accused of sexually assaulting a woman on a date. In the reports and media coverage after the incident he was described as not respecting her efforts to make it clear she was not interested in advancing the relationship sexually.<sup>539</sup>

Ansari, in the irony of later hindsight as to just how hard this can be to do given his later actions, encourages his readers to “treat potential partners like actual people, not bubbles on a

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<sup>534</sup> Dalessandro, 633-34.

<sup>535</sup> Dalessandro, 635.

<sup>536</sup> Konstam, 100.

<sup>537</sup> Rachel Aldrich, “A Bro’s Guide to Picking up Bros,” *Left Swipes and Love: A Millennial’s Guide to Hookups, Dating, and Tinder*, ed. Amanda Nachman and Daniel Kuhn (No location: College Magazine, 2016), 16.

<sup>538</sup> Aziz Ansari with Eric Klinenberg, *Modern Romance: An Investigation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 44-55; although a professional comedian and not a university-trained researcher, Ansari engaged sophisticated utilizing several forms of mixed methods. These included focuses groups around the world in major cities and also smaller ones like Witchita, Kansas. Included in his research methods, many who were interviewed for the project volunteered to share their phones with the researchers “so that we could track their interactions through text messages, e-mails, online dating sites, and swipe apps like Tinder,” which guarded against memory and self-identification bias, 7. He and his team also created a Modern Romantics SubReddit form which received thousands of messages worldwide, and conducted interviews with sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists, 7.

<sup>539</sup> In these reports, Ansari apologizes for misconduct he did not see as nonconsensual. His date accuses him of ignoring substantial signs for a considerable amount of time. There has been much debate by both men and women as to the moral judgement of Ansari’s conduct during, and after the incident, Emma Stefansky, “Aziz Ansari Accused of Sexual Misconduct,” *Vanity Fair*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/01/aziz-ansari-accused-of-sexual-misconduct>; Sopan Deb, “Aziz Ansari Addresses Sexual Misconduct Accusation During New York Set,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/12/arts/aziz-ansari-sexual-misconduct-accusation.html>.

screen” and not to “think of online dating as dating—thin of it as an online introduction service.”<sup>540</sup> As feminist sociologist Laurie Essig further details, there is not much in online dating contact made by men in between “match” and “dick pick.”<sup>541</sup> She also highlights that there is considerable racism and misogyny on the match making site Tinder, in particular, although none of them have particularly polite and respectful users.<sup>542</sup> While communities of users can create ways of shaming bad behavior on dating sites, those who use them also know that the sites themselves do not do much in response to racism and misogyny.<sup>543</sup>

Scholars and young adults themselves identify that often social media and other forms of technology serve as mechanisms to intensify their human temptations toward superficiality and speed. They know that giving into these temptations can greatly damage, or at least inhibit their ability to practice depth of relationship, grounded evaluation, and openness to personal and relational vulnerability. Tinder, for instance, is known as a way to have a relationship without emotional attachment.<sup>544</sup> This is in part because the manner in which one has access to potential partners for sex or dates, or access to tremendous amounts of pornography is also a notable change to the dating realm.<sup>545</sup> Ansari quips, “Today, if you own a smartphone, you’re carrying a 24-7 singles bar in your pocket.”<sup>546</sup> Young adults note that technology enables greater habituation of instant gratification, even though they acknowledge that worthwhile, deep relationships often involve development over time.<sup>547</sup> Freitas in particular describes young adults as using social media as a “shield [from] vulnerability” and as a tool which encourages busyness rather than stillness, contemplation, and thoughtful response.<sup>548</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> Ansari, 240, 245.

<sup>541</sup> Laurie Essig, *Love, Inc.: Dating Apps, the Big White Wedding, and Chasing the Happily Everafter* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2019), 68.

<sup>542</sup> Essig, 67.

<sup>543</sup> Essig, 68.

<sup>544</sup> Vandegrift, 36.

<sup>545</sup> Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 107.

<sup>546</sup> Ansari, 31.

<sup>547</sup> Vandegrift, 36.

<sup>548</sup> Freitas, *Happiness*, xiv.

## *Matching*

Dating applications such as Tinder, Grindr, and Bumble, as well as internet match up sites like E-harmony and Okcupid, as well as the effect of text messaging and social media are commonly assumed to water down, diversify, and distract from the intensity of intimate potential. Flipping through online dating profiles can encourage young adults to believe that they have too much choice in the dating market. This leads to it being easy to discard potential partners and not engage, either online or in person. Millennial respondents in studies about the effect of digital media on their intimate lives noted that as much as they succumbed to this illusion, they also realized it as “a detachment from reality,” because choice in dating partners is not infinite.<sup>549</sup> Yet this detachment is also mixed with some greater sensibility revealed via sociological analysis in exactly how people use media to communicate *once* they have found a potential intimate partner.

While much moral panic is made about the impersonal, broadcasting nature of social media as a method of communication today,<sup>550</sup> sociologist Deborah Chambers finds that careful evaluation of two key trends from a variety of research reveals that first, digital mediums are used to communicate with a remarkably small handful of people who are already known prior to social media engagement, and second, they are used for maintaining and deepening already existing off-line relationships and for tracing people already known off-line.<sup>551</sup> In the same volume, Paul Bloomfield writes that time studies have found that time spent on Facebook is primarily a substitute for watching television or other non-relational activities rather than supplanting time spent in genuine interpersonal engagement.<sup>552</sup> Most research finds that young people still prefer and enjoy talking face-to-face with romantic partners, especially at the more advanced stages a relationships even as they engage in social media moderately frequently.<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>549</sup> Dalessandro, 637.

<sup>550</sup> Ken Gilroy, “The Social Media Paradox,” *Social Media and Living Well*, ed. Berrin A. Beasley and Mitchell R. Haney (New York: Lexington, 2015), 9.

<sup>551</sup> Deborah Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*, Palgrave Macmillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life (Houndmills; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 9.

<sup>552</sup> Paul Bloomfield, “Friendship on Facebook,” *Social Media and Living Well*, ed. Berrin A. Beasley and Mitchell R. Haney (New York: Lexington, 2015), 28.

<sup>553</sup> Liesel Sharabi and John P. Caughlin, “Usage Patterns of Social Media across Stages of Romantic Relationships,” *The Impact of Social Media in Modern Romantic Relationships*, ed. Narissra M. Punyanun-Carter and Jason S. Wrench, Studies in New Media (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 26.

Contemporary young adults frequently find sifting through online profiles, and the immediacy of needing to respond during limited periods of “match windows” is exhausting and difficult.<sup>554</sup> Essig points out that Americans now work 25% more than they did 40 years ago, back when they resembled more the workhours of Europeans. Perhaps for this reason, most young adults see dating “as a huge time suck, and a poor investment done out of desperation because of the ratio of success to investment. Thus they develop personal policies and ways to engage in forms of romantic triage around dating and dating sites.”<sup>555</sup>

Calculation is involved in how one sets up a dating profile to contain demographic information which others will use searcher filters with possible ranges of acceptable information, such as age or race, to find and screen a person before reaching out to them with interest.<sup>556</sup> Chambers writes at length about how internet matching today is a tortured combination of calculation and casualness which she describes as “stage-managed and premeditated” in an attempt to control emotions and vulnerability.<sup>557</sup> In such profiles, especially for women, it is important to be “brief, positive and unique.”<sup>558</sup>

Feminist sociologist Suzanne Leonard notes that women need to present as easy-going, optimistic, and with no real needs of their own.<sup>559</sup> She notes that this sort of commodification and reduction of a person into a searchable profile involves the same sort of sorting, judging and quantifying as everything else in neoliberalism.<sup>560</sup> This pressure has its own ecology, for, as mentioned earlier in this section, the practice of “Facebook stalking” is a prevalent method—if not a norm—for assessing potential partners. While this increases social anxiety which young adults readily acknowledge, many people continue to practice it.<sup>561</sup> The presence of so much information online available a person not garnered initially from face-to-face interaction often

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<sup>554</sup> Essig, 74; Ansari, 5, 94.

<sup>555</sup> Essig, 77-78.

<sup>556</sup> Suzanne Leonard, *Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 40.

<sup>557</sup> Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships*, 166, 140-141.

<sup>558</sup> Leonard, 46.

<sup>559</sup> Leonard, 24.

<sup>560</sup> Leonard, 36.

<sup>561</sup> Narissra M. Punyanun-Carter and Jason S. Wrench, “From the Front Porch to Swiping Right: The Impact of Technology on Modern Dating,” *The Impact of Social Media in Modern Romantic Relationships*, ed. Narissra M. Punyanun-Carter and Jason S. Wrench, *Studies in New Media* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 5.



results in a jaded approach to potential partners or engaging the partner market itself. Some found that scoping someone out online for what information can be found out about them “reduces curiosity” and leads to disinterest.<sup>562</sup>

### *Maintaining intimacy*

Multiple commentators have remarked that digital technology has changed the interactional frequency of intimate relationships, and thus what is expected of them in terms of contact. Chambers writes, “young dating couples now have high expectations of continuous availability, connection online and reciprocity in their online exchanges. They may make several phone calls, texts or IMs each day.”<sup>563</sup> Frequency of contact is now a part of the equation of relational trust. Chambers goes on to elaborate, “check-ins are expected by partners to avoid misunderstandings about the actions and to account for their whereabouts.”<sup>564</sup> This level of connection and stimulation has various implications. Often couples, and even individuals, develop personal rules about timing, availability, and frequency as to what they desire to engage with regarding various forms of communication and phone calls.<sup>565</sup>

In reflecting upon the subject of the prevalence of texting in people’s lives, Ansari describes a particular experience of texting common to many: “The madness I was descending into wouldn’t have even existed twenty or even ten years ago. There I was, manically checking my phone every few minutes, going through this tornado of panic and hurt and anger all because this person hadn’t written me a short, stupid message on a dumb little phone.”<sup>566</sup> While technology has exacerbated human tendencies to have anxiety around romantic prospects, Konstam points out that larger forces of disposition and temperament often drive media-facilitated disagreements in terms of assigning a greater bulk of the responsibility to this than the forms of media themselves. For instance, she identifies that people’s overall relationship to the

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<sup>562</sup> Dalessandro, 636-38.

<sup>563</sup> Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships*, 125.

<sup>564</sup> Chambers, *Social Media and Personal Relationships*, 125.

<sup>565</sup> Konstam, 105.

<sup>566</sup> Ansari, 5.

concept of autonomy versus connectedness in their relationship is what would lead to conflict over cell phone communication more than the presence and use of cell phones themselves.<sup>567</sup>

As regards the lack of established etiquette usually resulting in poor communication and slovenly efforts, the serious dater nonetheless still has to determine for himself or herself the most appropriate medium in which to engage someone to ask them out on a date.<sup>568</sup> Most people consider texting a low-commitment and thus casual way to interact.<sup>569</sup> For some, this increases their tendency to use the medium in an attempt to lower the stakes of contact, and for others this requires them to step up their game with a more engaging form of communication. Nonetheless, 67% of teens said they would accept a prom invitation via text.<sup>570</sup> Ansari writes extensively about how panicked and nervous young people are today about talking face to face or on the phone in terms of romantic engagement, something which writers for *Left Swipes and Love: A Millennial's Guide to Hookups, Dating, and Tinder* also noted again and again. He comments, "Generally, younger dudes were *fucking terrified* of calling someone on the phone. This didn't surprise me that much, but I was surprised that younger women also expressed terror at the thought of a traditional phone call."<sup>571</sup>

As a final point of consideration about how technology affects intimacy, Chambers also found that it was of moral concern to young adults how one uses technology to facilitate a break up and family-based misunderstandings.<sup>572</sup> She notes that the presence of a considerable debate about the appropriate way to end a relationship with an online dimension "raises major questions about the management of intimacy in the digital age in terms of social media etiquette, agency, privacy and publicity, and vulnerability."<sup>573</sup> Ghosting, for instance, the sudden drop off of contact, is a common occurrence in which one "ghosts" from their previous social media presence for reasons of disinterest, awkwardness, and busyness. Because the drop off is sudden

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<sup>567</sup> Konstam, 107.

<sup>568</sup> Ansari, 34.

<sup>569</sup> Kendall Russell goes for the forms of communication that are easy and thus casual, writing, "tinder makes flirting easy," Kendall Russell, "Why I am not Embarrassed about Tinder," *Left Swipes and Love: A Millennial's Guide to Hookups, Dating, and Tinder*, ed. Amanda Nachman and Daniel Kuhn (No location: College Magazine, 2016), 42.

<sup>570</sup> Ansari, 36.

<sup>571</sup> Ansari, 39.

<sup>572</sup> Chambers, *Social Media*, 18.

<sup>573</sup> Chambers, *Social Media*, 122.

and unexplained, it often results in hurt and ambiguity. While people report that they have come to expect ghosting, both as victims and perpetrators, it nonetheless speaks to a lack of how to close a relationship that is so ambiguous in the first place. Yet dealing with ambiguity is far from something that will go away anytime soon. Rather, how to handle, and chart a path forward in relationship despite ambiguity and informality is essential in late modern life.

## **SECTION TWO: MODERN INTIMACY—CAPSTONE DELAY, CONVENIENCE, AND INFORMALITY**

In in this section, I provide a sweeping outline of the major themes of intimacy and gender as they pertain to the lives of young adults today, separating each theme of intimacy and into its own subsection. I highlight trends of marital delay and extensive planning, sexual and relationship behaviors in college, what dating looks like and how it is experienced, increases in cohabitation, and how technology impacts people’s approach to dating and intimacy.<sup>574</sup> My argument for this section is that, while young adults push intimacy to the side in favor of spending time and energy securing an education and prospects for a sufficient financial future and this is okay in and of itself, the lack of tangible thought given to what it will take to grow and sustain mature, committed personal relationships should be of great concern to them as well as to scholars of religion.

Because they rightfully and purposefully delay committed intimacy in favor of achieving other aims in early adulthood, contemporary young adults spend much of their 20s seeing their sexual intimate life through the lens of fun and exploration, which, while not at all bad on the face of it, involves significant ambiguity, informality, and pressure to “keep things casual.” This predominant script crowds out other concerns and makes those who seek something more feel isolated and unguided. In part, there is little cultural support for articulating how relationships

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<sup>574</sup> Studying dating and cohabitation as less intense, less formal types of intimacy, instead of the presumed height of intimacy, marriage, allows me to discuss intimacy saliency itself as a question of desire, possibility, and ethics in a fashion that allows me to more keenly focus on the idea of intimacy itself, and not the confines or relative commitment status of that intimacy (at least not directly).

After much searching, I found the idea of saliency as the explicatory bridge between aspiration and behavior in two main works, and to these authors I owe considerable debt for helping me articulate this. These are: Brian Willoughby and Spencer James, *The Marriage Paradox: Why Emerging Adults Love Marriage Yet Push it Aside*, Emerging Adulthood, ed. Larry J. Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) and Maria J. Kefalas, Frank F. Furstenberg, Patrick J. Carr, and Laura Napolitano, “Marriage Is More Than Being Together:” The Meaning of Marriage for Young Adults” *Journal of Family Issues* 32 no. 7 (2011): 845–875.

outside of marriage can still pertain to intimacy, love and justice, and not just fun and stress release. In any situation, a human relationship must be multidimensional. Any time there is a dominant way to be, the dynamic and diverse nature of the human being falls short of its fullest and most vibrant expression.

## Marriage

### *The idea of partnership: Planning and putting it off*

Much has been written about how millennials as a generational group are opting out of marriage, either by delay—the average age of marriage now being 27 for women and 29 for men<sup>575</sup> — or permanent non-marriage. The Pew Forum has predicted that 25% of millennials will *remain single* as of 2030, when the youngest millennial will be 35 years old.<sup>576</sup> This is in part based on projections of how many are married now. The Pew Forum found that in 2014, 26% of millennials were married, matched for age, compared to 36% of Generation X, 48% of Baby Boomers, and 65% of the Great Generation at the same age point in the generation.<sup>577</sup> In sum, fewer millennials will ever marry than other generations, and if they do, they marry later, respectively speaking. Contemporary intimacy researcher Suzanne Leonard comments that even as the number of people actively involved in a marriage is going down, devotion to marriage as a concept is staying strong.<sup>578</sup> She attributes this to the idea of marriage as something traditional and long-lasting, a particularly attractive wish in an era in which there is so much change and movement.<sup>579</sup> Aspiration to marriage is strong, but singleness is on the rise.<sup>580</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> Pew Research Forum, “Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends,” 9.

<sup>576</sup> Wendy Wang and Kim Parker, “Record Share of Americans have Never Married as Values, Economics and Gender Patterns Change,” *Pew Research Center*, September 24, 2014. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/>;

<sup>577</sup> Pew, “Millennials in Adulthood,” 5.

<sup>578</sup> So do other feminist researchers, see Essig, 1.

<sup>579</sup> Leonard, 5.

<sup>580</sup> Konstam articulates this in a way I have attempted to do so in the past: that the rise in singleness is in part related to a “decentering” of romantic relationships in emerging adult life, Konstam, 339.

While most everyone in the American populace continues to report that they aspire to become married, and over 90% Millennials do too,<sup>581</sup> multiple scholars of intimate life in recent decades have begun to note distinctly different tracks in society in regards to which type of union formation people are likely to engage in, as well as how, and when they engage it.<sup>582</sup> These patterns serve as clear markers of class division and geography in which for some sectors of the population, children are a more reliable commitment than a spouse and some plan for marriage while others do not.<sup>583</sup> Today, because Millennials tend to marry on more stable foundations if they do marry, they are more likely to stay married than those of other generations.<sup>584</sup> According to experts, 2/3rds of marriages entered into in the 2000s predicted to last.<sup>585</sup> Yet with the removal of social stigma around cohabitation, more people are cohabitating than ever before, especially if they are less likely to have a financial cushion that enables living apart from a romantic partner for reasons of autonomy. Thus, family legal scholars Naomi Cahn and June Carbone note that divorce and out of wedlock childbirth are now markers of lower socioeconomic class more than they have been at any other time in recent memory.<sup>586</sup>

Other family studies scholars such as Maria J. Kefalas and her fellow researchers detail that today cosmopolitan and material influences, such as elongated education in adulthood and high rent in the areas where Millennials predominately live, push four-fifths of contemporary young adults to be “marriage planners.” These are persons who put off and highly evaluate whether or not marriage is a fit for their life, compared to an approach to marriage as “natural” fast-track after high school. This “naturalist” approach is still in fashion with young adults who

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<sup>581</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 2014), 75; Konstam pegs this number at 80%, Konstam, 8.

<sup>582</sup> Konstam notes that in addition to a diversity of relationship forms and structures, there no one path to a “we identity,” possibly within these shapes either, Konstam, 4.

<sup>583</sup> Arnett notes that the range of “normal” ages at which people marry has broadened to a span of more than ten years, however, most young people feel they should commit to a partner by the turn of their third decade, Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 100, 102.

<sup>584</sup> The rate has dropped 18% as a ratio of all marriages, between the years 2008 to 2016. The dramatic difference between generations is in part because the Boomer generation continues to divorce at untypically high rates compared to generations before and after them, continuing to divorce even as they enter older adulthood, Ben Steverman, “Millennials are Causing the U.S. Divorce Rate to Plummet,” *Bloomberg Wire Service*, New York, September 25, 2018, ProQuest.

<sup>585</sup> Jill Filipovic, *The H-Spot: The Feminist Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 157.

<sup>586</sup> For more on tracking systems, see family law scholars Naomi Cahn and June Carbone’s writing on family law’s culpability in creating what they coin “Red Families vs. Blue Families,” in *Red Families vs. Blue Families: Legal Polarization and the Creation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 2010).

live in rural areas and do not pursue higher education.<sup>587</sup> For naturalists, marriage was “the next logical step” in getting older and an “inevitable outcome” because once one is in a reasonably satisfying relationship, “there is nothing else to do.”<sup>588</sup>

Planners, however, see it as a capstone to maturity and stability which can occur after each partner has met certain life goals but also “acquired the marriage mentality.”<sup>589</sup> The Pew Forum, for instance, found that 69% of unmarried millennials said they would like to be married, but claimed that they lacked a solid economic foundation which they deemed necessary for marriage. Thus they could not marry yet.<sup>590</sup> Young adults of all socioeconomic classes have a consensus on this to such a degree that cohabitation and gender researchers Sharon Sassler and Amanda Jayne Miller describe it as “a long-standing trope in literature” on young adults and modern intimacy that finances stand in the way of commitment.<sup>591</sup> In addition to wanting to marry when financially stable causing delay, Millennials start out having fewer assets and lower starting wages compared to generations past, thus also contributing to marriage delay.<sup>592</sup>

Kefalas and her team relate that “Marriage planners talk a great deal about being ready, or not, for marriage.[...] The planners’ focus on work, school, and even on raising children is [to them] fundamentally incompatible with the emotional labor required for the committed

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<sup>587</sup> Kefalas et al., 845. The role of education in determining whether or not one will be on a traditional adulthood pathway or an emerging adulthood ones is found by numerous researchers, such as in D. Wayne Osgood, Gretchen Ruth, Jacquelynn S. Eccles, Janis E. Jacobs, and Bonnie L. Barber, “Six Paths to Adulthood: Fast Starters, Parents without Careers, Educated Partners, Educated Singles, Working Singles, and Slow Starters,” *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, ed. Richard Settersten Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Ruben G. Rumbaut (Chicago; London: Chicago University Press, 2005), 344.

<sup>588</sup> Kefalas et al., 847, 857-58.

<sup>589</sup> Kefalas et al., 857; maturity was also frequently mentioned by respondents without solicitation by the researchers, in Willoughby and James, 58.

<sup>590</sup> Pew, “Millennials in Adulthood,” 5.

<sup>591</sup> Sharon Sassler and Amanda Jayne Miller, *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2017), 8; see also Janet Chen-Lan Kuo and R. Kelly Raley, “Is It All about Money? Work Characteristics and Women’s and Men’s Marriage Formation in Early Adulthood,” *Journal of Family Issues* 37, no. 8 (2016): 1046–1073; Jennifer Silva, *Coming up Short: Working-class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>592</sup> Coupled with astronomical student loan debt, lower assets, reduced earning power and the average price of a wedding approaching 40 thousand dollars, the argument that millennials are delaying marriage for financial reasons has some plausibility. See CNN Money, “Couples Now Spend More than \$30,000 to get Married,” March 12, 2015, <http://money.cnn.com/2015/03/12/pf/planning-for-wedding-costs/>; Essig notes that even engagement proposals these days are becoming high-priced production “events” that involve elaborate planning, family, and recording for posterity, Essig, 84.

relationships that survive into marriage.”<sup>593</sup> In order for planners to feel ready to wed, in addition to finances, people must know each other well and feel they fit together in terms of sharing a life. This involves having learned to communicate, make decisions together, and experience setbacks.<sup>594</sup> To have finances and self in check before marriage is now commonly called “a capstone marriage.” Others say that it is such a capstone to an accomplished life that marriage might as well be called as atop a pedestal rather than being just capstone.<sup>595</sup>

Brian Willoughby and Spencer James offer the first book-length inquiry into how and why contemporary young adults who do plan to marry deprioritize—and delay it—in their early adulthood in their 2017 *The Marriage Paradox*. They explicitly note that cognition about marriage in the minds of young adults affects how they live out their 20s. Specifically, rather than Millennials dismissing marriage as a value outright as some reports might make it seem, the authors describe the Millennial struggle to grapple with what marriage might mean in their lives as something they take rather seriously as an ever-present question. Based on their research, Willoughby and James find that their respondent pool feels that although their first answer is that there is no ideal age at which to marry, if pressed the ideal age to marry is 25. However, such an early achievement is often not possible.<sup>596</sup> Millennials still respect and value marriage and all that might come with it very deeply. This very respect leads them to enter into the arrangement with greater consideration and discernment than those in generations past.<sup>597</sup> As for the main reasons why they say they delay, according to research cited by journalist Jill Filipovic in 2017, of the unmarried today, a third say they have not found the right person, and about the same number cite finances.<sup>598</sup>

Willoughby and James’s *The Marriage Paradox* reveals in explicit detail that contemporary young adults doubt their ability to successfully juggle career, parenthood, and

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<sup>593</sup> Kefalas et al., 863.

<sup>594</sup> Kefalas et al., 864.

<sup>595</sup> As mentioned in Footnote 103 above, the standard of weddings as formal, once-in-a-lifetime personally tailored events has become such that persons frequently put off marriage in order to not be faced with orchestrating this event before they have the resources and ability to make this ceremony and its associated events into what they desire and others expect. For more, see Cele Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and Rebecca Mead, *One Perfect Day: The Selling of the American Wedding* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007).

<sup>596</sup> Willoughby and James, 52, 49.

<sup>597</sup> Willoughby and James, xvi.

<sup>598</sup> Filipovic, 141.

marital commitments.<sup>599</sup> Even though studies find that romantic ambitions rate in the top three areas of life hopes and fears,<sup>600</sup> they are willing to let marital commitments slip, if need be, to maintain a grip on everything else.<sup>601</sup> Summarized from a slightly different angle, it can be assessed that young adult Millennials feel this way in part because do not believe that a committed adult intimate partnership such as marriage will necessarily buoy them through life's rough waters better than they can move through them on their own. Because of the unpredictable fortune of a partner's fortune and the chance that they will walk away or turn bad, Millennials infer that adult partners are more likely to provide inertia to making the necessary changes to keep up with life than not.<sup>602</sup>

Millennial researcher Kate McGuire's study of 25 respondents explicitly say that they have doubts about whether the coming together of selves is possible and fruitful.<sup>603</sup> This is partially because they have not witnessed models in the personal lives that have shown the way,<sup>604</sup> and partly because they have a fundamental postmodern difficulty with postulating commonality and connection. McGuire's study supports what others find more generally speaking about how millennials find it difficult to arrive at a common conception of something as a generalized and objective. In her study, for instance, they have difficulty defining romantic love.<sup>605</sup> 64% of her respondents defined love as an emotional, physical, energetic connection,<sup>606</sup> with a higher percentage (78%) defining the feeling of love as "euphoric/unabridged passion/complete." She noted that 42% of her respondents defined romantic love as "Mutual

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<sup>599</sup> Willoughby and James, 16.

<sup>600</sup> Michael W. Pratt and M. Kyle Matsuba, *The Life Story, Domains of Identity, and Personality Development in Emerging Adulthood: Integrating Narrative and Traditional Approaches*, Emerging Adulthood, ed. Larry J. Nelson (New York; London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 226.

<sup>601</sup> Willoughby and James, 80; Kathleen Gerson finds a similar worry about juggling it all, but in the explicit context of desiring egalitarian relationships, Kathleen Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

<sup>602</sup> Erin Kramer Holmes, Geoffrey Brown, Kevin Schafer, and Nate Stoddard, "Healthy Transitions to Family Formation," *Flourishing in Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Laura M. Padilla-Walker and Larry J. Nelson, Emerging Adulthood (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 75.

<sup>603</sup> Kate McGuire, "Millennials' Perceptions of How Their Capacity for Romantic Love Developed and Manifests," Masters in Social Work Thesis (Northampton, Mass.: Smith College School for Social Work, 2015), 49.

<sup>604</sup> McGuire, 8, 31.

<sup>605</sup> McGuire, 27.

<sup>606</sup> McGuire, 26.



Respect/Partnering/Paired Decision.”<sup>607</sup> This last rating has highly relevant implications for discussing romance as a chance for love and justice in partnership.

McGuire’s study also discovered disconnect between how Millennials romanticize love relationships versus how they experience them, which may explain why they have doubts about a true love more lasting than a momentary connection.<sup>608</sup> She found that while respondents would say that they believed in “romantic love and security” and note older generations have serious, loyal and resilient romantic love relationships, the majority of millennials predominately experienced love as “transient, fostering conditional/superficial love [...] focused on instant gratification.”<sup>609</sup> Given their patchy grasping at how one gets from “connection” to “the real thing,” McGuire concludes that her data bolsters contemporary writer bell hooks’ claim in hooks’ *All About Love* that “the youth of today are chasing fantasy love in lieu of building solid, sustainable relationships based on true love.” She believes her data confirms hooks’ assessment that millennials are ““confused about the practice of love in everyday life.””<sup>610</sup> They are confused because they romanticize it at the same that they are also cynical about it.<sup>611</sup>

Willoughby and Spencer are inconclusive as to what all goes into this predictive horizon of a juggling act in which balls will drop. They describe predicting a future of painful choices and needing to let things slide in order to accomplish the goals of the life phase in front of them.<sup>612</sup> Contemporary young adults are so wedded to the individual life trajectories that they already see for themselves that they are, as Willoughby and James put it, looking for a partner who will “cause the least disruption in their daily lives.”<sup>613</sup> Despite the strong themes of staunch individualism appearing in the narratives of their respondents, Willoughby and James, speculate that this “paradox” of respect for and delay of marriage in young adults might have to do with the romantic nature with which young people view marriage.

A poll reported that 82% of Millennials describe their close partner as their “soul mate.” In this same study, respondents also reported that they do not feel like they are settling on

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<sup>607</sup> McGuire, 25.

<sup>608</sup> McGuire, 61.

<sup>609</sup> McGuire, 42, 47.

<sup>610</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Perennial, 2001, xviii), quoted by McGuire, 7.

<sup>611</sup> hooks, *All About Love*, xviii, cited by McGuire, 1, 60.

<sup>612</sup> Willoughby and James, 76-81.

<sup>613</sup> Willoughby and James, 106.

partners, but are in a relationship close to what they were looking for.<sup>614</sup> Other studies confirm contemporary young people's strong belief in true love, particularly the idea that God has a person picked out for them.<sup>615</sup> Researcher of contemporary culture Jennifer Silva noted that her working-class young adult respondents described marriage as "therapeutic," seeking to find this inner right mind and emotions as the key to much of what ails them, and seeking this path to healing in a partnership as well, as long as it did not cost them too much.<sup>616</sup> Yet Silva bemoaned this ideal as out of reach for the working class,<sup>617</sup> something with which cohabitation researchers Sassler and Miller agree.<sup>618</sup>

### *Defining purposes of contemporary marriage*

Multiple studies find that Millennials typically define marriage as a relationship aiming for mutual satisfaction.<sup>619</sup> Contemporary marriages are also often framed and influenced by a greater degree of autonomy between the partners than in the past, resulting in a different form of interdependence which bisects across both work and domestic life for each member of the couple in various ways across their life course.<sup>620</sup> Feminist sociologist Kathleen Gerson quotes one of her respondents from some of her earlier research regarding what one must bring into and expect out of a modern marriage.

Shauna, a 30-year-old African-American who was raised by her mother and stepfather, explains: 'If you're not happy with yourself, then you can't be happy with someone else. I'm not looking for someone to fill a void. I think that's what a lot of people do when they look for relationships, and that's not what it's about. It's about sharing yourself with

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<sup>614</sup> States News Service, "Clark Poll: Married or Not, Most Grown-up Millennials say they have 'Soul Mate,'" December 3, 2014, Academic OneFile; Ansari points out that "soul mate" is a relatively modern luxury, when in the past a partner would have been selected for being "good enough," Ansari, 20-22.

<sup>615</sup> Pratt and Matsuba, 239.

<sup>616</sup> Silva, 57, 19, 25.

<sup>617</sup> Silva, 24.

<sup>618</sup> Sassler and Miller, 192-193.

<sup>619</sup> Konstam, 1; Historian Stephanie Coontz notes that today people expect tremendous, unprecedented amounts of fulfillment, love, equity, intimacy, and fidelity in romantic partnership. As a historian, she relativizes that while in the past persons may have wanted to have had such aspirations, but could not have afforded to act upon them given constrained choices, Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy Or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 9; Essig notes that a cultural belief that one could be safe and happy through romantic love started in the industrial period in the form it is now, in Essig, 5; Barbara Risman, *Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47.

<sup>620</sup> Konstam, 326.

the more of yourself to someone else, and that's the type of person that I want to be with.<sup>621</sup>

Also on the list of what to expect of an intimate relationship, Konstam writes that in their lifestory interviews, her emerging adult respondents said that they discovered—with experience—that it was important to have the ability to rest and be real in the relationship. They noted that to be self-conscious all the time is unsustainable.<sup>622</sup> These young adults also reported learning that a true intimate relationship takes time, investment, and energy. As one respondent put it, she now sees that a romantic partner must be “more than a hobby.”<sup>623</sup> Konstam's respondents described a good relationship as involving a daily caring of the other person's day-to-day life, including its inherent stresses, joys and fears.<sup>624</sup>

Part of this involves an expectation for greater egalitarianism than in partnerships past. Feminist sociologist Kathleen Gerson notes of young adults she interviewed in for her book *The Unfinished Revolution*, “Most of my interviewees hope to create lasting, egalitarian partnerships, but they are also doubtful about their chances of reaching this goal [...]. Far from rejecting the value of commitment, almost everyone wants to create a lasting marriage or marriage-like relationship.”<sup>625</sup> Both men and women, expect to work and contribute at home in their future romantic relationships. Gerson quotes Michael, a 26-year-old African American raised by his working-class single mother:

I don't want the fifties type of marriage, where I come home with a briefcase and she's cooking. She doesn't have to cook. I just want her to have a career of her own. I want things to be comfortable. And somewhere down the line, if I lose my job or things start going crazy in the marriage, I want to be able to set my goals, and she can do what she wants, because we both have this economic base and the attitude to do it. That's what marriage is about.<sup>626</sup>

While the ability for everyone being able to “do what they want” is a new definition of marriage, most family studies research supports the idea that younger generations desire relationships of

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<sup>621</sup> Kathleen Gerson, “Moral Dilemmas, Moral Strategies and the Transformation of Gender: Lessons from Two Generations of Work and Family Change” 1998 Sociologists for Women in Society Feminist Lecture reprinted in *Gender and Society* 16, no. 1 (February 2002): 24-25.

<sup>622</sup> Konstam, 31.

<sup>623</sup> Konstam, 92.

<sup>624</sup> Konstam, 10.

<sup>625</sup> Gerson, *Unfinished Revolution*, 10-11.

<sup>626</sup> Gerson, “Moral Dilemmas,” 16.

flexibility, in terms of gender and prospects of work-home engagement being more flexibly divided.<sup>627</sup> Hence, the desire and expectation of partnership is flexibility, not erasure of gender roles as if a point on a political manifesto. Gerson notes that the young people she interviews want adaptable, equitable relationships. Respondent Amy had to say:

I want a fifty-fifty relationship, where we both have the potential of doing everything. Both of us working, and in dealing with kids, it would be a matter of who has more flexibility with regard to their career. And if neither does, then one of us will have to sacrifice for one period, and the other for another.<sup>628</sup>

Willoughby and James see one of the generational changes appearing in contemporary young adults they studied is that they are on the whole less willing to make sacrifices for each other, nor do they expect it from a partner. This holds true, to some degree, at any stage of the relationship.<sup>629</sup> Willoughby and James write that “For many [contemporary young adults], the idea of having a partner on which to rely, someone to help you through the ups and downs of life, sounds almost like a fairytale.”<sup>630</sup> They are always planning for contingencies and fall back options, but not ones that necessarily involve leaning on each other, regardless of gender. Where gender does come into play in terms of Life Plan Bs, Gerson describes this conundrum as men and women having similar ideals, but different experiences of what it is like to achieve them and what to do when they fall short.<sup>631</sup>

## **Avoidance, practice, and trial**

### *The stress of college, in brief*

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<sup>627</sup> Bonnie Fox, *When Couples become Parents: The Creation of Gender in the Transition to Parenthood* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2009); K. O. Mason and Y-H Lu, “Attitudes toward Women’s Familial Roles: Changes in the United States, 1977– 1985,” *Gender and Society* 2 (1988): 39-57; J. Zuo and S. Tang, “Breadwinner Status and Gender Ideologies of Men and Women regarding Family Roles,” *Sociological Perspectives* 43 (2000): 29-43, cited by Marla Kohlman and Dana B. Krieg, “Introduction: Intersectional Dynamics of Gender, Family, and Work,” *Notions of Family: Intersectional Perspectives*, ed. Marla Kohlman, Dana B. Krieg, and Bette J. Dickerson (Bingley, Great Britain: Emerald Group, 2013), xv.

<sup>628</sup> Gerson, “Moral Dilemmas,” 16.

<sup>629</sup> Willoughby and James, 16.

<sup>630</sup> Willoughby and James, 37.

<sup>631</sup> Gerson, *Unfinished Revolution*, 102-05.

Christian ethics professor Jennifer Beste, along with her student researchers, finds that intimate interactions at college are often alcohol-influenced. Students report that alcohol allows for a pseudo-openness to connection that students feel they often cannot achieve otherwise.<sup>632</sup> They also engage in drug and sexual behavior hoping that it will help relieve stress.<sup>633</sup> It is clear from the many reports of how much of college life is spent drunk these days, as well as the sexual interactions that go on during inebriation, that young adults find college environment as incredibly stress-inducing.<sup>634</sup> It is often described that college students work and party with equal hard core intensity.<sup>635</sup> As one of Beste's student researchers, Ella, had to say:

Hookups have become a source of relief for stressed-out college students that need some way to relax and forget their daily struggles. I think many college students have become so stressed out with their classes, job searching, and pursuit for friendships that they began to view the casual hookups on the weekends as a relief from all that stress. It gives them a chance to finally let their hair down and have sex with a random stranger that they won't have to deal with back in their daily life. They do not want another person that will cause them stress during the school week, so they need to find someone they can hook up with and forget about.<sup>636</sup>

At parties, contemporary young adults want their behavior to be "no strings attached," meaning that they would prefer to pretend as if their behavior in this context will not have consequences or require an expectation of follow-up in the context of their sober, weekday lives.<sup>637</sup>

In the classes in which students are assigned as ethnographers at college parties, Beste and her students discuss the fact that how college students interact in alcohol soaked environments bears little resemblance to how they would handle a romantic or sexual interaction in a sober context. Numerous researchers have noted that while there is an air of presumed belief

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<sup>632</sup> Jennifer Erin Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 162.

<sup>633</sup> Much more needs to be done in terms of researching millennial stress relief strategies. This is beyond the scope of the current project.

<sup>634</sup> Beste, 169; Extant scholarly literature on young and emerging adults has typically spotlighted behaviors, rather than theorize about the underlying intersection of anxiety and human developmental positioning that has led to them. For books that focus on risky sexual behaviors, drug-use and how college climates fuel or inhibit these behaviors, in addition to Beste, see Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2008); Jason King, *Faith with Benefits: Hook Up Culture on Catholic Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>635</sup> Freitas, *Happiness*, 12.

<sup>636</sup> Beste, 152.

<sup>637</sup> Beste, 64-66.

in gender equality among college students, actual behavior tells an entirely different story. Much of intimate social interaction is *highly* gendered.<sup>638</sup> Beste makes it clear in her book that she finds a significant decline in gender equality in comparison to college students of generations past when it comes to sex and negotiating the terms of intimate relationships.<sup>639</sup>

Pressures to use college as a time for exploration and yet also safeguard and prepare for a fluid future has resulted in people declaring they do not have time for nor interest in serious relationships. They feel like they already have too much responsibility.<sup>640</sup> Contemporary young adults are also often actively encouraged by parents not to be serious with someone at college for the purposes of focusing on school, exploration, and not limiting one's options prematurely.<sup>641</sup> Many young adults themselves do not even want to have serious relationships in early adulthood because even a partner can be seen as shutting off options to pursue self-development. Respondent Eileen noted, "Increasingly I see the way that my father has these expectations for us because we're his daughters that he doesn't have for his son. The expectation that marriage should be on my radar that I should be looking for someone to settle down with, even though I'm twenty. Kind of the more family-based goals that he thinks I should have but I don't."<sup>642</sup> Yet regardless of the type of pressure young adults feel from their parents, sex without commitment is still seen as appealing, becoming the common denominator of behavior.

When evangelical parents pressure their children to either marry or forestall marriage intensively, note family studies scholars Dwight Peterson and Kim Peterson, this can pressure children to consider hook-up culture and casual sex to be a next-best option to engaging in open dating or allowing one's self to be swept away before other facets of life are in place. As Peterson and Peterson comment, according to some of their evangelical students, "It is

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<sup>638</sup> Risman, 301; See also Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (New York: WW Norton, 2017); Bogle, 165, 173.

<sup>639</sup> Beste, 101.

<sup>640</sup> The recent spotlight upon sexual assault during adolescence and college has done some to draw attention to the frequency and severity of what it means to party to relieve stress and responsibility to such a degree, and the lasting impact this has on lives. Yet much of this focus remains on consent and communication strategies between men and women, rather than the factors that drive persons to this behavior and these environments in the first place. Yet few students in research older than the past few years, surprising even to the researchers who interview them, connect college party life to sexual assault, in King, 11;

<sup>641</sup> Vandegrift, 34-35.

<sup>642</sup> Alison Dahl Crossley, *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution* (New York University Press, 2017), 35.

permissible, therefore, to pursue sex, but love must at all costs be delayed, lest some premature commitment derail one's life or career."<sup>643</sup> The encouragement of exploration also feeds into practices of casual sex and hooking up as a way to "explore" with very little commitment. Freitas writes that the students she speaks with "know that to admit you care means that something is wrong with you. You have failed at having sex during college."<sup>644</sup> Yet, even when they sober, Beste finds that contemporary young adults flounder when it comes to discerning sexual ethics guidelines by which they might live.<sup>645</sup>

Beste's students describe the importance of adhering to certain social scripts with definite gender roles in order to receive affirmation at college, particularly in party situations. For instance, there is considerable encouragement for women to look sexually enticing no matter the situation or their relationship status.<sup>646</sup> In stark contrast, male appearances had to be very casual so that they did not look like they were trying too hard or could possibly come off as looking gay.<sup>647</sup> In addition to appearances, while it seemed like men had greater choice in this area, if they wanted to be a player, acting dominant over women was considered the only way to get them in any particular number.<sup>648</sup> Student after student described scripts of a pursuer and the pursued as something from which people did not deviate from if they wanted sex or social affirmation.<sup>649</sup> They adhered to this script to such a degree that they often never questioned it, and never thought about what they might wish about a sexual encounter to be different.

### *Dating, for fun and diversion*

Researcher of the college hook up culture Kathleen Bogle noted that college graduates often encountered dating as a new experience and needed skill for the first time since casual sex

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<sup>643</sup> Margaret Kim Peterson and Dwight Peterson, *Are you waiting for "The One?" Cultivating Realistic, Positive Expectations for Christian Marriage* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 17; echoed in King, 9.

<sup>644</sup> Donna Freitas, *Consent on Campus: A Manifesto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 44.

<sup>645</sup> Beste devotes the second half of her book to taking what her students have learned from observing their own college party and hookup culture and putting it in conversation with Roman Catholic ethicist Margaret Farley's guidelines for Just Love, as well as Roman Catholic theologian Johann Metz's idea of poverty of the spirit; echoed in King, 160.

<sup>646</sup> Beste 21, 72-78.

<sup>647</sup> Beste, 51.

<sup>648</sup> Beste, 52.

<sup>649</sup> Beste, 57; Bogle, 7.

was such a predominant sexual script on college campuses that it mainly precluded other forms of relationship.<sup>650</sup> Away from their tight social networks and easy access to other people at their age and stage of life, Bogle found that young adults become more sexually conservative and reticent about safety in their new, non-dormitory life.<sup>651</sup> Ansari notes that it was after college that many of his friends found their long-term mate.<sup>652</sup>

Given the pressure that Millennials feel in general, however, and the demands of marriage they perceive are awaiting them, even after college, rather than prepare for a married future while in their 20s, Millennials largely date for fun and exploration.<sup>653</sup> Yet a drive to have fun did not always eliminate the need to perform in some manner, be it in a dating profile, while getting to know someone online, or in person. Konstam's respondents frequently found it difficult to get the truth about a person in dating situations. They wanted to get to know the real person rather than the performance.<sup>654</sup>

Hyper-pressure of performance has always been a factor in American match making situations, yet increasingly people are dating others whom they find online and with whom they have no common social contacts. Studies note that 21% of respondents to a poll said they have used an internet dating service.<sup>655</sup> Other studies find nearly a third of long-term relationships begin online these days.<sup>656</sup> As young adult Emanuel Griffin writes in his brief advice column, "The Six Commandments for Sliding into a Girl's DM" (Direct Message):

1. Thou shall be confident.
2. Thou shall do your research
3. Thou shall be direct
4. Thou shall not send or ask for nudes (DUH- my editorial comment),
5. Thou shall proofread before sending.
6. Thou shall not double message.<sup>657</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Bogle, 121.

<sup>651</sup> Bogle, 131.

<sup>652</sup> Ansari, 16.

<sup>653</sup> David T. Gortner, *Varieties of Personal Theology: Charting the Beliefs and Values of American Young Adults* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 303-304; Willoughby and Spencer, 13.

<sup>654</sup> Konstam, 118.

<sup>655</sup> States News Service.

<sup>656</sup> Holmes et al., 72.

<sup>657</sup> Emanuel Griffin, "The Six Commandments for Sliding into a Girl's DM" *Left Swipes and Love: A Millennial's Guide to Hookups, Dating, and Tinder*, ed. Amanda Nachman and Daniel Kuhn (No location: College Magazine, 2016), 36-37.



Konstam's respondents echo Griffin's second commandment of research. Everyone researches a potential dating partner for what they can find online about them, commonly citing that they have a presumed social responsibility not to accept that information at face value.<sup>658</sup> As Ansari quips about how nervous people get about waiting through gaps in response, "Sometimes there's another reason that people take so long to text you back: They aren't playing mind games or busy. They're just GOOGLING THE FUCK OUT OF YOU." He noted that in a 2011 survey, 80% of millennials admitted to doing internet research on the person before the first date.<sup>659</sup> Donna Freitas found that even Conservative Jews engaged online dating platforms, even though their families were involved and their profiles included a resume of family status and history as well as information on the individual.<sup>660</sup> Thus using the internet and creating internet dating profiles was often ubiquitous across cultures.

Aldrich suggests in her advice column for modern love that people should "stalk to an appropriate level" by learning more about a person through finding what is available on social media and the internet.<sup>661</sup> Profile information is expected to be remembered and analyzed. Aldrich continues her advice: "Actually read his Tinder bio," she encourages, in order to search for commonalities so that when making contact with the person this similarity can be mentioned.<sup>662</sup> What similarities one might look for differ depending on whether one is looking for a good time or a more serious potential marriage partner.

In the doing the research for *The Marriage Paradox*, Willoughby and James discovered that contemporary young adults seek different characteristics in their dating partners compared to their marriage partners, indicating a characterological divide between what contemporary young adults see themselves doing while dating as opposed to in marriage.<sup>663</sup> They found that when it comes to criteria for potential marriage partners, young adults shift their desire away from an

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<sup>658</sup> Konstam, 119-120.

<sup>659</sup> Ansari, 64.

<sup>660</sup> Freitas, *Happiness*, 184.

<sup>661</sup> Aldrich, 15.

<sup>662</sup> Aldrich, 15-16.

<sup>663</sup> For instance, Konstam, writing after Willoughby and James, and likely partially in response to them as they published books in the same Oxford series, finds that amongst contemporary young adults there is a common belief that dating couples should not have to make sacrifices for each other, but marital couples absolutely should, 93; I wonder if there is a partial-way point of openness to sacrifice as ethically okay in cohabitating relationships, or if this expectation of greater sacrifice arrives with the wedding bells or engagement ring.

exciting partner toward one who is dependable and capable.<sup>664</sup> The researchers note that as the prospect of marriage becomes more realistic as age and stability are acquired, Millennials switch from seeking dating partners to dating to screen potential marriage partners, but do not offer reasons for why this switch is so drastic and the qualities sought after in partner so bifurcated by type of relationship.<sup>665</sup>

Willoughby and Spencer confirm the findings that young adults feel that dating is for lighthearted entertainment and diversion. Young adults themselves say that they seek persons who are creative, confident, and self-loving, and this is particularly attractive if men can beat the stereotypical odds to have these characteristics.<sup>666</sup> Dating is also done for reasons of affirmation of attractiveness, according to Konstam.<sup>667</sup> Thus, contemporary young adults pursue dating partners who are fun and who will hopefully think they are fun as well.<sup>668</sup> Following this line of behavior, sociologist of contemporary intimate life Mark Regnerus writes with a bit of edge and accuracy that “young Americans are not practicing to be married, but rather hoping to someday wake up in it.”<sup>669</sup> Researcher of emerging adults Varda Konstam infers that the diversity of life course no longer makes marriage a guarantee or a necessity, so seeing dating as practice may not be necessary.<sup>670</sup>

### *Cohabitation, for trial and equity*

Since marriage is such a capstone phenomenon for young adults today, a considerable number of them engage in cohabitation instead. Since the early 1980s, when cohabitation became legal state by state across the nation, and also destigmatized to a great degree, the numbers of people cohabitating across all demographic slices of America has skyrocketed.<sup>671</sup>

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<sup>664</sup> Willoughby and James, 12-14, 90-92.

<sup>665</sup> Willoughby and James, 89-90; author’s personal conversation with Willoughby at the biennial Society of the Study of Emerging Adulthood conference, Washington, D.C., November 2017.

<sup>666</sup> Max Dietz, “Boost your Confidence and Get the Girl,” *Left Swipes and Love: A Millennial’s Guide to Hookups, Dating, and Tinder*, edited by Amanda Nachman and Daniel Kuhn (No location: College Magazine, 2016), 6.

<sup>667</sup> Konstam, 117.

<sup>668</sup> Willoughby and James, 89-92.

<sup>669</sup> Regnerus, 174.

<sup>670</sup> Konstam, 323.

<sup>671</sup> Elizabeth H. Pleck, *Not Just Roommates: Cohabitation after the Sexual Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 14, 19; Other cohabitation scholars such as Maureen Baker and Vivienne Elizabeth indicate that prior to 1980s government did not collect statistics on rates of cohabitation because it was socially frowned

Poignantly, 2013 marked a watershed year in which as many people were living together outside of marriage as they were living together within.<sup>672</sup> Arnett describes few emerging adults as having moral qualms about cohabitating for they often do not see it as a moral issue.<sup>673</sup> Many young adults do believe, however, that it is better to not marry at all than it is to marry and then divorce. Often this specter of relationship dissolution encourages people to cohabit, whether as an alternative to marriage entirely, or to test the relationship first.<sup>674</sup>

Many young adults see cohabitation, without specific plans to progress the relationship into marital commitment, as a gradual and pragmatic route of increasing commitment nonetheless in a world in which everything else necessarily moves at a fast pace. While greater sexual permissiveness has become standard across generational lines, parents are nonetheless often thoroughly against non-committed cohabitating.<sup>675</sup> Yet many scholars of cohabitation note the fact that cohabitation is so easy to engage means that marriage can even further be reserved for providing a capstone to an accomplished or mature life.<sup>676</sup>

Scholars often comment that cohabitation is an ambiguous form of union, although they often have different reasons for describing it as such.<sup>677</sup> Part of this is because there are at least 3-5 types of cohabitation, depending on which scholarship is used.<sup>678</sup> Some scholars argue that there might even need to be more nuance of categorization than that to truly explore the

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upon as a union and numbers were small, Maureen Baker and Vivienne Elizabeth, *Marriage in an Age of Cohabitation: How and When People Tie the Knot in the Twenty-First Century* (Don Mills, Canada: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>672</sup> Rob Stein, "Study: Record Number of People Are Cohabitating," *National Public Radio*, April 4, 2013. <http://www.npr.org/2013/04/04/176203263/study-record-number-of-people-are-cohabitating>, accessed March 1, 2015.

<sup>673</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 111.

<sup>674</sup> Pleck, 231; Willoughby and James found this "testing" true not only of a need for residency before marriage, but also sexual experience with said partner, 22.

<sup>675</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 111; P.M. Huang, P.J. Smock, W.D. Manning, C.A. Bergstrom-Lynch, "He Says, She Says: Gender and Cohabitation," *Journal of Family Issues* 37 no.7 (2011): 876-905 cited in Holmes et al., 78.

<sup>676</sup> Pleck, 230.

<sup>677</sup> Sociologist Andrew Cherlin in 1992 called cohabitation an "incomplete institution" because of its rapid change of typologies, its diversity of meanings, and its lack of roles, rules, laws, a fact cited by sociologists Lynette Hoelter and Dawn Stauffer. They note that this paucity of observable patterns may have more to do with finessing research approaches to capturing such dynamism rather than assuming that they do exist because they are less institutional and formal, Lynette F. Hoelter and Dawn E. Stauffer, "What does it mean to be 'Just Living Together' in the New Millennium? An Overview," *Just Living Together: Implications of Cohabitation on Families, Children, and Social Policy*, ed. Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter, Pennsylvania State University Family Studies Symposia (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 256.

<sup>678</sup> Pleck, 19.

phenomenon accurately.<sup>679</sup> Relationships researcher Scott M. Stanley and his fellow researchers apportion cohabitation numerically into thirds, in which a third of those in cohabitation talked about and planned it, a third slid into it with some conversation, and a third simply found themselves in it without much deliberation at all.<sup>680</sup> Multiple other studies gauge the portion of cohabitating couples who do not discuss moving in together explicitly before doing so at 50%.<sup>681</sup> Other scholars put cohabitation into typologies by purpose, rather than planning, although the effects of classification between these various types may in fact be redundant in proportion. Social psychologist Patricia Noller and her colleagues see three types of purpose: “trial cohabitation,” liberal cohabitation (an anti-marriage ideology), and de facto relationships.<sup>682</sup>

Research indicates that two thirds of couples married since the beginning of the new century live together before their wedding, but this speaks more to what people do as an entry into marriage than what cohabitation as a phenomenon itself consists of.<sup>683</sup> Numerous scholars including Noller highlight that there is a belief among young adults that “living together erodes unrealistic illusions about the partner” and thus helps in mate selection.<sup>684</sup> Yet there is considerable debate over what data from empirical studies shows as to whether or not a “trial” attitude is effective as a deterrent to relationship dissolution or can serve adequately as a mechanism for confronting and evaluating the solidity and resilience of the partnership before becoming formally committed.<sup>685</sup> Yet, because so many young people on their way to marriage

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<sup>679</sup> Baker and Elizabeth, 177; Hoetler and Stauffer, 255.

<sup>680</sup> Scott M. Stanley, Galena K. Rhoades, and Frank D. Fincham, “Understanding Romantic Relationships among Emerging Adults: The Significant Roles of Cohabitation and Ambiguity,” *Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Frank D. Fincham and Ming Cui (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 236.

<sup>681</sup> Avidan Milevsky, Kristie Thudium, and Jillian Guldin, *The Transitory Nature of Parent, Sibling, and Romantic Partner Relationships*, Emerging Adulthood Springer Briefs in Well-being and Quality of Life Research (Cham: Springer, 2014), 41; W. D. Manning and Pamela J. Smock, “Measuring and Modeling Cohabitation: New Perspectives from Qualitative Data,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (2005): 989-1002.

<sup>682</sup> S. Sarantakos, *Modern Families* (Melbourne, Australia: Macmillan, 1992), quoted by Patricia Noller, Judith A. Feeney, and Candida Peterson, *Personal Relationships across the Lifespan*, International Series in Social Psychology (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001), 86-87.

<sup>683</sup> Sassler and Miller, 1.

<sup>684</sup> Noller et al., 87; Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 62.

<sup>685</sup> Cohabiting unions which never turn into marriage have highest rate of dissolution say several authors, including Hoetler and Stauffer, 257.

believe in a live-in trial period and the convenience and frugality of being under one roof, cohabitation has been described as “a new stage of the courtship system.”<sup>686</sup>

While most young adults by and large are in cohabitation for convenience, some millennials decline to get married because they do not think a ceremony would change the way they feel about each other,<sup>687</sup> fitting into the second of Noller’s typologies, of an “ideological” approach which is anti-marriage. Arnett notes that most young adults who marry have known their partner for years, possibly lived with them, and do not feel more adult when they marry, yet they do see marriage as a natural continuation of their relationship.<sup>688</sup> Other researchers found that the majority of emerging adults still value marriage over cohabitation, as they value the sense of permanence it can give.<sup>689</sup> Baker and Elizabeth note that generally those who marry after cohabitating feel emotionally more secure and that their relationship is more socially recognized as significant.<sup>690</sup>

The third category of de facto relationships often describe the youngest of those who cohabitate. The age of these persons might explain in part why the primary reasons the majority of people give for their status of cohabitation are finances, convenience, and taking advantages of changes in housing situation of the partners as leases expire.<sup>691</sup> It might also explain why researchers of contemporary cohabitation Maureen Baker and Vivienne Elizabeth, not alone in this observation comment that cohabitation, at least to contemporary denizens of the form, ironically, does not require much communication nor necessarily signify an advanced level of commitment in the relationship (although it often does).<sup>692</sup> As mentioned earlier, cohabitation still has some stigma of being a foolhardy engagement, in part not just because of its youthful association, but rather because it used to be associated with a causal link to divorce. However, in

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<sup>686</sup> R.M. Cate and S.A. Lloyd, *Courtship* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992), 30, cited by Noller et al., 86; Baker and Elizabeth, 39.

<sup>687</sup> Baker and Elizabeth, 148.

<sup>688</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 208; Baker and Elizabeth say 3-5 years, on average, 41.

<sup>689</sup> Holmes et al., 75-78.

<sup>690</sup> Baker and Elizabeth, 147.

<sup>691</sup> Progression of the relationship to more intensity and enmeshment is given as a primary reason for cohabitation in a strong minority of cases, Fiona Rose-Greenland and Pamela J. Smock, “Living Together Unmarried: What do we know about Cohabiting Families?” *Handbook of Marriage and Family*, third edition, Gary W. Peterson and Kevin R. Bush editors (New York: Springer, 2013), 264.

<sup>692</sup> Baker and Elizabeth, 6, 8, 9, 14, 147.

recent years new perspectives and research has shown that age of entry into a relationship of cohabitation has always been the determining predictive factor, not cohabitation itself.<sup>693</sup> The increased number of people who cohabit, regardless the reason, type or purpose, indicates a greater societal level of informality of intimate engagement. This shows up in other areas of intimacy as well.

*Casual Sexual Encounters: A common practice, yet hardly intimacy*

Some researchers indicate that traditional one-one-one formal dating is being supplanted by a variety of other, more casual ways of getting to know someone. These types include hanging out in groups or in doing something in common, but not necessarily in a way in which one is primarily trying to get know someone, dating strictly through online mediation rather than in person.<sup>694</sup> Also common is “stay over relationships,” which involve spending the night at the other’s residence anywhere from one to seven nights a week, but does not include sharing finances, keys, or responsibility in the maintenance of the residence.<sup>695</sup>

Lastly, in terms of types of intimate sexual relationships there is the phenomenon of “hooking up.” This is defined as casual sexual acts of some sort with little to no expectation of an emotional connection or ongoing relationship outside of the one-time or occasional encounter.<sup>696</sup> As mentioned earlier, this is a trend particularly dominant in college party environments, although it does occur in other settings. Researchers note that 60% to 80% of emerging adults have had some sort of hook up experience.<sup>697</sup> Yet despite press attention which might give the impression to the contrary, few regularly engage in such practices. There is a general consensus that while there is a “no-strings attached” expectation around sexual encounters is dominant, few students reported enjoying hook ups or had positive things to say

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<sup>693</sup> Cohabitation used to be associated with a causal link to divorce, Stephanie Hanes, “Best Predictor of Divorce? Age when Couples Cohabit, Study says,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2014/0310/Best-predictor-of-divorce-Age-when-couples-cohabit-study-says>.

<sup>694</sup> Holmes et al. note that while young adults find meaning and purpose in hanging out, it would be helpful to have research which examines the long-term role of hanging out and relationship formation, 71.

<sup>695</sup> T. Jamison and L. Ganong, “‘We’re not Living Together:’ Stayover Relationships among College-educated Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 28 (2011): 536-557, cited by Milevsky et al., 41.

<sup>696</sup> King, 15; Bogle, 2, 25.

<sup>697</sup> Holmes et al., 72; King, 5-6.

about them.<sup>698</sup> In fact, Beste writes, “many have suffered profoundly from hook up norms, and the forms of sexual violence that frequently occur at parties.”<sup>699</sup> She and her students described college parties as places where the normalcy of hook ups and sexual assaults encouraged aggressive male behavior and hypersexualization of women.<sup>700</sup>

As Freitas notes, one young woman she met at a dinner associated with one of her campus talks confided with her that “when you are hooking up with someone, it’s, like, a competition not to care.”<sup>701</sup> The young woman’s tablemates and colleagues readily agreed to this assessment, and summed it up as “maintaining power is key during a hook up.”<sup>702</sup> Feminist scholars have noted that women achieving and maintain sexual agency, at least of some sort, is seen as crucial to the development of new femininities.<sup>703</sup> This assertion of sexual agency by females is a change from generations past, and involves complicated layers of liberation, continued complicity in subjugation, and external and internal validation.<sup>704</sup>

There are many critics of hook-up culture. Freitas is slightly different from the rest in her level of psychological sympathy for why, despite all the reason not to, students continue to engage in and believe in hook-up culture. She describes the “hook-up-in-theory” that students idealize as involving free, liberated, equal sex, a fantasy that they want to live.<sup>705</sup> She goes on to say that hooking up as a practice and expectation encourages self-emptying and the idea that sex is meaningless. No one is supposed to actually care about their real desire.<sup>706</sup> Freitas is among scholars who feel that hook up culture, by dampening all emotions and discouraging any acknowledgement of vulnerability, inculcates shame, and teaches young adults to perform something they are far from actually feeling.<sup>707</sup> Some also point out the gendered double

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<sup>698</sup> King, 5-6.

<sup>699</sup> Beste, 13.

<sup>700</sup> Beste, 21, 43, 52, 72, 78.

<sup>701</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 42.

<sup>702</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 43.

<sup>703</sup> Feona Attwood, “Through the Looking Glass? Sexual Agency and Subjectification Online,” *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, edited by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Houndmills; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 203.

<sup>704</sup> According to sociologist Rosalind Gill, “From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualization of Women’s Bodies in the Media,” *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 1, 104, cited by Atwood, 204.

<sup>705</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 85.

<sup>706</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 86.

<sup>707</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 89, 88.

standards that still occur in hook up culture despite a fantastical allure of gender equality due to sexual agency.<sup>708</sup> While this may or may not have been different from how young adults approached sexual behavior in the past, if the contemporary goal is a self-actualized adult, these practices indicate that college students are far from the prize.<sup>709</sup>

Freitas finds that there is a general consensus around college students, of both genders, that “love makes you weak,” therefore they approach longing for love and intimacy, which they do long for, as embarrassing.<sup>710</sup> While they are scared of vulnerability in general, they also do not bring much reflection to the game of college “love.” For instance, Freitas notes that it does not occur to them to ask what good sex is, but they assume it involves not being “clingy” afterwards.<sup>711</sup> Beste found her students were more interested in avoiding the stress that relationships can bring, but they too were scared of this for reasons of vulnerability. Today in the young adult lexicon is the term “to catch feelings,” which describes an experience of discovering interest in someone unexpectedly. This surprise is often associated with the fact that by default, one is not supposed to care or be interested in another romantically, thus to “catch feelings” has an air of inappropriate shame about it.<sup>712</sup>

However, when it comes to sex rather than love or feelings, Arnett notes that, in general there is openness to sex and a lack of stigma about it among contemporary young adults, as long as there is not “too much” or “too early,” though how young adults define these terms is vague.<sup>713</sup> Researchers note that Millennials actually have less sex than previous generations at their age.<sup>714</sup> Theologian David Gortner commented that for the vast majority of contemporary

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<sup>708</sup> Bogle, 125, 181-183; Freitas, *Consent*, 80.

<sup>709</sup> Freitas likens the amount of conformity and pressure of hook up culture, compared to what people actually want, to the sexual restrictions of the 1950s, in *Consent*, 79.

<sup>710</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 90-91.

<sup>711</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 94, 92

<sup>712</sup> “Catch Feelings,” *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=catch%20feelings>.

<sup>713</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 5.

<sup>714</sup> Jean M. Twenge, Ryne A. Sherman, and Brooke E. Wells, “Sexual Inactivity During Young Adulthood Is More Common Among U.S. Millennials and iGen: Age, Period, and Cohort Effects on Having No Sexual Partners After Age 18,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 46 (2017): 433-440; Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, 3rd ed. (Vintage, 2000), cited by Jessica Grose, “Generation Scold: Why Millennials are so Judgmental about Promiscuity,” *Slate*, April 15, 2010.

[http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2010/04/generation\\_scold.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2010/04/generation_scold.html); Karen Kaplan, “The Paradox of Millennial Sex: More Casual Hookups, Fewer Partners,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sci-sn-millennials-sex-attitudes-20150508-story.html>; Tom Jacobs,



young adults, research bore out that fact that the practice of premarital sex is inconsequential to affecting or being affected by personal theologies.<sup>715</sup>

Given the informality with which getting to know someone can take place, often persons feel they must have a “DTR,” a talk which “Defines the Relationship,” because nothing is taken for granted, or assumed, but all must be negotiated, even if not directly verbally.<sup>716</sup> Relationship advocates and queer millennials themselves Nastassja Schmiedt and Lea Roth authored *Millennial Sex Education: I’ve Never Done This Before* in 2015 to help their peers and those who come after them navigate this terrain of discernment and negotiation. They describe their effort to revamp relationship and sexuality culture using the book as a cornerstone for workshops as an attempt to “cultivat[e] a revolution in millennial consciousness” through “story-based consent, gender and sexuality education.” The fact that they discuss consent and gender first as a way to get into sexuality education puts their focus on relationships in a refreshing and inspiring way. It attempts to teach people skills to figure out who they are relationally, what they want, and how to negotiate with an intimate partner receiving what they want.

Yet as youth and religion researchers Christian Smith and Patricia Snell remark, even with explicit discussions to define the relationship, it “does not seem to happen often or effectively. [...] Mostly they seem to simply go along and try their best to figure out what’s going on.”<sup>717</sup> Confusion and tension around these matters reign supreme for most contemporary young adults. Konstam notes that a large number of emerging adults encounter difficulties with approaching talks which aim to provide clarification or identify commitment talks, as they fear these situations will incur or bring up vulnerability, risk, and loss of face.<sup>718</sup> Scholars note that the new concept of “becoming Facebook official,” in which one changes one’s profile to announce a particular status of relationship with someone, is a conflict-laden transitional period.<sup>719</sup> As alluded by sex and relationship vanguards Schmiedt and Roth, not every Millennial

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“And the Prize for Promiscuity Goes to Generation X!” *Pacific Standard*, May 6, 2015, <http://www.psmag.com/health-and-behavior/and-the-prize-for-promiscuity-goes-to-generation-x#!>

<sup>715</sup> Gortner, 322.

<sup>716</sup> Bogle, 25, 161.

<sup>717</sup> Smith and Snell, 59.

<sup>718</sup> Konstam, 63.

<sup>719</sup> Lane and Piercy, 33.

keeps the terms and parameters of their romantic relationship ambiguous. Some have shocked the general public with how much they determine their relationship in writing.

An example of this is Mandy Len Carton, who wrote a *New York Times* Modern Love column in which she described her yearly relationship contract with her cohabitating boyfriend. This four-page single-space document is revised and renewed on an annual basis and it dictates everything from sex to chores to finances and life goals. While Carton says she realizes that to some this might feel calculating, unromantic, she believes that every relationship has de facto parameters. In her experience, making these terms and goals explicit can be incredibly beneficial to relationships.<sup>720</sup> This trend toward different ways of engaging in non-marriage and non-formal unions, which vary greatly in terms of monogamy, seriousness and length, underscores that Millennials eschew labels as a concept. What defines a couple as a couple to themselves, even before they have such an explicit talk as a DTR or something substantially more formal like Carton's contract, amounts to a few things. Konstam finds that today, given the porousness and fluidity of coupledness markers, "being together" is identified by the sharing of each other's personal Google calendars, the communal management and sharing of time, as well as "we narratives" in everyday conversation. External recognition of coupledness comes from validation of the relationship by social networks, such as the larger family including partner in events and scopes of concern.<sup>721</sup> Researchers were often explicit that young adults did not consider sexual intimacy to necessarily be a factor of being in a relationship, or defining it by any degree of intensity.<sup>722</sup>

### **"Love makes you weak:" How scholars of religion can help change this belief**

As mentioned at earlier points in this dissertation, many scholars of religion find that if asked, contemporary young adults are hungry for a framework with which to organize their lives. They seek fairness, want to believe in self-love, and question sacrifice, but do not know how to

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<sup>720</sup> Mandy Len Carton, "To Stay in Love, Sign on the Dotted Line," Modern Love, *New York Times*, June 23, 2017; Millennials' penchant for explicit terms on occasion is responsible for the increasing rate of prenuptials, often doing so in order to legally dictate that future gains accrued during the marriage are assigned to the earner, rather than split in some fashion as in times past, in Real Estate Monitor Worldwide, "Real Estate a Top Factor behind Growing Number of Millennials Signing Prenups," *SyndiGate Media*, July 13, 2018, ProQuest.

<sup>721</sup> Konstam, 33, 34.

<sup>722</sup> Bogle, 165.

connect these inclinations to a bigger moral picture. For the most part, ethical considerations are on the edges of young adult lives, as they pursue intellectual, vocational, and social development to such a degree that ethics is not often an explicit concern. Nonetheless, Beste notes that her students, when presented with ideas about harm, love, and justice as qualities that can pertain to intimate relationships, are highly willing to engage them.<sup>723</sup>

In figuring out just how to start such a conversation as Beste encourages, Freitas notes that the dominant cultural scripts around sexual interaction on college campuses also hardly ever engage questions of desire. Rather, young adults only engage in considerations of what is allowed and expected in a macho script of building and flaunting power, consuming sex as a commodity, and participating in pressure release. Beste and her students find that particularly for women, but also for men, there is not much hope for true pleasure in sex or intimate relationship.<sup>724</sup> Sex is mainly for achieving a superficial level of social and physical desirability, as well as providing a literal mechanism for physical release.<sup>725</sup> Beste asserts that these lackluster and damaging models make it all the more difficult for young people to process the grave injustice of sexual violence, to name it as such, and stand up against it.<sup>726</sup> Thus, no large, overarching value besides affirmations of power and sexual attractiveness operates in these narratives or provides any level of guidance. However, Freitas believes young adults can handle in-depth, sustained engagement with rigorous, intellectual and full-bodied conversations about sex and relationships if older adults are only willing to start and engage them.<sup>727</sup>

### *Bringing up the conversation*

While today's script of intimate interdependence may have a stronger element of autonomy in the past this does not mean that interdependence is a foregone conclusion,

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<sup>723</sup> Beste, 217.

<sup>724</sup> Beste, 242-253; in her study, Beste and her students found some women had only ever experienced unequal, non-mutual sex and were dissatisfied with it, 246.

<sup>725</sup> Beste, 152-169.

<sup>726</sup> Beste, 13.

<sup>727</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 78; Freitas believes rigorous discussion is needed to “empower [contemporary young adults] to unpack, critique, and become more self-aware” of what assumptions and narratives college students are operating out of, as well as how this matches up against their own desires and religious concerns.” She argues that only this level of engagement can begin to meet the complexity of sexuality and of the ethics of consent, 138, 47, 46, xii

automatic, nor when enacted, a healthy balance of love and justice.<sup>728</sup> The very fact that many relationships today must be personally charted rather than following a particular, culturally predetermined course is all the more reason to have active and robust conversations about respect, agency, assertion, and reception of consent. This informality and ambiguity often serves to obfuscate young adults' true beliefs on intimacy and gender equality to themselves and observers. It also muddies a clear, reflective understanding of the cost young adults may or may not be willing to pay to get to a deeper level of engagement. The true value of and desire for mutuality in intimate relationships among young adults, regardless of their profession of desiring it, is a question which remains empirically unclear and worthy of investigation because of its disparity with their behaviors. While there is limited data available on this exact subject, I attempt to carve away a bit at this question in the next chapter.

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<sup>728</sup> Konstam, 326.

#### IV.

### Gender, Feminism, and Inequity in Contemporary Intimacy

*It doesn't matter if you love him, or capital H-I-M  
Just put your paws up 'cause you were born this way, baby*

*My mama told me when I was young  
We are all born superstars*

*She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on  
In the glass of her boudoir*

*"There's nothing wrong with loving who you are"  
She said, "'Cause he made you perfect, babe"  
"So hold your head up girl and you'll go far,  
Listen to me when I say"*

*I'm beautiful in my way  
'Cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way.*

Lady Gaga, "Born this Way" (2011)<sup>729</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION: CONTINUING A "STALLED REVOLUTION" OR CHANGING COURSE?

There is consensus among feminist sociologists that since the 1990s women by and large have stopped making significant progress in equalizing their paid work and other measures to that of men.<sup>730</sup> In 2003, as gender equity between men and women continued to tread water, work-life researcher Arlie Hochschild named this phenomenon a "stalled revolution."<sup>731</sup> Other

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<sup>729</sup> Jack Dennis, "The Five All Time Best Lady Gaga Lyrics," April 28, 2015, accessed June 16, 2019, <https://www.axs.com/the-five-all-time-best-lady-gaga-lyrics-51140>; "Born this Way (album)," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 16, 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born\\_This\\_Way\\_\(album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born_This_Way_(album)).

<sup>730</sup> Sociologist Paula England articulates that "the gender revolution," of progress toward more equitable gender relations is because women are no longer making additional headway into male-dominated occupations and those that are highly lucrative despite efforts at recruitment, Paula England, "The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled," *Sociologists for Women in Society Feminist Lecture*, *Gender and Society* 24, no. 2 (April 2010): 150; Katherine R. Allen, Alexis J. Walker, and Brandy Renee McCann, "Feminism and Families," *Handbook of Marriage and Family*, 3rd ed., ed. Gary W. Peterson and Kevin R. Bush (New York: Springer, 2013), 150; Alison Dahl Crossley, *Finding Feminism: Millennial Activists and the Unfinished Gender Revolution* (New York: University Press, 2017), 14.

<sup>731</sup> Arlie Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), cited by Petra Bueskens, *Modern Motherhood and Women's Dual Identities: Rewriting the Sexual Contract* (London; New York: Routledge, 2018), 293.

scholars, such as Alison Dahl Crossley see little change nearly 15 years later.<sup>732</sup> A brief sketch of what men's and women's lives look like today reveals a picture in which, while millennial young women are twice as likely as their grandmothers-to be in the workforce,<sup>733</sup> most contemporary heterosexual partnerships are described by sociologists as "modified breadwinner" or "modified traditionalism."<sup>734</sup> For these reasons and what will be attenuated below, feminist journalist Jill Filipovic notes grimly that "feminist marriage," in which men and women contribute more or less equally at home and in the workforce is only in its "adolescence" as a social form. While a feminist intimate partnership or feminist marriage can be conceptualized theoretically, it has not yet developed into an institution taken seriously, envisioned, or practiced, by most people.<sup>735</sup>

In this chapter writ large, I lay out why who, how, and when a young woman partners with someone else, usually a male, still matters greatly to a woman's life fortunes. In the first section, I address literature on how Millennials perceive and experience gender and gender role possibilities as young men and women based on socialization and their own experiences of exploring as young adults.<sup>736</sup> I find, mainly following the research of sociologist Barbara Risman, that while the attitudes and spectrum of possibilities around gender are considerably open at least in theory, practice of gender behaviors, particularly at the young end of this developmental phase as it commonly takes place in college, are substantially more constrained in comparison. The mixed views of gender possibility and restraint which Millennials experience help to explain the individualized, largely postfeminist political landscape in which both women and men think about gendered agency and possibility. In the second section of this chapter, I highlight the ethnographic work of Crossley on campus feminisms and pair it with feminist theory and practices which flesh out what it means to envision rights, possibilities, and limits in a postfeminist era. I then conclude this chapter with a more precise focus on the contemporary

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<sup>732</sup> Crossley, 14.

<sup>733</sup> Pew Research Forum, "As Young Women, Silents were Twice as likely as Millennials to be out of the Workforce," March 18, 2015.

<sup>734</sup> Kathleen Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 159.

<sup>735</sup> Jill Filipovic, *The H-Spot: The Feminist Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 142.

<sup>736</sup> Sociologist Barbara Risman considers "role" language to be outdated sociologically as an essential category pertaining to gender. However, she agrees that "gendered expectations exist in every social role," Barbara Risman, *Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 15.

cultural challenges and stalled progress of intimate partnership between genders, but with data drawn from a slightly older demographic pool. I do this because little research has been conducted on how contemporary young adults live out long-term partnership, given that they often delay such engagements until the precipice of what used to be called “middle adulthood.”

I argue that Millennial views on gender give a glimpse of the larger picture of generational perspectives of coming of age as a man, woman, or other gender identification, and the possibilities, desires, and responsibilities such coming of age with a particular gender entails. As Risman notes, confusion, or at least inconsistency, reigns supreme among various gender orientations, as well as orientations to what gender should mean in terms of power, choice, and family. Feminism itself can mean for women a form of resistance to the dominant narrative of self-reliance at all costs, or, justify the narrative’s very inscription. Yet, amidst all this ambiguity and possibility, the larger questions of power and probability for a gender equitable intimate life, at least to my psychologically-trained eye, pertain who is willing to receive and accept influence in a partnership, how this has to do with gender, and why.

## **SECTION ONE: GENDER**

While it is hard to separate the intertwined threads of gender, feminism, and gender-based intimate inequity from each other, to have discussion of them one by one it is nonetheless useful to begin with some basic description of four typologies of relationship to gender identity. Developed by sociologist Barbara Risman through open-ended research with Millennials in Chicago on gender, I will provide a brief overview of these types and how they shed light on how contemporary notions of gender at large. A journey through the typologies allows for conversation on the large themes of gender essentialism and gendered constraints, as well as efforts to chart paths for egalitarian relationships and also gender rebel advocates. I conclude this section by ruminating about how the aforementioned typologies indicate a need for new scripts of masculinities, feminisms, and interaction between and amongst the genders.

### **Typologies of gender orientations**

Risman notes in her book, *Where the Millennials Will Take Us*, that while Millennials are progressively liberal in attitudes, advancing gender politics may not be as salient for them as

pursuing other values.<sup>737</sup> Yet, she reports that, regardless of what any particular Millennial individual espoused in terms of gender politics, across the board what they had in common was experiences of significant “gender policing” in which persons respond negatively when men or women are not acting within the relevant gender role the person expects.<sup>738</sup> Crossley also found in her research on contemporary campus feminism that study participants had a lot to say about the constraints of the gender binary regarding roles and appearances for women, whether or not they were mobilized around gender issues in other areas.<sup>739</sup>

Risman identifies four ideal types of gender structure ideology which she developed through her grounded-theory (open-ended) analysis of 116 multi-method interviews with Millennials in the Chicago area: *True Believers*, *Straddlers*, *Innovators*, and *Rebels*. Risman describes her study as the first of its kind as an attempt to describe Millennial relationships to gender as “inherited, experienced, and changed.”<sup>740</sup> Notably, Risman found that regardless of the typology of gender conservatism or liberalism she assigned Millennial respondents to by the content of their interview, all Millennials firmly believed that women working was an immutable necessity in late modernity.<sup>741</sup> She also felt that *Innovators* and *Rebels*, although not constituting a majority of respondents, opened up the social imaginary for themselves and others far beyond the normative impact which would be predicted by their numbers alone.<sup>742</sup> I second Risman’s findings from my own experience of contemporary culture opening up to the idea of *Rebels* in entertainment and political culture having an outsized impact upon social imaginations and policies that both do and do not translate to affecting the gender picture for heterosexual young adults.

As a bit of a caveat, Risman asserts that her findings, while crucial what they say about categories and content, are nonetheless not statistically representative of Millennial relationship at large because her respondents were recruited from around the Chicago area and were thus disproportionately cosmopolitan and educated.<sup>743</sup> Unfortunately, few people have written

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<sup>737</sup> Risman, 57.

<sup>738</sup> Risman, 5; Also Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>739</sup> Crossley, 52.

<sup>740</sup> Risman, 4.

<sup>741</sup> Risman, 6.

<sup>742</sup> Risman, 75.

<sup>743</sup> Risman, 74.



extensively on the intimate lives of young adults from the perspective of gender and gender equality. Nonetheless, Risman's research paired with the work of others focused on feminism from a popular culture lens offers a valuable window into the typologies of individuals' orientations to and experiences of gender, as well as what gender for them means in terms of their personal possibilities and future partnerships.

### True Believers *and gender essentialism*

Risman's category of *True Believers* believe that men and women are different and therefore ought to have different roles, often citing religious teachings for their thoughts.<sup>744</sup> *True Believers* found inspiration and meaning in gendered positions such that gender roles did not feel oppressive to them.<sup>745</sup> Generally, *True Believers* had received explicit gender-role socialization into these beliefs and patterns of behavior by their parents. They also continued to operate as adults in like-minded communities, experiencing little significant contestation of or variance in these gender roles in their everyday lives.<sup>746</sup>

As Paula England identifies, notions of gender essentialism, promulgating the idea that women are innately different in terms of interests and skills to men, continue to hold sway in certain demographics of the American population across age. In fact, Pew Center research I consulted cites that *majorities* of Americans believe that men and women are different in basic ways, but have no consensus on why and how this came to be – women say social, men say biological.<sup>747</sup> While the bulk of Americans believe that gender differences do exist, what this means and what its implications are for ethical agency remains to be determined, separates out *True Believers* from *Straddlers* and *Innovators*. As it influences behavior and choice, England highlights that the cohesiveness of this gender essentialism, among its diehard adherents and in society in general about assumptions of natural gender tendencies, means that even when opportunities for women to greatly advance in careers through company or governmental policy changes open up, men and women have already self-selected themselves into certain career or

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<sup>744</sup> Risman, 5, 79.

<sup>745</sup> Risman, 5.

<sup>746</sup> Risman, 94.

<sup>747</sup> Parker et al., no pages.

caregiving trajectories.<sup>748</sup> She argues that such essentialism and pre-placement can serve to excuse away the lack of any further progress as “personal preference,” rather than encouraging people to acknowledge the structural constraints that still inhibit women having as many resources and choices as men.<sup>749</sup>

Given Risman’s location at the University of Chicago, she had fewer *True Believers* than she believes probably exist in the population at large. Those she did interview were all pursuing higher education, even as the women planned to quit work once children arrived on the scene. Notably, they, especially *True Believer* men, were less likely to report peer pressure to stay within the confines of their gender roles, often because there was no such need, occasion, or desire to stray.<sup>750</sup> Yet both female and male *True Believers* wished that their bodies were more in line with the ideals of gender to which they ascribed in terms of attractiveness.<sup>751</sup> Body disparagement, to some degree, appeared in the respondent lives of all four of Risman’s categories.

#### *Straddlers on gender constraints, beliefs, and behaviors*

Risman’s largest category, at 40%, are the *Straddlers*.<sup>752</sup> Risman came up with category of *Straddlers* to group those who had no substantial consistency between beliefs and practices. These are persons for whom gender equity aspirations and practices may even be contradictory across their life stories and interview anecdotes. This wild inconsistency is true especially when comparing their espoused attitudes to how often they conform to gender-role behavior due to peer and family pressure. For instance, one woman gave the example of liking beer, which she and her surround identified as a typically masculine trait, for which she received comments about her mild transgression.<sup>753</sup>

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<sup>748</sup> England, “The Gender Revolution,” 150; For example, in men becoming nurses, or significantly primary caregivers at home, there is cultural resistance to the idea. Because it is not expected, men and women pioneers in fields traditionally occupied by the other sex often encounter loneliness and other issues in forging new paths.

<sup>749</sup> England, “The Gender Revolution,” 150.

<sup>750</sup> Risman, 94, 104.

<sup>751</sup> Risman, 102-104.

<sup>752</sup> Risman, 214.

<sup>753</sup> Risman, 211.

On the whole, *Straddlers* are often unsure where they stand on gender issues.<sup>754</sup> They are often traditionalists on one level of consideration of believe or behavior and innovators at another. After doing her field research, Risman decided that relative levels of conservatism or liberalism in behavior or ideals were not distinctive factors for grouping her respondents in comparison to the overall irregularity and unpredictability of connections between ideology and acts that held this group together regardless of political particularities.<sup>755</sup> Some *Straddlers* were more consistently liberal in their attitudes, yet were willing to adjust their behavior to fit in with more conservative expected gender norms in order to avoid comment.<sup>756</sup> Most male *Straddlers* had been socialized by their families to be the breadwinners.<sup>757</sup> In turn, women *Straddlers* were socialized to be economically able, although perhaps not to garner the lion's share of financial resources in the family in any way that was perceived as too aggressive or independent. Female *Straddlers* remember experiencing considerable pressure to look and act pretty while they were growing up and still feel pressure today.<sup>758</sup> While men may not have liked their bodies, per se, they did not feel the need to change them for the sake of social acceptance nearly as much as women did. Thus it is of little surprise that outside research conducted by the Pew Research Center has found that only 27% of contemporary men feel the need to be physically attractive.<sup>759</sup>

*Innovators charting egalitarian scripts in their personal lives*

Risman found *Innovators* who took pride in breaking gender expectations and integrating both masculine and feminine into themselves to be the case in less than 20% of women and around a third of men.<sup>760</sup> Risman pointed out that these persons engaged in cultural rejection of rigid gender roles, but did not go as far as to be involved in the material refashioning of how they physically presented and performed gender (in contrast to the *Rebel* category).<sup>761</sup> Yet, like those in other categories of Risman's gender typology, *Innovators* found plenty to critique about their

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<sup>754</sup> Risman, 6.

<sup>755</sup> Risman, 73.

<sup>756</sup> Risman, 214.

<sup>757</sup> Risman, 222.

<sup>758</sup> Risman, 222-231.

<sup>759</sup> Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, and Renee Stepler, "On Gender Differences, No Consensus on Nature v. Nurture," Pew Research Center, Dec. 5, 2017, no pages.

<sup>760</sup> Risman, 126, 73.

<sup>761</sup> Risman, 109.

bodies in terms of not finding them as a source of confidence, particularly in terms of achieving and maintain desired levels of weight for both sexes.<sup>762</sup> Male innovators each had at least one, often homophobic, story about receiving comment by their surrounding community for not adhering to gender norms. Yet female innovators were often championed for doing what had not been possible or expected of the older women in their families.<sup>763</sup> Risman noted that by the time both male and female innovators are able to pick their social support systems through self-selection as adults, if they did not have a supportive environment growing up, they have made sure to correct that situation by surrounding themselves now in like-minded communities.<sup>764</sup>

*Innovators* primarily innovate in personal lives rather than on the broader level of social action and do so by mixing male and female traits across a variety of spheres such as labor, domestic responsibility, hobbies, personal relationships to one's body, physical presentation and relationship to food quality and quantity. They were typically raised in liberal households. *Innovators* did not dispute sex categories at their foundation, but rather found it unnecessary to do so because so much of the content of what it meant to be male or female was able to be flexibly defined in their experience.<sup>765</sup> Yet at each level of gender organization in society, *Innovators* actively sought to analyze and change it, even if they remained more involved on a personal level than a social one.<sup>766</sup>

#### *Strains of queer Rebels on the edges and Gaga feminism*

*Rebels* are defined by Risman as those who work to actively undo the material constraints of gender.<sup>767</sup> A majority of *Rebels* identified themselves as also genderqueer. This means they do not identify as either male or female, but rather something else or both at the same time.<sup>768</sup> *Rebels* were creative, consistent, and "efficacious," as Risman particularly describes it, at disputing the system of gender binaries and essentialism for themselves and arguing for systemic

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<sup>762</sup> Risman, 130-135.

<sup>763</sup> Risman, 138, 142-146.

<sup>764</sup> Risman, 46-47.

<sup>765</sup> Risman, 110, 5.

<sup>766</sup> Risman, 73.

<sup>767</sup> Risman, 74.

<sup>768</sup> Risman, 156.

change on the basis of their experience and ideologies.<sup>769</sup> They often felt oppressed by social institutions for not being more flexible and welcoming to them on policies such as provisions around gender-neutral bathrooms or pronoun choices during introductions.<sup>770</sup> While all the people Risman interviewed supported women's fair treatment and empowerment of agency, however, only the most radical, the *Rebel* category, leveled any criticism of how men and women should present themselves as masculine and feminine in terms of bodily presentation. They argued that not only should they have the freedom to present in a variety of modes, but that all people should play with gender presentation more than they currently do.<sup>771</sup>

The *Rebel* ideology and activism which Risman articulates and describes can be seen as an embrace of a thoroughly postmodern, ironic form of relationship to equity, body, and affirmation that makes demands on the larger social imagination to move along with it. *Innovators* are likely to share elements of this view, and *Straddlers* are certainly affected by how it is changing the societal imagination in which they are trying to figure out what they believe and how this affects their actions. The pop culture artist known as Lady Gaga is an exemplification and model for the Rebel embodiment that this form of gender politics has come to be known as "Gaga feminism."

Queer theorist Jack Halberstam has commented upon this form of gender politics so named for the inversion of norms, clever double entendres, and shocking surprises prevalent in Gaga's music and performances. Gaga has a following she calls "Little Monsters," a fan base which self-identifies as those who are outside of the norm. "Little Monsters" are fantastic creatures derided by those who are normal. According to Halberstam, gaga feminism has five key points: "1) Wisdom lies in the unexpected; 2) Transformation is inevitable; 3) Think and act counterintuitively; 4) Practice creative non-believing; 5) Be outrageous or risk extinction."<sup>772</sup> To be outrageous is to explore, improvise, and surprise, elaborates Karin S. Hendricks.<sup>773</sup> Following Halberstam's claim that Gaga encourages "'emancipation through improvisation'" in her music,

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<sup>769</sup> Risman, 159.

<sup>770</sup> Risman, 160, 200.

<sup>771</sup> Risman, 73.

<sup>772</sup> Jack Halberstam, née Judith Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 27-29, cited by Karin S. Hendricks, "Gaga Spirituality," *Queering Freedom: Music, Identity, and Spirituality*, edited by Karin S. Hendricks and June Boyce-Tillman (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 245.

<sup>773</sup> Hendricks, 257.

Hendricks notes that emancipation, while improvised, comes first and foremost through defying the normal, and thus doing the unpredictable.<sup>774</sup> She goes on to note that in Gaga feminism, wisdom arrives from letting go of basic assumptions, particularly around redemption and bodies.<sup>775</sup> This is an ethic and epistemology reflective of a certain segment of contemporary young adults which, although it reflects queer and postmodern epistemologies, goes much deeper than those who identify as queer or same-sex loving in terms of its belief in “creative non-believing” and counterintuitive experimentation in the search for the real.

### **Needing new masculinities, femininities, scripts of interaction**

According to sociologist Bradford Wilcox of the National Marriage Project, removing the gender revolution from its current quicksand will require developing a new model of masculinity for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>776</sup> While Wilcox is certainly right, I believe that what is needed is new scripts for both men and women, as well as new guidelines for their interactions with each other in college, the dating world, and in intimate partnership. Christian ethics professor Jennifer Beste argues that such revision and attention are particularly exigent, as she identifies a significant decline in gender quality when it comes to sex and negotiating the terms of intimate relationships on college campuses.<sup>777</sup>

Part of this discussion of new scripts will also have to take into account the larger picture of stress and stress relief and how these factor into intimate gender interactions and gender equity within them. Because of the amount of alcohol in the lives of contemporary young adults, religion scholar Donna Freitas finds that one of the most crucial ethical questions young adults pose to her, particularly in her latest work around sexual consent, is, ““how many drinks, exactly, can a person have before consent is off the table?””<sup>778</sup> There is so much of importance wrapped up in this question. It speaks to alcoholism, responsibility, and the fact that alcohol is a non-

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<sup>774</sup> Hendricks, 245.

<sup>775</sup> Hendricks, 253, 256.

<sup>776</sup> Bradford Wilcox, “It’s not (just) the Economy, Stupid,” *Family Studies*, December 22, 2014, <http://family-studies.org/its-not-just-the-economy-stupid-why-is-the-working-class-family-really-coming-apart/>, cited by Filipovic, 153.

<sup>777</sup> Jennifer Erin Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 101.

<sup>778</sup> Donna Freitas, *Consent on Campus: A Manifesto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 61.

negotiable, but how much alcohol is responsible is a variant they are willing to consider. Few college students can envision talking to strangers without a drink inside them, so the question is not whether they will drink, but how much, and where the line is between remaining responsible and rape.

Freitas wrote her latest book, *Consent: A College Manifesto*, in order to set forth her own informed opinions on what is necessary for universities and colleges to actually begin to address the high rates of rape occurring on or near their campuses. She believes it will take brave university leadership to shift from narrow discussions of consent at new student orientation programming which simply instructs on the definition of consent and models a role play or two before the entire freshman class to longer, larger, more dialogical conversations about sexual relations and ethics at large. She believe this more committed, more difficult solution is necessary for rape to begin to be truly be addressed on college campuses.

According to Freitas, a key part of this larger discussion is to talk about the ways in which men and women are socialized to behave, especially in self-reflection and in their communication patterns with one another. Freitas notes, “To be a man is to assert one’s power and superiority over others, especially women.”<sup>779</sup> Concomitantly, women today, however, are socialized to blame, excuse, and doubt.<sup>780</sup> Their acceptability is still marked almost solely through sexualization of their body.<sup>781</sup> Beste argues that common narratives of “cultural eroticization of inequality, domination, and violence deeply influences college students (and the rest of us).”<sup>782</sup> These prevailing scripts encourage male aggression and female submissiveness, objectification, and victimization as acceptable and normal ways for men and women to interact sexually and relationally. Thus, Freitas writes, expecting an enthusiastic and clear yes from a woman in the context of a sexual relationship “is to ignore the power of these scripts.”<sup>783</sup> In starting to address consent and romantic agency, Freitas would first have us heed how wide a

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<sup>779</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 107.

<sup>780</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 127.

<sup>781</sup> Feona Attwood, “Through the Looking Glass? Sexual Agency and Subjectification Online,” *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, edited by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Houndmills; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 204.

<sup>782</sup> Beste, 253.

<sup>783</sup> Freitas, *Consent*, 58.

gulf there is between current practice and the recommended solution to avoid sexual assault. This seems incredibly wise and timely.

A variety of scholars who study young adulthood and intimacy also question and critique the typically vapid engagement around intimacy skills offered to young adults by those who proclaim to lead and lift them. Sociologist Michael Kimmel, while not writing about Christian ethics, nonetheless echoes these thoughts about a vacuum of engagement in any cultural or familial arena around intimacy skills and expectations. In his book *Guyland* about young adult men, Kimmel writes “the real skills that young people need as they take on adult sexual relationships rarely feature in the hook up culture. They’re not learning to ask for what they want, or how to listen to their partners, how to keep monogamous sex interesting, how to negotiate pleasure, how to improve their techniques.”<sup>784</sup> Multiple studies indicate that young adults feel negatively about hook up culture, but do not feel that they have alternatives to it.<sup>785</sup>

Furthermore on sexual and romantic interactions on the whole, research points to young adults feeling that they do not have criteria by which to decide whether or not or when to initiate sex in a romantic relationship,<sup>786</sup> to progress a casual or early relationship into a committed one,<sup>787</sup> and to break from the norms of casual sex and group activities to actually ask someone out and participate in a date.<sup>788</sup> Young adults also report trouble being honest and vulnerable with friends, much less a romantic interest.<sup>789</sup> This is significant and Freitas’ most recent book on young adults’ pressures to appear and feel happy all the time is an important contribution to unpacking this larger interpersonal problems puzzle and discovering how deeply it runs into what we are cultivating as a society on an intrapersonal level as well. Yet while I provide theory on developing self-reflexivity and interpersonal attunement and communication skills in both

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<sup>784</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009) 215, cited by Alan Reifman, “Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood: Conceptual Foundations,” *Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood*, edited by Frank D. Fincham and Ming Cui (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 20.

<sup>785</sup> Beste found that her students were unanimously negative about hook ups in private conversation with her, 121; Jason King, *Faith with Benefits: Hook up Culture on Catholic Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4-6.

<sup>786</sup> Kathleen A. Bogle, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2008), 161.

<sup>787</sup> King, 160.

<sup>788</sup> Bogle, 131.

<sup>789</sup> Beste, 162.



parts of this dissertation, I firmly believe that relationship awareness and discernment conversations ought to be had with young adults mindful of the greater dynamics of gender and gender politics at hand. For this, we turn to the second and third sections of this chapter, which focus on Millennial, neoliberal, and postfeminist ideas of feminism, as well as some data on how gendered partnership remains unequal and why.

## **SECTION TWO: FEMINISM**

In this section I gather together several feminist cultural theorists commenting on scripts and behaviors of postfeminism as well as ethnographic researchers doing work on feminist and gender views specifically among Millennials. Within this review, I highlight that young people, when asked, articulate that they believe it is better to believe in a conception of ‘fair’ rather than a conception of feminism. This is a response given in part because in neoliberal times feminism is associated strongly with issues of narcissistic grievance. Yet the facts of the matter show that there is worthwhile material for which to stage complaint. Researchers paint a picture of women pressured to believe in scarcity, retreat, and their own abilities. Furthermore in terms of political agency, ethnography reveals that the postfeminist era encourages people to be individualistically apolitical. Young adults and their parents mainly recognize feminism for its achievements by comparing current day to the past. Given this situation, I conclude this section with a nod toward what a postmodern feminist politics of agency can and should look like, which feminist philosopher Patricia Mann coins “micro-politics.” This articulation of agency recognizes that overarching, declarative political statements are unlikely to be made by postmodern subjects such as young adults, yet this does not preclude them from taking interested and interesting local action to improve their lives and those of others.

### **Feminism as ‘fair’ in neoliberal, postfeminist times**

In her book *Wife, Inc.*, Suzanne Leonard quotes cultural theorist Catherine Rottenberg as articulating a prevalent symbiosis between neoliberalism and feminism which is dangerously self-reinforcing. Rottenberg writes that a feminist subject in today’s neoliberal clime “‘accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on

crafting a felicitous work-life balance based on a cost-benefit analysis.”<sup>790</sup> Women are urged to be wise economists working on tight economies, just like everyone else, (but not really, since they are still in charge of the household). Women are supposed to be powerful and able to choose, yet feminist commentators note that a close look at making the “best choices” often comes down to those aligning with conservative norms.<sup>791</sup> Neoliberalism and postfeminism fuel themselves on contradictions and mythologies of choice even though experienced reality is more of constraint.

### *Postfeminism: Encouraging the self-reliant superwoman*

Cultural scholars define this period as one of postfeminism, in which feminist goals of women’s social equity to men in the public sphere are assumed to be more or less accomplished. In particular, postfeminism as a cultural phenomenon develops and thrives with the rise of global capitalism, expansion of information technologies, and crises of environmental degradation. It is further reinforced by acceptance of multiple modes of being, changing demographics and declining economics which I have mentioned as significant in earlier chapters.<sup>792</sup> As cultural studies scholar Elana Levine articulates:

Postfeminist culture is one in which feminism is painted as passé, as an historically specific outlook that once made an important intervention, but is now no longer necessary. Postfeminist logic sees gender equality as having been accomplished, freeing up women to choose for themselves that which they most desire, both professionally and personally. That the “empowerment” of “choice” so heralded in postfeminist culture is in fact limited to a narrow range of privileged women is ignored.<sup>793</sup>

Levine goes on to further define any attempt to note and address gender disparities as “holding a grudge” and reifying and reproducing the very disparity by drawing attention to it, as if such disparity would go away if ignored.<sup>794</sup> Cultural scholar Diane Negra quips that increasingly in a

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<sup>790</sup> Catherine Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 3 (2014): 420, cited by Suzanne Leonard, *Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 18.

<sup>791</sup> Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 4.

<sup>792</sup> Like all aspects of neoliberalism, Negra notes that habits and desires of the wealthy are promoted in postfeminism as universal (such as aspirations to marry only after achieving financial affluence), Negra, 9.

<sup>793</sup> Elana Levine, “Introduction: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-first Century,” *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, edited by Elana Levine, *Feminist Media Studies* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 5, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>794</sup> Levine, 5.

culture which lacks hearty support for democratic ideals writ large, aspirations for an egalitarian intimate relationship might come off as an air of “asking for too much” in which “democratic equity may be seen to have curdled into elitism.”<sup>795</sup> She too mentions that feminist women who assert their rights to choices and pleasure come off as narcissists to much of society.<sup>796</sup> Given that this is a personality quality of which the generation is already accused, millennial women might be all the more reticent to do anything that might further incur this accusation.

As Negra, author of *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, puts it, “postfeminism fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits.”<sup>797</sup> Scholars note that contemporary Americans, when they think of gender egalitarianism in a positive light, are in fact ascribing to a form of gender liberalism. This is because this form of egalitarianism is most compatible with American individualism.<sup>798</sup> This egalitarianism is largely couched in terms of gender-equal access to jobs, education, and rights not to be discriminated against.<sup>799</sup> This leads many young people to be partially convinced of the presence of a post-feminist era in which feminism is no longer needed because gender discrimination and segregation is considerably less blatant as it used to be in the past.

#### *Postfeminism, pressures, fuel female anxiety*

Many scholars also note the anxiety and self-reliance which women must have in neoliberal, postfeminist times. Negra highlights that postfeminism thrives on anxiety, ambivalence, and contradiction. While it is fabulously fun to be a young woman these days, pop culture insinuates, female adulthood is pictured a constant conciliation between panic and pleasure, the two feelings dialectically looped to each other.<sup>800</sup> In particular, there is anxiety for women about aging<sup>801</sup> and a feeling of time panic.<sup>802</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Negra describe this

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<sup>795</sup> Negra, 6.

<sup>796</sup> Negra, 2.

<sup>797</sup> Negra, 4; She notes that fundamentalism family values are still very much *en vogue* overall, Negra, 6.

<sup>798</sup> Kara Ellerby has noted liberalism serving as a substitute strategy for greater equity and mutuality by standing in for a proper power analysis of how things work and why, Kara Ellerby, *No Shortcut to Change: An Unlikely Path to a More Gender-Equitable World* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

<sup>799</sup> England, “The Gender Revolution,” 150.

<sup>800</sup> Negra, 13.

<sup>801</sup> Negra, 12.

<sup>802</sup> Negra, 47.

panic as on in which “women’s lives are regularly conceived of as timestarved, women themselves are overworked, rushed, harassed, subject to their ‘biological clocks,’ etc. to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis.”<sup>803</sup> To make up for this, they argue that popular culture, religious culture, and a cult of domesticity and “retreatism” combine. This serves to “anchor and mark time” in a reclaimatory fashion against a feeling of scarcity and lack of control.<sup>804</sup>

While Negra calls this inclination “retreatism,” she indicates that Kathleen Stewart calls it “trauma time.” Stewart notes:

There is a search for new forms of sentimentality and a longing for interiority. We find ourselves in the midst of the self-help movement, privatization, cocooning, family values, utopia walled up in theme parks and franchise culture, feel-good movies and colorful décor... But there is trauma, too, in the anesthetized distraction of an OK middle ground defending a womb against the world. Here, fear of falling meets a more profound fear of burst bubbles.<sup>805</sup>

Also related to this anxiety and how it results in “retreatism,” many feminist scholars of popular culture note that postfeminist culture treats women in the workforce with a “high degree of ambivalence.”<sup>806</sup> These scholars regale their readers with numerous instances of movies and narratives in which the threat of career women can be domesticated through romance, or women who, because while they have jobs are mainly in low paying support positions, find fulfillment in romance and family rather than in work.<sup>807</sup> This is made possible in part, psychologically at least, because there are prevailing ideas in popular culture that women are uncertain about what they want,<sup>808</sup> thus it is a common trope that women can be persuaded and influenced to be happy with only domestic life, often done so by wealthy men. Even if working women do not give up their

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<sup>803</sup> Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>804</sup> Negra, 85.

<sup>805</sup> Kathleen Stewart, “Trauma Time: A Still Life,” *Histories of the Future*, ed. Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Harding (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 326, quoted by Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 15.

<sup>806</sup> Negra, 87.

<sup>807</sup> Negra, 87.

<sup>808</sup> Negra, 89.

work in its entirety, narratives of adjusted ambition for women nonetheless, are often a crucial turning point in this common story arc.<sup>809</sup>

### **Being individualistically apolitical, comparing to the past**

Even after having conducted and analyzed her research for *Finding Feminism*, Crossley seemed unsure if contemporary young college women truly recognized gender inequality as a social problem rather than resorting to primarily seeing it as individual discrimination that lacks an air of social immediacy given the disparity between their mental recognition of inequality and their reluctance to do much about it.<sup>810</sup> Other sociologists like Crossley predict that contemporary young adults' focus on themselves as individuals may impede millennial gender change on any substantial social level.<sup>811</sup> She finds that it is common for people to criticize millennials for having a lack of awareness of systemic discrimination, and systemic influences in general, and yet she notes that not a single respondent of hers was unaware of these factors and systems.<sup>812</sup>

Going deeper into this, Crossley discovered that not only were young women deeply aware of gendered inequalities at cultural, interpersonal and socioeconomic structural levels, they had long been aware of them.<sup>813</sup> Yet, despite this, she ascertained that young college women still had little energy or experience for responding to this inequalities at a collective level.<sup>814</sup> Digging deeper into how and why this seeming contradiction exists, I draw on scholars Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake in their book *Third Wave Agenda*. Heywood and Drake note that it seems to be the case that contemporary approximations of gender parity make women more likely to identify with their *generation* than their *gender*.<sup>815</sup> This has political implications for what they see as important and how they will organize if motivated to act. If women *are* likely to

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<sup>809</sup> Negra, 95.

<sup>810</sup> Crossley, 5.

<sup>811</sup> Risman, 6.

<sup>812</sup> Crossley, 163.

<sup>813</sup> Crossley, 163.

<sup>814</sup> Crossley, 165.

<sup>815</sup> Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), cited by Shelly Budgeon, "The Contradictions of Successful Feminism: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism and 'New' Femininities," *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, edited by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Houndmills; Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 280.

be political, Heywood and Drake note, unlike in times past, there will be no single rallying issue for young adult women. In particular, they will not privilege a gender analysis above anything else.<sup>816</sup> I argue that this issue of awareness not necessarily leading to political and ethical effect is a key theme of the conundrum presented by millennials' seeming inaction in political and ethical spheres. Given all of this, it makes sense that Crossley describes feminism today as "waveless" and in "social movement abeyance."<sup>817</sup> In analyzing her findings, Crossley puts forth the idea that three "myths" operate to leave women apathetic to seeking change. These myths are: 1) that feminism is dead, 2) that it is everywhere, and that 3) girls can do anything. Crossley sees these contradictions within the three myths as inaccurate and greatly oversimplified, and yet they exist.<sup>818</sup>

Crossley notes, as do many others, that Millennials are resistant to labels, which likely reduces their inclination to self-identify with the term.<sup>819</sup> Yet part of it has to do with the fact that feminism itself is an associational term with numerous meanings and a diversity of contestations.<sup>820</sup> Scholar of feminism Shelly Budgeon identifies that feminism today must work with wide-ranging differences and unpredictable positioning.<sup>821</sup> Yet she cites that multiplicity often comes at the expense of definitional consistency or reliability,<sup>822</sup> such that it can be easy for young women to dismiss or find it difficult to articulate a gender-based consciousness when the notion of gender is becoming fluid.<sup>823</sup> For instance, as multiple forms of gender are now available, a young woman might ask: "why complain about the relative privileges and obstacles of any given iteration if everything is potentially changeable?"<sup>824</sup> Budgeon assesses that this mythos of easy, individual change and choice is grounded in fundamental misrecognition of the causes of social disadvantage,<sup>825</sup> but this is of some dispute. Crossley summarily quips that "The

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<sup>816</sup> Budgeon, 280.

<sup>817</sup> Crossley, 17-19, 23. Crossley notes that sociologist Verta Taylor helped articulate feminism as in abeyance.

<sup>818</sup> Crossley, 4-5.

<sup>819</sup> Crossley, 58.

<sup>820</sup> Budgeon, 280.

<sup>821</sup> Budgeon, 281, 282.

<sup>822</sup> Budgeon, 282.

<sup>823</sup> Budgeon, 281.

<sup>824</sup> Budgeon, 285.

<sup>825</sup> Budgeon, 285.

lack of empirical data on the role of feminism in the lives of women today is disproportionate to the significant amount of speculation about the topic.”<sup>826</sup> This certainly seems true, as the amount of contradiction in the lives of millennials around issues of gender is enough to make a reader’s head spin. Yet her ethnographic tome on millennial campus feminism provides some rendering of a picture, as do other sources.

Crossley and millennial researcher of women’s leadership Katherine McKeivitt Brentano both find that millennial women are more comfortable confronting gender inequalities on an individual level, like in terms of working on their salary negotiating skills.<sup>827</sup> Millennials were also willing to speak up at the interpersonal level or through social media. Brentano highlighted that “engage[ing] others in person when you feel that their behaviors are not fair or are gender biased” was the most frequent way her respondents addressed issues of gender fairness.<sup>828</sup> The second most likely way they sought to change opinion and knowledge about gender issues was by “Shar[ing] articles, videos, memes [about] gender equity and female empowerment online (Facebook, Instagram, e-mail, snapchat, etc.).”<sup>829</sup> Feminist scholar Dianna E. Anderson notes in her book *Problematic: How Toxic Callout Culture is Destroying Feminism*, that an effort to improve things has made “perfect the enemy of the good” in terms of feminist discourse. In trying to be better humans than they are, Anderson finds people are ceasing to use social media to speak about what matters to them for fear that it will receive feminist call out, even from friends.<sup>830</sup> The intensity with which peer pressure can be leveraged against someone on social media has a definite effect on people’s sense of being constantly monitored and pressured for their behavior, whatever that behavior might be.

### **Millennials on feminism and gender equity, and a micro-politics of feminist agency**

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<sup>826</sup> Crossley, 5.

<sup>827</sup> Crossley, 30, 43.

<sup>828</sup> Katherine McKeivitt Brentano, “Millennial Women: The Changing Face of the Fight for Gender Equity,” Master’s Thesis (Moraga, Calif.: Saint Mary’s College of California, summer 2017), 35.

<sup>829</sup> Brentano, 35.

<sup>830</sup> Dianna E. Anderson, *Problematic: How Toxic Callout Culture is Destroying Feminism* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2018), 10; the problem of virulent backlash is commonly cited as a reason for why feminism is not more popular among women who are social media engaged, Negra, 4.

*Subtle but very real feminist issues despite a belief in “equalism”*

As young people are assessing whether or not gender equality is a problem in their lives, they are looking for large, blatant instances of discrimination by gender and not necessarily seeing them readily.<sup>831</sup> Yet nonetheless, Brian Willoughby and Spencer James in their research for the book *The Marriage Paradox* found feminism to be by far the most divisive gender issue among their respondents.<sup>832</sup> As alluded to earlier, some studies found that contemporary early young adult respondents asked about feminism and their faith lives described themselves as not brought up as feminists, but as “equalists.”<sup>833</sup> In society at-large, Crossley notes that in 2013, 82 percent of Americans polled agreed with the statement that women should be “social, political and economic equals” while 63 percent in same poll identified neither as feminist nor non-feminist, but “other.”<sup>834</sup> Since “equalists” stand for the equal treatment that they believe most people already receive, feminism is seen as radical.<sup>835</sup>

Feminism is seen as radical because it is associated with hating men and believing in women’s superiority.<sup>836</sup> Crossley comments that these indications must be taken in context, as the general populace denying feminism for reasons of labeling and associations with the word has long been identified as a problem by scholarship, and suggested solutions need to therefore take into account the depth and breadth of the problem in culture at large.<sup>837</sup> Yet some young adult women do directly and clearly identify needing feminism in their lives.

What Crossley’s respondents said and the cultural rhetoric around feminism was frequently in reference to contemporary improvements in comparison to the past, not goals for eliminating further gender injustice in the future.<sup>838</sup> “I need feminism because my mother gave up her dreams for a family,” one young woman told her. Another said, “I need feminism because

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<sup>831</sup> Brentano, 38.

<sup>832</sup> Brian Willoughby and Spencer James, *The Marriage Paradox: Why Emerging Adults Love Marriage Yet Push it Aside*, Emerging Adulthood, ed. Larry J. Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 161.

<sup>833</sup> Sarah-Jane Page, “Feminist Faith Lives? Exploring Perceptions of Feminism within Two Anglican Cohorts,” *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls*, edited by Nicola Slee, Fran Porter, and Anne Phillips (London: Ashgate, 2013), 60.

<sup>834</sup> Crossley, 27.

<sup>835</sup> Page, 60-61.

<sup>836</sup> Page, 62.

<sup>837</sup> Crossley, 28.

<sup>838</sup> Crossley, 14; Feminist cultural scholar Shelley Budgeon notes that feminism as something of the past is a popular understanding, 281, 283.



my mother told me to take cat calling as a compliment.”<sup>839</sup> Crossley writes, “While most feminists were irritated with what they saw as Pollyanna-ish media depiction of gender equality, the non-feminists and fence-sitters agreed that women’s status in the United States is not great, but in comparison to how bad it could be, it was acceptable.”<sup>840</sup> In particular, many participants in her study still felt pressure to value male interest and vocational achievement above their own. One of Crossley’s respondents said:

I think women are pushed into things they don’t want to do, but a lot of times they don’t see it. My friend has a boyfriend, and she views it as a burden to him to tell him her emotions. It’s this underlying thing where the woman doesn’t want to bother the man and she’s afraid he’ll reject her. A lot of women don’t want to do something to upset the guy, but that doesn’t prevent the guy from doing really messed up things to the woman. And that’s what upsets me. Why don’t you view yourself as an equal. *If you were to ask them, do you think women are equal to men, they’ll say yes, of course, but in their daily life they don’t live it. And that’s what kills me.*<sup>841</sup>

As another point of blatant inequality at the college level, young women in her study also frequently reported being asked by men to go make them food. Crossley did not indicate whether or not these men were the intimate partners of the women they asked.<sup>842</sup> Beste and Freitas would likely say that the rates of rape and lack of sober interaction also serve as glaring indicators of needing feminist revival within contemporary culture, even as these issues are often seen as only college-specific issues.

*Suggesting utilization of a postmodern feminist “micro-politics”*<sup>843</sup>

As Patricia Mann writes in her book, *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era*, a feminist postmodern sensibility contending with postfeminism will need to be one of a gendered micro-politics which evaluates relationships that have often been considered to private and personal to have been political.<sup>844</sup> This will involve developing “a dynamic conception of the

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<sup>839</sup> Crossley, 24.

<sup>840</sup> Crossley, 57, 164.

<sup>841</sup> Crossley, emphasis added, 32.

<sup>842</sup> Crossley, 164.

<sup>843</sup> Patricia S. Mann, *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>844</sup> Mann, 27.

private sphere” as to what the responsibilities, challenges, and areas of growth might be.<sup>845</sup> On a large and fundamental scale, what Mann envisions will require that we as society rethink the significance of our actions in more basic ways to come up with categories that go beyond what we have right now, such as rational, utilitarian, and other ways of thinking ethically.<sup>846</sup> Such a project as a feminist micro-politics will also require acknowledging that often there is an uncritical focus on personal responsibility which falsely separates self from gender,<sup>847</sup> when it is better understood that all of our actions are done in complementary fashion to other actions and other actors, of which gender in its many manifestations and influences is a crucial part.<sup>848</sup> In tandem with her attempt to extract an unhealthy focus on and interpretation of the postmodern, individual self, Mann suggests that a feminist theory consider human beings to be conflicted actors rather than fragmented selves.<sup>849</sup> She suggests that a form of “engaged individualism” can be recuperated and redeemed in postmodernism toward the ethical good.<sup>850</sup>

Mann’s theory, to which I also adhere, having ruminated on the subject of millennial agency and ethics for some years now, is that “politically engaged individuals will act in contextually interesting ways, while frequently lacking any overarching consciousness.”<sup>851</sup> I think there is yet to have been done significant work on encapsulating a theory of how “contextually interesting ways” plays out, but do agree, such as in the case of embracing informal, convenient intimate relationships, that in some ways contemporary young adults are already doing so without having an “overarching consciousness” as to why or how they come to the decisions they do. Yet what I have just mentioned hardly seems on the face of it ready to take on the subtle depth of how and why inequity in intimate life continues to remain.

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<sup>845</sup> Mann, 34.

<sup>846</sup> Mann, 8.

<sup>847</sup> Budgeon, 286.

<sup>848</sup> Mann, 11.

<sup>849</sup> Mann, 4.

<sup>850</sup> Mann, 21.

<sup>851</sup> Mann, 157.

### SECTION THREE: INEQUITY IN INTIMATE LIFE

Studies continue to show that, past the turn of the twenty-first century, there is limited progress being made in terms of men's taking up greater responsibility for the emotional management of themselves, their marriages, and their families.<sup>852</sup> I summarize this situation by grouping it into two subsections. The first subsection reviews how contemporary young adults wanting egalitarianism but finding constrained choices because the gender structure that they have inherited and been socialized into is severely inequitable when it comes to intimate relationships. The second, following closely upon the first, further explores the significant inequality in intimate relationships as to taking the lead and receiving influence, and how sharing and gender relate to each other in the areas of marriage reticence, cohabitation embrace, and partnership fallback strategies sharply delineated by gender. I conclude that contemporary young adults find that socialization around values and identities, as well as social pressures in work and domesticity, prevent the easy achievement of egalitarian partnership which they wish they had.

#### **Contemporary young adults wanting egalitarianism, finding constrained choices**

Studies overwhelmingly infer that contemporary young adults across all markers of class and ethnicity want egalitarian intimate relationships.<sup>853</sup> They now find identity through both love and work,<sup>854</sup> and most would prefer a life that balances autonomy and commitment, satisfying work and egalitarian relationship.<sup>855</sup> These young adults generally see gender inequality as a problem, although to what degree is something they dispute.<sup>856</sup> In detail, some researchers found

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<sup>852</sup> Maya Salam, "Does 'Having It All' Mean Doing It All?" *New York Times*, December 7, 2018.

<sup>853</sup> Gerson, *Unfinished Revolution*, 106; In Gerson's most recently published research, she finds that a third of contemporary young adults are actively taking steps to make things as equal as possible. About half of these couples involve "reversers" in which women take the higher paid earnings, Gerson, "Different Ways," 158; Sangeeta R. Gupta, "Walking on the Edge: Indian-American Women Speak Out On Dating And Marriage," *Emerging Voices: South Asian American Women Redefine Self, Family and Community*, edited by Sangeeta R. Gupta (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1999), 138.

<sup>854</sup> Gerson, "Moral Dilemmas," 20.

<sup>855</sup> Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution*, 12.

<sup>856</sup> In summer of 2017, Brentano found while researching for her master's thesis in women's leadership that, "95.9% of millennial women responded "yes, [they] think gender inequity is a problem in our country," Brentano, 35; Pew Research Forum, "Among Women, Millennials most likely to see Advantages for Men," October 16, 2017, [http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/10/18/wide-partisan-gaps-in-u-s-over-how-far-the-country-has-come-on-gender-equality/psdt\\_10-18-17\\_gender-00-03/](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/10/18/wide-partisan-gaps-in-u-s-over-how-far-the-country-has-come-on-gender-equality/psdt_10-18-17_gender-00-03/).

language of equality used by couples served as a reassurance of values more than anything else, and for some such language was a substitute for practice which in effect perpetuated asymmetrical power dynamics.<sup>857</sup> In the gender equity study mentioned above, these excuses included: 1) benign framing/rationalization – to see issues as not problematic, 2) not examining the consequences of choices, 3) settling for less, 4) hiding the issues, and, 5) placing responsibility on the wife.<sup>858</sup>

In response to such ambivalence around judging inequity to be a problem, Hochschild calls the current gendered inequalities of modern intimate partnership “a modest delusional system.” She calls it such because people believe there is vastly more equity than there is.<sup>859</sup> While I will return to this in the last subsection of this chapter, it is first worth noting that aspiration is high. It is so high that Gerson found in 2010 among her respondent pool that 4/5ths of women want an egalitarian relationship and over 2/3rds of men do as well.<sup>860</sup> Indeed, family lawyers and scholars Naomi Cahn and June Carbone find that a script of egalitarian interdependence in which members of both genders contribute financially and domestically has become the contemporary ideal for intimate relationships.<sup>861</sup> Yet numerous studies show that what progress has been made between intimate partners related to gender structure issues only extends to persons in particularly luxurious, stable, and mature circumstances.<sup>862</sup> Gender equity

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<sup>857</sup> Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney, “The Myth of Equality,” *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 43, 51.

<sup>858</sup> Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, “Myth,” 53-54.

<sup>859</sup> Arlie Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 135; There are also other stark inequalities between what men and women do in terms of surgery to prevent conception, especially relative to the gravity of the surgeries by gender, as illustrated in Cristina Caron, “Why Don’t More American Men Get Vasectomies?” *New York Times*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/parenting/why-dont-more-american-men-get-vasectomies.html>.

<sup>860</sup> Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution*, 11.

<sup>861</sup> Naomi Cahn and June Carbone, *Marriage Markets: How Inequality is Remaking America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 93.

<sup>862</sup> Neoliberalism as an era marked by the worst social inequality over the past century which scholars cite as a direct result from economic, legislative and legal policy changes. See Jorge Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality makes Societies Stronger* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010, 2011); Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: from State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2013); Cahn and Carbone, *Marriage Markets*, 8, 45; Cahn and Carbone also note the implications of this disparity for culture and work culture in their *Red Families vs. Blue Families: Legal Polarization and the Creation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 2010).

is now more than ever a dividing marker of class, with more people now losing their standing than gaining.<sup>863</sup>

Gender equity as a marker of class notwithstanding, in the course of the most recent of young adult partnerships, researchers of millennial relationships Michelle Budig and Misun Lim see a lack of gender specialization becoming a new normal.<sup>864</sup> Dual-earner households have become ever more standard and attractive to younger persons, especially in comparison to breadwinner households of either gender.<sup>865</sup> However, Carbone and Cahn note that despite dual earner households and their greater approximation to egalitarian households than in previous generations, advancement of such a form of partnership remains an ideal out of reach for many poorer people and rural people because it is often not achievable. Such a flexibility is only possible when there is steady and good employment of both partners, as well as the versatility of both genders to care at home.

Young people do notice gender disparity at large and are incorporating its associated dilemmas into their assessment of life plans. Crossley quotes Smith student Magdalena at length:

I think it's going to be hard to find the family/career balance. I don't know what's looked down on more now, a woman who gives up her career to have a family, or if a woman gives up someone she loves for a career. I don't know if it's one or the other, and maybe there is a way to do both, but I don't know if it's selfish to choose your career over another person. But I definitely think that's the stigma and I just don't, I don't know what's going to happen there, but I see it as a problem.<sup>866</sup>

Magdalena does not specifically mention children when talking about sacrifices, being selfish, and considering a career, just choosing a partner who then allows for the possibility of a family. This choice to match oneself to a partner is the hinge decision for many Millennials, rather than the issue of having children.<sup>867</sup>

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<sup>863</sup> Michelle J. Budig and Misun Lim, "Cohort Differences and the Marriage Premium: Emergence of Gender-Neutral Household Specialization Effects," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78 (October 2016): 1367; W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage among African Americans and Latinos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 17.

<sup>864</sup> Budig and Lim, 1353.

<sup>865</sup> Budig and Lim, 1367.

<sup>866</sup> Crossley, 41.

<sup>867</sup> While a large part of my argument is that young adults concern themselves more with what a partner will or will not bring to a partnership than with prospects of children, given the presence of easily accessible birth control, the potential of a partner still affects their choices to become parents, and yet they receive a maternal work penalty for

For women, it involves a predictive horizon of being expected to compromise one's career to pursue other goals while the same is not nearly as expected for men.<sup>868</sup> As Lisa Miller writes in her article entitled "The Ambition Collision," looking at herself and her female colleagues, she describes women in their 30s giving in to the "parameters of the psychic vise." This vise is a gripping down on the self in the acknowledgement that statically for a large number of women there is no way to get truly ahead in work in comparison to men. Miller highlights that there are few if no career positions where women make substantially more than men and few where there is even employment parity between the sexes. Alluding to how the reboot of the television show of *The Gilmore Girls* ended with Rory, the intrepid feminist and child of a single mother repeating her mother's life story with a little more advantage by finding herself single and pregnant in her mid-twenties, Miller notes sardonically: "maybe Rory saw better than I did the corner she was in" in terms of knowing that women can still be felled from advancing by so many things.<sup>869</sup> Crossley predicts that for her young women respondents, college is a "bubble" of sorts, in which their high expectations of potential mobility and achievement will face a reality check of gendered socioeconomic constraints once they enter the full-time job market after graduation.<sup>870</sup> Scholars note that contemporary young adult women, compared to men, report feeling the greatest discrepancy between their preferred standards for relationships with what actually occurred in their relationships, but this is often something they note only as they age.<sup>871</sup>

Matching other research, Crossley finds that young adults' hesitance to let others get in the way of career pursuits is primarily because young adults are worried about finances in terms of school, debt, and keeping a job, and this is true of both genders.<sup>872</sup> Crossley found that young

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becoming parents than men do not automatically receive. Ridgeway articulates that as of 2011, there was still a "maternal wall" of 5% wage penalty for each child in the salary of women compared to non-mothers, 117.

<sup>868</sup> Risman, 61.

<sup>869</sup> Lisa Miller, "The Ambition Collision: This is what Happens to Ambition in your Thirties," *Cut*, September 6, 2017, 3; Risman notes that women still "age up" into a pay gap for a variety of reasons, many of them not in their control, 4.

<sup>870</sup> Crossley, 29.

<sup>871</sup> Avidan Milevsky, Kristie Thudium, and Jillian Guldin, *The Transitory Nature of Parent, Sibling, and Romantic Partner Relationships*, Emerging Adulthood, Springer Briefs in Well-being and Quality of Life Research (Cham: Springer, 2014), 43.

<sup>872</sup> Crossley, 43.

college women generally do not worry about gender-based wage gaps so much as their own ability to survive financially.<sup>873</sup> Where comparisons came most into play for young women was how going to a state or community college was going to affect their financial prospects and social networks in the long-term compared to those who could afford or get into a better college.<sup>874</sup> This supports Gerson's findings. Women who cannot find a partner with whom to have an egalitarian intimate relationship will fall back on notions of autonomy and financial security rather than settle for a partnership which might involve too much compromise and inequality.<sup>875</sup> Sociologists Alison Pugh and Jennifer Silva each note that women, particularly working-class women, often go to this default because they have trouble trusting men.<sup>876</sup> This often has to do with questions around financial "providership," safety, and fidelity, but also include how much support and decision-making responsibility they will receive from such potential husbands. This is a significant evaluative factor which all women, regardless of socioeconomic class, do, and *should*, bring to the partnership negotiation table.

### **Significant inequality in taking the lead and receiving influence, sharing responsibilities**

#### *With whom you marry matters*

Recent feminist icons for young adult women such as business leader Sheryl Sandberg and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg have noted that still today who young women marry matters greatly to their future as to what amount of agency and leadership they will be able to engage in their lives, even if they have a career.<sup>877</sup> This is in large part because women are aided or inhibited in any number of ways by the men in their lives in terms of the initiation

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<sup>873</sup> Crossley, 43; Carbone and Cahn found that ability to divorce without fault, beginning in the 1970s made vulnerable wives more vulnerable, so women began to invest in their own independence in order to survive, Cahn and Carbone, *Marriage Markets*, 113.

<sup>874</sup> Crossley, 43.

<sup>875</sup> Kathleen Gerson, "Moral Dilemmas, Moral Strategies and the Transformation of Gender: Lessons from Two Generations of Work and Family Change," 1998 Sociologists for Women in Society Feminist Lecture reprinted in *Gender and Society* 16, no. 1 (February 2002): 22.

<sup>876</sup> Allison Pugh, "Introduction: The Broader Impacts of Precariousness," *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self*, ed. Allison J. Pugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 14; Jennifer Silva, *Coming up Short: Working-class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>877</sup> Leonard, 33; Betsy West and Julie Cohen, *RBG*, Magnolia Pictures, 2018.

and progression of relationships already mentioned, the amount of support they receive from spouses while on maternity leave, the relative energy and sacrifice that spouses put toward female dreams, and many other factors. Lately, there have been attempts in popular media to raise consciousness about the amount of household labor and emotional management of the household that women still perform in comparison to the men in their lives and how this affects the rest of their life's balance in terms of energy and space for other things. Yet research backs up Hochschild's assessment of a "delusional system" on multiple levels by revealing how inequitable things are statistically, despite our self-reported aspiration that we wish things were different ideally.

I start this section on relational inequity by uplifting some statistics and patterns of influence that are seldom reported upon amidst issues of pay inequity and scrutiny on shares of household responsibility. Yet little can be done at the stage of intimate partnership if there is not significant reworking of the dynamics of relationship initiation, progression, and influence giving and receiving among both members of an intimate coupling. Feminist sociologist Laurie Essig found that in the United States men still propose marriage 95 percent of the time, even though surveys indicate 75% of people say it would be ok if the woman proposed (yet this is *permissible* versus *ideal*). She also noted that recently younger respondents were *more* likely to want men to propose than those in older generations.<sup>878</sup> This is hardly surprising, given the fact that men taking the romantic lead starts at the beginning: in 2012 only 12% of American women had asked anyone out in the past year.<sup>879</sup> Statistics show that men retain the prerogative around relationship initiation and advancement in all stages of relationships from dating through marriage.<sup>880</sup>

Interestingly, while men make *most* of the movements of advancement in intimate relationships, they do not instigate advancement into the realms of greater gender equity, but rather time and again leave this to the work of women.<sup>881</sup> Women must not only take the lead in

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<sup>878</sup> Laurie Essig, *Love, Inc.: Dating Apps, the Big White Wedding, and Chasing the Happily Everafter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 84-85.

<sup>879</sup> Aziz Ansari with Eric Klinenberg, *Modern Romance: An Investigation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 34.

<sup>880</sup> Paula England, Emily Fitzgibbons Schafer, and Alison C. K. Fogarty, "Hooking up and Forming Romantic Relationships on Today's College Campuses," *The Gendered Society Reader*, edited by Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson, third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 531-546, cited in Allen et al., 151.

<sup>881</sup> Kristin Celello, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 142.



making their existing relationships more equitable, they must also convince men to come along for the journey, something which is not always accomplished. In psycho-sociological language, this ability for men to be convinced and changed by something outside of themselves in a significant way is couched as the capacity “to receive influence.” While I address the idea of giving and receiving influence in greater detail in my last chapter, in short, receiving influence from one’s partner can be described as a process which leads to change in one’s self of behavior or attitude on a significant and fundamental level when one has the power to not receive it.<sup>882</sup> A recent illustration of changes to male reception of influence is Spain’s decision to offer men paternity leave where there had been none offered before. The study of it pointed to how those men’s desires around the number of children they wanted to have were more likely to align with that of women (where they had not before) after the men had gained greater experience of what it takes to raise a child.<sup>883</sup> The issue of men receiving influence remains a key issue because marital specialists consider male ability to receive influence from women to be the key factor in whether or not a relationship is ultimately satisfactory and sustainable.<sup>884</sup>

Authors of *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships* sociologists Sharon Sassler and Amanda Jayne Miller confirm that men being willing to receive influence from female partners is extremely important as to whether or not the relationship can be considered gender equitable.<sup>885</sup> Sassler and Miller note that there is a stark difference by socioeconomic class as to the likelihood that men are receptive. In particular, working and service class men, despite losing earning status as a whole since before the advent of neoliberal economics, Sassler and Miller note, are perhaps even more resistant to receiving influence from female partners in substantial ways than they might have been in past generations. Sassler and Miller articulate that lower class men are less willing to receive influence in part because they do

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<sup>882</sup> Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney, “Beyond Gender: The Processes of Relationship Equality,” *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 64.

<sup>883</sup> Corinne Purtill and Dan Kopf, “After Men in Spain got Paternity Leave they wanted Fewer Kids,” *Reuters*, May 9, 2019, [https://qz.com/work/1614893/after-men-in-spain-got-paternity-leave-they-wanted-fewer-kids/?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=qz-organic&fbclid=IwAR2F2QVPTjW\\_VF1VphHMw00u12GwKg6F5VfcBmkwDE5AAH7BpXGRStvDmpw](https://qz.com/work/1614893/after-men-in-spain-got-paternity-leave-they-wanted-fewer-kids/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=qz-organic&fbclid=IwAR2F2QVPTjW_VF1VphHMw00u12GwKg6F5VfcBmkwDE5AAH7BpXGRStvDmpw).

<sup>885</sup> Sharon Sassler and Amanda Jayne Miller, *Cohabitation Nation: Gender, Class, and the Remaking of Relationships* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2017), 2-3, 9, 10, 188.

not have the intra and interpersonal skills to do so.<sup>886</sup> Beyond even this, they cannot easily be flexible partners in terms of financial providing and shared home responsibilities with a female partner because of their own situations of work and its constraints.<sup>887</sup> This situation is especially worrisome as more Americans slip further down the economic ladder. On a whole, while I have noted that the level of gender-neutral, gender-egalitarian attitude is at an all-time generational high among Millennials of any socioeconomic class,<sup>888</sup> the economic stress which they are under predicts, and studies show, that behavior is nowhere near to matching their reported aspirations for an idealized partnership where both genders work and care.<sup>889</sup>

### *The state of sharing generally*

Time studies and other triangulating confirmations of the veracity of self-identification indicate that few couples, even those who identify as egalitarian, actually engage in thoroughly gender mutual partnership behavior.<sup>890</sup> In a particular psychological study done in the last decade on intimate gender equality of couples who professed to be “gender equal,” feminist counselors Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney found that only two of twelve couples actually shared household responsibilities. Instead, in order to engage in both paid work and domestic responsibilities, women in intimate partnerships reported cutting down time for friends and exercise.<sup>891</sup> The greatest amount of emotional fiction between couples regarding equity has to do with housework, scholars find time and again. Scholars of postmodern intimacy Jacqui Gabb and Janet Fink write, “One of the most intensely experienced sites of anger and exasperation in the home is around the gendered inequalities that shape responsibilities for domestic chores and childcare, particularly when women are also trying to manage the ‘double

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<sup>886</sup> Sassler and Miller write, “Compared to their middle-class counterparts, persons in service-class positions who cohabitate often failed to demonstrate mastery of important life skills increasingly central to contemporary relationships in the work world: communication, cooperation, and negotiation,” 18-19, 178-179.

<sup>887</sup> Sassler and Miller find this resistance among working class men to be particularly true in terms of accepting female partners’ encouragement of use of contraception and doing more housework, 2-3, 188; Cahn and Carbone, *Marriage Markets*, 45.

<sup>888</sup> Pew Research Forum, “Among Women.”

<sup>889</sup> Risman, 45.

<sup>890</sup> Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, “The Myth of Equality,” 43.

<sup>891</sup> Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, “Myth,” 47. Two couples were deemed by the researcher as unacceptably unequal despite their claiming partnership equality, Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, “Myth,” 48.

burden' of paid employment and the care of young children.”<sup>892</sup> Furthermore, and likely related, in 2016 *The Journal of Brain and Behavior* published a study that indicated that women are twice as likely as men to suffer from severe stress and anxiety.<sup>893</sup> While the burden of primary financial “providership” must also be considered in the balance of what makes an intimate relationship equitable in burden and benefit, the amount of anger and stress which women report experiencing in comparison to men stands as an indication of inequity and injustice.

It is now mainstream for both adult partners to work, but the woman’s work is often part-time while there are young children in the house,<sup>894</sup> as women are still expected to “be good mothers first and foremost.”<sup>895</sup> Studies estimate that 20% of fathers in two-parent households spend as much time as mothers interacting with and being available to their children.<sup>896</sup> As for what men are doing when they are not with their children, like was alluded to earlier, the U.S. Department of Labor found that men spend more time than women exercising, playing games, and enjoying hobbies.<sup>897</sup> Furthermore, this disparity is true of overall housework as well: it is commonly cited that women in 2006 still did twice as much childcare and twice as much housework as men, on average. This involved contemporary men doing 30% of the household domestic responsibilities total instead of 15% as they had in 1960.<sup>898</sup> Researchers find that this disparity is only somewhat excused by men making more money and working longer hours.<sup>899</sup>

Sociologist Ridgeway found that research indicated the *value* of the earnings brought home have the largest effect of the division of household labor rather than *hours* of paid work. Given that women still make only 83% of what men make for similar work, and then adding on

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<sup>892</sup> Jacqui Gabb and Janet Fink, *Couple Relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Studies in Family and Intimate Life series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 111.

<sup>893</sup> *The Journal of Brain and Behavior* (2016) cited by Salam, 2.

<sup>894</sup> Bueskens, 302.

<sup>895</sup> Risman, 47.

<sup>896</sup> Allison Pugh, *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 98.

<sup>897</sup> Salam, 2.

<sup>898</sup> Gerson, *Unfinished Revolution*, 201; This statistic has not received any significant update by a researcher in nearly 15 years, pointing, in my opinion, to the lack of contemporary energy around continued interpersonal equity research; Cecilia Ridgeway, *Framed By Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 128.

<sup>899</sup> Kristin Wong, “There’s a Stress Gap between Men and Women. Here’s Why It’s Important,” *New York Times*, November 14, 2018; Budig and Lim, 1368.

the differences in career tracks and decisions women make anticipating family responsibilities ahead of them, women bring home far less money than men on average—at about 80% in one recent study.<sup>900</sup> It is understandable that the more hours men spend in paid work, the less they spend on household work, yet this is not true for women.<sup>901</sup> Women who work the same number of hours and have the same salary as their male partners are still found to do more housework than men.<sup>902</sup> In the case of high-earning women, female breadwinners hire out household work in most often rather than make men do it. Ridgeway notes that this results in keeping household work a female responsibility and a female task, even as women rise in career ranks and pay otherwise.<sup>903</sup>

A good deal of the issue at hand, all things being relative, researchers note, comes down to whether or not men *want* to do what it takes to be equal in domestic responsibility to their partner.<sup>904</sup> This again, comes down to men deciding to accept women’s influence when such women suggest that they would like domestic responsibilities to be more equal, and men agreeing to this progression. Yet researchers also find, in a not mutually exclusive or contradictory way, that some of the inequality of domestic responsibility has to do with women retaining a sense that they are morally responsible for making sure the care work gets done and having difficulty ceding this on a spiritual and practical level to sharing the responsibility with men.<sup>905</sup> Women are still considered to be most feminine by retaining the bulk of the childcare responsibilities, what some researchers call “maternal gatekeeping” against a renegotiation of caretaking roles.<sup>906</sup> Overall, dual-career households make up for being spread more thinly in part

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<sup>900</sup> Deborah J. Vagins, “The Simple Truth about the Pay Gap,” *American Association of University Women*, no date listed, accessed June 25, 2019, <https://www.aauw.org/research/the-simple-truth-about-the-gender-pay-gap/>.

<sup>901</sup> Ridgeway, 143.

<sup>902</sup> Risman, 19.

<sup>903</sup> Ridgeway, 144; Men will do more housework when wives’ earnings approximate or exceed their own, to a degree, yet only 3% of households are women bread earners with “domestic” husbands, 144-145; This is most recently noted in the memoir exposé by Megan K. Stack, *Women’s Work: A Reckoning with Work and Home* (New York: Doubleday, 2019).

<sup>904</sup> Sassler and Miller, 9.

<sup>905</sup> Risman, 23; Marla Kohlman and Dana B. Krieg, “Introduction: Intersectional Dynamics of Gender, Family, and Work,” *Notions of Family: Intersectional Perspectives*, ed. Marla Kohlman, Dana B. Krieg, and Bette J. Dickerson (Bingley, Great Britain: Emerald Group, 2013), xv.

<sup>906</sup> Kohlman and Kreig, xv.

by spending less time doing housework than non-dual career families.<sup>907</sup> They simply live with less clean houses, which is true in a lot of cases, or they hire out.<sup>908</sup> Researchers note that while self-care and house care are places where dual-career households cut back to make things work, fatigue is more constant in families than ever before.<sup>909</sup> The role of fatigue, the rate at which change is expected and occurs, as well as the relative greater egalitarian nature of cohabitation are all likely contributing factors to the contemporary rise of cohabitation as a mainstream intimate status.

### *The state of gender and sharing in cohabitation*

As cohabitation becomes a mainstream form of relationship across all sectors of society, it is worthwhile to investigate how gender-structure dynamics are playing out in this new phenomenon. Persons who cohabit tend to each work, are more likely to have commensurate salaries to each other, and make decisions more independently of each other.<sup>910</sup> Most persons who cohabit prize individuality, autonomy, and equity more highly than conventional notions of dependency which are associated with becoming a family unit.<sup>911</sup> This is possibly an issue of self-selection of temperament, skills and ambitions, in which these pre-existing factors make persons amenable to cohabitation as a desirable union structure precisely for its gender-neutrality and greater functional autonomy.

In contemporary comparisons of differences in gender structure and roles comparative to the union forms of marriage and cohabitation, studies found that women engaging in cohabitation were more likely to be able to negotiate on the issue of gendered household work

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<sup>907</sup> Ridgeway, 142.

<sup>908</sup> Suzanne M. Bianchi, Melissa A. Milkie, and John P. Robinson suggest that stress, mundanity, and enjoyment of paid work versus aspects of the same in domestic work deserve to be considered in determining what is fair or equitable across a partnership, *The Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* (N.P: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 177-178. EBSCOHost.

<sup>909</sup> Bianchi et al., 179.

<sup>910</sup> Sassler and Miller, 10. They note that while cohabitating couples demonstrate greater similarity to each other in earning resources than married couples, women still remain disadvantaged in terms of overall negotiating power in the relationship compared to men. This is often in part because men are reticent to give up a sense of prerogative that they should be the ones to lead as a masculine right.

<sup>911</sup> Mick Cunningham, "Gender in Cohabitation and Marriage: The Influence of Gender Ideology on Housework Allocation over the Life Course," *Journal of Family Issues* 26, no. 8 (November 2005): 1038-1039; also in Sassler and Miller, 11.

and responsibilities than what was found to be true of their female peers who were married.<sup>912</sup> This is in part due to the retained gendered notions of wife and husband in marriage. While women were likely to find more voice in cohabitation than in marriage, other studies found that men are more likely than women to use cohabitation as a form to emphasize the advantages of retaining independence and limiting commitment.<sup>913</sup> As cohabitation has become more mainstream as a form of pre-marriage or an alternative to it, studies find that people who cohabit today have more conventional attitudes than those who cohabited in the last generation,<sup>914</sup> who were more likely to be in that form of union because of politics or marginalization. For instance, while both partners typically work in a relationship of cohabitation, women increase how much housework they do, and men decrease.<sup>915</sup>

Numerous studies have reported upon Millennial women's gendered reluctance to marry. Some of the reasons for this might be that the relative benefits are limited for a woman marrying if she is not able to engage in a commensurate career to her male spouse.<sup>916</sup> Psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett notes that generational delays on marriage and procreation allow men today to have the opportunity to find more fulfilling careers and explore options because there is less pressure upon them to find a job that can support a family right away, but Arnett does not spend a lot of time assessing this in terms of how this affects men and women's decisions as gendered.<sup>917</sup> Related to whether or not men feel pressure and how, Cahn and Carbone remark that today poor men do not need to commit to a woman to gain sexual access to her, so they are less willing to do so ever.<sup>918</sup> Cahn and Carbone link the reduced ability for women to be able to

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<sup>912</sup> Cunningham, 1058.

<sup>913</sup> Patricia Noller, Judith A. Feeney, and Candida Peterson, *Personal Relationships across the Lifespan*, International Series in Social Psychology (Philadelphia: Psychology Press, 2001), 87.

<sup>914</sup> Sassler and Miller, 186.

<sup>915</sup> Ridgeway, 148, 154.

<sup>916</sup> Budig and Lim, 1367; Silva notes this is particularly true of working-class women.

<sup>917</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 2014), 144.

<sup>918</sup> While most cultural commentary blames men for being commitment-phobic, sociologist Mark Regnerus sees it differently. He writes, "Men are not afraid to 'man up' and commit. They simply don't need to." Regnerus goes on to note that while women have gained greater sexual freedom "what women are less in control of—in exchange, is their relational (and emotional) destinies. Today's mating market is no less dominated by men's interests, and arguably far more than in previous generations," Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16, 26; Sassler and Miller agree, 9.

set the terms of the relationship to high rates of domestic violence, distrust, adultery.<sup>919</sup> *These relationship problems are real and frequent, and they often not adequately addressed in a literature quixotically focused on the possibilities rather than the probabilities of egalitarianism.*

If a contemporary women marries, regardless of her social class, she is likely to do more household labor than her male spouse, and he will furthermore retain privilege in decision-making and career priority. Similarly, while scholars find that caregivers of any kind receive a wage and promotion penalty over time, by and large the majority of childhood birthing and raising tasks are still done by women, making the penalty still highly gendered.<sup>920</sup> Sociologists Ashley Brooke Barr and Ronald L. Simons noted that millennial women in their study “were more likely than men to prefer to be married and were more certain about getting married *despite* also being more likely to disagree that marriage brings happiness and to agree that there are few good marriages.”<sup>921</sup> Carbone and Cahn comment that today women can be choosier about their relationships, but not necessarily after they commit.<sup>922</sup> I believe that this culturally obstinate inability for a majority of women to feel that they can sufficiently negotiate the terms of a committed gendered partnership is under-acknowledged in sociological literature as a reason for marriage and commitment delay.<sup>923</sup>

### *The state of gendered “fallback” strategies*

In particular, Gerson’s research finds that contemporary young adults are reticent for men to trade in career stability and advancement in order to increase their responsibility at home, even if the household is economically stable. Gerson notes that marriage for young men means pressure to earn more than they would otherwise have. She also found that contemporary young men are more apprehensive of the ability to financially make ends meet than their female peers.<sup>924</sup> She stresses that it is key for people to understand that self-reliance, something I note in

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<sup>919</sup> Cahn and Carbone, *Marriage Markets*, 75.

<sup>920</sup> Pugh, “Introduction,” *Tumbleweed*, 12.

<sup>921</sup> Ashley Brooke Barr and Ronald L. Simons, “Marital Beliefs among African American Emerging Adults: The Roles of Community Context, Family Background, and Relationship Experiences,” *Journal of Family Issues* (2016): 8.

<sup>922</sup> Cahn and Carbone, *Marriage Markets*, 46.

<sup>923</sup> Willoughby and James call these differences as appearing “subtle,” 159, 156.

<sup>924</sup> Gerson, *Unfinished Revolution*, 159.

Chapter One is particularly a high value for Millennials, is for men the opposite of women—it means not having to care for anyone except themselves.<sup>925</sup>

Many Millennials report that while they believe in equal rights for men and women, they are more interested in prioritizing an arrangement of work and care that they hope or feel will be less stressful than that of the two-career households they experienced growing up.<sup>926</sup> In Gerson’s latest published research from 2017, she notes that a third of her recent interviewees seek traditional, clear division between breadwinning and caretaking. She notes that in these cases, this occurs in contemporary young adult relationships after an earlier preference for equal arrangement that proved difficult to create or sustain.<sup>927</sup> Gerson highlighted that whether her couples were in traditional or “reversed” care-work relationships, it is important to highlight that most hoped for a more integrated and equal balance than they had been able to achieve.<sup>928</sup> Pugh, however, who had a closer focus on class, found that working-class persons in particular would most prefer a traditional model but fear it is not economically sustainable.<sup>929</sup> Thus desire versus settling, as well as the intricacies of class difference, needs to be taken into account when doing further research in this area.<sup>930</sup>

Work-life sociologist Alison Pugh found that somewhat “counterintuitively” men’s greater employment insecurity may make couples prioritize men’s jobs because women are more likely to get a job somewhere somehow.<sup>931</sup> In an age of dual-earner households having become standard, men of most socioeconomic classes are no longer able to cover the vast bulk of their family’s financial needs because a combination of such changing standards and relative

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<sup>925</sup> Gerson, *Unfinished Revolution*, 164.

<sup>926</sup> Daniel Carlson, “A View from Above: How Structural Barriers to Sharing Unpaid Work at Home May Lead to ‘Egalitarian Essentialism’ in Youth,” Online Symposium published by the Council on Contemporary Families, <http://contemporaryfamilies.org/4-carlson-egalitarian-essentialism-in-youth/> cited by Risman, 5; Filipovic, 36.

<sup>927</sup> Kathleen Gerson, “Different Ways of *not* having it all: Work, Care, and Shifting Gender Arrangements in the New Economy,” *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self*, edited by Allison J. Pugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 159.

<sup>928</sup> Gerson, “Different Ways, 167.

<sup>929</sup> Alison Pugh, “Introduction,” *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self*, edited by Allison J. Pugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 14.

<sup>930</sup> Gerson agrees that further research will need to do better on distinguishing between aspirations and actual practices which may be compromises, Gerson, *Unfinished Revolution*, 105.

<sup>931</sup> Pugh, “Introduction,” *Beyond the Cubicle*, 10.



lackluster conditions for employment themselves.<sup>932</sup> Despite the fact that men often find themselves in a disadvantaged position of “providership” compared to that of generations past, Sarah M. Corse and Silva note, “Neither the working-class or middle-class men we spoke with valued their intimate relationships as a specific hedge against the downside in the realm of work.”<sup>933</sup> This is significant.

In the predictive horizon of impermanence of which I have spoken about, men see the need to spend all the more energy and effort building an earning power safety net against economic need, rather than assume that women with whom they partner can provide financially for them if they not able to do so for themselves. Women, however, are still socialized—and believe—that they should take care of themselves and their children, or rely on a male partner for financial sustenance, but do not envision themselves taking the financial lead in a two-adult household. The fact that men and women have different, and somewhat mutually exclusive default strategies for when intimate equality cannot be achieved remains an issue to be addressed by further research and constructive intervention.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The issue of whether Millennials as young adults will continue the stalled gender revolution that they inherited or change course toward greater progressivism in gender equality largely depends on whether or not men are willing to acknowledge their continued gender privilege in the contemporary era. If they are, then they can more consciously note where their choices and chances still impede their female partner’s ability to have the same level of power in terms of resources, status, and decision-making capacity. In this chapter I have reviewed four major contemporary typologies of gender orientation present among young adults and how these typologies and other data point to the continued need for new scripts of femininity, masculinity, and intimate interaction. I then put forward data that describes young adults as individualistic

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<sup>932</sup> Enobong Hannah Branch comments that it is surprising to work-life scholars how persistent intimate gender role divisions continue despite this, Enobong Hannah Branch, “Racialized Family Ideals: Breadwinning, Domesticity, and the Negotiation of Insecurity,” *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self*, edited by Allison J. Pugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 196.

<sup>933</sup> Sarah M. Corse and Jennifer M. Silva, “Intimate Inequalities: Love and Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Beyond the Cubicle: Job Insecurity, Intimacy, and the Flexible Self*, edited by Allison J. Pugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 299.

and apolitical, but aware of discrimination and social pressures for people to conform their behaviors to conventional expectations. I then argue that, given the postmodern, postfeminist era, inequities are quickly written off as mythos, even as their empirical realities remain rather blatant. In the final section, I map how while most contemporary young adults want egalitarianism, a rocky terrain replete with gender inequity in practices from dating to partnership keep young adults conflicted by constrained choices.

**Part Two: Toward Mutuality on the “Oregon Trail Redux” through  
Reframing Love, Justice, and Mutual Recognition**

## V.

### Nepantlismo: Disrupting Norms and Developing Moral Imagination

*The Trickster, if anything, trusts herself/himself and goes for it, punto [...] It is part of being nepantleras. In a way, nepantleras are in step with the cosmos, because they recognize that the space/place of nepantla is definitely not static, but utterly dynamic, slippery, sometimes rocky, sometimes flowing. Negotiating this space requires alertness, often choosing at a moment's notice what to do, having a clear sense of self (with all our flaws and virtues), shrugging our shoulders when mistakes are made (sometimes remembering what did not work, sometimes forgetting and repeating the mistakes), laughing at ourselves and at life, longing, wanting what is prohibited, what seems absolutely unachievable, sometimes saving ourselves and others miraculously, with grace and compassion, sometimes surprising everyone with our generosity, wit, and wisdom, picking ourselves up, putting ourselves back together when we are knocked down or destroyed, moving on, always moving on.*

Inés Hernández-Avila, in *Fleshing the Spirit*<sup>934</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION

As I sketched across the first part of this dissertation, contemporary young adults are tuned to think in hybrid, eclectic, experientially-near forms which are closer than previous generations to the grindstone of “survivance” in a psychological way if not as closely in a material and financial way that tunes them to a certain sensitivity.<sup>935</sup> Specific in regards to this sensitivity, contemporary young adults are inclusive and intensely particular. This significantly affects how they approach ethical frames as they might be taught to them by college professors or religious leaders, as they are likely to be suspicious and dismissive of claims to universality and virtues discussed at abstract levels. They want to participate in the development of any proscription meant for them, as much as possible, as they do not grant considerable authority, for

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<sup>934</sup> Inés Hernández-Avila, “Forward: A Meditation,” *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives*, edited by Elisa Facio and Irene Lara (Phoenix: University of Arizona Press, 2014), xiv.

<sup>935</sup> Survivance refers to indigenous ways of, and knowledges engaged in, surviving trauma. “Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy. Survivance is more than mere survival—it is a way of life that nourishes Indigenous ways of knowing,” in *Acts of Survivance*. <http://survivance.org/acts-of-survivance/>; See Laurel C. Schneider, “More Than a Feeling A Queer Notion of Survivance,” *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*, edited by Kent L. Brintnall, Joseph A. Marchal, and Stephen D. Moore, first edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 258-276.

the most part, to anyone but themselves. While this is not entirely wise, due to the hypersensitive inclination toward self-reliance and authenticity I mention earlier, this deep personalization of filtering authority and relevance is, I argue, a method of survival for the guerilla self who believes deeply in personal responsibility, and therefore personal authority as well. This is not to say that young adults, however, are only interested in their own verdicts and their own tools for creating them. In fact, I have tried to argue that as postmodern subjects they are looking for a way to draw from and assess their lives as to who they are and where they want them to go in terms of spiritual and relational vision. In this chapter, I offer a methodology of ethical inquiry developed by those on the margins of society that is countercultural (in a postmodern sort of way), improvised and nascent, and, most importantly, profoundly particular and affirmative.

### **Ethics from the margins**

I believe that a perspective of ethics developed at the margins can be a good collaborative partner with young adults because at demographics' most creative, their lives are a testament to the diversity of ways in which some find relationship, affirmation, love, and care; and yet most in the mainstream are still “policed” and pressured when they go outside the norms. They know that the feminist revolution is stalled for a variety of reasons mentioned in the last chapter, while the queer one advances in places but not too far without considering the weight of its sister. Those whose bodies and loves get them recognized as outside the norms with the quickest of assessments and the rudest of questions offer testimonio of the depth and pervasive resistance, outright dismissal, and disregard that they receive for being them.

I argue that to support the seeming “social deviance” of young adults and that of others is hardly “just a thing” about “rights” or preferences. Movements to publicly recognize the way in which categorically underprivileged in society are treated can get people killed, disowned, fired, and beaten. As Angela Davis puts it in her forward to *When they Call you a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, disrupting undisputed mythic narratives Americans have about equality, justice and human freedom—especially if done by black people— “gets you called a terrorist.”<sup>936</sup> Ideas of which formulations of family or culture are best for women are of hot debate, and

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<sup>936</sup> Angela Davis, “Foreword,” Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandele, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017), xiii; for more about the interstices of these radical movements, see also Charlene A. Carruthers, *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

commonly used by multiple sides of the dispute as ideological leverage against whomever the other(s) might be.

This chapter departs from focusing on young adults explicitly to lift up the ways in which those who are marginalized by mythic notions (often white and patriarchal) and economic systems—which are often anything but free and just—live interpersonal lives of love, care, and creativity. The aim of this chapter is two-fold: first, I outline a form of queer, nepantla (a type of ethical knowledge and ethical discernment that comes about from a position of being in-between), hybridization of auto-ethnographic reflection that brings to the consciousness embodied moral knowledge and inspiration, a process which anyone can engage; second, I highlight various voices of the socially marginalized who use ethnography, postmodern theories and their spiritual roots (when life-giving) to reflect upon what about this life of theirs has been—and is—moral and virtuous on an interpersonal level.<sup>937</sup> These illuminate the process of what Hispanic theorist Gloria Anzaldúa would call *conocimiento*, a moral epistemology based on life reflection.<sup>938</sup> I argue that many aspects of nepantla and most borderland theories of finding one's existence as a disruption from the norm can be used by contemporary young adults to auto-ethnographically explore who they are and who they want to be in a way that facilitates fulfillment of new ways of being intimate and loving.

## SECTION ONE: QUEER THEORY, ETHICS, AND THE FAMILY

### *Young's Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination*

The backbone of this chapter rests on the work of Thelathia Nikki Young's *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* which provides a crucial perspective on how a

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<sup>937</sup> While postmodern “technologies of the self,” to use Michael Foucault’s language, involve self-reflexive adoption of a particular discourse that becomes agential in the act of doing it, this does not necessarily equivocate to moral evaluation, of whether or not a particular discourse, by itself, is good or bad or has good or bad implications, as feminist scholar Feona Attwood notes. This is often the critique against such technologies, and yet, as will be shown in this chapter, black queer ethicist Nikki Young crucially provides values from ethics and religion that can combine to help make such reflection a process of moral reflection, Feona Attwood, “Through the Looking Glass? Sexual Agency and Subjectification Online,” *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, edited by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 203-214.

<sup>938</sup> In addition to this chapter, in the second section of Chapter Two I outline how some feminists have put Gloria Anzaldúa’s processes of *conocimiento* and conscientization to work in developing a postmodern method for identity formation and continual moral growth.

black queer existence of marginality can lead to moral creativity in family relationships. Focusing ethnographically on her subject matter with forty self-identified black queer women, Young shows how a marginalized subject position allows for confronting and destabilizing norms because there is little choice in black queer life. For Young, self-identification that occurs in black queer life is a morally-laden act of “accountability, accommodation, and innovation.”<sup>939</sup>

It is, as I identify, an act of *nepantla*, of figuring out how to articulate the moral consciousness of living one’s life in the in-between of normative social structures and socially approved identities. To create a richer, more diverse picture in the spirit of *nepantlerismo* (of being in-between), I also engage the ethnographic work of Katie Acosta with “sexually non-conforming Latinas,” various ethical standpoints and critiques by persons of color, and reflections on queer virtue primarily by lesbian Episcopal priest Elizabeth Edman. Young speaks at the center of this picture, however, because she clearly identifies, without naming it as such, what it means to gain *conocimiento* from being *una nepantlera* as a black lesbian engaged in serious reflection about her life and the lives of those like her. She uses this knowledge to speak back to the field of ethics from which she came and to argue that the interpersonal lives of all persons, regardless of their identity, can have moral merit.

An Emory-trained social ethicist who now teaches Women and Gender Studies classes at Bucknell University, Young argues that the women whom she interviews have experiences of providing and receiving care which are a disruption of the normative meaning of family. In doing so, these disruptions offer a creative resistance that points to how other patterns of care and respect can lead to better outcomes than the dominant model. Young articulates that her project at large in queer black ethics involves “searching for an ethic of relationships that draws on concepts of love, justice, mutuality, embodiment, and interconnectedness” as well as growth.<sup>940</sup>

It is the Western family’s status as an incubator of rigid, particular gender roles and socialization in general that leads Young to dig into how the family can be different rather than dismiss it as a hopelessly oppressive and locked down system. She is certainly not the first person from a queer or feminist position to consider normative positions of the family as negative, but she is among the first scholars to address it as such while still accrediting the family

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<sup>939</sup> Thelathia Nikki Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family and Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 61.

<sup>940</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, xvi.

with positive potential for moral formation. She writes, “The concept of family is a useful starting point for engaging moral ideas of relationships because it is widely considered to be and often acts as a site of moral formation, self-identity negotiation, and social education.”<sup>941</sup> As a religious scholar by training, Young brings to the discussion an element of agreement on the moral importance of the family which spans political divides (a topic of similitude and agreement which is addressed again in Chapter Six).<sup>942</sup> In choosing to unearth the deep practices of normalization and its resulting effects in order to fight for the family being a place of growth and mutuality, Young represents the growth and *métier* of queer theory by the strength of her project to both deconstruct and then *reconstruct*.<sup>943</sup>

### Overview of queer theory

Queer theory as an intellectual movement, as religion and science scholars Lisa Stenmark and Whitney Bauman put it, with its roots in postmodernism and poststructuralism, came together in the 1980s and 1990s around common critiques of the intelligibility of presumptions around what is given or natural.<sup>944</sup> It is one of many postmodernist ways of critiquing fixed universals and grand narratives in such a manner as to fracture the presumed link between knowledge and progress.<sup>945</sup> As a theoretical lens, it is multidisciplinary and its authorship varies as to where members stand in terms of the depth of their post-structuralism and the relative nearness or distance to which they root their critiques in knowledge of the body and sexual difference. Yet, most relevant to my project at hand, queer theory as a whole focuses on the ways

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<sup>941</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 14.

<sup>942</sup> Scholar of religion, family and gender studies Seth Dowland notes that “Jerry Falwell’s 1980 polemic Listen, America! articulated this social critique. ‘The strength and stability of families’ he wrote, ‘determine the vitality and moral life of society,’” 16. Dowland also notes that the “racial salience” of the Christian Right’s definition of family form as nuclear and heterosexual was strongly implicit, Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 21.

<sup>943</sup> In addition to what I outline in my dissertation’s Introduction about postcolonial feminism, the idea of queer feminism is also of postmodern utility here. Queer feminism, according to Annamarie Jagose, acknowledges that “[f]eminist theory, no less than queer theory, is a broad and heterogeneous project of social critique that works itself out across provisional, contingent, and non-unitary grounds, unconstrained by any predefined field of inquiry and unanchored to the perspective of any specifiable demographic population,” in Annamarie Jagose, “Feminism’s Queer Theory” *Feminism and Psychology* 19.2 (2009), 172.

<sup>944</sup> Lisa Stenmark and Whitney Bauman, “Introduction,” *Unsettling Science and Religion: Contributions and Questions from Queer Studies*, edited by Lisa Stenmark and Whitney Bauman, afterword Timothy Morton (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 1.

<sup>945</sup> Stendmark and Bauman, 2.



identities exclude, and therefore impact all of us.<sup>946</sup> Also of significance, while some queer theory borders on nihilism, as an interlocutor with moral theories and social justice theories queer theory gets rid of the idea of innocence and starts from the premise that we are all implicated in moral fault because of our very existence.<sup>947</sup>

Young builds upon a generation of queer writing on the family such as Valerie Lehr's *Queer Family Values* (1999), of people drawn to reflect on the meaning of their own lives for larger social implications.<sup>948</sup> Young herself says that her journey into queer experience as a black person whose family never reflected the white, stable, nuclear family of the American dream was developed and recognized over time as she eventually partnered with women in a manner that was not so different from the extended family relations of her family of origin, yet socially was viewed quite differently.<sup>949</sup> Young is also drawing on a long queer theory legacy of defining the family as child-production centered. One of the instigators of queer theory, Lee Edelman, labeled this central concern of humanity in production and legacy obsessed culture as "reproductive futurism." According to the logic of reproductive futurism, one must have a certain motivation toward ethical agency, found most strongly in the bond and obligation one feels toward progeny. Yet reproductive futurism is not simply motivation, but also provides grounds for exclusion.

Blood bonds as ethical motivation are particularly problematic for Edelman because they provide little motivation to care for, or receive care from, one to whom one has little blood or legal connection.<sup>950</sup> This ends up creating a structure of care justified through its approved modes of production and guaranteed return which reinforce notions that some people are more worthy of care and social approval than others. This narrowness of ethical obligation to blood or legal connection, ownership of a sort, assumes in part that everyone's family lives up to the obligations that they do have, discounting how often family members are unable or unwilling to care for those who fall within this purview, as often occurs to members of the queer community.

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<sup>946</sup> Stendmark and Bauman, 8.

<sup>947</sup> Anna Russo, *Feminist Accountability: Disrupting Violence and Transforming Power* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 8.

<sup>948</sup> See Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family*, Queer Politics, Queer Theories series (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

<sup>949</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, vii-xvii.

<sup>950</sup> See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Young adds to this discussion of the motivations, fears, and outcomes of family life by putting her social scientific and humanist training to work in order to draw out and distill methodology and theory out of lived experience. Her book reflects some of my own investigations into the benefit of queer theory and lived experience for family studies. A possible weakness of the book, depending on how one looks at it, is the fact that Young focuses exclusively on what she does find as uprightly moral in the lives of her respondents; she does not ask them to reflect on places of regret, mistake, or how these factors relate in their lives to aspiration for further moral growth.<sup>951</sup>

Although I have no immediate solution to offer, in order to convince people of the effectiveness and richness of moral guidance from lived experience, it would be useful to also have a way of reflecting upon our less than morally stellar moments of life. Her argument is weaker than it could be if she had addressed a wider scope of human activity or provided a case when someone wished they had done something better.<sup>952</sup> Focusing on the heights of morality can give a skewed, or immoderate view of the everyday keel and tenor of life that ultimately works against feminist and queer aims to look at life comprehensively.

### **Young's three strategic moves of moral analysis**

In analyzing this process for its queer-ethical elements, Young identifies that her respondents engage in three strategic moves which she describes as such:

- 1) *Disruption-irruption* is a tool of collective and individual moral agency that emotionally, rationally, and practically dismantles normative institutions, behaviors, and expectations (along with the discourses that surround them).
- 2) *Creative resistance* is a mechanism by which marginalized people resist and eschew the internal and external disciplines that make possible their dehumanizing assimilation (which strips them of subjectivity) into those institutions.

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<sup>951</sup> In personal conversation with Young, she would answer my critique by saying that measures of growth in a queering affirmative perspective are hard to encapsulate, and distracts from the open-ended embracing of continual and evolving "becoming," author's personal conversation with Thelathia Nikki Young, October 2018.

<sup>952</sup> Lauren Winner writes that often in scholarship, the focus on practice insinuates whatever is being practiced as unquestionably good, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 168. Social justice advocates like Russo, and likely Young, would counter that cultivating accountability integrally involves acknowledgement of the imperfection of a practice, Russo, 11.

3) *Subversive-generative imagination* is a radical praxis (reflective action) of moral imagination in which new actions and possibilities overturn the power of inhibiting and oppressive norms.<sup>953</sup>

As I explore Young's work and that of others, I slightly revise these three major moves to frame the flow of the rest of my chapter in a way that largely mirrors hers: 1) Disruption, 2) the Dialectic of Dominance and Marginality (in which Young's creative resistance can show up in marginality through means of survival), 3) and Moral Improvisation. As poststructuralism theory is a circular and spiral dialectic, I will start by explicating the notion of disruption before outlining what there to be disrupted at a conceptual level. Focusing on the notion of disruption itself as a crucial methodology for opening up the space for new ways of life allows me to highlight specifically the energy it takes to engage in such travel as well as its often retrospective nature. We often do not know what there is to be disrupted before such disruption has occurred, and yet this movement of disruption is neither straightforward across time nor entirely backwards, but transgresses across time in multiple directions at once at the time of action.<sup>954</sup>

## SECTION TWO: DISRUPTION AS A METHOD

### The possible prevalence of disruptive marginality

In this section I explore how queer theory's methodology of disruption of norms allows for an interrogation of whether or not particular norms support the flourishing of all.<sup>955</sup> I argue that a disruption in the normative, formal, and complementary conceptions of family with its default assumptions of gender complementarianism and thus rigid gender roles can result in reflective moral improvisation that pursues honesty, admits vulnerability and risk; the process and act of disruption is backed up by a philosophical belief that claiming desire and affirming difference is generative and good. This way of life, while not standing in contradiction or contrast to a life-long formal commitments, may outline a framework of love and intimacy that is

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<sup>953</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 9.

<sup>954</sup> In this particular case, we already know the object of disruption to be rigid, often gendered notions about the family and people's roles within the family constellation.

<sup>955</sup> I address and define queer theory later in this chapter and also in my introduction and second chapter in reference to Julie Tilsen's critiques around normative human development theories inhibiting the ability of most counselors to work with queer youth. See Julie Tilsen, *Therapeutic Conversations with Queer Youth: Transcending Homonormativity and Constructing Preferred Identities* (New York: Jason Aronson, 2013).

flexible and responsive to a world that sees change, difference, and vulnerability as a given to be celebrated rather than something to be sublimated or avoided.

As I have alluded to, the most generative, thought-provoking aspect of queer theory is its methodology of reflection and disruption. Although some might assume that it is an essential quality of a person marginalized because they are queer, this praxis is accessible to everyone. As feminist Katy Mahraj puts it well, “to be marginalized is to be positioned on the edge of value, consideration, and justice.”<sup>956</sup> Even in queer theory, marginality itself is not be valorized, except for how it gives us insight into the creativity, strength, and resiliency of the human condition for survival amidst oppression. As an analytic term relevant to relational analysis, *marginality* can give focus to the possibilities and likelihood of inequity in any given relationship or situation. “[M]arginality can happen where two or more are gathered,”<sup>957</sup> Marhraj states. Thus, marginality and the queerness that comes with it, can occur in almost any social situation, including the intimate lives of Millennials. For instance, even one partner can be marginalized relative to the agency and resources of the other. When we all realize that our very experience of life is “queer” to some degree, that it “crosses” our expectations and shows us gaps and contradictions in life, we recognize that our very lives are a disruption of what we think is “normal.”

### **Norms and centers**

Everyone has a normal. There are always rules, patterns, and expectations in a given set of interactions which one learns by experience and thus pertain to one’s culture.<sup>958</sup> These norms create principles that keep social interaction from being chaotic. There is no living thing who does not have norms, and correspondingly a normative way of life. Even a hypothetical isolated individual would develop norms in interaction with his or her body and environment around seeking and eating food, sleeping, and other habitual functions according to some sort of pattern or observable logic.

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<sup>956</sup> Katy Mahraj, “Dis/locating the Margins: Gloria Anzaldúa and Dynamic Feminist Learning,” *Feminist Teacher* 21, no. 1 (2011): 2.

<sup>957</sup> Mahraj, 6.

<sup>958</sup> Nikita Dhawan, Elisabeth Fink, Johanna Leinius, and Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel, “Normative Legitimacy and Normative Dilemmas: Postcolonial Interventions,” *Negotiating Normativity: Postcolonial Appropriations, Contestations, and Transformations*, edited by Nikita Dhawan, Elisabeth Fink, Johanna Leinius, and Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel (Switzerland: Springer International 2016), 2.

As postcolonial feminist Nikita Dhawan and her colleagues write in reference to the habits of culture, “Norms set principles that individuals and collectivities employ to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate values, attitudes, and behaviors. Essentially, they define and regulate what is expected, required or desirable in certain circumstances. Norms evolve not only through time, but also vary between social classes and groups.”<sup>959</sup> As sociologist Barbara Risman notes about Millennial experiences of gender norms, for all their supposed liberality on political issues, contemporary young adults feel significant social censure in various ways and at numerous levels for deviating from norms.<sup>960</sup> Censure is a key aspect of the definition of a norm according to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy.<sup>961</sup>

Norms govern both implicit and explicit standards of behavior,<sup>962</sup> and receive their power through implicit social accord as people replicate and envision expected behavior. Dhawan and her colleagues further write, “Individuals subscribe to norms by accepting them as reasonable and proper standards for behavior. In this sense, norms provide reasons to act, believe or feel.”<sup>963</sup> As such, they find norms crucial for feminist and postcolonial investigation, for they pertain to and help facilitate power and relationships. As Dhawan and her co-authors detail, “Normativity, which refers to the regulatory power of norms, is therefore deeply linked to the operation of power. Norms not only simply describe how the subject, society or the world is; rather they prescribe how it should be, thereby creating obligations and duties.”<sup>964</sup> These senses of ideal and obligation make norms even more powerful than simply indicating what is expected in a given situation. They can include, exclude, censure, uphold, confirm, and render actions and persons unintelligible.<sup>965</sup>

While norms are enactments of power and mass, as social entities they are also malleable and organic. They may involve an assessment of priorities, values, and beliefs and how these components relate to each other in any given situation, such that the normativity of one shifts to

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<sup>959</sup> Dhawan et al., 2.

<sup>960</sup> See Barbara Risman, *Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Struggle* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>961</sup> Dhawan et al., 2.

<sup>962</sup> Dhawan et al., 3.

<sup>963</sup> Dhawan et al., 2.

<sup>964</sup> Dhawan et al., 2-3.

<sup>965</sup> Dhawan et al., 2, 3.

some new content.<sup>966</sup> This has been the case with how mainstream America has changed its views on same-sex marriage over time.<sup>967</sup> Nonetheless, it is common for persons not to analyze norms for their justice or rightness, but most of the time simply adhere to them with little serious thought in order to go about their day. This level of compliance to normativity is commonly described by moral and cognitive theorists as the level of conventional thinking and morality.

Where the investigation of norms becomes necessary is when they do not serve the most just and moral purposes, but rather serve particular power interests over a more balanced distribution of power and recognition. Christian ethics professor and scholar of young adult ethics Donna Freitas crucially realizes in her observations of young adults that they do not think to reflect upon the norms in which they operate, even in contexts of higher education and critical thinking.<sup>968</sup> As young adults, they are often only beginning to develop a sense of self authorship and reflection on their own values and actions in such a way that human development theorist Robert Kegan would describe as Stage Four “Institutional” level.<sup>969</sup> This does not develop automatically in a new environment, for young people away from home of the first time often have fragile senses of identity because they are away from their tried and true support system.

As Christian ethics professor Jennifer Beste’s student Tami relates, her fellow college students often resort to a certain way of acting at parties as a way of being socially accepted when they seek affirmation so much and have not developed creative and authentic ways to be recognized and affirmed. This sense of novice-hood can morph into a default way of being. However, as reasons for continued insecurities abound as school pressures mount, Tami says, “We can become addicted to this feeling of being socially accepted and secure within a harsh

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<sup>966</sup> Dhawan et al., 3; As ethicist Timothy Sedgwick puts it, “The purpose of a moral norm is not primarily judicial, rendering final judgment on the morality of specific acts on the basis of immutable moral laws. Rather, norms seek to describe the form of human acts and relations necessary to embody the broader meanings and purposes of life. Deviations from the norm are best not considered narrowly as acts of ignorance or rebellion but as part of a broader conversation about the meaning of human life. Such conversation provides the means of deepening an understanding of what is the most basic meaning of particular acts,” Timothy F. Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics: Paschal Identity and the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 71.

<sup>967</sup> See Peter Hart-Brinson, *The Gay Marriage Generation: How the LGBTQ Movement Transformed American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

<sup>968</sup> Donna Freitas, *Consent on Campus: A Manifesto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 45.

<sup>969</sup> See Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

society.”<sup>970</sup> Thus young adults need to be encouraged to reflect upon their lives from outside the box of what is normal and expected to discover the power of tweaking the social system of expectations in order to be more true to themselves.

### **Thinking across and between: Young and others “Queering the Human Situation”**

The usage of the word “queer” itself exemplifies this “crossing” which reveals the contradictions and gaps between experience, normality, and our desires. According to leading queer feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, the etymology of the word queer refers to “that which is ‘oblique’ or ‘offline’ and ‘out of line.’” Its Greek roots indicate a crossing of categories, of being adverse.<sup>971</sup> It is, in its essence, a term of destabilization, of disrupting what is known or neatly categorized. As a term of destabilization queer theorists have discovered that “queer” can have a functional versatility. Young writes:

*Queer* is, among other things, a word that simultaneously designates a noun, adjective, and a verb. Certainly, our common use of ‘queer’ is a modifier that points to things that are odd/abnormal and even undesirable. A rather important use of the term comes through its active capacities. That is, queer *performs* because it can bring something into being that illustrates the unnaturalness of ‘the norm.’ Inasmuch as queer destabilizes and even dismantles dominant structures of meaning making in normativity, it contributes to our ways of being in the world.<sup>972</sup>

As such, queer turns the seemingly undesirable into the desirable, and “describes an evolution in activism and theorizing of identity and the workings of power” writes queer researchers on the family Anne Harris and Stacy Holman Jones.<sup>973</sup> Although queer theory was originally created through a reflection on queer sexual identity, Harris and Holman Jones note that queering goes beyond sex to provide relational re-orientation.<sup>974</sup> It is this re-orientation of relationships that I find so potentially powerful and largely transferable across sexual orientation and identity.

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<sup>970</sup> Jennifer Erin Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 61.

<sup>971</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 172.

<sup>972</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 11.

<sup>973</sup> Anne M. Harris and Stacy Holman Jones, “What have we Learned? Keywords,” *Queering Families, Schooling Publics, Keywords*, edited by Anne M. Harris, Stacy Holman Jones, Sandra L. Faulkner, and Eloise D. Brook (New York: Routledge, 2018), 5.

<sup>974</sup> Harris and Holman Jones, 5.

Young argues for queering as a method in a *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* panel of papers reflecting upon the 1960 feminist critique by Valerie Saiving of Reinhold Niebhur's presumptions about the particular content of sin being pride. In Saiving's original piece, she declares Niebhur's claim to be speaking universally as false, yet moreover Saiving engages in an interrogation of the methodologies by which Niebhur came to such a conclusion of both form and content such that she can articulate his method as distinctly masculine and not universal. To make her point and point to a trajectory of thought about differences over time, Young reviews Valerie Saiving's groundbreaking article "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," riffing off Saiving's title in titling her own essay, "Queering 'The Human Situation.'" Young shows how Saiving used the marginalized experiences of female epistemology to disrupt and respond to the ideal of a universal view based on and devised by male experience. According to Young, Saiving conducts three moves in the article by disputing: 1) the notion of humanity as *singular*, 2) the *reliability* of male experience to fully capture human experience, and 3), the sufficiency of male *authority* to project and define experience.<sup>975</sup>

Young lauds Saiving for showing the moral inadequacy of Euro-masculine frameworks for all of humanity and attempting to dismantle the power and privilege hidden in those subjectivities by focusing on experience as method. Yet she faults Saiving for nonetheless being essentialist in insisting that "the female view" be added to the mix, as if that were easy to define and nail down, and the only relevant possible difference in standpoint. Young argues that with its inherent destabilization, a queering position goes much further as a methodology for improvisation than Saiving simply expanding upon the "types" of epistemology previously recognized, but leaving the concept of types nonetheless in place.<sup>976</sup> In its place, Young suggests queering as a method, arguing that queering as a method 1) "broadens the scope of theological imaginations and ethical creativity," 2) "unbinds potentialities," and 3) "rocks the boat of privilege."<sup>977</sup> This argument of "rocking the boat of privilege" is its most concrete application to my argument that scholars and practitioners of religion preaching and teaching exclusively from the paradigm of marriage is one of privilege that does not recognize the precarity of the lives of

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<sup>975</sup> Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (1960): 100-112, cited by Thelathia Nikki Young, "Queering 'The Human Situation,'" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 1: 127.

<sup>976</sup> Young, "Queering 'The Human Situation,'" 129.

<sup>977</sup> Young, "Queering 'The Human Situation,'" 130.



contemporary young adults as a major influence to why they choose to delay marriage or not marry at all. Nor does working from such a myopic paradigm do anything to properly locate and affirm the moral creativity of intimate relationships that are logically less formal than marriage but nonetheless imbued with the potential which humans have in every moment of their lives to ever live with greater ethical thoughtfulness.

Other researchers who theorize and investigate from the intersection of racial, gender and sexual orientation marginalization also offer conceptual tools for thinking across and through types. In *Amigas y Amantes*, qualitative researcher on sexually non-conforming Latinas Katie Acosta cites the need to adopt broader labels to talk about sexual variance and non-exclusive attractions in order to better understand her respondents' lives and self-identifications.<sup>978</sup> Acosta also draws on noted Latinx theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. Acosta writes that reading Anzaldúa's work helped her to "explore the in-between, unspoken spaces inhabited by the mestiza. Anzaldúa (2002) came to call this ambiguous space 'nepantla,' a place where one lives in a constant state of displacement."<sup>979</sup> According to Latin American race and religious studies scholar Rudy Busto, nepantla as a term first was used to describe the experience of Christianized Meso-Americans who found themselves displaced from their old ways, yet not fully accepted, or able to be accepted into the new. Thus, they were stuck acting out of syncreticism from a place of "middle ground."<sup>980</sup> This displacement is the disruption of the norm that Young sees in her respondents, of which the will and intention to disrupt rather than seek normality plays a complicated role. Nepantla is not a comfortable place at best, and at worst, involves a lot of pain and disorder, but pain that leads to moral and relational growth.<sup>981</sup> To understand and to live into nepantla involves a messy leap of faith.<sup>982</sup>

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<sup>978</sup> Katie L. Acosta, *Amigas y Amantes: Sexually Nonconforming Latinas Negotiate Family*, Families in Focus series (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 3-4.

<sup>979</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa with Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Berkeley, Calif.: Third Woman Press, 2002), quoted by Acosta, 11.

<sup>980</sup> Rudy V. Busto, "The Predicament of Neplanta: Chicano(a) Religions in the Twenty-first Century," *New Horizons in Hispanic/Latino(a) Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 238-239.

<sup>981</sup> Hernández-Avila, xvi.

<sup>982</sup> Busto, 248.

### **Anzaldúa and the importance of self-reflection**

Following Anzaldúa, Acosta also notes that this displacement from the norm allows for a certain type of knowledge and psycho-emotional maturity to develop in the displaced who manage their displacement well. “In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa theorized about one’s ability to develop la facultad, a deeper level of cognition that one can achieve through self-reflection and digging ‘below the surface.’”<sup>983</sup> Acosta notes that little research has been done on non-heterosexual women outside white, middle-class groups, limiting the opportunity for academic, empirical knowledge to be gained from respondents living in neplanta. For instance, facultad as a form of self-recognition can lead to resistance of external social labels if they do not appropriately fit one’s felt experience of life. In the case of Acosta’s respondents, facultad serves as an explanation for why many Latinx eschew labels of lesbianism and exchange embrace the term queer. This is because they believe that the concept of lesbian developed in a milieu of binaries, which was and still is common in white circles because of a lack of understanding of hybridity in general.<sup>984</sup> As Hispanic indigenous theorist Inés Hernández-Avila puts it, nepantla is about discovering and moving through harmony of these interstices by bridging and negotiating. A fundamental belief of the positive and generative nature of hybridity involves, out of experience, recognizing that often things come creatively and uniquely together. This stands in opposite to white ideas of culture in which differences interacting necessarily involves a collision which is damaging and negative.<sup>985</sup>

To some extent, this facultad is available below the surface of the experience of any social position. In her piece on “‘Uses of the Erotic’ for Teaching Queer Studies,” Young explains how she leans heavily into black queer feminist Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic to teach her gender studies students to mine their own sense of self for moral experience and knowledge. Young writes, “Lorde suggests that we have been taught to question the self as a

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<sup>983</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza*, second edition (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 60, quoted in Acosta, 12.

<sup>984</sup> Acosta, 4-5; Acosta notes that a wealth of creative theoretical work has been done on Latina lesbians, particularly around issues of “lesbian desire, the creation of safe spaces, and the establishment of community,” but not as much qualitative work, Acosta, 2.

<sup>985</sup> Hernández-Avila, xvi.

source, ‘to suspect what is deepest in ourselves.’”<sup>986</sup> We must return to using the self as a source, even if, and particularly when, its knowledge stands in direct contradiction to the regulatory knowledge of common social wisdom. For Young, this work begins by examining the ethical experience of relationships that are not normally sanctioned.<sup>987</sup> In particular, she gives keen attention to participants’ experiences and stories to “illustrate black queer moral practices of confronting and destabilizing norms, creatively resisting the disciplinary technologies of race, gender, and sexuality in families, and subverting normative ideas of family through the imagination of new relational possibilities.”<sup>988</sup> Going straight to an analysis of experiences and practices has not typically been the way of engaging relationship ethics.

In order to normalize people away from experiencing and expressing diversity of relational desire, we as a human culture have taught ourselves to suppress and deny the self as a source for moral knowledge. Lorde also frequently asserts that, in Young’s words “the relationship between oppression and power is often marked by corruption and distortion.”<sup>989</sup> It would, for example, directly contradict the concept of universal morality if we realized that our selves gave us information that what is most moral for each person may not be the same for another. In her article, Young continues to draw on more of “Lorde’s wisdom: ‘To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.’”<sup>990</sup> Certainly the “pornographic, the abused, and the absurd” is what many young people today, queer or not, feel that the media and society has given them in terms of choices for intimacy and relationship. The quiet voice of their gut tells them that somehow they want more, but do not know how to ask for or create it.

One of the mothers of exploring queer notions of family, Valerie Lehr, explains why a focus on the desires of our body and mind are so integral to reflective, authentic thought. Queers do not flaunt social convention for the sake of it, but because when they listen to their desires

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<sup>986</sup> Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. "An Interview with Audre Lorde," *Signs* 4, no. 6 (1981): 730 cited by Thelathia Nikki Young, "'Uses of the Erotic' for Teaching Queer Studies," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 3 and 4 (Fall/Winter 2012): 302.

<sup>987</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, xvi.

<sup>988</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 2.

<sup>989</sup> Young, "'Uses of the Erotic,' 302.

<sup>990</sup> Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 2007), 59, cited by Young, "'Uses of the Erotic for Teaching Queer Studies,' 304.

they find that what is assumed to be natural, to be the best way to be, does not in fact meet their needs. Throughout her book, Lehr uses monogamy as a case in point. She writes, “If we accept social structures, such as monogamous marriage, as simply natural, we lose the opportunity to engage in the processes of self-reflection and self-construction. That is, we lose the possibility of enhancing our freedom.”<sup>991</sup> Many members of the queer community see the recent social movement for marriage equality as detrimental to encouraging self-reflection upon what kind of relationship structure is best for each situation, individual, and relationship. Access to the acceptability and social convention of marriage to gain social power through social assimilation diminishes and downplays the difference between gays and lesbians and heterosexuals in a way that is attractive and convenient to many.

However, many queer theorists claim, entry into marriage for non-heterosexuals can lead to exchanging creative moral potential for assimilation into a system whose values may ultimately still seek to diminish their lives.<sup>992</sup> For instance, gay and lesbian marriage does not solve the fact that kinship structures for the queer community need to be larger than the nuclear family to accommodate the needs of queer youth often disowned by their families of origin and queer elders who have experienced the same and do not always have children to care for them.<sup>993</sup> Lehr writes about reflecting upon social structures in general in order to consciously choose them rather than accept them as natural, “If monogamy is understood as a choice rather than as an indication of the ability to form a sexually and ethically mature relationship, it is possible and useful to ask new questions about the values and decision making processes that are a part of either choosing or rejecting monogamy.”<sup>994</sup> It is this level of reflection upon their sexual, emotional, and relational desires that I wish for all people, and that queer theorists hope will expand the way of thinking about care and kinship. Thinking, by default, does not acknowledge without the aid of reflection the fact that the conventional is consented to and constructed, rather than biologically essential. However, if the way that things came to be is reflected upon, than assumptions that pose as naturalism, such as the idea that women are more natural caregivers

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<sup>991</sup> Lehr, 21.

<sup>992</sup> Lehr, 65.

<sup>993</sup> Lehr, 68.

<sup>994</sup> Lehr, 69.

simply because they have more socialization toward caregiving, and thus more experience, can be brought into analysis and then contestation.

This, however, requires an understanding that people are a mixture of individual and constructed desire, a mixture which is neither static nor essential. In *Queer Latinidad* Juana Maria Rodriguez writes that “Identity is about situatedness in motion: embodiment and spatiality. It is about a self that is constituted through and against other selves in contexts that serve to establish the relationship between the self and the other.”<sup>995</sup> We all, with reflection upon our experience, recognize paradoxes and contradictions between lived experience and what is socially expected of us. If we pay attention to this incongruence, we are beginning to disrupt an essentialist normativity that claims that there is a seamlessness between experience, social values, and expectations. Some coherency does exist, and this is what creates the ability to “cross” rather than simply engage in categorical difference. Rodriguez writes that “the subject’s ability to subvert dominant readings is both unlimited and partial.”<sup>996</sup> This is in part why “queer” is such a potentially generative term, because destabilization is theoretically unlimited, and yet nothing can maintain meaning if it is entirely new. Thus, the “crossing” of queerness will always create a partially new reading rather than a fully new one. As Rodriguez writes, “The term ‘subject-in-process’ does not insinuate a progressional [sic], unidirectional development; instead the process is often spastic and unpredictable, continually unfolding without origin or end, an act of becoming that never ceases.”<sup>997</sup> I see this as having more connective potential between paradigms of dominance and marginality, a spiral movement of crossing in and out and back to what is normative and what is disruptive that is fluid and not always predictable. As this pertains to the family, queer kinship structures are often intentionally vague and fluid, disrupting the notion that family is about order, permanence, and role.<sup>998</sup> This occurs to such a degree that the term *family*, much like the term *marriage*, is questioned as whether or not it can apply to a phenomenon so different in definition from the normative understanding of the term.

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<sup>995</sup> Juana Maria Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>996</sup> Rodriguez, 5.

<sup>997</sup> Rodriguez, 7.

<sup>998</sup> Eloise D. Brook, “Un/Queering Family in the Media,” *Queering Families, Schooling Publics, Keywords*, edited by Anne M. Harris, Stacy Holman Jones, Sandra L. Faulkner, and Eloise D. Brook (New York: Routledge, 2018), 52.

## Deconstructing privilege and theorizing vulnerability

In part, many scholars of marginalized perspectives argue that heterosexual marriage's penchant for order, stability, and resource accumulation is why the fight for marriage equality, and any solution for care and recognition organized around marriage, is faulty as a universal solution. Black queer female theorist Sheena Howard, who wrote *Black Queer Identity Matrix* as a way to argue for the continued need to advance intersectional thinking in social liberation movements, believes that a lack of privilege for racial minorities means that civil rights and gay rights cannot be equated as so many people seek to do. She sees this as particularly true of the marriage equality movement, citing that marriage equality itself is a stance borne out of white privilege, of having enough stability and wealth to seek to further organize and secure these qualities through marriage. She writes, "despite the growing visibility of queer communities of color, the mainstream gay community and its political aspirations remain White in its orientation."<sup>999</sup> Young, in her book's introduction, explicitly states that rather than weigh in on the benefits or negatives of same-sex marriage as a particular formula or solution for queer life, she decided to focus on the power of disrupting gender roles as her contribution to the family debate for its wider deconstructive impact. In doing so, Young leaves open the ability to interrogate privilege, wherever it is found, as something that needs to be seen for how it plays into our thinking.

How privilege affects our notions of agency and vulnerability is another key aspect of what it means to use a queer lens to investigate a system focused on consolidated power and reproduction. A white, Roman Catholic feminist who uses women of color in her case studies around motherhood, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo defines "vulnerability as the universal, though diversely experienced and often exacerbated, risk of harm in human life."<sup>1000</sup> Rather than see vulnerability as a result of sin as is traditional in Roman Catholic theology, Gandolfo names vulnerability as a root, a universal state of embodiment and relationality. She writes that we then respond to it in way that either 1) increases the vulnerability of others in exchange for increasing

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<sup>999</sup> Sheena C. Howard, *Black Queer Identity Matrix: Towards an Integrated Queer of Color Framework* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 28.

<sup>1000</sup> Elizabeth M. Edman, *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know about Life and Love and how it can Revitalize Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 3.

the privilege (and thus lessening the vulnerability) of some, or 2) uses that very vulnerability to increase compassion and thus abundance for all.<sup>1001</sup>

Thus, according to this line of thinking, vulnerability is a very social phenomenon, almost a commodity or resource that can be used or abused. Drawing on legal theorist Martha Fineman, Gandolfo writes, “I interpret privilege as communal mismanagement of vulnerability in which certain groups and individuals have disproportionate access to assets that capacitate them for self-protection and resilience in the face of harm.”<sup>1002</sup> Gandolfo states that the privilege to disproportionately protect ourselves from vulnerability is born out of existential anxiety. Because of this, it creates more harm than necessary because it cannot ultimately be quenched no matter how much security and resources we are able to gather away from others to shore against it for ourselves.<sup>1003</sup> Gandolfo writes, “It is important to make a distinction between the vulnerability which is a fundamental and unavoidable feature of the human condition and the *violation of human vulnerability* in situations of injustice, poverty, oppression and violence (though, admittedly this distinction is not always unambiguous).”<sup>1004</sup> This is true because endlessly consolidating resources has diminishing returns for the privileged compared to the impact that those resources could have on the lives of the less privileged.

And yet on a personal, individual level vulnerability begins to appear more like a permanent quality of one’s social location that affects social relations in a way that is not easily changed or addressed. Feminist social ethicist Karen Lebacqz has written a key article on needing to account for different levels of vulnerability in adjudicating the ethicality of actions taken within intimate relationships. Lebacqz goes so far as to identify that no agreement, no structure, shields us against the harms of a potential violation of vulnerability through intimate relationship that we understandably seek to avoid. She writes, “certainly in theory the commitment of a stable and monogamous marriage provides a supportive context for vulnerable expressions of the self,” yet, speaking perhaps more broadly, she writes, “No covenant of fidelity

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<sup>1001</sup> In working toward justice, transformative justice feminist Anna Russo notes that part of what it takes for the privileged to work toward justice is to understand, that, on some level, without discounting Gandolfo’s generative point, oppression is the necessarily dualistic opposite of privilege as an overabundance of resources and invulnerability, Russo, 5.

<sup>1002</sup> Elizabeth O’Donnell Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 25.

<sup>1003</sup> Gandolfo, 137, 145.

<sup>1004</sup> Gandolfo, emphasis added, 8.

ensures that my vulnerability will not lead to my being hurt, foolish, exposed, wounded.”<sup>1005</sup> Often religious writing on the vulnerability of marriage infers, if not explicitly states, that this vulnerability is allowed to simultaneously unfurl into its true raw form in marriage, and that it also provides some immunity from the wounding of vulnerability through the covenant of fidelity, making the aforementioned “unfurling” more “safe” in theory.<sup>1006</sup> This immunity certainly does not take into account differing levels of social power and personal capacity. In “Appropriate Vulnerability,” Lebacqz writes that as long as husband and wife have different earning potential and public social recognition, despite the commitment to share a household, their relative vulnerability to each other is not the same.

Writing more than 20 years later than Lebacqz, in a constructive move, Gandolfo writes that ‘existential and practical resources’ offered by divine love to our suffering in the here and now “can empower human beings to face our frightening condition with courage, peace, and compassion rather than egocentrism, anxiety and violence.”<sup>1007</sup> Gandolfo contends that feminist, liberation, and political theologies often overlook the existential elements she tackles. In making her point, she quotes Beverly Lanzetta as writing “While feminism has awakened women to the structural components that generate violence, it has been less successful in analyzing the deeper spiritual causes and consequences that underlie dominating behaviors and subjugating forms of consciousness.”<sup>1008</sup> Lebacqz’s focus on structural components only goes so far in addressing “deeper spiritual causes” that occur out of feelings of unequal vulnerability.

### **Advancing the power of destabilizing—Back to the heart of norms and the family**

A body of scholarship started in the 1980s, queer theory has now reached a critical mass of thought going beyond Lee Edelman’s cornerstone critique of the Western, heterosexual family being organized around the existential anxiety of “reproductive futurism.” While in the past this analysis of the intractability of anxiety lead to queer distancing from notions of family, there is now a movement in the literature for a careful recuperation of how family and queerness can generatively intersect. I argue that this allows queer theory to more fully embrace and name its

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<sup>1005</sup> Karen Lebacqz, “Appropriate Vulnerability: A Sexual Ethic for Singles,” *Christian Century*, May 6, 1987, 437.

<sup>1006</sup> See Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 141-146.

<sup>1007</sup> Gandolfo, 6.

<sup>1008</sup> Gandolfo, 7.



potential for fundamentally changing how we conceive of intimate and kinship relationships. Harris and Holman Jones note that the family is the “primary site of belonging and solidarity for individuals and by extension various (racial/ethnic, geographic, religious, etc.) groups.”<sup>1009</sup> While Edelman also noted the family as the primary mechanism and unit for addressing belonging and anxiety, scholars such as Harris, Holman Jones and Young see this psychological and social lynchpin of society as a place of engagement, unafraid of tackling the anxiety it expresses and seeks to manage. I take them as believing that if we address family anxiety for what it is rather than attempting to control it or dismiss it through claims to unconditional and unrealistic love, it can be used toward moral creativity and care.<sup>1010</sup>

Young’s vision for what the family can be under the influence of better attention to diversity, fluidity, and empirical reality is multi-faceted. Young states:

the family ought to (a) recognize, attend to, and show care for the diverse subjectivities within familial relationships; (b) acknowledge and deconstruct the institutional, structural, social, and interpersonal disciplines that inhibit *a* from happening; (c) deconstruct and creatively resist the institutions, structures, and relational behaviors that establish inequality and oppression as normative; (d) imagine new possibilities for relationality based on a commitment to preserving potentialities and relational interdependence.<sup>1011</sup>

Young notes that in scholarship and lived experience concepts such as intimacy, care, love, and trust, rather than procreation and notions of ownership, have begun to correlate with discussions of family.<sup>1012</sup> She hopes that orienting the family around these ideas and that of emotional happiness will encourage further acceptance of family structures beyond the nuclear.<sup>1013</sup>

As an example of these shifting of values, for one of Young’s respondents as Young writes, “‘family’ came to mean *accountability*, *accommodation*, and *innovation* instead of obedience, authority, and tradition.”<sup>1014</sup> Many queer homes in Young’s study were places where

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<sup>1009</sup> Harris and Holman Jones, 1.

<sup>1010</sup>A leader in the field of articulating ethical theory created by those on the social margins, Latino ethicist Miguel de la Torre argues that scholars of marginalized identities have largely imitated and worked within a European framework of domination and power that does not serve marginalized persons, Miguel de la Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*, New Perspectives in Latina/o Religion (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010), 5.

<sup>1011</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 24.

<sup>1012</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, xvii.

<sup>1013</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, xvi.

<sup>1014</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 61.

lesbian sisters took in siblings, particularly younger brothers. In these homes, chores often became applicable to persons irrespective of gender and age without much dispute.<sup>1015</sup> Siblings living together and taking care of each other without parents broke what some saw as a common mold of ownership and gender role distinction in family relations.<sup>1016</sup>

In Young's study, sometimes employers or neighbors assumed this responsibility for one another. When asked, respondent Madame said she thought of her family as one woman who relied on her for paid domestic help. This woman solidified her role as family in Madame's eyes when she said that although Madame was traveling a lot to take care of her own family, no matter how much time Madame needed to take off she would keep employing Madame as long as she could be employed herself.<sup>1017</sup> Another respondent, Sage, elaborated on what these moments of creative responsibility and cooperativity might mean in her own life:

I think I want to move even from that to a place where we operate outside of capitalism, outside of a nuclear family system such that you're creating family all over the place and not necessarily because you are partnering romantically with somebody, or not because you share blood with somebody, but because you've made a choice to have that collaborative work and responsibility, that cooperative economics and then that constant I guess growing in accountability to one another.<sup>1018</sup>

The notion of collaborative work and responsibility made respondents realize that "Loving one another is an open process in which we recognize the limits in our ability to know and categorize one another."<sup>1019</sup> It seems that in abiding by codified gender roles it was too easy to assume that one knew the other without really focusing on who the person was and how they could best engage individual strengths and weaknesses.

It would be interesting to have Young and Acosta discuss the concept of transgression with each other. Young does not spend much space in her book discussing pressure to conform that might yet remain despite the space to create new forms of relationality that she highlights so well. A focus on how an idea of transgression might provide an obstacle to engaging fully in the disruption-irruption cycle that Young stresses seems important for Acosta's respondents to be

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<sup>1015</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 62.

<sup>1016</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 104.

<sup>1017</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 128.

<sup>1018</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 128.

<sup>1019</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 102.

able to live into Young’s prescription of queer method. For mainstream contemporary young adults, I identify transgression as not settling down in their early 20s rather than anything particularly sexual or racial, but given the pull of “reproductive futurism,” this is a major transgression nonetheless in the eyes of the society judging them. However, they do not see it in the same way.

As alluded to earlier, Young decided to focus on the family in her exploration of black queer ethics because she sees the family as key site for moral learning and practical survival.<sup>1020</sup> She writes, “Recognizing black queer people as moral agents is a pointed disruption of several intersecting processes of normalization that together imply an irrefutable hierarchy of categorized identities.”<sup>1021</sup> According to Kelly Brown Douglas whom Young draws upon, this hierarchy of identities includes dominant culture viewing black bodies as having “unrestrained sexuality.”<sup>1022</sup> Young states that this view has led to external and internal racism, of a “respectability politics” which governs the behaviors, expectations, and ideological positions of black people by black people. While adhering to notions of respectability is done in an attempt to fight negative stereotypes, many cultural commentators see these efforts as implicitly reinforcing negative stereotypes.<sup>1023</sup> Perhaps because so much of black family life and sexuality has been scripted as a political and racial game, Young writes that there is no *a priori* idea of the good life for black queers, but rather that it has to be created.<sup>1024</sup> This is done by paying attention to the different forms of relationality that surface out of need and practical survival when the respectability of gender roles is no longer at play, or at least less so.<sup>1025</sup>

Similarly, Acosta writes *Amigas y Amantes* in large part because, “For the women in this study, who by and large did not hold strong ties to gay communities, doing family looked very different” than white gay communities.<sup>1026</sup> Acosta notes that these differences include a respondent population greatly affected by power imbalances from language capacity, different immigration statuses, cultural clashes, everything else in terms of social and familial disapproval

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<sup>1020</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 5.

<sup>1021</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 77.

<sup>1022</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 76.

<sup>1023</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 95.

<sup>1024</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 138.

<sup>1025</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 8.

<sup>1026</sup> Acosta, 131.

between and among partners. Perhaps because of this vast social imbalance already in existence from being Latinx, the vast majority of her respondents underwent extraordinary effort to do what they could to diminish disapproval by their families and their society for their sexually and racially transgressive statuses.<sup>1027</sup> Sometimes this was done through what some scholars call “strategic ambiguity” about their personal and sexual lives.<sup>1028</sup> This can involve silences and intentional spaces for lack of discussion that as ““a way to put love first”” between family members when there is an overall discomfort or dispute about the morality of a family member’s sexual orientation and the acts which come with it.<sup>1029</sup>

In part, Acosta’s respondents actively sought to diminish disapproval and conform as much as possible because they wanted to remain attached to families who happened to be uncomfortable with their sexual identities and practices. Acosta noted that her respondents often spoke about devotion to family of origin with pride, attempting to integrate partners into families of origin and undergoing tension in the effort.<sup>1030</sup> Often respondents managed to keep their family’s discomfort at a minimum by acting and physically presenting as feminine by doing their hair, makeup and nails.<sup>1031</sup> Particularly in Latin culture, the status and draw of femininity is so strong that “There were only a few Latinas (three) in the study who could be described by themselves and others as transgressive. These women transgressed gender boundaries by adopting stereotypically masculine behaviors and forms of aggression.”<sup>1032</sup> Often interracial dating was considered more transgressive by family than sexual non-conformity.<sup>1033</sup> Many respondents struggled with how to connect to, claim, or distance from, their own racial identity

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<sup>1027</sup> Acosta, 62.

<sup>1028</sup> As communications scholar Ralina L. Joseph, writes about black women usage of the term, ‘strategic ambiguity is not simply the safe choice. It’s a different, subtle form of resistance and risk that balances on an escape hatch of deniability. Any race/gender talk by Black women is risky, even if that risk is insulated by the extreme privilege of celebrity, the conflict codes of postrace, and the deniability of strategic ambiguity,’ Ralina L. Joseph, *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>1029</sup> Yolanda Chavez Leyva, “Listening to the Silences in Latina/Chicana Lesbian History,” *Living Chicana Theory*, edited by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, Calif.: Third Woman Press, 1998), 432, quoted by Clara Román-Odio, *Sacred Iconographies in Chicana Cultural Productions*, first edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 119.

<sup>1030</sup> Acosta, 106, 110.

<sup>1031</sup> Acosta, 20-25.

<sup>1032</sup> Acosta, 36.

<sup>1033</sup> Acosta, 78.

and that of others. This often caused discord and stress with their partner because of their partner's own differing relationship to racial identity.<sup>1034</sup>

Religion also caused stress and discord in the families of sexually-nonconforming Latinas in Acosta's study, psychological subjects that Young does not address in her book. Even families of origin in Acosta's study who were not active participants in a parish or in home religious practices used religion as a reason and justification for their discomfort with their family member's transgressive sexuality. Generally, sexually-nonconforming Latinas also believed that they were doing something that God does not accept.<sup>1035</sup> If they stayed in their churches of origin that did not support them, they managed to do so by creating tangential relationships to the church.<sup>1036</sup> Acosta notes that as a defensive strategy her respondents typically "reassure[d] themselves of their morality by finding wrong in the behaviors of others."<sup>1037</sup> Most did not resolve the tensions between their sexuality and religious beliefs. LGBTQ-friendly churches often did not meet these Latinas' spiritual needs because they found the forms of worship and theology were too different and unappealing from what they desired.

While both Acosta and Young through their respondents note that oppression around sexuality and religious tenets tend to go hand in hand, in normative neoliberal life,<sup>1038</sup> only Young and her respondents take the opportunity to reflect upon how to undo the link of oppression religion and sexuality going hand in hand. This makes sense, given that was the explicit intention of their study and reflection. Acosta's project is much more an illustration of Latinx expressions and tensions of family in their same-sex affinity than anything that has larger aims. It may be, as Theresa Delgadillo alludes to *Spiritual Mestizaje*, that Acosta's respondents find in the Catholic Church what she calls "bad religion," a form of colonial practice which very much operates in a dialectic of dominance that creates a marginality so profound it can hardly be

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<sup>1034</sup> Acosta, 73.

<sup>1035</sup> Hispanic, Chicana, and indigenous spirituality theorists Irene Lara and Elisa Facio comment that "being 'religious' connotes participating in a religious institutional structure and following specific religious tenets and canonical practices, even if in popular or hybrid cultural forms," and that religion has often been used against Hispanic and indigenous people in domineering, colonial ways, Lara and Facio, 4.

<sup>1036</sup> Acosta, 40.

<sup>1037</sup> Acosta, 48.

<sup>1038</sup> Irene Lara and Elisa Facio, "Introduction: Fleshing the Spirit: Spiriting the Flesh," *Fleshing the Spirit: Spirituality and Activism in Chicana, Latina, and Indigenous Women's Lives*, edited by Elisa Facio and Irene Lara (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 11.

questioned by its victims. Rather than expend the energy necessary to fight back against this formidable oppression, Acosta's respondents simply leave questions of spirituality for the most part. They do not have the tools with which to search for a form of religion that bridges how they were raised and who they identify as now, which Delgado, drawing on Anzaldúa, calls *spiritual mestizaje*, a process of moral creativity which Episcopal priest Elizabeth Edman calls queer virtue, and with which I end this chapter.<sup>1039</sup> Yet before moving on to the positive, it is important to understand the gravity with which a structure of dominance and marginality holds us back from easily embracing or engaging this ethical creativity.

### **SECTION THREE: THE DIALECTIC OF DOMINANCE AND MARGINALITY**

In this section, I highlight ethicists of color who point out how traditional notions of ethics in the West are not universal, but products of social construction which create dynamics of dominance that result in power differentials and marginality from the ideal. I argue that this dialectic takes place in the construction of the family as well, and conclude this section with ruminations from several theorists on how Western culture is still greatly wedded to notions of intimate ownership rather than sexual and romantic freedom. We as a society must not ever consider our intimate partner to be "owned" by us, for this shuts down an empathetic ability to connect with them as subject rather than a piece of property.

#### **Dominance makes marginality**

Hispanic ethicist Miguel De la Torre identifies Western culture's framework of capitalism, patriarchy, and consumerism as one structured to perpetuate and reward dominance of power and resources by some over others. He writes that system inculcates a corresponding "ethics of dominance" in academic and theological thought. This ethics is defined by a "propensity toward hyper individualism, a call for law and order, an emphasis on charity, an uncritical acceptance of the market economy, an emphasis on orthodoxy, and a preponderance for deductive reasoning" that privileges the few against the many.<sup>1040</sup> He cautions that, given their relative privilege in this system globally, because of their residency in the United States U.S. scholars of all identities must recognize "the difficulty of doing any liberationist

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<sup>1039</sup> See Theresa Delgado, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race, and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>1040</sup> Miguel A. de La Torre, *Ethics: A Liberative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1-2.

work within the fabric of Empire, for U.S. culture has made it possible to live with power and privilege and still claim to be a liberationist.”<sup>1041</sup> De la Torre seems to see a stark contrast between this value system of dominance and what can happen on the margins of society, where people can, by virtue of having less privilege and power to use in the first place, come up with alternative values and methods for relationality. The thrust of de la Torre’s position trades one set of values for another rather than suggesting a methodology for how norms and new practices can be created.

Black feminist ethicist Traci West, who also writes about the concept of doing ethics that center the lives and needs of women and people of color, identifies that Western ethics based in disembodied rationality creates dissonance between aspiration and lived experience, and between thought and practice which liberates.<sup>1042</sup> West writes, “the confusion centers upon how to distinguish rudimentary, universal understandings of Christian moral positions from particular tangents, ideologies, or situational interpretations of Christian morality. A common understanding of the foundations of Christian social ethics and of the core Christian beliefs that support it cannot be taken for granted.”<sup>1043</sup> And yet, core Christian beliefs are taken for granted, to the point that they are not well understood. This, I argue, allows for Western capitalistic notions of hierarchy and roles to disguise themselves as Christian notions of the family without most people even realizing it because they do not spend time exploring how lived experience, as well as Christian and Western values intermingle and can end up replacing each other.

### **Dominance and marginality in the family**

Young sees an example of this incongruence between aspiration and actual practice in the Western family when she identifies Western families as “regulating devices” and “units of relationality” that lay out rules and assumptions for how to achieve the goal of raising a good child. As mentioned in reference to Edelman’s work earlier, this production of progeny is the central role of family activity.<sup>1044</sup> As a way to achieve this production most efficiently, the family is primarily an enforcer of gender norms and relations, by protecting femininity, ensuring male superiority, and securing purity of the body in teaching about becoming husband and wives, to name a few specific aspects.<sup>1045</sup> Lehr notes that this is particularly effective because marital roles

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<sup>1041</sup> de la Torre, *Liberative Approach*, 4.

<sup>1042</sup> Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 42.

<sup>1043</sup> West, 39.

<sup>1044</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, xiv.

<sup>1045</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, xv.

that are gendered and ranked delineate responsibility, thus providing a sense of order and control.<sup>1046</sup> Queer scholars note that queering can go well beyond changing up what we expect of gender, but as gender has been a key organizing factor for so long, gender roles in the family are an incisive way to be involved in disrupting norms and improvising new morality.

While most radical theorists identify Western family structure as most benefiting men by giving them the power to “extract labor of care from wife and control children,” further analysis shows that the family is utilized as a tool to control *everyone* toward acting with greater order than they might otherwise be inclined to act. Lehr notes that historically, family involvement has been a way to control and civilize biologically loose men.<sup>1047</sup> It goes that, if men are responsible for the children and spouse of their legal marriage, at least some responsibility has been given to them. If a wider range of sexual relationships were to become acceptable, one of the key issues is determining responsibility, particularly men’s, within these new connections. Many people avoid engaging the potential of this second, messier proposal of wider, more complex and particular responsibility in part because of the possibility that responsibility might never be fully identified and claimed. However, mess and complication is often reality for all people whose lives do not simply exist in the confines of formal legal responsibility.

In this sense, a family primarily delineated by legal agreement, as queer theorists argue that the Western one is, attempts more order than is realistically possible and ethically warranted. Simplification of responsibility to the legal, formal family dismisses and excludes much of life. This Western definition of the family being automatically moral simply by virtue of being a special relationship thus does significant damage to our sense of ethical obligation by convincing us to narrow and concentrate our vision on people who only become morally relevant to us through situations such as legal, formal marriage.<sup>1048</sup> It asks us, ultimately, not to feel, experience, or be responsible for relationships outside of this narrow realm, numbing us to such an extent that the relationships in which it is socially acceptable to give our full ethical capacity are relationships full of pressure. This system encourages and expects a relational maturity in our intimate legal relationships that we likely have not been able to practice anywhere else but there,

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<sup>1046</sup> Lehr, 126.

<sup>1047</sup> Lehr, 118.

<sup>1048</sup> For instance, the belief that rape was not possible in marriage because of the preexisting special legal relationship between husband and wife was common until recently because of such logic.



since a valuation of intimate bond beyond the family is not considered as ethically valuable. This demand, mixed with limited experience, ironically and inherently leads to relational immaturity.

As other feminist and queer theorists I have drawn on throughout this dissertation have noted, the issue at hand for most radical reformers is the issue of power inequalities that then in turn keep us acting a certain way in order to get or keep power in relation to where we are in the system. As feminist political scientist Kara Ellerby notes, “*Gender, as a shortcut, became a way to acknowledge power without talking about the production of power.*”<sup>1049</sup> According to Young, a focus on the framework of *disruption, resistance, and imagination* instead of gender will intentionally and directly decenter the concept of family from a normative center based on the power differentials inherent in gender relations. It will, in effect, be less likely to follow into an essentialism or simplistic trap that there is any “add and stir” or “switch and stir” easy route to a more equitable society.

### **Notions of intimate ownership, rather than freedom, prevail in Western culture**

In terms of heterosexual relations from a mainstream point of view, marriage historically has been seen as a benevolent, certainly not harmful, justification for women to be economically dependent on men as a reasonable division of labor between a biological producer and a financial one. This assumes that these roles are valued well enough to justify the division between them. It also assumes that women receive the fruits of the man’s economic labor in a way that sufficiently meets their needs. If this is the case, then there may truly be no need for her to engage in paid work of her own. However, generations of feminist and queer study have revealed that the implications of women having indirect access to financial resources and public recognition typically results in inequality.

Repeated feminist empirical study has found that this indirectness and inequality has serious repercussions on a woman’s her own health and agency, that of her spouse’s, and the ability for her to negotiate and pursue equity and mutual interdependence in her relationship. These days, sociological scholarship and legal adjudication are beginning to assess family and marital relationships more particularly for the resources available to each member, rather than assuming resources are shared, or able to be shared equally by creation of the legal family unit.

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<sup>1049</sup> Ellerby, emphasis original, 6.

Yet this level of conscientious analysis is still in its nascent stages, particularly in comparison to the powerful measures of analysis from the past.<sup>1050</sup>

As black scholars and queer scholars point out, centering our life on a legal notion of responsibility keeps us thinking within a long history of ownership language rather than a language of freedom. Bernadette Brooten, in her book *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*, notes that in Western society women, children, and powerless others were long considered property of powerful men. This history of ownership as a philosophical concept, which some think we have moved beyond to focus on ethical concepts such as human rights and autonomy, continues. Brooten writes that even after the official institution of racial slavery has ended in the United States, slaveholding values continue to be expressed in which owning a person's body is morally permissible, in part because this logic extends from before the institution of racial slavery and also beyond, insidiously affecting how we still think about relationships.<sup>1051</sup>

This results in black women being reluctant to be open about sex because of racism since such openness for black person is construed as linked to promiscuity and thinking that black women are “jungle things,” says 22-year-old Veronica, a storyteller in Tricia Rose Farrar's collection of narratives entitled *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy*.<sup>1052</sup> Another storyteller in Farrar's anthology, Sarita, talks extensively about black women being treated as objects of black men and property. She says it is “screwed up” that black women in relationships need to get permission first from their male intimate to speak to somebody.<sup>1053</sup>

This notion of ownership as a primary relational currency goes deeper and far back into the human psyche and historical practice. Given the extent and depth of this taint of ownership thinking, Brooten suggests that we develop sexual ethics based on the premise that all human

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<sup>1050</sup> For a leading feminist articulator of these ideas see Susan Okin's work through Brooke A. Ackerly, “Raising One Eyebrow and Re-envisioning Justice, Gender, and the Family,” *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 638-650.

<sup>1051</sup> Every contemporary scholar addressing African American families has acknowledged and indicated the depth to which, as Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger articulate, “the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow fueled an underlying fragility in black relationships and families that made African-Americans much more vulnerable to economic, political and cultural changes,” *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage among African Americans and Latinos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14.

<sup>1052</sup> Tricia Rose Farrar, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 2003), 5.

<sup>1053</sup> Farrar, 47.

beings deserve freedom.<sup>1054</sup> In particular, Brooten argues that religious leaders must intentionally re-read the Bible through the paradigm of freedom because believing slavery to be acceptable as a human relation has continued to have an effect on all aspects of social and personal interactions.<sup>1055</sup>

Although missing the opportunity to connect notions of freedom explicitly to family relationships in her book, in her article which engages Saiving, Young addresses this need for rethinking what freedom means in terms of the discipline of ethics. While Young acknowledges Saiving as a foremother to the concept of particularizing ethical experience, Young also narrows in on Saiving's troubling continued use of a masculine/dominant notion of freedom. Following Reinhold Niebuhr, in "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," Saiving identifies freedom as a core ethical value. Young is not so sure that this is a helpful principle, at least as it is used and defined as she sees it by Niebuhr and Saiving, as "a conceptual middle ground between domination and subjugation." In this classic notion of freedom, which most people still believe in because of the power of classic notions, Young views the concept as still too associated with "power over" rather than viewing power as a relational quality between and among people.<sup>1056</sup>

In her rebuttal to Saiving, Young outlines a value of interdependence as a preferable core value rather than freedom.<sup>1057</sup> Freedom can be useful as a concept, Young notes, if it can be seen as "both the precipitant and result of noticing and actively living in response to the changing relations between norms and power."<sup>1058</sup> As Christian ethicists have also stated, freedom enables one with the capacity to meet obligations rather than removing one from obligation.<sup>1059</sup> Freedom queered would give opportunity for conscious attention to particularity and "individual and

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<sup>1054</sup> Brooten, 17; Cultural theorist Shannon Winnubst cautions people to think carefully about their desire for Western notions of freedom, as such concepts are entangled with intricacies of domination. For more on this, see Shannon Winnubst, *Queering Freedom* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 17.

<sup>1055</sup> Brooten, 4; Jennifer Nash sees this effect of ownership thinking implicated in black feminist thought when black people try so hard to name intersectionality as a theoretical lens, or anything they put into articulation, as particularly black intellectual property. She encourages a disruption of this practice through a letting go, of letting go of defensiveness and in exchange, "seeking a vision of black feminist theory that is not invested in making property of knowledge," Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 3

<sup>1056</sup> Young, "Uses of the Erotic for Teaching Queer Studies," 302.

<sup>1057</sup> Young, "Queering," 130.

<sup>1058</sup> Young, "Queering," 130.

<sup>1059</sup> Darlene Fozard Weaver, *Self-love and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

collective potentiality.”<sup>1060</sup> It would become “unapologetically active” rather than tied to the passivity of bondage and obligation that it represents in classic ethics, Young notes.<sup>1061</sup> Andrew Prevot elaborates upon this idea of a different kind of freedom for the black self: “Black selfhood has to be more than racial conformity or racial antagonism. It has to show forth freedom that provokes not fear but wonder and respect. A black body has to be able to mean both singularity and transcendence.”<sup>1062</sup> He goes on to describe authenticity, a relevant factor to ethics, as the “ability to live freely in their bodies.” It may be what young adults seek to do when they mention wanting to live authentic lives.

These musings are, of course, not the final word on what it means to re-envision freedom into a more active frame. As ethicist Paul Wadell cautions, the object of our freedom remains a crucial concern. He writes, “Freedom at the service of misdirected desires will make us inhumane. If I am dominated by desire for pleasure, wealth, or power, and want those things more than healthy relationships, justice to others, or times for worship and prayer, my ambitions will make me careless with the lives of others.”<sup>1063</sup> Young and others would not necessarily disagree. They would, however, point out that *lack* of freedom through legal and formal obligation, which could be argued as justification for ensuring that one will not be “careless with the lives of others,” is a false assurance. Control of freedom is still control. Instead, meditations upon moral reflection, regardless of legal and formal responsibility, must be counted upon to guide us ethically, a subject I turn to now.

#### **SECTION FOUR: DEVELOPING MORAL IMAGINATION AND ETHICAL CREATIVITY**

In this penultimate section of the chapter, I explore how queer life as a life with less power, resources, and social recognition can encourage us all to envision and practice a relationality which is guided less by control and rigid gender expectations and more guided by response to need and ability however it may come. As I said at the chapter’s beginning, despite a lack of permanence, formality, and resources, a (queer) life lived well is one that pursues

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<sup>1060</sup> Young, “Queering,” 130.

<sup>1061</sup> Young, “Queering,” 130.

<sup>1062</sup> Andrew Prevot, “Sources of a Black Self? Ethics of Authenticity in an Era of Anti-Blackness,” *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, edited by Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 79.

<sup>1063</sup> Paul J. Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, third edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 145.

honesty, admits vulnerability and risk, and is willful in claiming desire and difference as generative. To live in such a manner requires a certain amount of comfort with improvisation, of a constant decentering to find a new, deeper center; but luckily today's young adults are naturally attuned to this via having been raised in a fast-moving postmodern culture.<sup>1064</sup>

### Exploring *Queer Virtue*

Like Young and others, Episcopal priest and queer ethicist Elizabeth Edman also asserts that in the in-betweenness queer life has thrust her unwittingly into a moral journey of astonishing richness. Edman writes that she has found that her life as queer person has given her a more demanding set of virtues and ethics to live by than what has come about by trying to live out priestly orders.<sup>1065</sup> While there is a good deal of non-biological kinship structure discussed in the Bible, and some amount in practice,<sup>1066</sup> husbands to each other and queer Christians David Khalaf and Constantino Khalaf bring up a valid point that until extremely recently, few if no resources were available to navigate interpersonal and marital waters for queer Christians that spoke affirmatively and directly to them.<sup>1067</sup>

In her book, Edman articulates that her position in queer marginality as a lesbian has taught her keen lessons on “widely recognized Christian virtues: spiritual discernment, rigorous self-assessment, honesty, courage, material risk, dedication to community life, and care for the marginalized and oppressed.”<sup>1068</sup> In the first part of her book she explicates that the *queer path* leads her to intensely experience the virtues of *identity, risk, touch, scandal, and adoption*.<sup>1069</sup> In the second part, she points out several destabilizing aspects of Christianity that she sees as

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<sup>1064</sup> For more resources on how to go about this, see Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making*, first edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Matthew C. Kruger, *Spiritual Exercises for the Postmodern Christian* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2018); Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, *Sacred Resistance a Practical Guide to Christian Witness and Dissent* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018); Liz Barrington Forney, *What Is Your Practice? Lifelong Growth in the Spirit* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015).

<sup>1065</sup> Edman, 1-2.

<sup>1066</sup> A good example of this is non-biological people becoming family through Godparenting, a tradition that particularly strong in Latino culture in terms of how much involvement Godparents play in a child's life, Jana Marguerite Bennett, *Singleness and the Church: A New Theology of the Single Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

<sup>1067</sup> David Khalaf and Constantino Khalaf, *Modern Kinship: A Queer Guide to Christian Marriage*, foreword by Rachel Held Evans (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>1068</sup> Edman, 3.

<sup>1069</sup> Edman, 1-2.

characteristically queer: *pride, coming out, authenticity and hospitality*. Reviewers of the book comment that, according to Edman, both Christianity and queerness aim to interrupt binary thinking.<sup>1070</sup> As such, Edman is one of several Christians in mainline traditions recently to articulate how queer ideas are representative of progressive Christianity “with power,” writes Staks Rosch for *Publisher’s Weekly*.<sup>1071</sup>

Using Edman and others, I will briefly explore the virtues she mentions which I find most relevant to creating a new moral imagination of family relations. These are: identity, risk, scandal, pride, hospitality, and finally, adoption. Honesty of the self, risk, and different notions of safety are all examples of queer disruption of normative practices to hide and disregard the self, avoid risks, and assume that safety can only be obtained materially. In addition to engaging in a richer conversation by having multiple chiming in on these virtues, I also do this, because, as Brian Bromberger one of Edman’s reviewers and Roman Catholic deacon rightly notes, Edman’s treatment of virtues in the first part of her book comes across as, “abstract, academic, and overly stifling paean to political correctness.”<sup>1072</sup> While I think describing it as paean is exaggeration, I too found this part wanting in delivery. It read to me as piecemeal in presentation, as if these were parts of an un(der)theorized or unarticulated whole.

However, Bromberger in salutary fashion assesses that Edman does better in discussing pride and coming out with gusto and appeal. This is a particularly valuable effort on Edman’s part, he notes, because of the wider interpretation of pride as sinful, or at least self-isolating, whereas she makes a compelling case for seeing pride as supporting a sense of self-worth that can tie people together.<sup>1073</sup> This idea of self-worth as a positive virtue that can lead to moral connection is an idea I pick up again at the end of Chapter Five. In a similar fashion to

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<sup>1070</sup> Staks Rosch, “Exploring the Queerness of Christianity with Episcopal Priest Elizabeth Edman,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, May 16, 2016, Academic OneFile.

<sup>1071</sup> Rosch; See also Mihee Kim Kort, *Outside the Lines: How Embracing Queerness will Transform your Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

<sup>1072</sup> Brian Bromberger, “Book Review of *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know about Life and Love and how it can Revitalize Christianity*,” *Theology Today* 74, no. 1: 73.

<sup>1073</sup> Bromberger, 73; Bromberger also wishes Edman had been fully dialogical, in speaking to what queers could learn from Christianity, 74. I agree that in the spirit of dialogical mutuality this is a great idea, but critiquing her for not doing so disregards the need to acknowledge the full weight of the greater context in which she writes, in which queer people are dominated by what Christianity says, and often in a negative sense de-colonial balancing in context. For a minister who does provide more of a focus about what she has found to be useful in Christianity for the queer and marginalized, see Nadia Bolz-Weber’s *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, first edition (New York: Convergent Books, 2015).

Bromberger's compliment, I feel most grateful to Edman for her meditation on risk. In exploring the aforementioned values, I attempt to use vulnerability, and the risk within this vulnerability, as a common conceptual thread weaving together how these values and practices inform, interpret, and lead back to each other in a praxiological spiral.<sup>1074</sup>

### *Honesty about identity*

Edman, like many contemporary theorists and authors, starts off her exploration of queerness with identity as a cornerstone concept.<sup>1075</sup> She writes, "Queer virtue is a path that begins with discernment of an identity. This discernment is often retrospective, as notice of difference from others occurs at an age when most young people are too young, at least in earlier times before being gay or lesbian was more socially accepted in the mainstream, for them to articulate fully what this difference means or to claim it affirmatively as their own."<sup>1076</sup> For Edman, discernment of this identity has always been a deeply experiential experience, rather than an intellectual one about labels.<sup>1077</sup> As identities are supposed to do, her queer one offered her "guidance, created obligations, helped pushed me out into the world to do the work that I knew was important and necessary."<sup>1078</sup> Other queer theorists such as counselor of queer youth Julie Tilsen might critique Edman for implying that queer identity is remotely stable, even though Edman does not make such an explicit claim about her own experience. However, Tilsen, a pragmatist as a counselor, argues that it is possible to counsel youth through a matrix of expectation that one is always "becoming," such that while identity is never stable, there are loose rubric criterion or processes to follow with which to aid clients in their psychological

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<sup>1074</sup> Without further research I list this as an "attempt," for I would not say I do sufficient justice, nor treat with sufficient caution, the concept of vulnerability and precarity for moral knowledge. I am too cognizant of the eroticization and fetishization potential around such concepts, even as from a counseling perspective I know places of vulnerability to be potential sites for significant moral and psychological growth. See Chapter Six for more on this, as well as Michalinos Zembylas, "The Ethics and Politics of Precarity: Risks and Productive Possibilities of a Critical Pedagogy for Precarity," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (Online: Springer, July 23, 2018): 1-17.

<sup>1075</sup> Identity as a cornerstone for further moral development is reminiscent of Erik Erikson's theory, although I doubt that Edman has him in mind as she theorizes given her lack of developmental theory references in *Queer Virtue*.

<sup>1076</sup> Edman, 31-35.

<sup>1077</sup> Edman, 35-36; Edman asserts that being queer, even—and particularly—at an early age is about orientation to the world regarding difference and plurality, not "only" who one sleeps with, 37.

<sup>1078</sup> Edman, 39.

journey.<sup>1079</sup> These, as an ethics for relationally driven counseling, include accountability to power, transparency, self-reflexivity, social poetics, and conversational imagination.<sup>1080</sup>

Edman concludes her identity chapter with an observation that Christian faith is premised on identity, that humans are God's creatures who were created for love and inherent relationality.<sup>1081</sup> Yet, in a world who sees love as transgressive and improper, such identity and such love takes considerable risk. After internally acknowledging one's identity, Edman articulates that "taking the risk to speak our identities out loud is the next crucial step on the path to moral virtue. It is a step that most of us, perhaps all of us, take over and over again. Coming out never ends. At the same time, this path is one that you get better at."<sup>1082</sup> This means that while many aspects of being queer remain difficult throughout life because of the reactions of people one encounters socially, the person who must "come out" to them gets better at facilitating this aspect of the queer identity process with others. In connection to my mention of "survivance" at the beginning of this chapter, it is a common motif of queer literature to be cognizant of the rate at which queers, especially young queer persons die, particularly at their own hand, or are killed by others for their sexuality. Edman poignantly writes that queer people, as do Christians, risk because:

we know that the only way not to be crushed by persecution is to recognize that our connection to one another paves the road to our survival. It is the way that we may someday establish a better, more just world, but it also allows those of us who are killed to live on. And so we risk, knowing that we are a part of a life, a love, a truth, that cannot die.<sup>1083</sup>

For queer people who do not have quite the same source of eschatological hope as queer Christians, motivation is often found in a slightly different form, as a manner of ethical remembrance and betterment of life in order to honor the queer dead.<sup>1084</sup>

Young, in her own work of teaching students how to engage queer lenses, also starts with the concept of naming, and thus coming out, with one's identity as the cornerstone of exploration. She writes:

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<sup>1079</sup> Tilsen, xxvi, 2.

<sup>1080</sup> Tilsen, 6-7.

<sup>1081</sup> Edman, 41-42.

<sup>1082</sup> Edman, 58-59.

<sup>1083</sup> Edman, 57-58.

<sup>1084</sup> See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).



For students in this [queer studies] course, the ability to engage truth about self and neighbor requires "testimony." That is, students learn to pay attention to and speak about what is real about themselves—what they feel, who they are, how they came to be, and so on—as a way to thoughtfully engage these truths about others. Learning to testify to truth about the self from an internal perspective (rather than an external directive) creates space for understanding queerness and nonnormativity as a function of both social forces and self-perceptions. Recognizing queerness as both theoretical and embodied in this way actually helps them to deconstruct categories of identity, which sometimes aids in subverting oppressive power.<sup>1085</sup>

Edman notes that within a Christian framework, one risks being honest about oneself with others knowing that Christians, because of their connection to God and Jesus, are a part of a true love that cannot die, that cannot ultimately be breached no matter the depth of honesty about fault, desire, and other deeply felt things.<sup>1086</sup>

### *Risk, scandal, and vulnerability*

Much of Edman's chapter on risk is about the risk of physical and psychological safety for gays and lesbians for simply being themselves.<sup>1087</sup> After reviewing the various ways in which queer people are often unsafe or harmed, Edman makes a clear argument that Christian churches need to be actively welcoming of gays and lesbians if they are so, not just tolerant.<sup>1088</sup> This, too, is a risk, one which involves members leaving and people being uncomfortable, but one which is done for the sake of saving literal lives. About risk in general, Edman writes:

Risk is what happens when you have something that you value and you take a chance with it, hoping to achieve something of greater value. Identity-based risk involves putting on the line something that is a part of you, hoping to get a return on investment that will also be a part of you. These types of risks are particularly bracing, and particularly important.<sup>1089</sup>

While many queers are rightly concerned about their physical safety, Edman notes that Christianity provides a different form of security than bodily safety, one that is more existential

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<sup>1085</sup> Young, "Uses of the Erotic for Teaching Queer Studies," 303.

<sup>1086</sup> Edman, 58.

<sup>1087</sup> Edman, 47.

<sup>1088</sup> Edman, 52.

<sup>1089</sup> Edman, 44.

and relational.<sup>1090</sup> And yet, speaking of scandal and risk, Edman writes, “We know it will exact a price, and we do it anyway.”<sup>1091</sup> This does not excuse a real concern about physical safety, but rather speaks to the fact that there are more values and currencies at play that make a life worth living and surviving than simply material ones. Sometimes one form of safety must be risked in order to gain another, and sometimes other forms of safety act as compensation when the meeting of material needs remains tenuous.

We are often uncomfortable with vulnerability to the point that revealing a formerly neglected or hidden vulnerability often causes scandal. Edman writes, “Queers are able to endure scandal, so many of us, because we have already confronted and survived the threats, the sanctions imposed by those who police scandal and punish it with violation.”<sup>1092</sup> This is easy for queer persons to do because scandal is defined as whatever offends normal sensibilities that are that way simply because it is the way things are “supposed” to be.<sup>1093</sup> This also leaves open the opportunity for numerous things to be considered scandalous.

A bit in response to discovering that people found his special needs family scandalous, theologian and father Thomas Reynolds argues for discovering and dismantling the “cult” of normalcy in exchange for a more Christologically-oriented system of value and categorization based instead on vulnerability. Reynolds writes *Vulnerable Communion* to grapple with and grow from his family’s experience of his special needs son being asked to be removed from Sunday school classrooms by their church. Other parents had deemed his energetic, quirky behavior as “bad behavior” and worried it would rub off on their children.

Reynolds theorizes in his book that disability represents disorder, and that human beings fear the lack of order implied by difference.<sup>1094</sup> “The different is frightening because it is experienced as out of control, untamed, wild, freakish, and undomesticated,” he writes. It threatens to unhouse us from our sense of security and firm dwelling.<sup>1095</sup> In being frightened by difference, we seek to make more out of the distance in difference than actually exists. Reynolds

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<sup>1090</sup> Edman, 58.

<sup>1091</sup> Edman, 73.

<sup>1092</sup> Edman, 80.

<sup>1093</sup> Edman, 82.

<sup>1094</sup> Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2008), 67.

<sup>1095</sup> Reynolds, 110.

argues, “Disability is not something less than normal, an inferior or broken nature. Disabled and non-disabled people do not count as two exclusive categories of human beings. All people are linked, indissolubly, sharing a fundamental condition: vulnerable personhood.”<sup>1096</sup> And yet, many people seek distance from any sense of disability within themselves.

The cult of normalcy that denies the reality of a common vulnerable personhood is understandably powerful. Without analysis, it is not always easy to see how exclusionary and dehumanizing it can be to idolize a norm. On the surface a norm can have a beneficent veneer.<sup>1097</sup> Young writes, “One way that normalization achieves this ‘behind the veil’ status is by appearing to be a benevolent processes in which help for a desired identity, body, circumstance, and relationship is available.”<sup>1098</sup> Reynolds, out of his experience with his son, would agree with Young that norms are particularly powerful in that they uphold a desire for able-bodiedness, for strength. Yet, he writes, we must not be lulled into being complacent with our aspirations, for when they encourage us to dismiss reality they breed decidedly unbenevolent results. “Refusing to own up to our vulnerability cultivates an aversion to difference. This, in turn, yields ideologies of exclusion and violence, for prejudice is nourished by fear. It feigns the status of strength by connecting well-being and wholeness with power, ability, and sameness, idealizing an imaginary completeness that suppresses or denies the capacity to be wounded.”<sup>1099</sup> Instead, Reynolds suggests, we should follow the example of the Christian narrative which encourages us to embrace the power that comes from being willing to be wounded, to being relationally available in all the messiness of human life.

### *Willfulness of desire and not limiting difference*

Often queer persons embrace this type of active willingness to be wounded when they claim their desires and make themselves available to each other regardless of the lack of social recognition they will receive for these efforts. Edman writes that this takes a certain sort of pride in one’s self to accomplish, a pride that often comes after a journey of dealing with the shame of not being normative. Edman notes that shame processed well can lead to both humility and pride,

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<sup>1096</sup> Reynolds, 105.

<sup>1097</sup> Reynolds, 18.

<sup>1098</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 67.

<sup>1099</sup> Reynolds, 110.

although pride in mainstream culture is often not considered positively.<sup>1100</sup> “Demonizing Pride is, in fact, one of the most effective ways that Christianity has ended up serving those who conquer and dominate, contributing to the disempowerment of people the world over” because it encourages people who are different to hide and devalue themselves.<sup>1101</sup> Flipping this on its head, Edman articulates that queer pride is about a healthy relationship with self, other, and transcendent reality.<sup>1102</sup> As such, it is not hubristic or isolating. Instead, “Pride is a statement of personal affirmation that extends out to others. Pride calls us together.”<sup>1103</sup> It is this sense of willful, affirming extension against all odds that makes queer hospitality and adoption so distinctive.

Holman Jones and others write about how the process of child adoption is a great example of how queer time and queer desire often represent delayed performance, or performance out of sync.<sup>1104</sup> In part because of this lack of syncopation, adoption has a type of willful resiliency that helps one become comfortable with waiting, of living with time and potentiality differently than most people. Queer adoption in its many varied forms of biology and affinity shows that queer life does not necessarily argue for a lack of commitment, just a willingness to understand that things aren’t neatly linear, progressive or timed as we wish. If we focus too much on this falsehood, as we usually do it, it can interfere with our moral vision. Again, the redirected focus that queer theory offers allows us to become more comfortable with life’s quirky particularity and be able follow this unfurling particularity wherever it goes.

## **CONCLUSION: HOW QUEERING AND VIRTUE CAN AID ETHICS**

It makes sense, then, that one of the key characteristics of a more liberation ethics is a notion of fluidity, of constantly becoming more than what one was before. This is in contrast to an ethics of dominance that is more likely to focus on static, less agential notions of the self which is bound by its subject location. As West describes it, the idea of becoming “describes an

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<sup>1100</sup> Edman, 87.

<sup>1101</sup> Edman, 115.

<sup>1102</sup> Edman, 113.

<sup>1103</sup> Edman, 112.

<sup>1104</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, “Waiting for Queer: Key Words,” *Queering Families, Schooling Publics, Keywords*, edited by Anne M. Harris, Stacy Holman Jones, Sandra L. Faulkner, and Eloise D. Brook (New York: Routledge, 2018), 98.

ethic that is not concerned with achieving a finite goal or with the place the one aspires to reach in order to be finished with certain ethical problems. Instead, hope for ethical relationships is only found in one's participation in the process of becoming a more compassionate society, in confronting the multiple patterns of denial, devaluation, and abuse or assaults [...] Becoming is a perpetually unfinished task."<sup>1105</sup> This lack of resolution and thus this willingness to stay in improvisational mode is what makes this form of ethics more methodologically liberative than any other model. Young writes, "The process of thinking ethically and doing ethical work must include a deep desire to allow that process to unfold, reshape, and reimagine itself."<sup>1106</sup> Ultimately, a willingness to always respond anew to changing circumstances is what keeps us ethically virile.

It is a bit of an uphill battle against the normative presumptions of society to declare that youth and queers are not only moral, but perhaps more moral than those closer to the normative center of society of the stably married and financially confident.<sup>1107</sup> While I am not willing to say that they are more moral, the difference and diversity of their lives from what has been the norm needs to be acknowledged before further examination and judgement regarding the morality of the intimacy practices can be conducted. Young argues, "Christian ethics must not only acknowledge the reality of diversity and pluralism, but it must also envision and consistently worked to create a just and loving community *because of* that reality."<sup>1108</sup> Right now I see Christian ethics engaging relational variation through accommodation and tolerance lenses rather than embracing what this diversity might mean toward of fuller vision of Christian relationality and attention to lived experience.

### *A path to openness*

I encourage scholars and practitioners of religion and human development to be more open and generous to where and why young adults are, intentionally or not, disrupting the moral norms of marriage at the beginning of adulthood—and its presumed justice-inducing complementarity of commitment—in favor of a future where self and other as embodied persons

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<sup>1105</sup> West, 52.

<sup>1106</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 23.

<sup>1107</sup> Edman, 3.

<sup>1108</sup> Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 4.

of differing desires and capabilities are taken more seriously. This occurs in part by not so quickly locking our legal and relational lives together in a way that muddies and detracts from the information we need to acquire about ourselves and others in order to be honest about our desires, fulfillment, and ethical obligations. The reticence of contemporary young adults to discipline themselves to live more intentionally and with a vision that connects their current lives with what they want for themselves in the near future remains something that their elders and wider communities can help them with, yet this aid will be better given and received if the reasons and creative moral potential in their differing relational practices are better understood.

As I have alluded to in regards to neoliberalism supporting a certain idea of femininity and feminism, and mention when addressing theological and practical obstacles to interpersonal mutuality, *there are narratives about gendered norms and family life that can directly limit the fulfillment and capacity building of all members of the family*. Thus, in order to begin taking relationship ethics in a direction which is more about interpersonal, authentic intimacy, it is important to disrupt the norms which keep family relationships overly determined by rigid gender rules and divisions of labor.<sup>1109</sup> Then, and only then, can we effectively shift our values, expectations, and behaviors in directions which are more mutual and fulfilling for everyone involved.<sup>1110</sup>

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<sup>1109</sup> While rigid, divisive gender roles are my main concern, it is worth stating that this ideal has been concomitant with the normative practice of a formal, life-long relationship commitment of care, stability, and sacrifice. These values too, deserve to be evaluated, and discernment engaged to figure out how these should be kept or tweaked for new generations.

<sup>1110</sup> As political scientist Kara Ellerby notes, this involves acknowledging places where the logic of liberalism, in which sheer participation of women is assumed to be a sufficient enough good for the advancement of women in society, is too narrow an analytic lens because it obfuscates the necessity of than questioning how things are done in the first place and if this is the most free system, Kara Ellerby, *No Shortcut to Change: An Unlikely Path to a More Gender-Equitable World* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 13.

## VI.

### Pursuing Love, Justice, and Self in Lived Theological Ethics

*Improvisation can't work without a tradition.*

*Try improvising without a tradition and you dry up within 30 seconds.*

Samuel Wells, on “Improvising Leadership”<sup>1111</sup>

*Theological ethics in this sense is a transitional moment of gaining distance within a task that is practical from beginning to end.*

Don Browning, in *Fundamental Practical Theology*<sup>1112</sup>

#### INTRODUCTION

Communities in pluralistic societies must be explicit and dialogical about how they connect human wholeness, care, and morality in late modern times.<sup>1113</sup> Rather than a simple reliance on the tradition of the past or moralistic injunctions in the present, visions of how ultimate meaning can guide us in the unique situations of our everyday lives—and how behavior and aspiration inform each other—need to be engaged anew for every generation and for every person. I employ a practical-theological lens to argue that Don Browning’s concept of equal regard with its elements of love, justice, and mutuality are all relevant to contemporary young adults. With the feminist tweaking I propose in which love and justice carry nearly equal weight, as well as my examination elsewhere in this project of practical methods to get there, I believe a concept of equal regard, which already has an inherent flexibility of interpretation and application in any given situation can continue to work well in a late modern situation.

This chapter provides material for how religious leaders can redirect young adults’ impression of Christianity as offering nothing but false purity and judgement by exploring

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<sup>1111</sup> Samuel Wells, “Improvising Leadership,” Faith and Leadership, March 26, 2012, <http://www.faithandleadership.com/multimedia/samuel-wells-improvising-leadership>.

<sup>1112</sup> Don Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 96.

<sup>1113</sup> See Don S. Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

collaboratively with them how the theological ideas of love and justice connect to everyday intimate relationships.<sup>1114</sup> In particular, relationship ethics will need to adjust to speak in a way that has bearing on people's whole lives and rather than offer a perspective in which everything relational is derivative of marriage. While fidelity and steadfastness remain important virtues cultivated through covenantal commitments, a redirection of what is important about relationships necessarily requires that we focus anew on the self. It goes against the grain of much standard Christian tradition to do this, however, since an emptying and denying of the self is considered spiritually and ethically generative.

In some interpretations, even, self-transcendence absolutely and unequivocally requires self-abnegation. I, and many theologically-inclined feminists, however, claim the opposite. It is only through investment in the generativity of the self that mutuality in relationship can be properly grounded and constructed. Otherwise, the aims of human flourishing, love, and justice, are always undercut by the belief that a portion of that system, be it the self, or the other in relationship to the first subject, does not deserve its full balance. While generativity might be well served by discipline and forethought, it is *not* well served by outright denial and derision of any part of the system, no matter how selfish or self-deluded that part is presumed to be.

In this chapter I move through a variety of assertions about how people in late modernity should operate as theological agents. In the first section of three, I argue that theological and ecclesial ethics needs to develop an innovative, collaborative style that can partner with today's young people who, as spiritual "guerilla agents," seek to carve out space in an oppressive system of individual responsibility to still find the sacred. In the second section, I outline a vision and tradition of mutuality from theological and practical perspectives and root Browning's articulation of equal regard as a particular iteration and instance of this. In the third and final section, I run through a select variety of ways feminist and womanist theologians and philosophers have dealt with the entanglement of self-love, sacrifice, love and justice, particularly as they pertain to intimate life. In conclusion, in order to advance feminist thought and practice regarding intimate ethics, I suggest that the particular relationship of self and sacrifice in terms of the balance of what an equal regard relationship might look like for them be further addressed in conversations with young adults, as much of our ethical notions inherited

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<sup>1114</sup> Jennifer Erin Beste, *College Hookup Culture and Christian Ethics: The Lives and Longings of Emerging Adults* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.



from the thought of masculine interpretations of Saint Augustine, Reinhold Niebuhr and others is fundamentally suspicious of a love of self that ultimately does not serve the fullest flourishing of God's creation.

## **SECTION ONE: CHRISTIAN ETHICS AS LIVED AND IMPROVISED**

In this section, I first discuss the need for the established church to be willing to adopt a more innovative, agile, collaborative ministry style in order to productively partnership with contemporary young adults who find many forms of institutional life impersonal, hard to participate in, and doubtfully impactful in regards to the change they would like to see in the world. I put forth the idea that a particular strategy for encouraging this collaboration is to think about ethical discernment and articulation as a practice of improvisation and connected character building which aids what ethicist Jenkins Willis calls a "trajectory of response." To finish off this section, I offer touchstone protocols for how to aid in this deliberation such as embracing generosity of response and fluidity, and making sure to have relevant sources, good partners, and "good enough" questions.

### **The guerilla self and the agile church**

As I have mentioned in Chapter One, social philosophers Luke Howie and Perri Campbell describe contemporary young adults as operating out of a sense of a "guerilla self."<sup>1115</sup> In that chapter I use their words to sketch a picture of a relatively weak political agent outside the conventional power structures fighting back against an overwhelmingly oppressive powerful force.<sup>1116</sup> In what Howie and Campbell describe, these guerillas fight back by tweaking the rules of the system back against itself to find a space for survival. This powerful oppressive force is the neoliberal system that would seek to turn these young adults into mindless, numb, and fearful consumers who believe to their core that they are responsible for everything that happens to them. Following the war analogy, sociologist Matt Dawson further describes neoliberalism as an

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<sup>1115</sup> Luke Howie and Perri Campbell, *Crisis and Terror in the Age of Anxiety: 9/11 and the Global Financial Crisis* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 76.

<sup>1116</sup> See Brian Loveman, "Guerrilla Warfare," *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (Oxford University Press, 2001)  
<http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195117394.001.0001/acref-9780195117394-e-0301>.

“ideological offensive, a mode of domination, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, that seeks to create uncertainty and anxiety and fear on the side of labour in order to guarantee its compliance.”<sup>1117</sup> Neoliberalism sells an ethic of freedom if one adheres to the market as a totalizing ideology. For this reason, cultural theorist Patricia Ventura says neoliberalism has a stronger influence than postmodernity upon late modern subjects for its pull on the psyche.<sup>1118</sup> For this reason, the guerilla self can be described as at war against a system which would seek to dehumanize it and remove it from all interpersonal connection and dependency.<sup>1119</sup>

I describe the guerilla self’s strategies as subtle, and possibly not ultimately successful; yet Howie and Campbell’s description of this as contemporary young adults’ main strategy of resistance and attack nonetheless resonates as true to me. To take this metaphor further in order to then connect it to the concepts of tradition and community, a guerilla agent is also unorganized, under-resourced, solitary (compared to opponents), and sporadic. A guerilla agent is, by definition, not the establishment who has convention, resources, and organization. Yet a guerilla agent has advantages. He or she knows the terrain best because it is his or her home. Guerilla agents must develop tactics and strategies to leverage what they do have in their arsenal and fight back in a different way than the organized, because those are their plusses.<sup>1120</sup>

I suggest that there is much that Christianity and the established church can offer these guerilla agents that will help everyone involved live lives of better flourishing and moral growth than they currently do.<sup>1121</sup> The established church does not need to continue to stand at a distance

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<sup>1117</sup> Kevin Doogan, *New Capitalism? The Transformation of Work* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 214, cited by Matthew Dawson, *Late Modernity, Individualization and Socialism: An Associational Critique of Neoliberalism* (Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2013). ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vand/detail.action?docID=1209513>.

<sup>1118</sup> Patricia Ventura, *Neoliberal Culture: Living with American Neoliberalism* (Taylor and Francis Group, 2012), 10-12. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/vand/detail.action?docID=1002996>; I agree with this latter statement. For this reason, I only use postmodern to describe contemporary young adults as rejecting grand narratives as universally applicable in moral judgement. In most other cases, their lives are best described as driven and confined by late modern neoliberalism rather than an anything-goes postmodern mentality. Ventura describes neoliberalism is a worldview, a set of practices, and a form of governmentality and feeling, Ventura, 2.

<sup>1119</sup> In a “post-Westphalian” age after the Cold War in which capital and production are global and more sovereign than political states, the enemy is no longer a different nation state, or a different ethnic group. Rather, the enemy can be your neighbor, who, more disenchanting and isolated than you are, commits acts of individual terror such as shooting up a school, movie theatre, or political event. Neither side can easily tell who is friendly to their cause and who is foe.

<sup>1120</sup> Loveman.

<sup>1121</sup> Guerilla warfare is most successful as a direct reversal of the conventional logic of the system, C. Townshend, “Guerrilla Warfare,” *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, edited by Richard Holmes, Charles Singleton, and Spencer Jones (Oxford University Press, 2001). Accessed 22 Apr. 2019,

from the circle of contemporary young adult concern by ceding discussion of relationships to either secular or conservative forces. This is often perceived to be the case by all but the most religious and well-connected of young adults. Christianity through the established church can articulate plenty of positive virtues which can be inculcated through intimate relationships outside of marriage through the lens of advancing love and justice through interpersonal relationship. It can help young adults understand its long tradition of contemplative practices and various strands and processes of ethical and theological discernment in a way that can create stronger meaning for people's lives.

Yet, to do so, the church will need to act more like agile guerillas, or at least more like partners in the fight against a common enemy, rather than continue to see itself as the established armory which is well-resourced but perhaps far from the front-lines. Lutheran minister and author of *The Digital Cathedral*, Keith Anderson, sees the aforementioned title as a late modern analogy for how the church can do—and does already in some cases—public ministry in a world where the boundaries between the church and the more secular public are not so rigid.<sup>1122</sup> Yet there is still much work to be done to make this digital cathedral the predominant metaphor for Christianity in a digital, late modern world.

Dwight J. Zcheile, a seminary professor and member of a taskforce for reimagining the Episcopal Church, notes in his book, *The Agile Church*, that due to flagging in innovation and revisions in upkeep, “established patterns of Christian life and witness no longer connect with many people in the neighborhood.”<sup>1123</sup> Zcheile argues that in order to make these connections, traditions must be refashioned to be accessible in a lean, participatory way in which they are collaboratively reinvented with the help of the end user.<sup>1124</sup> To do so, those Christians who identify with the established church must drop many of their own assumptions, which come from a power and privilege that their contemporary young adult partners do not have, to meet them where they are. Zcheile points out, heartbreakingly so, that most people think the church does not

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<http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198606963.001.0001/acref-9780198606963-e-524>.

<sup>1122</sup> Most Nones still believe in God and seek some form a sacred life, Keith Anderson, *The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wireless World* (New York: Morehouse, 2015), xiii.

<sup>1123</sup> Dwight J. Zcheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), x.

<sup>1124</sup> Zcheile, xi; Stripping things down to the lean for the sake of agility is a key aspect of improvisation according to MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *God, Improv, and the Art of Living* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Eerdmans, 2018), 105.

care about their stories, hopes, struggles, and dreams. I would say this observation hits the nail on the metaphoric hammer head as to how little involvement or input most establishment churches ask of their members in terms of bringing forth their non-Sunday lives into church.<sup>1125</sup>

To partner with young people in the innovative authorship and telling of their stories requires an establishment church used to being a respected moral authority with centrality and power to give itself over to the flexibility and responsiveness of a Holy Spirit. As Zcheile notes, this is uncontrollable and messy.<sup>1126</sup> He suggests that such a partnership aim for “traditioned innovation,” of new practices rooted in the wisdom and practices of other times.<sup>1127</sup> He emphasizes that this innovation must be intentionally cultivated, for changing one’s assumptions, patterns of being, and behaviors will otherwise not happen sufficiently or holistically enough.<sup>1128</sup> It must be intentional or it will not happen because it involves a vulnerability of translation, learning, conversion, and wiliness to learn from failure that does not come naturally to people or organizations.<sup>1129</sup>

Zcheile suggests that the development of “traditioned innovation” will work like an adaptive challenge. I liken this to how guerillas adapt to the presence of occupying forces by developing an unconventional strategy of resistance to the most systemic and organized warfare of their resourced enemy. In particular, this different approach to design involves making many, small cost and low risk changes along the way, as well as giving attention to things that others with less familiarity with the problems have ignored.<sup>1130</sup> He concludes that those in the established church are not as open to learning as they should be because of how learning requires a reevaluation of, and thus competition between values. Zcheile asserts that this competition can be eased if space is made for conversation that is reflective of how shame, ambivalence, and conflict block us from imaginative thinking, so that we can see the reward in holding certain values that we previously did not see.<sup>1131</sup>

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<sup>1125</sup> Zcheile, 66.

<sup>1126</sup> Zcheile, xi, xiii, 4, xii, 1.

<sup>1127</sup> Zcheile, 6.

<sup>1128</sup> Zcheile, 5.

<sup>1129</sup> Zcheile, xii, 6-11.

<sup>1130</sup> Zcheile, 61-65; He also suggests finding some solutions already among the people by looking carefully within, 72.

<sup>1131</sup> Zcheile, 95.

## Practicing improvisation as connected character-building

In a postmodern sense, it is helpful to think of God and ethics as involving improvisation skills. As Presbyterian pastor MaryAnn McKibben Dana writes in her book, *God, Improv and the Art of Living*, drawing upon theologian Samuel Wells' concept of Christian ethics as improvisation and her own extensive experience of improv comedy as a hobby, she has found it helpful to think of God and the Christian life in this way. Dana notes that improvisation starts with a "yes" to the situation at hand in which we first accept what we cannot change in order to then respond appropriately to what is right in front of us.<sup>1132</sup> It thus requires deep attention to the other and the moment at hand to be successful.<sup>1133</sup> This has a pragmatic realism to it, and a form of concrete, intense relationality that a lived ethics requires.

As Dana encourages, we need to receive what life offers us, and then build upon it. In her book, Dana cites Wells as outlining that there are three main responses to any overture: 1) we can block the offer, 2) accept the offer, 3) or over-accept, which is what Jesus does.<sup>1134</sup> Dana sees over-accepting as a process of embracing, of committing our whole selves to whatever happens next.<sup>1135</sup> She points out that the Biblical narrative indicates that Jesus was largely uninhibited, a risk taker for all the right reasons.<sup>1136</sup>

Dana recognizes that this way of looking at the Christian life can be counterintuitive to what Christians in particular have been taught about life. It stands in contrast to Christian providentialism, to the common belief that God has a plan for your life and one need only find that one plan and then respond.<sup>1137</sup> This view of life, she writes, can lead one to have immense anxiety over the fear of messing up or getting it wrong.<sup>1138</sup> Rather, if, for instance, the Christian life is viewed as lots of little moments of ethical response, then the level of fear and the anxiety can go down considerably.<sup>1139</sup>

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<sup>1132</sup> Dana, 18.

<sup>1133</sup> Dana, 70, 73.

<sup>1134</sup> Dana, 39-41.

<sup>1135</sup> Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004), 103-106, cited by Dana, 39-42.

<sup>1136</sup> Dana, 51.

<sup>1137</sup> Dana, ix.

<sup>1138</sup> Kate M. Ott, *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 5.

<sup>1139</sup> Dana, ix.

If we think of the goal of ethics as coming to moral wholeness of the human being and society through the building of integrity of character, rather than simply a situation of determining whether an action is right or wrong,<sup>1140</sup> then an approach of improvisation and cultivating a trajectory of response through character-building makes sense. This is hardly new thought, but it is not necessarily normatively practiced.<sup>1141</sup> Yet as Flanagan notes, because of the common interpretation of ethics as a consideration of right or wrong action, there is often little discussion publicly about the practical ethics of changing one's self, nor envisioning this as a moral goal.<sup>1142</sup> A contemporary change toward seeing Christian ethics as "a project of becoming," to use postmodern lingo, need not seem like a free-for-all. Dana emphasizes that the process of improvisation may not know the end game, but there are certainly patterned rules and response to rely upon in order to develop a momentary plan.<sup>1143</sup>

### **Ethics as aiding a "trajectory of response"**

I see the style of Christian ethics I would like to put forward as requiring two main things: one, the aforementioned becoming familiar with engaging in adaptive challenges and, two, movement beyond an impoverished and narrowly applied theological vision of human flourishing and relationality through guidance of what it means to do ethics with particular touchstone protocols. While there is "no common consensus," as ethicist Peter Singer puts it, in terms of grounds, process, reasoning, or goal content for ethics, there is general agreement that the field of ethics involves contemplation about the good life and what actions can be taken to achieve it.<sup>1144</sup> Toward these ends, I highlight that the task of the ethicist is, as ethicist Willis

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<sup>1140</sup> Diane J. Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), 259.

<sup>1141</sup> Chandler, 249.

<sup>1142</sup> Owen J. Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>1143</sup> Dana, ix.

<sup>1144</sup> Peter Singer, "Introduction," *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 3; Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, *The Ethics Toolkit: A Compendium of Ethical Concepts and Methods* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), xv; There are two main forms of ethics. The first, meta-ethics, is about determining how to adjudicate the rightness or wrongness of an action, while normative ethics, as Singer describes it, seeks to directly guide behavior. My project is a bit of both. It takes a new turn at the question of "what are the goods we should be seeking for better life?" and "how might we translate such values into creative, normative action for today?" It seeks to bridge the common ethical divide between deontology and consequentialism by implicitly involving a backdrop of virtue ethics, Singer, 3, 10, 12; Peter Singer, "Deciding what is Right: Introduction," *Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 243; Browning, *Ethics and Pastoral Care*, 25.

Jenkins puts it, to “help cultivate a trajectory of response” to push people further in generosity, thorough and critical reflexivity, and humility.<sup>1145</sup>

As I am particularly concerned about how one engages in moral deliberation in regards to interpersonal engagement, I am most interested in how big questions narrow down to an intense consideration of the intimate other and thus influence behavior. Ethicist Owen Flanagan calls this the third of three varieties of “moral sensitivity.” The first and second forms deal, respectively, with attention to individuals and particular situations, and the normative background of morality itself. The third involves being sensitive to that of what he describes as, “différance, to be attuned to learn from the other, as a way to open up moral possibility spaces, and to teach and learn better methods of developing moral sensitivity to persons, to the normative structures of everyday life, and to the varieties of moral possibility itself.”<sup>1146</sup> Thus this third type is not just third, but builds upon and circles back around to more thoroughly pursue the first two types of moral sensitivity through the relational capacity and complexity of the third. Flanagan asserts that ethics requires not only knowing what to value, as mentioned above, but also how to be situationally sensitive so that one may live one’s values in life’s moments, a task of human capacity that is not automatically nor universally achieved.<sup>1147</sup> He goes on to write that such sensitivity can be culturally and structurally encouraged or discouraged, depending on predominant values and practices.<sup>1148</sup>

*“Being extra:” Generosity and love*

Part of what it means to be Christian is what contemporary colloquial lexicon calls “being extra.”<sup>1149</sup> As an instance of this, theologian Diane Chandler writes that Christians are called to love their enemies in addition to God, self, and neighbor.<sup>1150</sup> This superfluity of over-acceptance of even those who wish you ill is often considered a distinguishing characteristic by Christians of

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<sup>1145</sup> Willis Jenkins, “Doing Theological Ethics with Incompetent Christians: Social Problems and Religious Creativity,” *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, edited by Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 65.

<sup>1146</sup> Owen J. Flanagan, “Foreword,” *Developing Moral Sensitivity*, edited by Deborah S. Mower, Phyllis Vandenberg, and Wade L. Robison (New York: Routledge, 2015), ix.

<sup>1147</sup> Flanagan, “Foreword,” ix.

<sup>1148</sup> Flanagan, “Foreword,” x-xii.

<sup>1149</sup> “Extra,” *Urban Dictionary*, accessed April 27, 2019, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=extra>.

<sup>1150</sup> Chandler, 255.

how Christianity differs from other spiritualities and religions, although the veracity that other religions do not also encourage this is easily disputable. Nonetheless, an outpouring of undeserved generosity which is inclusive serves as a guiding Christian attitude regardless of the situation.<sup>1151</sup> This generosity of spirit is often what Christians mean when they say that love is their purpose and guiding principle.

Christian ethicists have a common agreement that love is the ultimate principle, yet love as a value is often abstracted.<sup>1152</sup> In its abstraction, it can be utilized as a method to shut down inquiry, imagination, and action by being too weighty a concept, too varying in its detail of how it might be appropriately applied in any given situation. Christian ethicist Timothy Sedgwick helps me clarify my point. He writes:

Christian ethics must include the development of norms, principles, and rules, but these must never alone become the content of Christian ethics. First it is necessary to develop the basic metaphors and images that illumine the tensions that constitute human life and suggest the form of the Christian response. Love, for example, as a singular image and principle for the Christian life is inadequate because it abstracts from life and therefore loses the power to illumine and hence provide guidance.<sup>1153</sup>

Love as a basic metaphor does allow one to establish personal values, make decisions, and live life, but my point is that it cannot do so just on its own. A metaphor, and even a value, can only point in a direction,<sup>1154</sup> it cannot direct how one then takes a step in that direction.

### **Touchstone protocols for lived, creative ethics**

What can begin to take us in the right direction for ethical discernment and articulation is engaging a variety of what I am calling “touchstone protocols.” The first three attitudinal: critical and thorough reflexivity, comfort with incompetency in the effort, and understanding situational fluidity, subjectivity, and complexity. The last three, having thoughtful, relevant, and diverse

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<sup>1151</sup> Chandler notes that this outpouring involves the Spirit of God and Christian ethics is not Christian without it, 258; Feminist ethicist Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar notes that according to the parable of the Good Samaritan and feminist philosophical reflection in general the care necessary for survival is extravagant care, for “we are deeply needy,” *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 8.

<sup>1152</sup> Karen D. Scheib, *Attend to Stories: How to Flourish in Ministry* (Nashville: Wesley’s Foundery, 2018), 80-81.

<sup>1153</sup> Timothy F. Sedgwick, *Sacramental Ethics: Paschal Identity and the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 88-89.

<sup>1154</sup> Christian educator Sharon Galgay Ketcham notes that values are shared ideals we try to reach, which allow us to mark what is ahead of us and, as such, act as a point of orientation, Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church: Becoming a Community Where Faith Flourishing Beyond High School* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 5.



sources, finding partners (often already doing the work), and asking “good enough” Christian questions toward social justice, embracing the *imago dei*, are more instrumental. Together with the spirit of love, generosity and moral sensitivity, these touchstones should be able to launch innovative projects of ethical creativity.

*Critical, thorough reflexivity*

In his book *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, pastoral and practical ethicist Don Browning offered a way of thinking about the places of values in moral reflection by suggestion that ethics was a process of engagement at five dimensions. These five are: 1) Ultimate context of action-metaphoric vision (examples of such being God as creator, redeemer, governor); 2) obligation (such as to love or forgive); 3) human tendencies and needs (for instance, security, acknowledgement); 4) immediate context of action and various factors which condition it (the situational and environmental shaping); and 5) roles, rules, and processes that should occur in order to accomplish our moral ends.<sup>1155</sup> As Christian educator Sharon Galgay Ketcham notes in her book *Reciprocal Church*, “values only have meaning as people adopt them and creatively give them shape.”<sup>1156</sup> This shape is created by interpreting how a metaphor or value translates into a notion of obligation to translate into roles, rules, and processes in any given situation.

Nonetheless, a focus on the metaphoric-visional dimension can help by reminding us to look “beyond the immediate experience,” as Roman Catholic feminist ethicist Kate Ott puts it.<sup>1157</sup> Her injunction in her book *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society* to consider how any particular technology “was created, how our use of it shapes us, and what values are promoted in the process” is applicable to any situation of ethical discernment.<sup>1158</sup> She goes on to write that a process of ethical reflection involves asking questions about responsible use and what actions would reduce disparities.<sup>1159</sup> With these injunctions, Ott is encouraging us to recognize and embrace the dialectical nature of a creative, ongoing ethic.

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<sup>1155</sup> Browning, *Religious Ethics*, 53.

<sup>1156</sup> Ketcham, emphasis original, 8.

<sup>1157</sup> Ott, vii.

<sup>1158</sup> Ott, vii.

<sup>1159</sup> Ott, viii.

### *Comfort with incompetency*

While European American ethics of the mainstream American church and society are highly influenced by deontologist ethicist Immanuel Kant and social contract theorists like John Locke and John Rawls, such that ethical decisions can be seen as predetermined in their universal answers to situations, this is not the case for a postmodern, lived ethic.<sup>1160</sup> Jenkins writes, “ethics begins with a recognition of incompleteness—of something that compels a person to a response not yet given.” He goes on to say that identifying “the interesting moral production” of any one situation may not be the individual’s response, but rather when there is community change on a cultural level out of this individual’s response.<sup>1161</sup> This, again, involves knowing that the purpose of ethics is to shape a trajectory, not impossibly “micro-manage” the process of following that trajectory.

In this sense, ethics does not require a terribly prepared or mature person to begin asking or responding, which can help Christians realize that this is a situation that can pertain to them; it does not require any formal training, expertise, or special relationship to the situation at hand. As Ott writes, “Ethics is often considered the domain of adult decision making and the implementation of preexisting value sets. In actuality, ethics is something we all do, all the time. Ethics is extremely contextual even when we can see certain values exhibited across experiences, cultures, or time periods.”<sup>1162</sup> Yet, as Jenkins notes, a “turn toward the everyday [in ethics...] seems to make ethics captive to incompetent performances” of everyday, average, fallible Christians.<sup>1163</sup> While I would wager that, in reality, ethics is always subject to incompetent performances by virtue of being a human project, the question of what we need in our toolbox in order to be more competent than not is a good one.

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<sup>1160</sup> While not the same thing, such universalism helps cultivate an air of moralism, in which people do not need to be careful in their assessments if they claim that something is universal, and therefore it is the moral agents who must get in alignment with this universal principle or rule, rather than consider that it could possibly a more dialogically constructive situation. Craig Taylor describes moralism as “a class of defects of thought and understanding that apply not only to the practice of making moral judgements but to moral thought and moral theorizing more generally,” Craig Taylor, *Moralism: A Study of a Vice* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), 8.

<sup>1161</sup> Jenkins, 60.

<sup>1162</sup> Ott, 3; Ott goes on to write a bit later, “Each time we face a moral decision or are called upon for ethical response, we do so with all of our limitations and potentialities,” Ott, 4.

<sup>1163</sup> Jenkins, 55.

*Understanding situational fluidity, subjectivity, and complexity*

As Ott articulates it, the most helpful moral responses that can help steer a just and generative Christian engagement with digital technology are creative and embodied rather than rule-based. Technology in particular, she argues, and I would say postmodern life in general, requires that we see ethics as play, as creativity and engagement in order to attempt to keep up to speed with constant technological evolution.<sup>1164</sup> Ethics as lived and character-based thus assumes a bias toward action, with everyday engagement.<sup>1165</sup> It can be seen as a process of growth, of asking questions and coming up with moral responses. As Flanagan writes, for the sake of our own moral creativity and integrity it is important at the outset to realize that “there are multiple ways to live good human lives; that morality is fragile, subject to vagaries of temperament, personality, gender, class, culture, economics, and politics; and that moral ideals are typically pictures of what kind of person from among the possibilities one ought to be, where ‘be’ is intended in a deep, existential sense.”<sup>1166</sup> In short, morality is situational. Thus it is varied and subjective. Although morality and ethics from this perspective can be accused of being morally relative, the claims of moral relativism often refer to the larger worry of an ethical free-for-all in which there is no procedure for discernment or judgment.

*Having thoughtful, relevant, and diverse sources*

In her textbook *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, Ellen Ott Marshall outlines the importance of having good, relevant, and diverse sources as well as understanding all the different ways that these sources, and the various weight given to them can have on determining pathways to decision-making. She cites that Wesleyan quadrilateral of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience serves as a basis for sources.<sup>1167</sup> The weight which each Christian gives to the various sources and the interaction between them results in how Christians manage to come up with so many different responses to seemingly similar situations.<sup>1168</sup> She notes that Christian ethics as a field draws on a range of disciplines to understand a context as fully as

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<sup>1164</sup> Ott, viii.

<sup>1165</sup> Ott, 6.

<sup>1166</sup> Flanagan, 3.

<sup>1167</sup> Ellen Ott Marshall, *Introduction to Christian Ethics: Conflict, Faith, and Human Life*, first edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 11.

<sup>1168</sup> Marshall, 11-12.

possible. Given the variety of sources and disciplines from which knowledge and consideration can come, Marshall concludes that Christian ethics must always be more than Biblical warrant.<sup>1169</sup>

In her own work, Ott adds that an ethical response also involves procedures which allow one to “increase diversity, engage co-creative responsibility, cultivate attunement, deepen our practice of metanoia, and hack our social worlds in a participatory manner in order to reduce inequalities.”<sup>1170</sup> While hacking is terminology specific to computer systems, the disruption-irruption move articulated by Nikki Young in her work on black queer ethics of the family is its social equivalent. The co-creativity, responsibility, and attunement which Ott mentions as relevant qualities to ethics puts questions of technology, or any question pertaining to a large, abstract, and multifaceted topic, back into the realm of human action and interaction.

#### *Finding partners (often already doing the work)*

Persons who advocate for viewing ethics as a dynamic, lived theology articulate that this crucially involves collaboration, partners in the project of ethical discernment. As Jenkins notes of contemporary African American Christian ethicist Traci West, known for formulating a style of ethics known as “disruptive ethics,” that “Christian ethics itself is an organic practice, intentionally waged through community building. Doing Christian ethics this way is not a matter of articulating the moral genius of a great tradition, but rather a critical way of participating in what communities are already doing in response to dehumanizing challenges.”<sup>1171</sup> Jenkins identifies this as a form of theocentric pragmatism, a “strategy that supposes that Christian ethics should interpret social problems in relation to communities already creating lived strategies of response.”<sup>1172</sup> Like an ethics derived from a situation of social margins discussed in the previous Chapter Four, this ethics is disruptive in that it values the struggle that already exists, but that is not well known or well leveraged because of inequalities of power. It disrupts the idea that ethics is an abstract discipline of academic and expertise guidance by elites.

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<sup>1169</sup> Marshall, 28.

<sup>1170</sup> Ott, 6.

<sup>1171</sup> Jenkins, 56.

<sup>1172</sup> Jenkins, 60-61.

If we follow Jenkins and others to the logical conclusion of the significance of lived ethics, we are oriented to a greater focus on possibility writ large. As Jenkins somewhat radically concludes, “What a community believes, and even what it already does, matters less than the potential of the strategies it is organizing. Ethicists can help realize that potential by cultivating and criticizing a community’s initial responses, working to make their trajectory more competent in facing their problems.”<sup>1173</sup> Thus, the last touchstone protocol focuses on the possibility opened up by asking good enough questions.

### *Asking “good enough” Christian questions*

Marshall and Ott argue that ethics is about questions and responses that move toward greater justice for those who experience oppression by exploring who we ought to be as Christians, and out of this, how we ought to act.<sup>1174</sup> Marshall couches such questioning in the terms of being “good enough,” a qualification that echoes both a humility that encourages everyday action and also a standard of criteria that is multifaceted. Good enough questions “move us to a level of moral reflection on meaning, responsibilities, and implications related to the issue and context we have studied.”<sup>1175</sup> Ott comments that this process of questioning necessarily requires personal reflection upon past and habitual actions. She asks, “*How on an everyday basis do we begin to notice our moral responses and cultivate new meanings out of these encounters?*”<sup>1176</sup> Marshall adds that part of reflecting upon the good life is considering the impact of our actions upon others.<sup>1177</sup>

A Christian question, according to her, fundamentally involves an orientation toward social justice. Taking this large, seemingly abstract value and breaking it down into implications involves asking what about our practices keeps people on the margins and how we might live our lives in a way that reduces their oppression and suffering.<sup>1178</sup> This means that part of a Christian

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<sup>1173</sup> Jenkins, 61.

<sup>1174</sup> Ott, 3-4; Marshall, 22.

<sup>1175</sup> Marshall, 22.

<sup>1176</sup> Ott, 7.

<sup>1177</sup> Marshall, 20; Browning calls a good enough question a “thick one,” of considerable consideration of the various dimensions of a situation, *Fundamental*, 135.

<sup>1178</sup> Marshall, 31.

ethics answer involves definitive content about human theological anthropology.<sup>1179</sup> It asks, and answers, “What does it mean to be made in the image of God?”<sup>1180</sup> In short, it means to respect and love the person for their uniqueness and goodness, and to encourage them toward a generosity of spirit and action that furthers the fruition of this uniqueness and goodness in themselves and others. To do anything less than this, according to most Christian ethicists and family scholars, is to diminish those involved.

## **SECTION TWO: EQUAL REGARD AND *FROM CULTURE WARS TO COMMON GROUND***

Now that I have shown that ethics can be engaged in an improvisational fashion that nonetheless involves critical reflexivity, I can turn to how the particular ethical construct of Browning’s equal regard offers substantial room for improvisation as to how it is to be lived out in any particular circumstance, while still bearing the overall theological vision of connectivity, love, and justice. As I have alluded to earlier, I have always viewed equal regard as an ethical construct involving love, justice, and relationship, in which love primarily matches to regard, and equal to justice. Equal regard as a relationship refers to the implicit interaction over time that allows for the actualization of the first two to occur in a concrete situation.<sup>1181</sup>

In this section, I will outline the concept of equal regard, and place it as a position within a field of various interpretations of the Christian love ethic. I will conclude with how an exploration and promotion of equal regard as fitting to the late modern family was contextualized within the larger project of theological family studies in the 1990s and the cultural wars that surrounded it, but serves as an artifact of its time which needs significant update and detailing to be as useful as possible to the cause of gender equality in contemporary intimate relationships.

### **The place of equal regard in a perennial Christian love ethic**

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<sup>1179</sup> Marshall, 32.

<sup>1180</sup> Marshall, 28.

<sup>1181</sup> In conversation with *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* co-author Bonnie Miller-McLemore, I have come to find out that Browning himself never interpreted his construct to have such a strong pole of justice as I delineate. She surmises that this was likely because, as much as Browning’s ethic involved love of self as crucial to equal regard, he would have likely considered any incorporation of justice as derivative of the primary value of love rather than seeing justice as a possible *definition* of love, personal conversation, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Dec. 2018.

### *Equal regard as a concept*

Throughout Browning's work, he increasingly sought to articulate what kind of religious ethic would most serve the pastoral aim of affirming, meeting, and critical interrogating the needs of the modern Christian and modern Christian family. Browning assessed that mutuality of relationship was an essential aspect of Christian love and interpersonal behavior, rooted in the *imago dei*, and thus interpreted that each human being stood in equality to each other before God and thus should be treated equally by fellow Christians.<sup>1182</sup> As to what mutuality meant specifically as an ethical construct, he called this equal regard.<sup>1183</sup>

In 1997 Browning and a team of co-authors for the book *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* defined equal regard as "characterized by mutual respect, affection, practical assistance, and justice—a relationship that values and aids the self and other with equal seriousness."<sup>1184</sup> In other words, equal regard is a relationship of mutuality of regard with implications for action. Regard, or respect, naturally is the first integral element. Pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey has the best description of regard that I have read. He writes that respect, defined in a Christian counseling perspective, refers to "a deliberate choice" of those involved in caregiving "to presuppose a measure of integrity and love of truth" in the recipient of their respect. This involves, according to Lartey, a "deep valuing of the full personhood and otherness" of persons who are thus "seen as having the resources of self-determination and inner-directedness necessary to manage their lives more effectively."<sup>1185</sup>

### *Rooted in Christian value of creation*

The team argued that mutuality in the family as an ideal was embedded in, not apart from, a shift in Christian thinking toward greater egalitarianism, an idea Browning had noted before. As Miller-McLemore notes in a festschrift for Browning, the equal aspect of equal regard "embodies the ideal of neighbor love as an impartial regard for all persons as children of

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<sup>1182</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 178; Browning argued that while most scriptural interpretation translated well to the visional and obligational dimensions of his ethic mentioned in the first section of this chapter, in order to truly figure out what to do in any particular situation it was important to also consider human tendencies and needs, the greater context of the situation, and how rules, roles and processes come into play, *Fundamental*, 140.

<sup>1183</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 187, 11, 155-160.

<sup>1184</sup> Browning et al., 2.

<sup>1185</sup> Emmanuel Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, second edition (London; New York: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 95.

God.”<sup>1186</sup> Theological ethicist Stephen Pope further notes that persons as children of God is rooted in Christian symbolism around the value and shape of creation as derivative of and reflective of God.<sup>1187</sup> Feminist Christian ethicist Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar also notes that this moral equality before God is distinctive in its roots. It has long been a widely agreed upon Christian theme that, unlike other modern bases for political equality such as enlightenment-period human rights of the individual, but in the fully inclusive relationship of Creation to Creator which leaves out no part of creation for any reason.<sup>1188</sup> The goal of equal regard is to maximize love, and this is done via through acknowledgement of a certain human equality before God which translates into fundamental respect owed to everyone.

*A balance of elements, a role for sacrifice*

As Browning, and others note, there are several crucial elements that must be kept in proper proportion for love and justice to be properly balanced. Browning writes that a well-balanced morality involves three things: “the unities of eros or instinctuality (the tendency-need dimension), the refinements of mutuality and justice (the obligational dimension), and the forgiveness empowerment of agape (the visional dimension).”<sup>1189</sup> Referring back to his five-dimensions of moral thinking, rules, roles and process are helpful to consider as well, as they are full of assumptions made at other levels of dimension.<sup>1190</sup> Analyzing a subject from multiple directions and entry points can help aid in creatively assessing whether or not a situation of practical reason is consistent and comprehensive.

The team noted that when it came to the special relationships of family commitment and care, a balanced morality of equal regard also needed a place for sacrifice, as well as

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<sup>1186</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Generativity, Self-Sacrifice, and the Ethics of Family Life,” *The Equal Regard Family and its Friendly Critics: Don Browning and the Practical Theological Ethics of the Family*, edited by John Witte Jr., M. Christian Green, and Amy Wheeler (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2007), 30.

<sup>1187</sup> Stephen J. Pope, “The Place of Evolutionary Psychology in a Practical Theological Ethics of Families,” *The Equal Regard Family and its Friendly Critics: Don Browning and the Practical Theological Ethics of the Family*, edited by John Witte Jr., M. Christian Green, and Amy Wheeler (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2007), 61.

<sup>1188</sup> Sullivan-Dunbar, 2, 22.

<sup>1189</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 156.

<sup>1190</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 107.



interrogation of the self for areas of deception and the moral horizon of idolatry.<sup>1191</sup> What is considered a need or desire that must be met, given the totality of that particular human person is no easy nor automatic question, for what one feels or “presents” to use a counseling term, is not necessarily the problem that needs to be most crucially addressed or leads to the greatest amount of love and growth of said human.<sup>1192</sup> Yet Browning argued that this mutuality could serve as a love ethic that did not contrast the traditional Christian notion of love involving openness to self-sacrifice, as he saw self-sacrifice as a transitional ethic whose end was always toward the restoration of love.<sup>1193</sup>

### **Browning’s equal regard within a scope, and debate, of Christian interpretation**

#### *Largely Protestant-Catholic divide*

Browning’s articulation of equal regard enters at a particular moment in the long debate in the Christian tradition about the place of self, other, and God in love. As the *Culture Wars* team noted, debates about whether or not love can include the self or what the position of sacrifice need be in a Christian ethic of love goes back centuries. These debates stem from differences of how Lutherans, and other Protestants, and Roman Catholics interpret the love commandments of the Bible. Protestants, following Martin Luther for the most part, believe strongly in agapic love as necessarily more about neighbor-other love than a blend of self-love and neighbor-love as mentioned in the Biblical commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Roman Catholics, on the other hand, were more likely to engage the “testament of nature” as a creation of God has been called in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas,<sup>1194</sup> to draw upon biology as well as philosophy and theology to inform their view of ethics.

In this century, a few scholars stand out in contributing and furthering the debate of where and how sacrifice plays into Christian love. Gene Outka wrote the quintessential book on a pro-mutuality perspective in his 1972 tome *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* in which he argues that

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<sup>1191</sup> Darlene Fozard Weaver, *Self-love and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 70-71.

<sup>1192</sup> Jules Toner, "The Ethical Features of 'Agape,'" *The Journal of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1975), 463-464, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/stable/1201716>.

<sup>1193</sup> Browning, *Christian Ethics*, 112.

<sup>1194</sup> Browning et al., 115-120.

true neighbor love of which the Bible commands requires that this love will be sustained without condition or “defectability” from its sustenance. Outka notes that injunctions to love, and specifically to love with agapic tenor, is often analytically imprecise, a sentiment I have echoed.<sup>1195</sup> According to a reviewer of Outka’s *Agape*, “Love, therefore, is taken to be regard [... and stands as] the central feature of agape’s normative content.”<sup>1196</sup> Outka, shaping the lexicon in his preferred direction, indicated that the term “equal regard” was synonymous in his mind with agape.<sup>1197</sup> The reviewer notes that most interpretations of love, particularly that of Reinhold Niebuhr, does not necessarily take into account and tend to the other’s particular needs, but rather are about the effect on the lover, not the loved.<sup>1198</sup> Outka argues that this regard works as a fundamental, self-regulating, fully generative and life-giving system because special relations require agapic love which is reciprocally given, even if it is unconditional.<sup>1199</sup> It has an implicit assumption that truest regard involves responding to the long-view of a person’s life and moral trajectory, not just the moment.

Given the denominational divide on interpretation, it is no surprise that Swedish Lutheran Anders Nygren, wrote in his 1935 contribution to the debate, *Agape and Eros*, that agape and eros are distinct and unrelated forms of love, in which the first is divine, spontaneous, altruistic, and the second a matter of desire, of that which one wants and does not have. Thus eros is human and agape divine and never shall the two cross because of the significant difference between the Created and the Creator.<sup>1200</sup> Outka does not draw such a profound distinction between divine and human, a presumption that predefines Nygren’s conclusions on the natures of love.

Feminists Valerie Saiving and Judith Plaskow weighed into the discussion as well arguing that such distinction between God and man because of sin, as defined by men, was false to their experience and unhelpful. Saiving stated in the 1960s, that from a female perspective, one must argue against Reinhold Niebuhr’s assertion that pride was the primary factor

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<sup>1195</sup> Gene H. Outka, *Agape: an Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 257-258.

<sup>1196</sup> Toner, 462.

<sup>1197</sup> Outka, 13, cited by Toner, 462.

<sup>1198</sup> Toner, 463.

<sup>1199</sup> Outka, 268, cited by Toner, 464.

<sup>1200</sup> See Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros: A Study of the Christian Idea of Love* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1935); John A. T. Robinson, “Agape and Eros,” *Theology* 48, no. 299 (May 1945): 98–104. doi:10.1177/0040571X4504829902.

preventing proper love, at least as it pertained as a universal element applicable to all humans. She redirected the discussion to focus on what influenced and defined love was social constructed and based on the differences in the situation at hand relative to any other situation, thus striking down a universalistic definition of the content of sin.<sup>1201</sup> Plaskow, a generation later, published her revised dissertation in 1975 under the title of *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* echoed Saiving's commentary on Niebuhr, to say that a focus on self-sacrifice commonly meant that women developed no core sense of self at all. This was seen as problematic to her and other feminists.<sup>1202</sup> Thelathia Nikki Young and others would continue to offer critiques of Niebuhrian thought and the Protestantism behind it in recent decades.<sup>1203</sup>

#### *Cultural preferences of egalitarianism or hierarchy*

In addition to pointing to this long debate, the team of co-authors of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* also identifies the regulating influence of the Grecian household codes upon the development of early Christianity at the hand of Paul which runs throughout much of the New Testament.<sup>1204</sup> These interpretations are still commonly in use today, especially in the American South where antebellum notions of aristocracy flourished because of the large paterfamilias structure of plantation life. In more urban places of the country, both in the past, and I argue today, education to participate in a modern economy encourages a cultural approach which values a flatter, more egalitarian social structure.<sup>1205</sup> The team argues that the gravitational weight of the Grecian household codes upon Christianity today is more cultural than theological, in that the "earliest days of the Jesus movement contained an ethos of genuine

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<sup>1201</sup> See Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *The Journal of Religion* 40 (April 1960): 100-112.

<sup>1202</sup> See Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980).

<sup>1203</sup> See Thelathia Nikki Young, "Queering 'The Human Situation,'" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 1: 126-131; also Jodie L. Lyon, "Pride and the Symptoms of Sin," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28.1: 96-102.

<sup>1204</sup> Anderson et al., 2; Scheib, 98.

<sup>1205</sup> Browning et al., 75-95.

egalitarianism.”<sup>1206</sup> Yet preferences for which type of love is in fashion, or viewed as more Christian at any one time can oscillate.

Regarding what she sees as a more recent preference for agape, ethicist Darlene Fozard Weaver notes, “the erotic tenor of classical and medieval accounts of the divine-human relation shifted in the Reformation to an emphasis on God’s agape and subsequently, to agape as the norm for Christian life.”<sup>1207</sup> This has often caused the evacuation of consideration of the self in the right ordering of love toward considering self-sacrifice as the cornerstone Christian ethic.<sup>1208</sup> Yet this contemporary preference is far from universal among ethicists. Timothy Sedgewick calls love as intuition, which he sees as prevalent in moralistic accounts of ethics, and love as agape, reductionist in comparison to a fuller notion of the ways in which love can be seen as generative and regarding.<sup>1209</sup> In reality, love, whatever it is, should be defined by that which goes beyond and leads to wholeness, unity, and flourishing.

### *Louis Janssens’ effect upon Browning*

As many ethicists who come to a care-oriented angle on ethics, while deeply influenced by American Protestant ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr in his training, Browning attributes his ability to move away from a Niebuhrian interpretation of self-sacrifice as the means to love thanks to Roman Catholic moral theologian Louis Janssens who, in Browning’s mind, fixes major problems in the concept of Christian love by deciding that agape as un-preferential must entail the self or else it is in fact preferential to that which is not the self. Thus regard need not be centered in self-sacrifice in order to secure avoidance of preference.<sup>1210</sup> Reading Janssens also opened Browning up to the idea of *caritas*, of Christian love and charity toward human kind, as a possible go-between between divine and human love, altruism and self-interest.<sup>1211</sup> This allowed him to find a strong tradition of how love by the Christian, and bolstered by a relationship with the divine, could be more than simply human love, and something that began to approximate the

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<sup>1206</sup> Browning et al., 134.

<sup>1207</sup> Weaver, 5.

<sup>1208</sup> Weaver, 5.

<sup>1209</sup> Timothy F. Sedgewick, *Sacramental Ethics: Paschal Identity and the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 22.

<sup>1210</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 158.

<sup>1211</sup> “Caritas,” Google Dictionary definition, accessed June 15, 2019.

altruistic, extravagant outpouring of love being more than just regard, but aiding in the imagination of all of what it might mean to further somebody through love and care.

While Niebuhr believes that Christian anthropology involves an “essential unity” of vitality and form, he nonetheless believes that humanity’s freedom opens the door to original sin, which further down the line leads to the development of an inordinate amount of self-regard in persons as a basic starting point for all human action and valuing.<sup>1212</sup> Yet there are plenty of Christian and therapeutic anthropologies that believe that the self is fundamentally a social self and that self-transcendence occurs in this larger web of relationality such that the self does not need to be denied or abnegated to transcend and become something deeper and larger than it was before.<sup>1213</sup> This is the anthropological perspective Browning fundamentally believes in, and which feminists share. The question then becomes how to engage in universal regard that has particular content and particular obligation, nonetheless, to special relationships such as intimate ones.<sup>1214</sup>

Following Janssens, Browning explicates that the impartiality of agape requires regard for both oneself and the other, and that it is mutuality.<sup>1215</sup> The reasons for valuing self and others is that everyone, by virtue of being a human being, has ethical responsibility and value. Equal regard as a concept finds common ground, so to speak, as *Culture Wars* co-author Bonnie Miller-McLemore writes at a later date, in that it “includes but subordinates moments of sacrifice” and also relativizes the good of families and human relationships to the ultimate good of love of and life in communion with God.<sup>1216</sup> This it bridges the divide between definitions of love-as-sacrifice and love-as -regard. In making his argument for where sacrifice fits into an impartial agape of regard, Browning highlights sacrificial love theorist Timothy Jackson, who asserts that Christian love from a strong agape position requires an openness to self-sacrifice, yet

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<sup>1212</sup> Don Browning, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies: A Critical Conversation in the Theology of Culture*, first edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 24-25.

<sup>1213</sup> Browning, *Religious Thought*, 216.

<sup>1214</sup> Christina Gschwandtner, “Ethics, Eros, or Caritas? Levinas and Marion on Individuation of the Other,” *Philosophy Today* 49, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 70-72, doi: 10.5840/philtoday200549165.

<sup>1215</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 159.

<sup>1216</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Sloppy Mutuality: Just Love for Children and Adults,” *Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith, and Just Love*, edited by Edward Foley (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 132; Browning et al., 302.

this openness itself does not demand constant, steady sacrifice.<sup>1217</sup> Jackson describes this position as a “priority of love,” in which strong agapē is a “supernaturally granted” capacity for love given to humans.<sup>1218</sup> He sees self-love as compatible with agape, but urges that the harmonious version of self-love requires self-transcendence, rather than self-realization with prioritizes self-gain without consideration of the other.<sup>1219</sup> I do not disagree with Jackson on the importance that the self which is embraced and loved be one which is transcendent in that it is ever becoming and growing, yet I think such obsession with “other” focus in Christian ethics as Jackson represents dismisses a theological anthropology that sees self as inextricably interdependent with other and thus creates a straw man out of the degree to which people pursue self-realization versus feeling they must pursue self-reliance, which is an entirely different objective. Self-reliance out of a sense of survival is a different starting place than a narcissistic self-actualizer who makes more of an agential, privileged choice not to concern himself with the other.

Browning notes that as much as mutuality is inherent to equal regard, Janssens still thinks that mutuality slides into a “calculating reciprocity” which ends up leaving aside obligations to love beyond measure and beyond one’s deserving of love.<sup>1220</sup> While acknowledging this as a potential problem by bringing it up without answer, Browning seems to leave dwelling on this possibility of sliding into “calculating reciprocity” in our behavior aside in order to focus on asserting the power of the visional level of equal regard. Browning sees the mutuality of equal regard as an evolving ethic, which, similar to other lines of thought, sees these details of adjudicating moments of justice, self-regard, and transitory sacrifice, as still contributing to the trajectory of love without variance.

*Equal Regard as a strenuous ethic*

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<sup>1217</sup> Timothy P. Jackson, *The Priority of Love: Christian Charity and Social Justice* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003), xiv-10, cited by Browning, *Christian Ethics and the Moral Psychologies*, 119; Browning also notes that Jackson’s other significant work on the subject is *Love Disconsolated: Meditations on Christian Charity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>1218</sup> Jackson, *Priority*, 117.

<sup>1219</sup> Jackson, *Priority*, 117.

<sup>1220</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 159.

Miller-McLemore comments that mutuality is itself a “strenuous ethic.”<sup>1221</sup> She says so in the face of detractors who scoff at mutuality as a possibly lower-grade love because it does not immediately and clearly orient to God. Yet, such an ethic of mutuality is strenuous, for to be in relationship is to be engaged in strain and complexity. Miller-McLemore draws on social ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison who often had male mentors tell her to avoid concerning herself with notions of mutuality because of its connotations of lesser love.<sup>1222</sup> Harrison writes:

I shudder to think how many times during my years of theological study I came upon a warning from a writer of Christian ethics not to confuse real, Christian love with ‘mere mutuality.’ One senses that persons who can think this way have yet to experience the power of love as the real pleasure of mutual vulnerability, the experience of truly being cared for or of actively caring for another. Mutual love, I submit, is love in its deepest radicality. It is so radical that many of us have not yet learned to bear it. To experience it, we must be open, we must be capable of giving and receiving. The tragedy is that a masculinist reified Christianity cannot help us learn to be such lovers.<sup>1223</sup>

Luckily those unwilling to be “imprisoned by their own upbringing” of masculine Christianity, as ethicist Owen Flanagan puts it, can see much of ethical import in relational, rather than disinterested, love. In some ways, the disinterested love is safer and less radical, as it is always undercut by having no grounding in self since the self is denied and evacuated in such non-preferential love.

If one does not understand relationships, however, one might miss how this is high-bar call to action. As couples’ counselor Michael D. Reiter notes, to weather the storms of a relationship in a successful and satisfactory way, people must have a particular understanding of couples’ relationships in general. This involves accepting that relationships are made up of both stability and growth/change, merging of perspectives, and a process of mutual influence.<sup>1224</sup> As such, Miller-McLemore maintains, part of the strenuousness of equal regard is that it “does not appear overnight. It requires a complex process of ‘intersubjective communication and mutual

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<sup>1221</sup> Miller-McLemore, “Sloppy Mutuality,” 132.

<sup>1222</sup> Personal knowledge of author, class conversations with Miller-McLemore.

<sup>1223</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love: Christian Ethics for Women and Other Strangers,” reprinted in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* by Beverly Wildung Harrison, edited by Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 18.

<sup>1224</sup> Michael D. Reiter, “Couples Counseling” in *Behavioral, Humanistic-Existential, and Psychodynamic Approaches to Couples Counseling*, edited by Michael D. Reiter and Ronald J. Chenail (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3.

decision' about its concrete enactment in the lives of those involved.”<sup>1225</sup> As such, a relationship of equal regard can only be pursued in a particular context in which rules, roles, processes, vision, obligation, and human tendencies and needs are put forward in dialogue.

It has been the goal of the second half of this dissertation to provide some theoretical tools on how to conceive of identity, engage in therapeutic listening with one's self and an intimate partner, and disrupt cultural patterns and processes that discourage these and other processes of reflexivity. Yet before we turn to the final chapter, it is worthwhile to explore how equal regard was most practically put forth by Browning and his co-authors, and how several feminist theologians and ethicists might take the conversation even further regarding the interdependence—and equality—of love and justice in a feminist interpretation of equal regard.

### **The place of equal regard in the 1990s' focus on the family**

The best investigation of the intersection of love and justice as applied dialogically to the American family to date is practical theologian Don Browning's Religion, Family and Culture project, which culminated in a book *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* in 1997. Overall, the project provided a setting to highlight Browning's notion, long in development in his own writings, that regardless of the circumstance, a Christian ethic was one of equal regard. This project drew together a five-person team led by Browning and comprised of scholars who had studied with him. As is suggested by the title, the time of the book's publication was one of tense debate about the needs of American families in an increasingly post-industrial era of two-income households and the role the family could and should play in providing stability and nurture for raising children.<sup>1226</sup> As such, while the book explains myriad approaches to the family from the integrity of particular viewpoints, the four co-authors also collectively suggested a particular way to look at the family which they labeled a move of “strategic practical theology.”<sup>1227</sup>

The book did many things which made it both an artifact of its time as well as exemplary as a model for practical theological investigation. It investigated notions of mutuality, and

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<sup>1225</sup> Miller-McLemore, “Sloppy Mutuality,” 132.

<sup>1226</sup> Suzanne Leonard, *Wife, Inc.: The Business of Marriage in the Twenty-first Century* (New York University Press, 2018), 10.

<sup>1227</sup> Don S. Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Byrnolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, second edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 339.



published survey information about the proportion of American Christians who valued mutuality as the primary model of love in comparison to models of either self-sacrifice or self-fulfillment.<sup>1228</sup> In brief, the team of authors concluded that “Americans are struggling to find a language of mutuality,” a struggle I see as continuing today in much the same manner as before.<sup>1229</sup> In terms of practical theology, the research team of *From Culture Wars to Common Ground* modeled a process of engaging the family with multi-dimension, holistic analysis which takes history, biology, culture, religious tradition, and social science knowledge into account.

As a product of its time, it encapsulated prevalent concerns about how material conditions and gender role changes in which both women and men were likely to engage in paid work would change the structure, capability, and normative ideals of the American family. The team of researchers saw themselves as “finding common ground” between warring cultural views at the time of the rise of the Moral Majority as a particular Christian evangelical political movement that was effective in shaping for the American public what it meant to be “family.” It is worth noting, that despite the hold of conservative groups on the American imagination in the 1980s, the decade in which Millennials began to be born, historian Susan Ridgley found that any men and women who followed the teachings of Focus on the Family were unable to “articulate anything uniquely Christian about supportive and engaged relationships.”<sup>1230</sup> Ridgely noted, that if anything, her respondents indicated that Christians had a difference in morals in terms of being against homosexuality, of refraining from watching R-rated movies, and stressing the importance of nurture, modeling, and exposure in raising healthy, happy children.<sup>1231</sup>

In contrast, other historians of religion, family, and gender such as Seth Dowland have stated that in conservative Christian movements of the 1980s and 1990s ideas of bifurcated

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<sup>1228</sup> Browning et al., 19: at the time of the survey, 55% of respondents believed that mutuality as a model of love was reflective of their beliefs in what kind of love produced a good marriage. 38% listed self-sacrifice, while 5% listed self-fulfillment. The survey also revealed that over the course of one generation, these respondents became much more interested in mutuality as a dominant model, whereas men of a previous generation had a more three way split among the models and women of the previous generation were much more likely to believe self-sacrifice was the best model for a good marriage.

<sup>1229</sup> Browning et al., 20, 21.

<sup>1230</sup> Susan B. Ridgley, *Practicing what the Doctor Preached: At Home with Focus on the Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 53.

<sup>1231</sup> Ridgley, 53; Ridgely crucially noted that in general, American families who claimed to follow Focus on the Family nonetheless did not follow rigid gender rules as Dobson put them out, mostly defining a God-ruled family to be one in which men and women worked as a team to parent and run their household, even if women were considered helpmates, throughout Chapter Two, “Father, Mother, Child: The Foundational Trinity,” 52-91.

gender roles in the family clearly articulated and adhered to as part of what it meant to belong. Dowland writes, “Such an ideal resonated with evangelicals, as it spoke to two key beliefs: gender roles are God-given destinies, and lines of authority matter. In a rapidly fragmenting culture, evangelicals gravitated to the family values ideal and made it the most potent force in late-twentieth century American politics.”<sup>1232</sup> He emphasizes that such lines of authority are also God-given, and echo the rightly ordered lines of authority that come down from the time of creation. These lines of responsibility and jurisdiction are considered to be the only way society can function properly; if they are disregarded then society will fall apart.<sup>1233</sup>

After conducting their research, the authors of *Culture Wars* tried to bridge liberal and conservative Christian concerns to articulate the ideal postindustrial family as one of a “committed, intact, equal regard, public-private family.”<sup>1234</sup> The team identified these characteristics as crucial to the family, advocating that all of these elements were necessary to provide both connection and flexibility. The “committed” and “intact” elements allowed the powers of grace and conversion to do their work over time within and between people in order for them to grow in loving character toward each other.<sup>1235</sup> As outlined, it involved a certain level of interdependent connection across the spheres of domestic life as both private and public. Toward the actualization of a healthy and generative postindustrial family, the *Culture Wars* research team assessed that such a situational change and ideal “will need new preparations, new skills, new religious and communal supports, and a new theory of authority.”<sup>1236</sup> The multi-dimensional, multi-perspective approach to outlining these supports nonetheless remained highly an artifact of its time, I argue, in that it remained predisposed, by simple absence of any conversation to the contrary, to favor certain visions of love rather than putting a new vision of gender and gender-role fluidity in full conversation with its other assumptions, such as the nature and purpose of love, human relationship, and human need.

On the face of it, within the cultural-historical framework of *Culture Wars*, the notion of equal regard is viewed as advocating for gender egalitarianism in the family. This is how Roman

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<sup>1232</sup> Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 9-10.

<sup>1233</sup> Dowland, 10.

<sup>1234</sup> Browning et al., 2.

<sup>1235</sup> Browning et al., 71.

<sup>1236</sup> Browning et al., 1.

Catholic ethicist Julie Hanlon Rubio interprets it. Rubio notes that equal regard's inclusion in a book written in the 1990s reflected movement in Christian theology toward greater egalitarianism in general. She writes that Browning's project upheld the notion that "the Christian vision both embraces and challenges the contemporary emphasis on egalitarianism," and that popular belief in this notion is growing.<sup>1237</sup> As Rubio gives nod to, the team recognized that the ethical aspiration of equal regard is not always present in history, but serves as the goal and plumb line of Christian ethical reasoning nonetheless.<sup>1238</sup>

### **SECTION THREE: ENVISIONING LOVE AND JUSTICE AS INTERPERSONAL AND INTERDEPENDENT**

In this last chapter section, overall, I advance a long line of feminist critique of sacrifice as ethically and theologically problematic and add to such a critique by including other scholars of religion and Millennial views on sacrifice in intimate relationship as well.<sup>1239</sup> I counter the pro-sacrifice love ethicists, and even some feminists, in arguing that it is only through the self, interpersonally understood, that we can claim any sure ethical ground and measure to our love. I review in greater detail here the Christian traditional preference to view sacrifice as necessary for self-transformation by way of self-transcendence and how this idea obfuscates clarity on ideas of what actually transforms, transcends, and delivers love. I conclude by advocating for ideals which would offer alternatives to myopic interpretations of agapic love, such as interdependent, radical self-love, and Biblical promises of flourishing in this life.

#### **Starting with self, not sacrifice**

The typical Christian interpretation of the role of self in love, developed by men, requires that the self must be subsumed, if not evacuated or emptied in order for true love to occur. This emptying, along this line of thought, equivocates to a sacrifice of the self. Yet, drawing on the work of religious scholar David Weddle, I argue that to privilege sacrifice as a path to

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<sup>1237</sup> Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Hope for the Common Good: Mediating the Personal and the Political in a Divided Church* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 91.

<sup>1238</sup> Browning et al., 3.

<sup>1239</sup> It is worthwhile justice issue to rehearse that calls to sacrifice often come from a place and privilege and pride which some of us have to lesser degree because of social location, and that these same calls in actuality place a disproportionate burden on some relative to others; also in Sullivan-Dunbar, 6;

transcendence through self-denial cultivates an intolerance of the messiness of ethical adjudication; it instead offers a shortcut to transcendence through self-flagellation.

This is not to say that there is not a place for putting others before the self *in the least*, but to consider this putting others first—rather than as self-sacrifice—as an issue of interpersonal accommodation, negotiation, and justice.<sup>1240</sup> In this interpersonal perspective, the self is aided via incurring long term pleasure of the other and the relationship by putting the other first in certain circumstances, rather than held in tension as having interests which are mutually exclusive and against that of the other.<sup>1241</sup> This vision of greater interpersonal flourishing involves many things, among which are a closer examination of sacrifice, justice, and self-love through religious and interpersonal lenses.

Weddle particularly argues that sacrifice entails a violence of intimacy.<sup>1242</sup> In order to draw closer to the divine through transcendence of the natural, one must get beyond nature by giving nature up.<sup>1243</sup> In his recent survey of sacrifice in the Abrahamic religions, Weddle calls the common theme of demanding self-sacrifice the way in which “religions signify the immense value of their benefits and the daunting difference between ordinary existence and life lived in relation to transcendent reality.”<sup>1244</sup> The deepest, and therefore best costs in sacrifice are that to the self.<sup>1245</sup> It is a way, as philosopher of surrealism Georges Bataille puts it, to depart from everyday economics of value by busting through all notions of convention.<sup>1246</sup> Weddle describes this as imaginative and creative, and therefore ethically dangerous.<sup>1247</sup> He sees sacrifice as an

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<sup>1240</sup> There is much to say about religious people’s typically avoidant relationship to power which I do not have space to address here.

<sup>1241</sup> My interpersonal vision involves religious people coming to better comfort and facility with ideas of power, self-interest, and conflict, in order to have some of the tools necessary for ethical evaluation of the right place of accommodation and compromise toward the goal of reasonable interpersonal sacrifice. The *Culture Wars* team called for an analysis of power relations and other factors in order to discover resistances and obstacles to equal regard that could be overcome with skill and attention, in Browning et al., 2. As part of this assessment of what else might be needed to bolster enactment of equal regard in everyday family relationship, the team criticized therapeutic lenses and strategies as having only “a limited but crucial role to play,” because the authors believed they encouraged people into only concerning themselves with a narrow realm of existence, in Browning et al., 191-206.

<sup>1242</sup> David Weddle, *Sacrifice in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), ix.

<sup>1243</sup> Weddle, xi, 7.

<sup>1244</sup> Weddle, 3.

<sup>1245</sup> Weddle, 21.

<sup>1246</sup> Weddle, 40.

<sup>1247</sup> Weddle, 7.

age-old way to deal with anxiety about the future,<sup>1248</sup> which is a similar situation as the ones young adults are experiencing now. As I have also just argued, Weddle interprets religious sacrifice as not just entailing giving up natural reality, but actively denigrating it in the effort to get away from it.<sup>1249</sup>

### *Millennials and the place of sacrifice in love*

In terms of relationships, psychologist and researcher of emerging adults Varda Konstam emphasizes that relational commitment cannot be sustained long-term without sacrifice.<sup>1250</sup> Thus, sacrifice is considered a key element of love. While those who are highly committed to their interpersonal relationship are more likely to sacrifice for each other, most Millennials still see sacrifice as derivative of love, and a personal choice of commitment which may or may not be essential to the sustenance of that commitment.<sup>1251</sup> In the context of her work, she draws on A. Kogan and colleagues to define sacrifice as entailing “actions in which an individual forgoes his or her immediate self-interest to promote the well-being of a partner or a relationship.”<sup>1252</sup> She categorizes sacrifices having different depths and frequencies to them such as major sacrifices,<sup>1253</sup> which none of the young adults in her study had felt they had done yet in their lives, and the daily, as well as active and passive qualities. Konstam describes active sacrifice as taking an action that otherwise would be considered undesirable, whereas passive is more about giving up a preference for the sake of another.<sup>1254</sup>

While Konstam acknowledges that feminists have been critical of the concept of sacrifice because, especially among women, it can lead to depression, relationship co-dependency, and

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<sup>1248</sup> Weddle, 209; Christian ethicist Sam Wells acknowledges that the church writ large has anxiety about the future. Following how I started this chapter, Wells suggests that the best way for religious groups to deal with this anxiety is to use processes of improvisation to “become a community of trust in order that it may faithfully encounter the unknown of the future without fear.” This is a trust that entails self, other, and God, Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>1249</sup> Weddle, 11.

<sup>1250</sup> Varda Konstam, *The Romantic Lives of Emerging Adults: Moving from I to We* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 74.

<sup>1251</sup> Konstam, 69, 70.

<sup>1252</sup> A. Kogan, E.A. Impett, C. Oveis, B. Hui, A.M. Gordon, D. Keltner, “When Giving Feels Good: the Intrinsic Benefits of Sacrifice in Romantic Relationships for the Communally Motivated,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 12 (2010): 1918-1924, cited in Konstam, 70.

<sup>1253</sup> Konstam, 80.

<sup>1254</sup> Konstam, 70-71.

dissatisfaction, she takes the tact to exclude acts that are genuinely self-harmful from what she defines as the scope of sacrifice.<sup>1255</sup> Leaning on Weddle, however, I would say that such an exclusion of self-harm from the scope of what can rightly be considered sacrifice may not be a move that religious persons seeking a transcendence above the self might necessarily agree with. There is significant Christian tradition of dying to, emptying, or shaping the self, which, while not all the same level of severity, do manipulate and could be argued as causing harm to the self for the sake of a higher purpose in closeness to God. Thus, religious sacrifice might very well entail personal harm as the deepest, and therefore best of sacrifices. Yet I do agree with the ultimate import of her message that “sacrifice is a subjective experience; only the doer knows the cost.”<sup>1256</sup> This subjective perception means that if the person has developed a communal couple orientation, the same sacrifices would no longer be perceived as a loss or as detrimental to self-interest.<sup>1257</sup> Konstam notes that interpersonally, sacrifice also serves as a self-reinforcing element of the positive investment in the relationship. This is particularly true if the relationship is foreseen as long-term since cycles of reciprocity will have time to rotate between benefits and burdens to each partner.<sup>1258</sup> However, it is the times in which sacrifice is incurred yet in the end not considered worthwhile by the giver that the relationship crumbles rather than solidifies.

Konstam crucially notes that the young adults in her study saw a sufficiently developed self as well as learned interpersonal engagement were key to developing a mature and fulfilling relationship to sacrifice, a path which they described as experimental.<sup>1259</sup> As something learned through experience, young adults did not see sacrifice as a cerebral concept one could engage in without personal experience.<sup>1260</sup> She had specifically asked about their relationship to sacrifice and its change over time, as well as how they viewed it in terms of obligation or volition.<sup>1261</sup>

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<sup>1255</sup> Konstam, 71; One such recent critic is Jill Filipovic, who devotes a chapter to the ways in which women today are still defined by and how they sacrifice, such as in the continued prevalence of surname change upon marriage, the expected years of pain and bodily discomfort after giving birth, the time spent on physical appearance that men do not have to spend in order to be considered attractive, in *The H-Spot: The Feminist Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Nation Books, 2017), 45-66.

<sup>1256</sup> Konstam, 71, 329.

<sup>1257</sup> Konstam, 26.

<sup>1258</sup> Konstam, 73.

<sup>1259</sup> Konstam, 74, 86.

<sup>1260</sup> Konstam, 328.

<sup>1261</sup> Konstam, 75.

Most replied that sacrifice should be mainly volitional, because it needed to be volitional in order to be meaningful and agential. Only a small minority of her respondents outright considered sacrifice to be an obligation of an interpersonal relationship.<sup>1262</sup> Parity in sacrifice was considered extremely important to 6 out of 29 respondents, or about 20%.<sup>1263</sup> Most contemporary young adults felt that learning about their personal relationship to sacrifice was a worthwhile endeavor that enabled them to learn about what makes a relationship work, more about themselves, and how to set boundaries.<sup>1264</sup>

Konstam's young adult respondents refutes the necessity of sacrifice as an inherent moral obligation in personal or loving relationships.<sup>1265</sup> While many might think that this is because self-fulfillment motivates the generation, her research indicated that self-actualization through relationship only serves as a driving motivation for some Emerging Adults. Thus, self-actualization, while present, is not the dominant factor it is often perceived to be. Instead, most young adults have a broader view of why and for what reasons one becomes involved in a committed relationship.<sup>1266</sup> These reasons share stock more equitable as drivers for committed intimacy, rather than any one particular motivator or ideal.

Yet Konstam assessed that beyond this notion that both self and sacrifice are among a pantheon of reasons for committed relationship, the role of self-sacrifice in relationships with *concomitant* high values of self-actualization were not known. What did exist on the subject she deemed inconclusive, and thus projections a matter of some debate.<sup>1267</sup> She stated that sacrifice as a concept is under-researched and theorized.<sup>1268</sup> In the final pages of her book, Konstam encourages researchers to understand that while intimate relationships have always been risky, the amount of risk Emerging Adults feel in general because of their position in a neoliberal economy causes a "perfect storm" of screening relationships with extra care.<sup>1269</sup> I would say that they are critically evaluating what partnership adds to their "risk portfolio" or "profile," as the

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<sup>1262</sup> Konstam, 77.

<sup>1263</sup> Konstam, 79.

<sup>1264</sup> Konstam, 82, 81.

<sup>1265</sup> Konstam, 7.

<sup>1266</sup> Konstam, 89.

<sup>1267</sup> Konstam, 75.

<sup>1268</sup> Konstam, 330.

<sup>1269</sup> Konstam, 331, 337.

amount of risk one feels and how this factors into evaluation of potential partners is a complex compilation of interactions.

As I turn to end this chapter by detailing my particular suggestions for rethinking sacrifice's role in a love ethic as appropriate only at certain points toward the goal of mutuality, I must make a particular note of how risk avoidance can result in Emerging Adults putting themselves more at risk. By keeping their intimate relationships informal but close, for instance, they can deny themselves the community affirmation and support of their relationship that a more formal codification of the relationship might entail. Or, in the case of cohabitation without legal agreement of the union, property and assets might come into perilous dispute in the event of the dissolution of the relationship (or, they might not, in a manner less so than in traditional marriage). This openness to greater potential risk through practices of informality is in part because young adults do not engage the skills of self-discernment, communication, and negotiation toward making informality work for them rather than unwittingly against them.

While a lack of any particularly worn pathway for relationship type or discernment of this type, Konstam and others note that it is of particular interest that Defining the Relationship talks (DTRs), are considered risky moments of clarification, in that when the relationship becomes more concrete through definition, the parties involved may become aware of asymmetry or be asked to change. While this clarification in this day and age is particularly essential, it is a deep irony that Emerging Adults are inclined to avoid such conversations out of a sense of risk avoidance, usually to their detriment.<sup>1270</sup> I imagine that young adults avoid conversations which clarify the terms of the relationship they are in because they do not have a clear idea of how to think through such interpersonal discernment and negotiation. This is partially based in a general cultural milieu that is unclear as to the ethical place of justice and self-regard in relationships of love and affection.

### **The feminist relationship of justice and love**

Feminist Christian ethicist Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar argues in her book *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics* that a Christian love ethic that adequately incorporates

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<sup>1270</sup> Konstam, 332.



dependency must be one in which love is interdependent with justice.<sup>1271</sup> Thus, in this final section of the chapter, I explore what it means for love to be interdependent with justice, and notions of self as interdependent with notions of the other. Much of this commentary is offered as correctives to longstanding masculine interpretations of Christian teachings, particularly that of the aforementioned Reinhold Niebuhr and also Saint Augustine.

In the clearest definition of justice I have read, although it is likely too simplistic compared to the robustness of equal regard, Kristina LaCelle-Peterson describes justice as valuing each person's contribution equally.<sup>1272</sup> Revising ethical theories of love for where they place justice, Sullivan-Dunbar adumbrates that for some Christian ethicists, justice seeks its own while love seeks the other, which is by this definition, not its own.<sup>1273</sup> Others avoid seeing justice as an issue of personal relationships by considering justice as an issue of individual persons, and not of units.<sup>1274</sup>

### *Practical interdependence of love and justice*

The most practically oriented, feminist ethicist Pauline Keingeld argues that love and justice are independent, particularly so in the most intimate of relationships. She brings questions of love and justice and the commonality of compartmentalizing them as Niebuhr and others have done to bear in suggesting a "cultural reconceptualization of marriage itself as not merely a relationship of love, but as also a commitment to interpersonal justice."<sup>1275</sup> She notes as others do that questions of justice are taken out of the equation under the justification that such a relationship of love should have no problem with care and affection.<sup>1276</sup> Sardonicly she quips, "Few people get married with the explicit intention to distribute burdens and benefits justly, to

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<sup>1271</sup> Sullivan-Dunbar, 4.

<sup>1272</sup> Kristina LaCelle-Peterson, *Liberating Tradition: Women's Identity and Vocation in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 134.

<sup>1273</sup> Sullivan-Dunbar, 3.

<sup>1274</sup> Sullivan-Dunbar, 3-4; Wadell comments in regard to this common criticism that, "Justice is relevant to every relationship, to every situation and circumstance of life, because no setting exists in which we do not have to take into account our responsibilities to others," *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, third edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 240.

<sup>1275</sup> Pauline Keingeld, "Just Love? Marriage and the Question of Justice," *Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith, and Just Love*, edited by Edward Foley (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 23.

<sup>1276</sup> Keingeld, 25.

respect each other's bodily integrity, to establish fair procedures for conflict resolution."<sup>1277</sup> Yet she encourages people to do so, stemming from a belief that failing to see things as issues of justice make it hard to see them accurately, because one feels one does not need to see or evaluate like one would naturally do with other types of things.<sup>1278</sup> While treating someone with equality and equity should be natural outcome of regard for one's partner, this is not always the case without clear parameters, and involvement of both partners at all levels of mutuality.<sup>1279</sup> Keingeld notes that justice involves seeing each other as free and interdependent equals, rather than seeing a level of fusion which complicates the free movement of the parts of the whole.<sup>1280</sup>

### *Sacrifice opposed to existence*

Echoing what Weddle stated earlier from a political neutral point of view, in Sullivan-Dunbar's chapter reviewing the work of a multitude of sacrificial love thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, Anders Nygren, Timothy Jackson, she concludes that they all commonly "treat sacrifice not as the pervasive moral reality that it is, but as an ideal sharply opposed to the realities of our daily, embodied existence."<sup>1281</sup> She goes on to argue that this sacrificial love ethic declares all natural processes of embodiment to be morally bereft, even though they are the exact opposite.

Thus, according to their masculine line of thinking, anything physical or natural is meant to be overcome by cultivating the Christian will to enact an idealized altruism that necessarily loves the distant other more than the embodied self. I agree with her that the sacrificial love tradition is problematic as it stands, as it "must engage nature in a more complex way than simply idealizing transcendence of struggle and competition and must incorporate a notion of justice that goes beyond Niebuhr's balance of competing interests."<sup>1282</sup> There are historical Christian foundations which can be leveraged to get out of this self-denying quicksand, Sullivan-

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<sup>1277</sup> Keingeld, 23.

<sup>1278</sup> Keingeld, 27.

<sup>1279</sup> Keingeld, 33.

<sup>1280</sup> Keingeld, 31.

<sup>1281</sup> Sullivan-Dunbar, 23.

<sup>1282</sup> Sullivan-Dunbar, 23.

Dunbar points out, such as the Thomistic tradition that allows us to love others for their own sakes as well as enhance the goodness of our own lives.<sup>1283</sup>

*Marandiuc on Augustine's lack of worry about instrumentalism*

Following this line but engaged in discussion with and over a different Christian forefather, theological ethicist Natalia Marandiuc, author of *The Goodness of Home*, argues that Christian tradition often misinterprets Augustine, and in doing so, skews the original balance of his concerns. It is no secret that there are distinct and contradictory camps to how Augustine has been interpreted over the centuries, yet Marandiuc's use of him is careful about addressing what Augustine values as a Christian, and why. She cedes that Augustine considered human attachment to transient things such as other human beings dangerous because only God is permanent.<sup>1284</sup> Yet she emphasizes that what is often left aside in Augustine's teachings is that Augustine would not have wanted Christians to reject human beings. According to her interpretation of Augustine, doing so rejects the very thing by which we reach God, which is our creatureliness. She goes as far as to politely laugh at the foolishness of the notion, retorting that "we are not teleported, so to speak, into union with God," but rather Christians have to get there through living an earthly existence of transforming and deepening ourselves through love.<sup>1285</sup>

Alluding to the title of her book, Marandiuc writes that in Christian understanding people are not a Christian's ultimate home place. Rather, we are all in exile from heaven and travel back there through the experience of love and affection.<sup>1286</sup> She said that Augustine imagined there to be two main types of love: The first, *frui* love – love of an object or subject for its own sake and the second, *uti* love—love as a means to an end.<sup>1287</sup> While it was theologically and soteriologically problematic if humans placed love of humans as their ultimate end, according to

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<sup>1283</sup> Sullivan-Dunbar, 25; As Browning notes in *Fundamental*, what gets to be the issue in the case of the well-off suburban church taking care of its self is the imbalance of claiming more for our own needs than others, 166.

<sup>1284</sup> Natalia Marandiuc, *The Goodness of Home: Human and Divine Love and the Making of the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 7, 8; Sullivan-Dunbar puts forth Kathryn Tanner's idea, which runs throughout much of Tanner's work, of "non-contrastive transcendence" in which God's permanence and otherness means that to value the earthly and mundane is not to devalue God, for the goods in comparison are categorically incomparable, in Sullivan-Dunbar, 26, 229.

<sup>1285</sup> Marandiuc, 8.

<sup>1286</sup> Marandiuc, 8.

<sup>1287</sup> Marandiuc, 9.

Augustine it was not to be worried about because it was ultimately impossible. The finitude of creation meant it could not fulfill that depth of expectation which divine love and divine reception could out of its infinitude.<sup>1288</sup>

Marandiuc believes that Augustine is clear, if not nuanced in his stance. Yet she notes that in contemporary times treating human beings instrumentally has “struck an ethical nerve in post- and neo-Kantian imaginations” which causes such persons to not read Augustine carefully but rather assume that human beings are predisposed to use other human beings as objects and thus for the Christian, this must be actively guarded against, despite Augustine declaring it negligible.<sup>1289</sup> As an example of a neo-Kantian, Marandiuc mentions that Anders Nygren critiqued Augustine for offering a distinction between *frui* and *uti* loves, saying that Augustine was unduly influenced by Platonism and thus, despite being a church father worth venerating in general, was not to be listened to with authority in this regard.<sup>1290</sup>

If, as Christians generally believe, God is the ultimate giver who is the source of all the love that is, Marandiuc asserts that nature and grace need not be viewed as mutually exclusive categories. Instead, we are enabled to perfect and sanctify our special human loves through God’s spirit.<sup>1291</sup> We are able to become a fully developed self that starts out as inchoate but develops and contours into shape through participation in love. Marandiuc goes so far as to say that Augustine in fact privileges attachment love as a type of love that rises above the rest of creaturely existence, and thus “empowers us to face the universe with fortitude.”<sup>1292</sup> She stresses that *frui* and *uti* love can join forces in the manner that Christians can be useful to each other’s ultimate good in God.<sup>1293</sup>

### *Gentry: Good old fashioned postmodern empathy*

The postmodern of my collection of commentators, feminist Christian political theorist Caron Gentry takes a highly contemporary tact to the subject when she writes that agape is pretty

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<sup>1288</sup> Marandiuc, 9, 110.

<sup>1289</sup> Marandiuc, 10.

<sup>1290</sup> Marandiuc, 11.

<sup>1291</sup> Marandiuc, 13.

<sup>1292</sup> Marandiuc, 16.

<sup>1293</sup> Marandiuc, 12.

much empathy. As a Christian realist, she articulates that empathy is what allows for negotiation to seek respect on both sides.<sup>1294</sup> Gentry defines justice as many constructive liberal feminists do, as a balance of power.<sup>1295</sup> She believes that anxiety is caused when a Self necessarily encounters an Other and in doing so recognizes its own finitude.<sup>1296</sup> While she agrees with the view that agape involves profound lack of self-interest, she sees a balance of power and anxiety possible between Self and Other that allows for a more creative relationship between Self and Other than posits the founder of Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr. Gentry thinks that, perhaps out of his own sense of privilege, Niebuhr does not realize that mutuality of love involves a mutuality of vulnerability. She details that she can come to this conclusion because he only focuses on the Self's vulnerability, and not that of the Other.<sup>1297</sup>

Browning notes in his own work that Niebuhr's focus on the imperative of love held in tandem with his fear of preening self-interest meant that Niebuhr treats mutuality and justice as concessions in regard to the purity of love as the ultimate goal.<sup>1298</sup> Browning's suggestion that self-regard serve as a component of a transitional ethic that allows us to journey toward and through love still sees love as the ultimate trajectory, but allows for a fuller conception of what it means to be mutual. Gentry and Browning both point out that Niebuhr predisposed the self to be inherently disproportionate in such a way that he could not theorize what mutuality might look like without an assumption of skewed self.<sup>1299</sup>

### **Advocating for an embrace of interdependent flourishing and self-love**

Before ending this chapter, it is important for a Millennial feminist to make a few notes that highlight the importance of self-regard to an interpersonal system of interdependent love and justice. In her latest book on how stories foster a Christian vision of human flourishing, Karen

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<sup>1294</sup> Caron E. Gentry, *This American Moment: A Feminist Christian Realist Intervention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 22.

<sup>1295</sup> Gentry, 24.

<sup>1296</sup> Gentry, 51, 26.

<sup>1297</sup> Gentry, 51.

<sup>1298</sup> Browning, *Fundamental*, 153, 177.

<sup>1299</sup> Browning notes that Niebuhr indicated that mutuality as a goal narrowed the trajectory of love's scope, in his opinion, such that for him, mutuality could not be the goal, in *Fundamental*, 152; I disagree that mutuality cannot serve as a goal. If mutuality is defined by meeting and encouraging self and other to become the fullest person they can be, this will always have a generative horizon to it.

Scheib accuses Christian theology of having distorted self-love by evaluating it as necessarily excessive or prideful.<sup>1300</sup> As many Christian commentators agree, self-love has its place in right proportion and order to other loves and other persons,<sup>1301</sup> but determining what this means still remains an open question. Weaver explains that “a Christian ethics of self-love can locate the self in a personal history that connects agency and identity in a way that overcomes [being yoked to an already present identity]” and allows for a new creation in Christ.<sup>1302</sup> This sense of becoming a new creation in Christ requires an embrace of the self as part of the equation of love. It is possible to engage notions of self-regard as love which are distinguishable from secular, individualist notions of self-actualization and self-esteem.<sup>1303</sup>

*Scheib: Biblical promises of flourishing demand self-care*

As Scheib sees it, a Biblical calling to flourishing in this life asks that we be “fully human, as God intends, not more or less.”<sup>1304</sup> Scheib acknowledges that there has been a long and complex conversation about Christian flourishing and all it entails, and yet overall she considers interpretation and focus between this life and the next unbalanced. According to Scheib, this is in part because wellbeing as a Christian concept remains undertheorized.<sup>1305</sup> She outlines such temporal flourishing as *Eudaimonia*, defined as enduring state of well-being, and a life well lived in terms of virtue.<sup>1306</sup> This involves joy and playfulness, even pleasure in right order.<sup>1307</sup> She goes on to write that this happiness, as depicted in the Bible, is sustained through worship of God and obedience to the Torah.<sup>1308</sup> On a communal level, this means seeking justice,

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<sup>1300</sup> Scheib, 99.

<sup>1301</sup> Weaver, 30.

<sup>1302</sup> Weaver, 35.

<sup>1303</sup> Scheib, 70.

<sup>1304</sup> Scheib, 72.

<sup>1305</sup> Scheib, 73, 69.

<sup>1306</sup> Scheib, 74.

<sup>1307</sup> Scheib, 76.

<sup>1308</sup> Scheib, 77; Donna Freitas cautions in her book *The Happiness Effect* that contemporary young adults feel a constant pressure, which some describe as a duty, to appear both happy all the time and happier than they actually are. This commonly results in negative health effects. Therefore the question of happiness is one of cultural complexity and layers of delusion and performance that will not easily or automatically lend themselves to true flourishing or authenticity. Donna Freitas, *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a New Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 13, 15, 14.

peace, and abundance. In a Christian sense, happiness is very much a relational concept.<sup>1309</sup> Scheib articulates that one way to recuperate self-love as Christian is to argue for the love of self, God and others as “intertwined and inseparable,” and to say that the Biblical promise of flourishing therefore demands it.<sup>1310</sup>

*Charry: Happiness compatible with flourishing, not anti-ethical*

As Ellen T. Charry puts it in *God and the Art of Happiness*, true Christian happiness is never falling short of loving as we should. Even though we will never accomplish and complete such perfect happiness in this life, Charry argues that the Christian ethic and promise of sanctification encourages us to work toward this true happiness anyway.<sup>1311</sup> Charry cites, that according to Augustine’s moral theology: “salvation is the healing of love that one may rest in God [...] Salvation is an excellent pattern of living that is personally rewarding because it advances God’s intention for creation. It is realizing eschatology.”<sup>1312</sup> Charry outlines that her book is written to address “older weaknesses” in the Christian interpretive tradition around the place of temporal happiness of human persons so as to articulate a Christian version of happiness that stands in contrast to secular versions.<sup>1313</sup> While Charry offers a strong vision of this from a theological perspective, it still warrants further embodiment as a personal ideal that can be actualized, which I turn to now.

*Taylor: Radical self-love an avenue toward greater, deeper love for all*

Sonya Renee Taylor, while not self-identifying as writing from a theological view, argues in *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* that radical self-love is a deep, relational calling that is generative. While having family resemblances to self-esteem and self-confidence, Taylor writes that radical self-love stands in stark contrast in that it is “exponentially

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<sup>1309</sup> Scheib, 78.

<sup>1310</sup> Scheib, 99.

<sup>1311</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010), 276, x.

<sup>1312</sup> Charry, xi.

<sup>1313</sup> Charry, xii; Charry writes that there is a significant gap in theological literature, in that “Christian doctrine has not adequately linked piety to pleasure, thus leaving a theological gap between goodness and happiness. Happiness unlinked from goodness and linked to excitement instead has moved into to fill the space,” xii.

more magnanimous, more succulent.”<sup>1314</sup> She describes radical self-love as a harbor, an island amidst a sea, which is solid and grounded. Self-confidence and self-esteem to Taylor are but ships which attempt navigation. Yet they “often choose to wander aimlessly adrift at sea, relying on willpower or ego to drive them,” or otherwise rely upon a futuristic “some-day” which never actualizes.<sup>1315</sup> According to Taylor, radical self-love is a transformative project we are all called to do and it will powerfully ripple out to help us examine and love the rest of the world.<sup>1316</sup>

In an interpersonal epistemology and anthropology that I have laid out with the help of numerous feminists, theologians, ethicists, and womanists in this chapter, the question of transcendence and transformation is one of the ever deepening becoming of the self, and through this becoming, the ever increasing depth and breadth of right relationship—defined by balance—of self, others, and God. As Taylor writes:

Radical self-love is not a destination you are trying to get to; it is who you already are, and it is already working tirelessly to guide your life. The question is how can you listen to it more distinctly, more often? Even over the blaring of constant body shame? How can you allow it to change your relationship with your body and your world?<sup>1317</sup>

Such radical self-love will be transformative because self and others are interdependent to an intimate degree.<sup>1318</sup> Taylor believes that we have been convinced that the self is not the place of transformative power, nor properly and effectively linked to others, because “systems of oppression have distanced us from that knowing.”<sup>1319</sup> Taylor delineates that we will know what there is to know about self and love when we embrace our complex nature and all of its various aspects and make room for us to grow in complexity.<sup>1320</sup> She ultimately goes back and forth between calling self-love an island and finding it difficult to describe her vision of

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<sup>1314</sup> Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 5, 1.

<sup>1315</sup> Taylor, 1-2; Taylor sees self-acceptance as a paltry, saddening goal in the family of self-relations. She writes, “self-acceptance is used as a synonym for acquiescence. We accept the things we cannot change. We accept death because we have no say over its arbitrary and indifferent arrival at our door. We have personal histories of bland acceptance. We have accepted lackluster jobs because we were broke. We have accepted lousy partners because their lousy presence was better than the hollow aloneness of their absence. We practice self-acceptance when we have grown tired of self-hatred but can’t conceive of anything beyond a paltry tolerance of ourselves. What a thin coat to wear on this weather-tossed road,” 2-3.

<sup>1316</sup> Taylor, 77, 5.

<sup>1317</sup> Taylor, xiii.

<sup>1318</sup> Taylor, 9.

<sup>1319</sup> Taylor, 10.

<sup>1320</sup> Taylor, 9.



transformation without using journey language, although at one points she describes the process as one akin to peeling the layers of an onion.<sup>1321</sup>

While our navigational beacons are internal, physical and subjective, Taylor argues that “we can install signposts and guardrails that help us know if we are still on the road to radical self-love.<sup>1322</sup> It is not without direction, or accountability to ideas and assessment.<sup>1323</sup> While throughout the dissertation I suggest numerous signposts, in this chapter I have suggested that an approach which views ethics as innovative yet grounded in a vision of love, justice, and embodiment can serve as a start to how ethics might serve the agile church and the guerilla self. This requires interrogation of our assumptions and practices around sacrifice and the self, on which Millennials are already pushing society. I and others suggest that Christian promises of flourishing found in the Bible can help us reorient our perspectives toward claiming radical love in this life rather than giving it away for the sake of the next. In Chapter Seven, I will end this project with practical considerations garnered from feminist psychoanalytic and counseling practices on what measures of assertion, reception, and risk are needed for a couple to journey into the creative wilderness of their souls and lives together.

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<sup>1321</sup> Taylor, 10.

<sup>1322</sup> Taylor, 64.

<sup>1323</sup> Taylor, 76.

## VII.

### Mutuality as Psychological Recognition

*In the absence of clear sequences and rituals to conduct courtship, the self struggles to get recognition from another without being in a position to demand it. That is, because the self's value is not established in advance, it becomes an object of intense intersubjective negotiation.*

Sociologist Eva Illouz in *Why Love Hurts*<sup>1324</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

As many have argued, mutuality cannot occur in intimate relationship without a deep belief within the members of a couple that their relationship is one of cooperation, of mutual, generative interest in which one receives from the other as much as one gives or imposes. Too often this is not the case. While women today are much freer to have identities apart from their families, the imbalance of social power by gender continues by the sheer fact that even today Millennial men do not “receive influence” from others as much as Millennial women do. As a first step toward changing this situation, it is still true today that both men and women need to be psychologically and personally “converted” to the idea that such mutual surrender is possible and desirable.<sup>1325</sup> I believe that this larger agenda of encouraging people to be receptive listeners can be aided by using psychodynamic techniques of recognition and validation as well as by a vision of how mutuality psychologically plays into relationships.

A healthy relationship of cooperation requires people to have a love and respect for themselves, the other, and the relationship which must run through the entire being of each member of the couple. This includes addressing the formidable challenges of their narcissistic unconscious, of the wounds and powerlessness they have experienced in the past, and of how these *imagoes*, as psychology calls them, are experienced and dealt with in the present as adults. On a psychological level, members of the couple must feel that they can engage each other's differences in a way that builds and furthers their self and that of the other, as well as survive the

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<sup>1324</sup> Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation* (Boston and Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 139.

<sup>1325</sup> Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) cited by Lallene J. Rector, “Are We Making Love yet? Theological and Psychological Perspectives on the Role of Gender Identity in the Experience of Domination,” *The Good News of the Body: Sexual Theology and Feminism*, edited by Lisa Isherwood (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 91.

entrenched patterns of projection and powerlessness felt acutely in contexts of intimacy and familiarity. While psychologists such as Heinz Kohut and D.W. Winnicott have postulated that there are many ways for adults to receive psychological “recognition” by culture and institutions, relationships of intimacy and ongoing partnership remain crucial locations for receiving and giving this recognition.

Feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin in her book *The Bonds of Love* investigates the logic and practices behind the imbalance of intimate recognition. I argue that a deep understanding of Benjamin’s theory and its general implementation in feminist counseling practices is exceptionally necessary to grasp in terms of three things: 1) what causes a drive for psychic dominance and thus provides obstacles to recognition, 2) the process of recognition itself and the struggles to maintain it, and 3) the productive growth of self and relationship that can come from mutual recognition, which Benjamin calls “surrender” and most people label as an “intersubjective” relationship. To explore these three facets, I start by reviewing how Benjamin’s thought and concurrent feminist moves in counseling and philosophy have fundamentally and crucially redirected what it means to be psychoanalytically-minded. Understanding basic psychoanalytic processes and theories of motivation are important to incorporate into any plan for increasing mutuality because the ways in which *lack* of recognition threatens the very sense of self on a psychic level. It thus intensifies all other aspects of a struggle for balance between persons engaged in intimate relationship.

In this chapter I focus on how feminist relational psychologists understand this process of recognition in terms of psychodynamic theory and couples counseling practice. In the first section, I engage Benjamin’s theory of the sheer importance of psychic recognition, as well as the struggle for mutual recognition in the contexts of asymmetrical intimacy. In the second section, I draw on counseling practice strategies for moving toward a greater balance of recognition between intimate partners since historically this has been far from a shared task. Furthermore, I believe that these techniques can be used more generally, although less expertly, by non-experts to improve practices and expectations of intimate balance at a cultural level.

## SECTION ONE: MUTUAL RECOGNITION IN JESSICA BENJAMIN'S THEORY

### Benjamin as a feminist relational psychoanalyst

In her 1988 *The Bonds of Love* Benjamin offered a groundbreaking, re-directive contribution to understanding the psychodynamics involved in creating intimacies of asymmetry. She did so not only by naming patriarchal domination as the leading reason for women's oppression (which was surely nothing new), but by also postulating a path by which a psychic reformulation of relationship toward greater mutuality could occur. In doing so, she was among the first psychoanalysts to address the patriarchal legacy of Freud and British object relations theory, which is predominantly represented by Donald Woods Winnicott in her treatment. In particular, she articulated how psychoanalytic theory understood desire for psychic dominance as the primary explanation for how and why people in the world function as they do. She then highlighted how this psychological drive of an individual seeking his or her physical and psychological survival is in fact what leads to dominance, not dominance itself. A quest for ensuring survival leads to a dominance-submission paradigm in human relationship, especially in terms of how people relate to each other across categories of difference in gender. Thus, Benjamin postulated that this drive for dominance was *really* a drive for recognition. Based on the veracity of this idea, it could then be argued that recognition could be shared in a more mutual fashion. This would in turn erode the capacity for an imbalance in recognition to result in a paradigm of submission and domination making it less of a rote possibility in the first place. Benjamin also makes her feminist mark on the psychoanalytic literature by arguing that recognition achieved through attunement is pleasurable. As part of this claim, she also asserts that when attunement is seen as pleasurable, then the tension of difference can be held and used toward discovery, rather than necessarily discharged or cast off as painful excess like Freud believed was necessary.<sup>1326</sup>

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<sup>1326</sup> This was noted at the time of the publication of *Bonds*. See Ethel Spector Perrson, "Why it is so sweet to Surrender," Book review, *The New York Times*, February 26, 1989; Also Jessica Benjamin, "Revisiting the Riddle of Sex: An Intersubjective View of Masculinity and Femininity," *Dialogues on Sexuality, Gender, and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Irene Matthis (New York: Karnac, 2004), 146, 164-165.

In the next decades, Benjamin published two books, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (1995) and *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (1998), which retrospectively probe the significance of *Bonds* and also outline major areas of feminist relational theory yet to be developed sufficiently and how to work toward them. In *Like Subjects*, she reflects upon the difficulty of putting together an inclusive, integrated yet eclectic relational theory of the psychoanalytic subject, her particular notion of intersubjectivity as a pre-existing relationship which one lives into through action, and how this affects and interacts with contemporary notions of gender, sameness, and difference.<sup>1327</sup> In *Shadow*, Benjamin tracks a genealogy of her work through a postmodern lens, identifying three key problematics: 1) problem of difference, 2) subject position, 3) and construction of knowledge.<sup>1328</sup> Yet *Bonds* remains her key contribution, with much of her work there after being commentary upon the original. In her later work of the mid-2000s, Benjamin begins to articulate this relationship of mutuality as “the intersubjective third,” expanding it from simply a psychological description to a moral prescription and further applying the concept to situations of international peacekeeping. In doing so, she continued to crucially contribute to psychological and feminist literature by describing the role of psychic and social surrender necessary for this intersubjective dynamic to be possible.<sup>1329</sup>

Throughout *Bonds* Benjamin is responding to Freudian-lineage psychoanalytic theory takes subject-object relationships as an essential given, out of the belief that a drive for psychic omnipotence will always result in the person attempting to make everything else into an object in order to best assure his dominance as a subject who controls himself and others.<sup>1330</sup> Yet, building upon object relations theory developed in the mid-twentieth century which identified the

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<sup>1327</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 5-15.

<sup>1328</sup> Jessica Benjamin *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), vii-xx.

<sup>1329</sup> Such work includes Jessica Benjamin, “Two-Way Streets: Recognition of Difference and the Intersubjective Third,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17 no. 1 (2006): 116-146, and Jessica Benjamin, “‘Moving beyond Violence:’ what we can Learn from Two Former Combatants about the Transition from Aggression to Recognition,” *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory*, edited by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2016), 71-89.

<sup>1330</sup> Yvette G. Flores-Ortiz notes that this casting of the other as object psychologically and socially occurs with race since non-whites lack the qualities of the Eurocentric mainstream, “Voices from the Couch: The Co-Creation of a Chicana Psychology,” *Living Chicana Theory*, edited by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, Calif.: Third Woman Press, 1998), 102.

importance of *relationship* to psychoanalytic cure, feminists and poststructuralists in the 1980s such as Benjamin began to theorize that relationship perhaps could serve as a foci for a deeper conceptual theory of psychodynamics than previously recognized. Benjamin, as a member of the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory, and a daughter of a famous American Communist leader of the Depression-era unemployment movements, constructively suggests that social theorists must fully depart from the Freudian concept of subject-object as the primary and inevitable form of relationship.<sup>1331</sup> In exchange, we must theorize a subject-to-subject relationship, which she outlines in *Bonds* by engaging an eclectic “model-mixing” of psychodynamic theories.

Feminist psychoanalysts such as founder of the Stone Center for Women Jean Baker Miller and Nancy Chodorow had identified patterns of psychologically-driven dominance as problematic to women’s liberation in the 1970s, and thus they crucially paved the way for Benjamin’s theories. Baker Miller, in her 1976 book entitled *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, noted that the oppression which women faced was unique among oppressed groups, given that women were in such close relationship to their oppressors.<sup>1332</sup> This remains a key problematic of intimate life today. Baker Miller joined other feminists of the time such as ethicist Carol Gilligan and Chodorow in articulating the main difference between women and men is a deeper, more complex relationality engaged in by women. Yet feminist pastoral theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore notes that among second-wave feminists Baker Miller’s focus on power, domination and subordination was distinct.<sup>1333</sup>

Baker Miller outlined and excavated from her position as a female theorist that there were two main psychologies at hand, of the dominant and subordinate. Each were socially constructed rather than biologically constructed but they were nonetheless firmly entrenched in the psyches of men and women due to gender expectations. The dominant person had the privilege of bliss about the other and the subordinate person had the burden of providing for everyone’s sense of self and relationship. In Baker Miller’s time and still today, these general differences of subject-

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<sup>1331</sup> Mari Jo Buhle, *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998), 311.

<sup>1332</sup> Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1976), 2.

<sup>1333</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 270-272.

in-relation map onto men and women respectively.<sup>1334</sup> Therefore, since they are mainly in relationship to others, women are seen as companions much more than individuals in their own right.<sup>1335</sup>

Baker Miller crucially also theorized a way out of this current state of inequality between the sexes by encouraging women to fight for social recognition of a new level of their self-determination through a few key strategies. She sought for women to bring such inequity to critical consciousness and to deal with the social and existential anxiety that had been previously controlled through a socially gendered split of roles and responsibilities. In detail, this necessitated developing a willingness and ability to withstand fears of abandonment and of causing conflict and displeasure.<sup>1336</sup>

Chodorow is known for having engaged psychoanalysis as part as a feminist effort to refute the biological essentialism socially attributed to mothering as well as figure out why male domination has persisted throughout history. In her 1978 *The Reproduction of Mothering*, she argued that the drive to find fulfillment in mothering was psychologically inculcated in women such that it was neither strictly biological, an attribution she was firmly against, nor something that could be addressed consciously as simply as attributing it to role socialization. According to Chodorow, the validation of the female self psychologically comes about through the close identificatory relationship between mother and daughter *as female* over and against the male figures in their lives. According to this theory, women raise male children to have greater autonomy and detachment from their emotions. Because of this differential form of child rearing by gender, the men women seek to match up with intimately and sexually as adults lack practice and skill in intimacy precisely because they are trained not be fluent in intimacy by their mothers and the rest of society.<sup>1337</sup> In this dualistic set up, women take on the responsibility of carrying men's emotions for them, making them emotional experts who are often seen as having a pathological level of "excess" emotion as defined through male standards.<sup>1338</sup>

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<sup>1334</sup> Baker Miller, 10; Baker Miller's work in this regard reminds me of the similar moves of the psychology of colonialist versus the anti-colonialist/pro-black in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

<sup>1335</sup> Flores-Ortiz notes the relevance of Jean Baker Miller's work for outlining a Chicana psychology, 106-107, 113.

<sup>1336</sup> Baker Miller, 23, 29, 31, 40.

<sup>1337</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, 1999), 5-7, 11, 33, 41, 43.

<sup>1338</sup> Baker Miller noted that women carried emotions for men, Flores-Ortiz, 109.

Like Benjamin would take on shortly, Chodorow argued that in theory either gender could take on a parenting role, due to the socialization of skills and talents as well as the oxytocin that chemically develops in a caregiver through the process of caregiving.<sup>1339</sup> Yet Chodorow believed it would be hard to break the psychological patterning of the genders in which women identified themselves so closely to being selves-in-relation through mothering, while men identified as rugged independents. Chodorow claimed that while the oedipal complex involved forcing children to differentiate from their original caregiver (among other things which define the oedipal complex) and thus still played a role in the socialization of one's sexual orientation, she argued that in fact, patterns of gender identification occurred much earlier in an infant's development.<sup>1340</sup> This was a belief held by many object relations theorists like Winnicott.

While Baker Miller and Chodorow's theories still remain captivating and explanatory reads more than 60 years later, their writings are not texts that could be confused for having been written in today's illusion of a post-feminist era. These two women, as products of their time, too readily acquiesced to the idea of gendered difference arising from the psychoanalytic processes of splitting and of problematic identification as inevitable realities to be as useable for a general audience today, even as they sought to change social belief in biological determinism as differentiated by gender.<sup>1341</sup> Benjamin, with her ideas of the need for the human being to learn to assert and receive in a cycle of mutual recognition, does not necessarily adhere gender to her theory in *Bonds of Love*, even though she clearly sees that it has been mapped onto how submission and domination have played out in society thus far.<sup>1342</sup> In her later work she addresses gender as a representation of a category, operating as a symbol of relative difference or sameness to the central subject at hand. Yet gender as category, for Benjamin, has no essential content, only its socially constructed content which is ultimately malleable and reversible. I engage Benjamin as a primary psychological interlocutor in my project because her position on the

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<sup>1339</sup> Chodorow, 87, 21.

<sup>1340</sup> Chodorow, 114-116, 99.

<sup>1341</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 56-59; Bruhle, 242-254; I agree with cultural feminists who see in Chodorow a form of essentialism that is created in socialization and development, even as she disputes it as such the case in biology, Buhle, 264.

<sup>1342</sup> Bruhle notes that Benjamin, although she does not address this directly in *Bonds of Love*, was very much influenced by Heinz Kohut's ideas of selfobjects and their role in the development of narcissism if not present. Kohut's ideas did not have the gendered cast that so many theorists still engaged, Bruhle, 312-315.



simultaneous relevance and irrelevance of gender to the problem of domination tracks with similarly ambiguous millennial views on gender.

Benjamin was in concert with her psychoanalytic foremothers' claim that the current cultural pattern of dealing with psychic omnipotence by splitting was both prevalent and problematic. Psychoanalysts hold that splitting occurs in situations of simultaneous dependency and aggression. This aggression develops as a response to that which the self finds undesirable, which is a broad category of content to be sure. Such undesirable objects or traits as they apply to particular individuals are known only retrospectively through psychoanalytic analysis, and yet, with some amount of contestation, psychoanalysis agrees that particular types of material are more prone to being split and repressed than others. For instance, Freud theorized that dependency itself was undesirable, and therefore a large part of the life material that led to psychological repression was rooted in the fact of human dependency. Following along the lines of his gender theory, however, males were more likely to break free of this dependency than females were, meaning that men were less likely to be neurotic or pathological precisely because they were able to be constitutionally and psychologically less dependent upon others. Relational theorists like Benjamin do not adhere to such an essentialist notion of gender and its relationship to dependency, but do still agree that human beings find certain situations or characteristics overwhelming and undesirable such that the continuing presence of such undesirable material is determined by the psyche to be unbecoming to its preservation. Therefore such content must be expelled.

A common way of thinking about splitting psychoanalytically is to think about an infant developmentally. An infant, incapable of complex operations of cognition or psychology, sees the facts of its own aggression and difference as threatening. Thus, in a defense against perceived aggression, it breaks a whole subject into parts which are no longer associated with each other but rather polarized and differentially prioritized in value.<sup>1343</sup> Eventually the infant, through “good enough” caregiving, reaches the oedipal stage in which a more dynamic, integrated way of relating is possible, although not automatic.<sup>1344</sup> Benjamin notes that she engages the concept of

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<sup>1343</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 63; also James L. Poulton, *Object Relations and Relationality in Couple Therapy: Exploring Middle Ground* (Boulder; New York: Jason Aronson, 2013), 5.

<sup>1344</sup> “Good enough” language is from Winnicott in his attempts to articulate the type and standard of caregiving that raises a psychologically secure and balanced child. This standard involves a good deal of recognition, but also a cultivating of the child’s own abilities to care for herself or himself as developmentally appropriate.

splitting on both the narrow psychoanalytic level and as a metaphysical metaphor for social relations.<sup>1345</sup>

Benjamin was able to define psychological splitting as a crucial social problem, and yet rather than dwell on the gendered fracture this caused, spend most of her time writing about balance and repair from this splitting. She articulated a belief in a tenable struggle for mutual recognition that did not involve splitting, so much as moments of break down in recognition that regained their equilibrium. Perhaps because she was writing in the 1980s in which educated career women were entering the workforce in great numbers, Benjamin was able to go further than Baker Miller and Chodorow to envision a reality in which gender was no longer automatically entangled with the natural tendency of human beings to split in order to control. To get past the reiteration of such a process, however, required a new theory of how to deal with deep desire, its relational facilitation, and its outcomes; she provided it.

Psychologists Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Obach note in their reflection on feminist psychoanalytic involvement in feminism that psychoanalysis was “a natural ally” because of its blend of the social, familial, and personal-experiential.<sup>1346</sup> They write that the shift from one-person psychology to two-person psychology brought about by the relational school of thinkers of which Benjamin was a part, was monumental, if not a bit hard to even imagine before it happened.<sup>1347</sup> “An adult relationship based on mutuality without surrender to the other was not a known phenomenon” they write.<sup>1348</sup> As evidence of this, Eichenbaum and Obach note that, as it pertained to the therapy room, women patients often did not believe in the possibility of actually receiving care from therapists and were often also afraid that the sheer weight of their emotions and psychic needs would overwhelm therapists to the point of relational turnoff and distancing.<sup>1349</sup> This approach of women in the 1970s to therapy is what Benjamin would have called an attitude born out of a social-categorical position of submission in which society expected women to give of themselves to such a degree that it cultivated in them a deep belief that their own needs did not exist nor were they valid. Furthermore, even if they were valid, most

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<sup>1345</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 63.

<sup>1346</sup> Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Obach, “Relational Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Crossing of Historical Paths,” *Psychotherapy and Politics International* 1.1, 18.

<sup>1347</sup> Eichenbaum and Obach, 19.

<sup>1348</sup> Eichenbaum and Obach, 22.

<sup>1349</sup> Eichenbaum and Obach, 22, 21.

women doubted that these needs could ever be met, particularly by others. Thus, Benjamin remains distinct in identifying—and speaking to—the significant barriers to adequate symmetry in psychological recognition which must be overcome to empower women.

### **Benjamin's theory of the struggle for mutual recognition**

Many commentators have noted that Benjamin's theory of mutual recognition has three main movements: dominance, recognition, and surrender.<sup>1350</sup> While this adumbration offers a traceable progression from a relationship of dominance and submission to an intersubjective relationship, it is the case that delineating these movements as such, because of the very dynamism inherent in them, is heuristic in its over-simplicity. I must first point out the very need and fact of recognition needs to be addressed as a key aspect which makes relational psychology distinct from its Freudian lineage. The term "struggle for mutual recognition" is a double entendre. In the first sense of meaning, the struggle takes place between two subjects, as well as within and across the subjects. In the second meaning, the struggle is about the intrapersonal tension of two desires, of wanting to stay insular within our preexisting psyche and wanting, very much, to experience the world outside of our psyche as the only way to feel psychologically as if we matter. However, in both meanings this struggle involves a dialectic in which affirmative recognition is achieved through acknowledgement of our difference from the rest of reality. Yet it is our very similitude to the rest of reality outside of ourselves which allows us to interact with outside reality and thus come to this knowledge.

Benjamin identifies this intersubjective experience of the other as a clear break from the typical psychoanalytic understanding of the single psyche who can only relate to the other as an object, but not a subject. In Freudian theory, one is born dependent and develops toward a desired state of autonomy and separation by progressively internalizing the roles of authority and consolation that external objects provide, thus separating from the actual, original provider. The true struggle of the human condition, according to Freudian thought, is biological: the vulnerability of the human body against the elements, the competition among others for limited resources to ensure bodily survival, and sex, life, and death drives that overwhelmingly compel

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<sup>1350</sup> For a particular example of a discussion of these three movements, see Boaz Shagli, "The Cat Ate Our Tongue: But We Got it Back: Benjamin's Journey from Domination to Surrender," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 13 (2012): 277-294.

us from deep inside.<sup>1351</sup> Out of this Freudian lineage, in the standard ego psychology and object relations theory which come forth from Freud, relationships are instrumental and fundamentally narcissistic: one acts upon another to get what one needs with little ultimate concern for the other. In *Bonds* Benjamin writes that this is not actually the case in a truly intersubjective relationship. She underscores that “the joy of discovering the other, the agency of the self, and the outsideness of the other—these are at best only fuzzily apprehended by internalization theory.”<sup>1352</sup> The internalization theory of Freud sees other people as psychologically external to the subject at hand. Therefore, for the subject to use others requires aspects of interactions with them to become internalized by the subject in what can be a dehumanizing consumption of them.

Benjamin departs significantly from classic psychoanalytic theory when she postulates that our need to ensure survival, contra Freud, actually comes about relationally. Freud portrayed the drive for dominance and omnipotence as the quintessential struggle. Benjamin, by contrast, argues that dominance comes about only as we try to deny our dependency upon others. While Freud might have agreed to some degree he ultimately would have thought this denial was inevitable. Benjamin crucially argues that denial of dependency is not essential nor inevitable.<sup>1353</sup> Yet she would argue that our primal drive to perpetuate ourselves and defend ourselves against threats remains a psychoanalytic truth with which we must contend. In simple terms, it remains a desire which controls us. As critical theorist Chris Weedon writes “in reality no one can control desire since no one can occupy the position of the Other.”<sup>1354</sup> This Other symbolically represents the desire of that which is outside the self, and the gap between need, demand, and satisfaction about which psychoanalytic theory deliberates.<sup>1355</sup>

Benjamin does not dismiss the tension of desire, but rather acknowledges it and says it can be bent toward the ethical good. She writes, “our psychic makeup is such that we are torn between omnipotence, illusion of control, on the one hand, and wish for contact with the

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<sup>1351</sup> See Sigmund Freud with Joan Riviere, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1930), 28.

<sup>1352</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 43.

<sup>1353</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 52.

<sup>1354</sup> Weedon, 52.

<sup>1355</sup> Weedon, 52.

different, the external, the not-me, on the other.”<sup>1356</sup> Omnipotence is a position from which we act, according to psychoanalysis, and Benjamin does not disagree with her forefathers here. As a relational theorist, however, she dissents from the tradition of believing that acting out of omnipotence, and its often negative results, is a state in which we can, must, or should stay. Factually, we necessarily come into contact with the other, which is why omnipotence, to a degree, is matter of psychological illusion. Although we act out of a desire for omnipotence, we cannot stay in it fully once we come into contact with others, no matter how dominant over others we may manage to be. Relational theorists hold that human beings are not narcissistic enough to maintain this illusion upon contact, although Freudians might believe we are. Neither do relational theorists believe that, once acted upon, a desire for omnipotence necessarily must result in domination of the weaker by the stronger. Rather, this relational tension in which two psyches strive for omnipotence at the same time with each other can best be ethically managed by using this drive to both recognize the other and receive recognition. For relational theorists, recognition is the real desire behind omnipotence, not omnipotence itself.

Philosopher Michael Oppenheim comments that Benjamin is first and foremost known for claiming that we have need for recognition.<sup>1357</sup> Benjamin names her groundbreaking book *Bonds of Love* because the mother-child relationship confounded Freud’s general ideas of every man for himself. In Freud’s world, other people were nothing but constraints to the aggression and desires of the body. To Freud, this early relationship of mother and child, however, “is a problem that must be defined not simply in terms of aggression and civilized constraints, but as an extension of the bonds of love.”<sup>1358</sup> Freud thought these bonds of love required the child to respond to this love through obedience, which helps him develop his idea that civilization, as other people, is a system which requires begrudgingly ceding to its authority.

While Benjamin is tangling and contrasting with her psychodynamic heritage rooted in Freud, she mainly uses Winnicott’s analysis of the mother-child relationship as a starting point to her feminist take on psychodynamic theory. Winnicott was among the first psychodynamic

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<sup>1356</sup> Jessica Benjamin, “Recognition and Destruction: An Outline of Intersubjectivity,” *Relational Psychoanalysis: The Emergence of a Tradition*, edited by Stephen A. Mitchell and Lewis Aron (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1999), 202 quoted by Michael Oppenheim, “Jessica Benjamin and (the Missing) Martin Buber on Intersubjectivity,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Modern Jewish Philosophy: Two Languages of Love* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 52-53.

<sup>1357</sup> Oppenheim, 54.

<sup>1358</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 5.

theorist to acknowledge the importance of the mother to her infant's development, and thus the importance of relationship to development. Winnicott theorized that the mother was important to the infant in a number of ways. She served as an affirmative mirror to his own developing psyche, and also as a model for how to contain and moderate the desires of the body. The mother, knowing the child's needs and desires out of her own sense of cognition and empathy, can help the child meet its needs while the infant is yet incapable of doing this for the most part. The mother does so, Benjamin equates, because she recognizes the needs and desires of the infant. Thus, recognition meets needs. Recognition *is* the bond of love, in which a mother represents, reflects, and moderates her child's desire by meeting it out of a sense of love and her own experience as a human being.

Given the stanchion of autonomy inherent in Freudian psychology, in order to put forth an alternative idea, Benjamin must clearly make the case that Freudian psychology, discounting this early relationship, believed in a one-subject psychology that is both false and ethically unproductive. In one-person psychology all other persons besides the individual in question, by virtue of being in competition for the most freedom to act out of aggression, are treated by the person as objects to be acted upon by the psyche.<sup>1359</sup> In its mythic struggle for survival against a cruel world, the Freudian psyche could not afford to consider the world its friend. This has the effect of normalizing a doer-and-done-to mentality as standard human interaction, particularly in describing relations between men and women.<sup>1360</sup> Benjamin crucially argued that while it was quite clear that the world operated in terms of a domination/submission dynamic, it was not out of a sense of natural essentialism,<sup>1361</sup> but out of an acceptance of a certain broken way of relating that this happened. She argued that this default way of relating could be changed through shifting the standard of relational interactions through culture.<sup>1362</sup>

This is contra Freud, Benjamin notes, as he believed some kind of domination was inevitable, it was just a question of what kind.<sup>1363</sup> Yet for Benjamin as a feminist and a relational

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<sup>1359</sup> *The Shadow of the Other* is titled so because Freud once wrote that "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego," meaning that the ego is made up of all the objects it assimilates, Jessica Benjamin, "Introduction," *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), xii.

<sup>1360</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 7.

<sup>1361</sup> Katharine E. Lassiter, *Recognizing Other Subjects: Feminist Pastoral Theology and the Challenge of Identity* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 75.

<sup>1362</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 90.

<sup>1363</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 4.

theorist, anything other than a mutual struggle for recognition is a shortfall of true love and recognition as it is meant to be. Therefore—and this is crucial—*dominance and submission are not positions of love and true recognition*. Although they are forms of recognition which involve agency of a sort by both parties, Benjamin and other theorists on intimacy assert that they are compromises, and ultimate facades, of the real, healthy love that could be.<sup>1364</sup>

### **Three-stage cycle of the struggle for mutual recognition**

In the part that follows, I attempt to reiterate some of Benjamin's theory as it pertains to what can heuristically be called "stages" of the cyclical struggle for mutual recognition; this outlines a progression from a patterning of asymmetrical domination/submission to one of mutual, intersubjective surrender to—and really, the embrace of—being partially defined by the other. Benjamin notes that this field of actual surrender is inherently unstable. The drive for recognition remains ever present, threatening the balance of recognition between two people through its constant, excessive need springing from the (individual) psyche.

#### *Dominance*

Benjamin believes that dominance is the frequent result of two things within the psyche: 1) the desire for and belief in psychic omnipotence and, 2), as a result of this psychic omnipotence, the tendency to split off (and thus distance and disavow) characteristics from the holistic self that are overwhelming. The first, psychic omnipotence, Freud called Primary Narcissism. Oppenheim further notes that this problem of omnipotence is central in Benjamin's work. He describes omnipotence as "the desire, in the realm of fantasy and the intrapsychic, to be the only one."<sup>1365</sup> Despite the fact that she is better known for postulating the human need for recognition, Oppenheim remarks that Benjamin describes the tension of omnipotence as such, as well as calling it narcissism, aggression, and destruction while recognition is the only term she uses for describing the other side of this dynamic.<sup>1366</sup> As theologian and minister Emma Percy puts it, according to Benjamin "Domination is a result of fantasy, but that does not mean that it

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<sup>1364</sup> Lassiter, 69; See also Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Marrying Well: Possibilities in Christian Marriage Today* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 106-110.

<sup>1365</sup> Oppenheim, 53.

<sup>1366</sup> Oppenheim, 53.

stems initially from wrong motivation.”<sup>1367</sup> The motivation is one of embracing life, but it often turns into a fearful protection of it. Benjamin sees an inclination toward domination as a result of trying to move beyond any sense of dependency, something which certainly happens with the infant given his or her great state of neediness. However, domination can also happen *to* but also *by* the mother by the infant if she does not remain psychologically balanced by attending to and asserting her own needs such that she can continue to care for her child in a nurturing rather than controlling way out of a sense of self-defense against the child’s incessant need of her.<sup>1368</sup> Thus, in any relationship, domination can result out of any number of relational factors and settings depending on the broader ecosystem of need and response. Benjamin recognizes that from a psychodynamic perspective, omnipotence will always be the primary problematic of the self, that it cannot be worked through, but only constantly addressed dialectically.

Ultimately, however, recognition is more foundational than dominance writes feminist pastoral theologian Katharine Lassiter, because it is “The desire for recognition [that] fuels domination.”<sup>1369</sup> Lassiter goes on to write, “From a theological perspective, the sin of domination is a trick. It makes use of what we most desire, what we want most for ourselves, and which can only be received through the hands of another.”<sup>1370</sup> We take that desire for the other, and like a child learning motor skills, grasp it a little too tightly. We are inexpert at holding on in a way that does not warp the object in our hands. In other words, domination is twisting of the bonds of love.<sup>1371</sup> Because of omnipotence as a psychoanalytic fact of nature, Benjamin comments, “the decisive problem remains recognizing the other” in a healthy, mature way.<sup>1372</sup>

Toward a better understanding of the role which dominance plays in society, one of Benjamin’s key contributions in *Bonds*, following Baker Miller and Chodorow, is to note that the men having the upper hand in society leads to a splitting off of undesired characteristics in males, because they have the power to do so, and to an over-projection of these traits onto women and their “nature.” She identifies the societal private/public split into the gendered

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<sup>1367</sup> Emma Percy, *Mothering as a Metaphor for Ministry* (Farnham; Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2014), 91.

<sup>1368</sup> Percy, 92

<sup>1369</sup> Lassiter, 63.

<sup>1370</sup> Lassiter, 68.

<sup>1371</sup> Lassiter, 68.

<sup>1372</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 36.



domains of a feminine private home world and a masculine public work world as one of the main causes of exacerbated gendered thinking and valuing.<sup>1373</sup>

Perhaps implicitly drawing on Foucault or other postmodern scholarship, Benjamin sees each pattern of domination she reviews in *Bonds* as what has been actualized in the world, a disproportionate and uneven distribution of power. Just because power is unevenly distributed in the current state of events by gender does not, according to most social constructionists, mean that men and women have essentially different amounts of power and capacity, but rather that the submissive one allows for the domination to occur. Lassiter comments that Benjamin's ability to show how "suffering is weaved into the textures of everyday existence" through relational interactions caused by splitting is a key feminist contribution of hers to both women's studies and psychoanalysis.<sup>1374</sup>

### *Recognition*

Overtaking Freud, Benjamin believes that mutual recognition is desirable and possible. This is so because the struggle for mutual recognition is aided by the pleasures of attunement and interaction which rely on each other. According to Benjamin, we do not simply use the Other for release as Freud postulated. This sexual attachment, which he confused for love according to Benjamin, was one of two types: 1) anaclitic "attachment" (which might be described as excessive fusion), or 2) a narcissistic, identificatory love.<sup>1375</sup> Perhaps revealing a contrast to Benjamin's view on Freud's relationship to love, however, Oppenheim writes that Freudian psychoanalysis sees "love as a fundamental life force and key human motivation, as well as core to the talking cure itself."<sup>1376</sup> Oppenheim can argue this point because Freud's theory changes over the course of his development of it. Freud starts off believing that the fundamental drives of humanity are sexual and life-preserving, yet later he develops what can be seen as a theory with greater explanation for life's tension in the dual instincts of life and death. The instinct for life is also an instinct for love.<sup>1377</sup>

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<sup>1373</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 7.

<sup>1374</sup> Lassiter, 79.

<sup>1375</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 4.

<sup>1376</sup> Oppenheim, 1.

<sup>1377</sup> The history of psychoanalytic reception places Freud and his early contemporaries as "neo-romantics" who sought to overcome the very constraints which they identified as constraints, Buhl, 8.

Yet Freud, in postulating a drive for life and love, does not, in my mind, nor in Benjamin's I suspect, go back to rework his fundamental belief in the autonomy and psychic omnipotence of the self in such a manner that love is not utterly contradictory to his initial claims. It bears repeating that Benjamin resolves this tension in her own theory by postulating a different psychological anthropology from the start, and thus her theories ring more consistent. In a Benjamin-inspired utopia of relating, mutuality and reciprocity are defining features of the relationship between subjects.<sup>1378</sup> Two subjects, with full equality and sovereignty in terms of existential regard, are both the original state of subjects in relationship to each other, and in a world in which this natural relationship has broken down into dominance, also the state to which she hopes society will someday return.

Benjamin asserts that even if women are treated as submissive and act that way, because of this natural, inherent capacity at their core to strive for life and love, it is possible for women and those who recognize them to turn women into subjects by treating them as such. It is this treatment of subjects as subjects that she says lays at the center of the true psychological story of mother-child relationships. In *Bonds*, Benjamin highlights that Winnicott believed that recognizing an outside self was key to recognizing one's own self as authentic. Furthermore, this was a process that occurred in infants.<sup>1379</sup> However, Benjamin breaks from Winnicott by refusing to believe that infants are passive and mothers are objects.<sup>1380</sup> Rather, to Benjamin, the infant is sociable from the start, *but does grow within relationships just like everyone else*.<sup>1381</sup> She postulates that we develop *through* our innate capacities coming to fruition and construction *through* interaction with others. Against Freud, then, she articulates that "reality is thus *discovered*, rather than imposed; and authentic selfhood is not absorbed from without but discovered within."<sup>1382</sup> This psychological anthropology means that Benjamin necessarily disputes the Freudian and Winnicottian notion that the infant is ever fully unified with mother. Thus, even for infants, human development is always a process of relating, not separation.<sup>1383</sup>

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<sup>1378</sup> Oppenheim, 54.

<sup>1379</sup> Benjamin draws on child psychologist Daniel Stern to say that infant is not blank emotional slate at start, entirely dependent on mother, but already his or her own person, notes Lassiter, 65.

<sup>1380</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 16-17.

<sup>1381</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 17-18.

<sup>1382</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 41.

<sup>1383</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 18; Thus, aloneness is a particular point along a spectrum of relationship, 20.

While Winnicott did not translate the importance of the mother to the infant into inferring subject status for the mother, he did hold that the mother's separateness from the child was crucial to the child learning about difference in a way that leads toward recognition as a capacity. For example, in the case of a child's anger at a parent, Benjamin writes, "The parent must feel separate and secure enough to be able to tolerate the thwarted child's anger without giving in. Otherwise, the parent is destroyed in the child's eyes."<sup>1384</sup> This is a figurative destruction, but it is very important psychically. As Benjamin writes, "The meaning of destruction is that the subject can engage in an all-out collision with the other, can hurtle himself against the barriers of otherness in order to feel the shock of the fresh, cold outside. And he can experience this collision as hurtful neither to the other nor to himself, as occasioning neither withdrawal nor retaliation."<sup>1385</sup> This ability to survive destruction is an ambitious project, one which realistically we do not often achieve. Thus, especially in the intensity of caretaking we can slide into patterns of domination and submission.

For Benjamin, the dynamic of domination and submission is a result of the breakdown of holding two subjects and their needs for recognition in tension, a tension which she coins "the struggle for mutual recognition." The frequency and probability of this breakdown occurring for Benjamin is in itself not proof that it is impossible to reach the status of having an intersubjective relationship, only proof that it is immensely difficult to achieve. In fact, one of the key contributions that Benjamin makes to intersubjective theory is a valuing of this very breakdown for its potential to pick away at ossified forms of recognition that can then be made anew into more mutual interactions.<sup>1386</sup> She writes, "What is crucial here is that [while] the breakdown in intersubjective relations is a necessary part of ongoing learning processes, it is potentially a complementary cognitive experience, only to the extent, however, that communicative relations can be resumed."<sup>1387</sup> Given our current tendency to flatten the actual dynamic of intersubjective relationship into nothing more than an exchange, Benjamin rightfully cautions us to be careful

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<sup>1384</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 71.

<sup>1385</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 40.

<sup>1386</sup> Benjamin, "Discourse," 171; Jessica Benjamin, "The Shadow of the Other Subject: Intersubjectivity and Feminist Theory," *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 97.

<sup>1387</sup> Benjamin, "Discourse," 166.

not to just reverse the terms of dominance and submission.<sup>1388</sup> Thus the repair back to actualizing the original possibility of intersubjective relationship occurs in recognition.<sup>1389</sup>

As alluded to earlier, according to Benjamin, the need for mutual recognition is what so many psychoanalytic theories have missed.<sup>1390</sup> She writes, “Recognition is that response from the other that makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self. It allows itself to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way. But such recognition can only come from another person, whom we, in turn, recognize as a person in his or her own right.”<sup>1391</sup> It is a reflexive, continual exchange of influence between the sameness and difference in each self and the other.<sup>1392</sup> Benjamin details, “Recognition is not a sequence of events, like the phases of maturation and development, but a constant element through all events and phases. Recognition might be compared to that essential element in photosynthesis, sunlight, which provides the energy for the plant’s constant transformation of substance.”<sup>1393</sup> Relating to the theme of a quest for authenticity that runs throughout this dissertation, Benjamin lauded Winnicott for seeing recognition, a reality outside of one’s own projection that nonetheless recognizes one’s self, as a substantial part of what it means to feel authentic and fresh.<sup>1394</sup>

It is crucial to recognize in the above example that the parent *tolerates* the child’s anger, but does not retaliate (a reassertion of domination), walk away (separation or disassembly of the union), but rather is attuned to the child’s anger and withstands it. The anger has affected the parent, but not destroyed him or her, and, based on the parent’s calm reaction, neither has the anger destroyed the child by causing the parent to retaliate. The anger has been held, and in that holding, dissipated. This process of absorbing and metabolizing affect without destruction via a substantial change in response or personality is what it means to engage in an intersubjective relationship. Winnicott believed that infants must learn to use an object, that is, to be able to

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<sup>1388</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 9.

<sup>1389</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 20.

<sup>1390</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 23; Oppenheim summarizes: “Benjamin’s understanding of recognition can be seen to include four important insights: There is a basic human need to be recognized; persons have the capacity to recognize others; there is a corresponding pleasure or pleasures in the fulfillment of this need and capacity; and lastly, recognition rests upon prior experiences of having things in common, and sharing emotions and experiences,” 54.

<sup>1391</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 12.

<sup>1392</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 21, 49.

<sup>1393</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 22.

<sup>1394</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 37.

destroy something in one's psychic mind, and yet have the object survive destruction by the object not responding differently and thus being beyond simply an effect to the infant's cause.<sup>1395</sup> We as humans are able to act in an intersubjective fashion when we are decently mature, and not operating out of too much fusion or enmeshment.

According to Winnicott and Benjamin, we are being psychologically mature human beings when we are "able to creatively benefit from other person" rather than treat the other as an object who will deliver to the other the subject's predetermined needs.<sup>1396</sup> Other theorists have expanded upon this notion of a "creative couple" to also include as a crucial ingredient the idea of flexible containment, as mentioned above, which allows for both defense of what exists, and developmental growth, depending on the situation. This will result in the appropriate amount of projective identification rather than an excessive amount.<sup>1397</sup> As commentators have noted, because of Benjamin's idea of the self as always in development in relationship to the other, boundaries of self are shaped as more porous or rigid based on the types of early mutuality, or lack thereof experienced with caregivers in one's earliest years. Pastoral psychotherapist Lallene Rector in her essay, "Are We Making Love yet? Theological and Psychological Perspectives on the Role of Gender Identity in the Experience of Domination," notes that refusal to recognize the other out of a sense of being caught in a paradox loneliness and fear of intrusiveness is a frequent and consistent problem that starts with the mother-infant dyad and continues to be challenge throughout life stages and relationships. Yet, while this tempting tendency is omnipresent, it is important to guard against giving into, particularly for the caregiver in any dyad. This is because negative recognition, or rejection of recognition when it is sought, leads to more rigid boundaries between self and other, for the infant learns that there is little to nothing positive to learn from the other, so it is best to rely on one's own resources, weak as they may be.<sup>1398</sup> This lack of learning from the other also results in a privation of robust engagement with the complexity of

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<sup>1395</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 38.

<sup>1396</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 37.

<sup>1397</sup> Mary Morgan, "Projective Identification Processes in the Couple Relationship," *Couple Stories: Applications of Psychoanalytic Ideas in Thinking about Couple Interaction*, edited by Alexandra Novakovic and Marguerite Reid, the Library of Couple and Family Psychoanalysis (London; New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2018), 56-64.

<sup>1398</sup> Rector, 83.

the self, causing the growing person to develop what theorists call a “false self,” which are the socially approved elements of the self rather than a holistic, complex self.<sup>1399</sup>

While the language Benjamin engages seems confusing on the face of it, in psychodynamic terms learning how to “use” another is creative and indicates a level of mature engagement. I liken this to the parallel play of babies (“relating” in the sense that they acknowledge someone else is in the room) versus how they interact with each other once they have a stronger sense of self and other as they age (using). Benjamin notes, “When the subject fails to make the transition from “relating” to “using,” it means that he has not been able to place the object outside of himself, to distinguish it from his mental experience of omnipotent control.”<sup>1400</sup> Following her earlier claims, only creative relating to another is honoring that other’s subjectivity. She clearly makes the distinction that “mutual recognition cannot be achieved through obedience, through identification with another’s power, or through repression.”<sup>1401</sup> Although it should be our natural interactive default according to Benjamin, interaction between subjects in itself is not sufficient to be labeled as intersubjective interaction.<sup>1402</sup> Similarly in terms of applying such theory to gender, Benjamin believes that a person becomes a subject when her sense of self as a subject who desires is recognized and asserted by both the woman herself and whomever is interacting with her.<sup>1403</sup> Recognizing and valuing a woman as engaging in activity in which tasks are accomplished is insufficient, for activity alone does not equate authorship.<sup>1404</sup> Her power to love and contribute for her own sake, must be recognized as its own end, rather than as a means to someone else’s ends.

### *Surrender*

Benjamin postulates that after dominance has been dismantled through a mutual process of recognition, a “third space” opens up within and between the two persons involved in the struggle for mutual recognition. She describes this psychic space as “the experience of a co-

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<sup>1399</sup> Rector, 84.

<sup>1400</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 37.

<sup>1401</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 40.

<sup>1402</sup> Benjamin, “Shadow of the Other Subject,” *Shadow*, 80.

<sup>1403</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 87.

<sup>1404</sup> Benjamin, “Introduction,” *Shadow*, xvii.

created space of shared rhythms, attunement, and collaboration,” an experience which begins with early caregivers through their caregiving.<sup>1405</sup> Oppenheim comments that over the course of her career Benjamin, out of her beginning interest to postulate a two-person theory of psychology, “builds up a large vocabulary around the term thirdness, including the ‘shared, intersubjective third,’ the ‘primordial third,’ the ‘symbolic third,’ and the ‘moral third’” of transpersonal interaction.<sup>1406</sup> These respectively refer to a space of negotiation, the space of attunement created by psychically successful caregiving, and the idea of respect for the value of human life.<sup>1407</sup> They become much more than subjective overlap and dynamic creation, but rather involve a fundamentally new and demanding way of relating interpersonally and intimately that allows for the maximum possible achievement of psychological mutual recognition.

Benjamin notes that the moral third means that there is suffering on all sides which deserves recognition rather than adjudicating who is the more legitimate victim. She indicates that in their natural starting state all persons expect to receive care when they need it. Thus in any situation where we are not cared for, we have a “violation of expectancy” that affects us at the psychic level. If one can realize that all human beings deserve respect, then we can address the gap between what should be and what is in terms of recognition.<sup>1408</sup> Lassiter, in reviewing Benjamin’s contributions to a feminist theory of recognition, notes that suspending judgment, as well as judging, is a relational and ethical act. It is important to have within us the practice and ability to suspend judgment in order to live out the golden rule of the moral third, Lassiter concludes, because this is the only way to address our frequent failure in truly understanding and recognizing ourselves.<sup>1409</sup>

Suspending the judgment of blame and self-righteousness we might otherwise have or engage in might be why Benjamin labels this phase of the struggle for mutual recognition “surrender.” At first glance, this is a term which seems off-putting and possibly vestigial to the very ideology of autonomy and submission from which Benjamin is attempting to gain distance.

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<sup>1405</sup> Jessica Benjamin, “‘Moving beyond Violence:’ what we can Learn from Two Former Combatants about the Transition from Aggression to Recognition,” *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory*, edited by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2016), 72.

<sup>1406</sup> Oppenheim, 57.

<sup>1407</sup> Oppenheim, 57.

<sup>1408</sup> Benjamin, “‘Moving Beyond,’” 73.

<sup>1409</sup> Lassiter, 96.

Yet in Benjamin's surrender, one surrenders to the moral claim of the other to be respected and loved no matter what. As she puts it, "Contemporary Freudian ego psychology has often understood submission as a failure to separate and as an inhibition of aggression."<sup>1410</sup> "Surrender" does require giving up a claim to righteousness and just outcomes. It involves being able to move beyond the past, beyond whatever actions have already taken place, and pursue the moral advancement of loving action anew yet again. In this sense, Lassiter notes, recognition is not only about the present, but the future possibility, as postmodern theorist Judith Butler has said in her own writings about recognition, "to solicit becoming."<sup>1411</sup> Quoting her own earlier work, Benjamin writes, "It is the position that transcends the duality of the doer and done-to, the inevitability of kill or be killed, power, and submission."<sup>1412</sup> Instead, surrender is possible in a world where safe attachment to others happens, and is reasserted and repaired when such safe attachment fails.<sup>1413</sup> Being in the intersubjective field of surrender requires a type of witnessing of the pain of the other, particularly, in relationships, of the pain caused to the other by the one witnessing.<sup>1414</sup> This is not easy to do, but it is essential for recognition to reach its fullest depth.

### **Limitations to and weaknesses of Benjamin's work**

There are limitations to Benjamin's theories around issues of power, agency, and consent. As part and parcel of this, she undertheorizes gender as a construct, and thus also does not see the subtleties of how other factors of identity, such as race and sexual orientation, intermingle with gender such that they create different outcomes than would be the case if gender could be treated as a monolithic theme. In this final consideration of Benjamin's theory and its contributions to critical thought, I will review her weaknesses on gender and race as well as indicate she ignores how limited resources in general might lead to constrained choices. This dearth of attention to varieties of constraint and their effect on agency results in the need for a greater subtlety of theory in regards to what feminist ethicist Shay Welch calls "self-perpetuated

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<sup>1410</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 72.

<sup>1411</sup> Lassiter, 99.

<sup>1412</sup> Jessica Benjamin, "Beyond Doer and Done to: An Intersubjective View of Thirdness," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 63: 5-46, quoted by Benjamin, "Moving Beyond," 73.

<sup>1413</sup> Benjamin, "Moving Beyond," 73.

<sup>1414</sup> Benjamin, "Moving Beyond," 82.



oppression.”<sup>1415</sup> I will also defend why, despite these significant weaknesses in Benjamin’s thought, her theory is nonetheless a good foundation from which to work toward mutuality, as Millennials today are at similar places on gender and surrender.

In terms of specifically moving the barometer on gender justice in society, Benjamin highlights recognizing mothers as subjects as a crucial step toward the overall goal.<sup>1416</sup> Despite the importance Winnicott placed on the mother-child dyad for the child, Benjamin states that “No psychological theory has adequately articulated the mother’s independent existence.”<sup>1417</sup> For object relations theory, the mother is a valuable object, but an object nonetheless. Benjamin, in theorizing about the social projection of the gendered differences that makes a mother *qua* mother, however, does not do much better. Like the objects relations theory before her, she can more easily observe how relationship relates to the psychoanalytic cure better than she can address the subtleties of what went wrong in projective splitting in the first place and the subtleties of how and why it continues in contemporary society.

In Benjamin’s *Shadow of the Other*, a collection of three essays published in 1998 a decade after *Bonds*, she admits that in *Bonds* she had some weak ideas on gender, such as calling the vagina a symbol of union. This equating the vagina to a simple container rather than an active element shows vestiges of Freudian thought.<sup>1418</sup> I am not sure in most cases that *Shadow* or any of her later work does much more to address this situation than to name it as a weakness. Her addressing it in *Shadow* as she does fails to significantly make a corrective mark on the notoriety she gained for the thoughts in her first book. Yet in her *Shadow* essay “Constructions of Uncertain Content,” Benjamin theorizes beyond and within the gender binary using Freud’s notion of oedipal conflict, which is the psychoanalytic paradigm for dealing with anything triadic

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<sup>1415</sup> Shay Welch, *Existential Eroticism: A Feminist Approach to Understanding Women’s Oppression-Perpetuating Choices* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 8.

<sup>1416</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 24; Objects lack complexity, or at least recognition of their complexity. Part of the reason why women have historically been treated as psychological objects is that they were assumed to not offer a complexity of capability to their children. Their children had to seek their father for “difference” and the creativity which it brought. While some theories of gender complementarianism today believe that men and women have strengths in different spheres of life which equate to more or less equal power and capacity, most feminists would say that original ideas of the capacity of men and women were always based in the idea that men had more built in ability and flexibility than women even if they did not always display or engage it, *Bonds*, 112, 96.

<sup>1417</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 23.

<sup>1418</sup> Jessica Benjamin, “‘Constructions of Uncertain Content:’ Gender and Subjectivity Beyond the Oedipal Complementarities,” *Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 77.

and beyond dualism. In this essay, she postulates two active partners more robustly than she did in *Bonds*. These two active partners are possible if persons of any gender engage in “bisexual identification,” a cross-sexual identification that Freud identified as present at birth in all people.

This type of fluid, non-binary identification is a fundamental, original human characteristic even as far back as Freudian anthropology. Yet Freud believed that this original capacity at birth develops differently as males and females grow into and develop their bodies and social positions as related to their bodies. Gender as a proportion of one’s personality and self was a splitting phenomenon for Freud, in which natural bisexuality nonetheless necessarily split off into a dominance of one gender or another in a person as they developed and received socialization. For Freud, to fight this inevitable result was to be neurotic, to not accept one’s place in society, whatever that might be.

In “Constructions of Uncertain Content,” however, Benjamin argues the exact opposite, that acceptance and engagement with this very fluidity is a marker of maturity, rather than immature lack of acceptance with the fates of life. She argues that acceptance of one’s bisexual identity uses the totality of the person’s gender at its most fundamental. This integration makes it the more mature position. Furthermore, Benjamin articulates that the oedipal, that which deals with more than two things at once, can serve as a developmental position which signifies a certain degree of complexity of relational capacity. This is much like the post-conventional level of engagement in the moral theories of thinkers like Lawrence Kohlberg and Jean Piaget in which a post-conventional agent is doing more than simply following the accepted rules of the system or relating directly and intimately to a single other source of authority and influence. Rather, he or she is able to take self, other, and relational system into consideration such that ownership and authorship of one’s agency and its effects on others is all taken into account.

At the post-conventional level, a person has the ability to hold things in tension without seeing paradox as a threat. Thus, psychological splitting of subjects into good and bad objects in order to contain and respond to complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity in a simplistic fashion is no longer necessary nor automatic. It is Benjamin’s postulation of how to psychoanalytically hold complexity in its paradoxical tensions while not relativizing nor dismissing the constructed substance of the subject which makes her a useful interlocutor for how to encourage young adults to think more creatively and complexly about the possibilities and predilections of their

intimate relationships. Benjamin epitomizes a theoretical hinge figure between structuralist notions of gender and agency and a post-structuralist future not yet arrived nor fully comforting.

In *Bonds*, and not picked up again in a corrective way in her later work, Benjamin similarly does not interrogate the vestiges of racism that can be associated with her uncritical usage of certain stories toward vastly different ends than that for which they were intended. In the first chapter of *Bonds*, Benjamin outlines how the first bond between mother and child sets up patterns of relating and recognition that are often then reiterated in master-slave dynamics out in the world which she highlights in her second chapter. It is here that she enters troubled waters with commentators. American studies and transatlantic diaspora scholar Sabine Broeck, in her book *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness*, takes Benjamin to task for her assumptions as a white woman around the presumed agency of “slaves” in the central case study Benjamin uses to anchor her points in the second chapter of *Bonds*. Broeck argues that Benjamin’s misreading of *The Story of O*, what Broeck calls “a quasihistoriographical account of Barbadian ex-enslaved black people in rebellion against the British imperial governor [...] not being able to bear their sudden freedom” is “pure anti-Black contempt.”<sup>1419</sup> While I do not agree with Broeck that Benjamin necessarily sees “Blackness as signification of human absence,” because of how she transposes *The Story of O*, Broeck’s painting of Benjamin as analytically sloppy and assumptive in using the story as she does is hard to refute.<sup>1420</sup>

In reviewing Hegel’s master-slave dynamic and connecting it to *The Story of O*, Benjamin points out that there can be affective intimacy in relationship, but it is not actual recognition nor love, as the dominator only appreciates the submissive as an object for the qualities he needs but nothing more.<sup>1421</sup> In using this story, Broeck claims that Benjamin “signifies unquestioning acceptance of the white mythology of the slave’s slavishness, and a willingness to disseminate it.”<sup>1422</sup> Said this way, Benjamin’s transposition of a narrative of inherent racial inequality due to the story’s location in the colony of Barbados to one which can stand as a literary archetype for the extremities of relationship which can occur between all men

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<sup>1419</sup> Sabine Broeck, *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2018), 118.

<sup>1420</sup> Broeck, 5.

<sup>1421</sup> Benjamin, *Bonds*, 52-54.

<sup>1422</sup> Broeck, 118.

and women, can easily be read as sloppy in its neglect of the vast contextual differences between the story and the universal paradigms Benjamin is trying to surmise from it.

This shows that Benjamin, for all her effort to articulate the complicity with which the submissive ones enact their submission as part of a constructive goal of *interrogation* of the patterns of dominance, nonetheless ends up blaming the victim for her oppression. Part of the problem here is that what Benjamin postulates as a sufficiently mature psyche, and the developmental points toward achieving this, are unclear. Without this sense of standard and the ladder steps one must climb to reach it, the construct of a mature psyche that can thus be and is ethically responsible and complicit can end up doing more damage than good in the face of human shortcomings and oppression. Broeck is but one of many people who have pointed out that Benjamin insufficiently theorizes structural constraint and its role in constrained agency. The easy belief that all persons have the capacity to say no, while personal testimony of oppressed persons points to something different, is something Lassiter points out as well.<sup>1423</sup>

To address this need for a theory of ethics within constraint, I point to briefly to Welch's attempts to reconceive what it means morally for women to have constrained choices within patriarchy.<sup>1424</sup> Out of her own experience of having engaged in sex work because of a life on the economic margins, Welch advocates that women as a category deal with constant oppression. This oppression derives from how men and society respond to female beauty and sexuality. Welch believes that in the face of patriarchy, women's choices are corrupted and predetermined. Yet these constraints upon their agency are often not taken into consideration in assessing their moral accountability or blameworthiness, so they are blamed for that which they cannot possibly be fully responsible since they are not, in Welch's opinion, fully engaged agents. Given the constraints under which women operate, Welch suggests that women should be forgiven of the blame they receive for making less than morally perfect choices.<sup>1425</sup> Rather than assign moral blame or praiseworthiness to agents, Welch recommends assessing the morality of the situation at large. This would involve taking into account the broader picture that keeps her (and those

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<sup>1423</sup> Lassiter, 68, 79.

<sup>1424</sup> Welch, 7.

<sup>1425</sup> Welch, 11.

observing her from a distance) from being able to place her life in a moral frame in the first place.<sup>1426</sup>

In sum, when Benjamin glosses over the possibility of a complex relationship of the choice to be complicit or resistant to domination, she is also neglecting to fully theorize how the struggle for mutual recognition might not happen.<sup>1427</sup> Lassiter highlights that Benjamin, more benignly this time than in regards to race, does not account for the possibility and probability of misrecognition. Leaning on Butler again, Lassiter notes that we can be misrecognized on the journey to overcome non-recognition.<sup>1428</sup> Benjamin might translate misrecognition as equivalent to maintaining a situation of dominance and submission, or she might call it something else.

In my view, Benjamin fails to distinguish between having subject status on a theoretical and moral level on the one hand, and the myriad social issues of having it recognized in actual practice on the other hand. This is a difficulty in psychoanalytic literature which Miller-McLemore noted in her chapters on generativity in *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* in 1994. As cultural critic Allison Weir has commented:

While it is probably true that being a subject is a prerequisite to being recognized as one, this fails to address the problems of what it means to be a subject, how women are to become subjects (if indeed they are not subjects already), and what it means to recognize another person as a subject. The assumption, apparently, is that once one is a subject one will automatically be recognized as one.<sup>1429</sup>

And yet we have plenty of evidence that this assumption does not always follow through to reality. As I end this penultimate section, I wonder: does the theory of struggle, of continual

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<sup>1426</sup> Welch, 23; these ideas deserve much more exploration than I can give them here.

<sup>1427</sup> Drawing on the work of Axel Honneth in *The Struggle of Recognition*, philosopher Matthew Congdon differentiates types of recognition and connects them to notions of episteme. Unlike the prevailing theory which runs throughout this dissertation that connects intimacy to mutuality and respect without grand distinction, at least on the optimal theoretical level, Honneth distinguishes between these ideas, such that love is defined by care and attentiveness given to someone who is deserving of some support, while respect is moral worth in a universal sense. Honneth puts forth a third category of esteem which is separate from either: it is indexed individually and is based on one's achievements, character, and contributions to society. All three—love, respect, and esteem—provide normative modes for social recognition, but are certainly not the same, Matthew Congdon citing Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 92-130, Matthew Congdon, "What's wrong with Epistemic Injustice? Harm, Vice, Objectification, and Misrecognition," *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, edited by Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 248.

<sup>1428</sup> Lassiter, 94.

<sup>1429</sup> Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 83.

breakdown into dominance and submission really account for all the types of quasi-closeness, or does there need to be more theoretical articulation on this front?

My most ready answer is two-fold. First, yes, there needs to be much greater theorization around constrained choices than has occurred so far. Second, in terms of how to work across the gap between recognizing and inculcating the agency persons already have and the fact that they are currently not recognized for it, I argue that there is hope ever inherent in new encounter for a little more recognition than there was before. I believe that change can occur, not sanguinely just for wishing it, but rather by engaging a practical, counseling lens applied to those new encounters on a sustained, constant level. It has been the argument of this dissertation that counseling and feminist theory can be applied much more broadly as an expectation of relationship practice at a cultural level rather than just in the therapy room or classroom. While failure and misrecognition do occur on interpersonal and social levels, a crucial part of the theory of an intersubjective relationship is that each encounter involves subjects who have been made slightly anew by their previous encounters. The engagement is never one of static gridlock. The battle might be one involving an uphill climb, but it still holds out hope.

## **SECTION TWO: THE STRUGGLE OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION IN COUPLES COUNSELING**

Women and men alike have traditionally found the gendered expectations that men are essentially dominant and women are essentially submissive to the needs of others reinforced in society at large as well as in secular counseling and pastoral counseling spaces. Pulling together the work of feminist historians and counselors, in this second section of the chapter, I argue that these expectations remain alive at least by the sheer weight of their historical practice. They also remain active because of the lack of prevalent alternatives which directly respond to, and thus significantly rework, these expectations that women are more the coordinators of other people's subjectivity than bearers of their own.

### **The history of intimacy as gendered work**

In her book on the intersections of psychology, gender, and marriage, researcher Caroline Dryden claims that psychology has been one of the hardest disciplines to modernize toward a

feminist perspective because of its association with hard science.<sup>1430</sup> In attempting to make this point, Dryden furthermore points to an extensive literature gap in psychology on the subject of marriage itself. While she writes that much rumination exists in the literature on fear, love, pain, and hurt, when it comes to tackling these issues in relationship to marriage or intimate adult relationship, the ponderings at this particular intersection ironically fall short.<sup>1431</sup> Dryden claims that this is so because marriage is an emotional experience and psychology has never been great at grappling with emotional experience.<sup>1432</sup>

There is considerable truth in this claim. Yet the veracity of Dryden's claim does little to explicate why there is such a contradiction between psychology seeming to address quite a number of emotional issues, depending on the type of relationship in which they express themselves, and psychology failing to say much about these issues, if not outright ignoring that they exist in a context of adult intimacy. Neither does the truth that psychology is uncomfortable with the concept of marriage do much to explain why, on the other hand, marriage and family counseling, couples counseling, and the pastoral dimensions of these forms have often had *quite a bit* to say about spiritualizing and moralizing the psychological dimensions of committed adult relationships of marriage. Thus, I will briefly review the history of gendered imbalance in the spiritualization of family relationships through counseling practices before adumbrating what couples counseling is and what strategies some feminist counselors have suggested for using therapeutic tactics toward moving couples who want it toward greater gender mutuality.

Cultural historians Rebecca Davis and Kristin Celello have recently published books, *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss* (2010) and *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the United States* (2009) respectively, which explore this history of marital counseling as an American religious project deeply bound up with essentialist notions of morality and gender. Davis notes that as pastoral counseling became a rising trend in American culture in the middle of the last century, clergy began to "put secular knowledge and methods to work in a project they imbued with profound theological

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<sup>1430</sup> Caroline Dryden, *Being Married, Doing Gender: A Critical Analysis of Gender Relationships in Marriage* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

<sup>1431</sup> Dryden, 5.

<sup>1432</sup> Dryden, 7.

significance.”<sup>1433</sup> In this way, marriage became codified in religious circles as “a benchmark of spiritual growth” which could be furthered and achieved by appropriating psychological method and philosophy toward religious ends.<sup>1434</sup> Davis and Celeslo attribute this appropriation as an attempt by clergy, who were competing with the expert claims of secular scientists for authority and status in American society at the time (and still are), to incorporate and subsume therapeutic ideology into helping them to uphold the stature of religion and its values as authoritative.<sup>1435</sup>

Eventually clergy and committed Christians began to see marriage and the psychological relationship it stood for as “a religious objective, a sacred relationship with the power to sustain and perpetuate communities of faith.”<sup>1436</sup> While much could be written about marriage as a religious objective and has been, the point of Davis and Celeslo’s chronologies shed light on the historically constructed nature of how the advent of psychology and its use in pastoral counseling in the United States came to align with marriage as a religious objective that could lead to spiritual fulfillment.<sup>1437</sup> Counselors and social workers also still claim that marriage can lead to social upward mobility.<sup>1438</sup> Furthermore, any arrangement of structure outside of this model of emotional maintenance by the woman and financial responsibility by the man was seen as socially aberrant, and impinging upon the ability of a family to move up socially and financially. Thus, marriage counselors contributed to American culture as seeing African American families as pathological because it was common for both women and men to work out of financial need.<sup>1439</sup>

Davis and Celeslo also note in their books how preconceived, essentialist notions about gender fed into and perpetuated themselves throughout the history of American couples counseling. Davis remarks that, according to counselors, “Healthy heterosexuality required both a husband’s employment and a wife’s emotional dependence,” particularly during the 1950s and

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<sup>1433</sup> Rebecca Davis, *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 138.

<sup>1434</sup> Davis, 138.

<sup>1435</sup> Davis, 2-3, 161; Kristin Celeslo, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3, 6-7.

<sup>1436</sup> Davis, 161.

<sup>1437</sup> Davis, 254.

<sup>1438</sup> Davis, 84.

<sup>1439</sup> Davis, 7.



60's post-World War Two period of incredible material affluence.<sup>1440</sup> Individualism ramping up in the 1960s caused social upheaval to this arrangement. Yet no matter the new arrangement, women continued to find themselves in the counseling room and at home needing to “adjust” more than men.<sup>1441</sup> In short, women were held responsible for marriages, children, and the emotions of themselves and their family members. This was particularly true at the middle of the last century, but remains true today.

Not only was domestic and emotional responsibility women's “work,” it was imperative to work hard to achieve success in these areas.<sup>1442</sup> Women were very specifically not to seek fulfillment outside of these areas, such as in the public arena or in paid employment.<sup>1443</sup> When women complained of dissatisfaction in life, counselors, following Freudian psychoanalytic theory that women were naturally pathological because they were envious that they were not men and therefore deficient as human beings, “still attributed those frustrations to underlying sexual pathologies” which could not be resolved, rather than seeking to ameliorate or eliminate the dissatisfaction.<sup>1444</sup>

When it came to how men should operate in a marriage, Davis remarks that “Men received contradictory messages about household leadership and marital mutuality. Through the 1940s and 1950s, for instance, clergy and social workers urged men to serve as spiritual and emotional partners to their wives even as they reminded married couples to value the husband's career above the wife's.”<sup>1445</sup> The male ego was seen as fragile. It was so greatly in need of—and

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<sup>1440</sup> Davis, 89.

<sup>1441</sup> Davis, 177, 183.

<sup>1442</sup> Celello, 3.

<sup>1443</sup> Celello 76, 77.

<sup>1444</sup> Davis, 182; Freudian theory on women as regressive, poorly turned out men is nicely summarized by feminist practical theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore in *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 46, 47.

<sup>1445</sup> Davis, 4; By very definition, sociologist Jo VanEvery notes, writing in the mid-1990s, the role of “wife” is defined as a woman subordinate to a particular man. This involves appropriation of the women's labor by the man, and often some degree, if not total, economic dependence. VanEvery suggests that in concrete practices, refusing to “play wife” can involve a married woman not taking her husband's name (or I would say at least not losing her own), rejecting economic reliance and the unfair usage and control of the woman's emotional and sexual labor by the male partner, Jo VanEvery, *Refusing to be a Wife! Heterosexual Women Changing the Family* (London and Bristol, PA: Taylor and Francis, 1995), 15, 5, 16. Joining a long line of feminists who have thought this way, feminist theologian Kathlyn Breazeale claims that women have been socialized to be victims of violence and other forms of oppression and subordination because they have been encouraged to believe that they are less valuable and powerful than their husbands, Kathlyn Breazeale, *Mutual Empowerment: A Theology of Marriage, Intimacy, and Redemption* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 24.

deserving of— management and uplift from wives that wives were blamed for not doing enough to emotionally support their husbands. Thus they were also blamed when their husbands engaged in alcoholism and domestic violence.<sup>1446</sup> No marriage problem could not be overcome as long as the wife recognized her culpability for it and worked to address it.<sup>1447</sup>

As divorce became more common, people often blamed the increase of divorce on women's rising expectations of marriage.<sup>1448</sup> This blame could be seen as both empirical fact as women did seek more fulfillment and power in their lives and questioned the role their families played in this balance, and also as a foolish, egoistic desire on the part of women wanting too much. It thus goes without saying that the questioning of power and inequalities of power in status and resources by gender went unconsidered as relevant elements of couples counseling for many years.<sup>1449</sup> Still today cultural commentators who research intimate gender relations such as Mark Regnerus and Eva Illouz remark that women fail to put enough value on themselves in the market of intimate sexual and partnership relations to ask for and demand what they want.<sup>1450</sup> Illouz highlights that self-doubt in 2010 remains a predominately female-expressed trope.<sup>1451</sup>

At the end of *More Perfect Unions*, Davis concludes that couples counseling has dangerously served as an indoctrination tool toward the value of marriage as a religious goal much more than it has served as an effective means toward improving relationship quality.<sup>1452</sup> She notes that leading researcher of marital therapy efforts John Gottman has been quoted publicly as saying that “a large part of marital therapy is not working. That is just a very consistent finding in the research literature.”<sup>1453</sup> Despite this assessment at the professional level,

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<sup>1446</sup> Davis, 92.

<sup>1447</sup> Ceello, 10.

<sup>1448</sup> Ceello, 24.

<sup>1449</sup> Not until the 1970s would counselors consider unequal power as contributing to domestic violence, Davis, 190-1.

<sup>1450</sup> Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 66.

<sup>1451</sup> Illouz, 153.

<sup>1452</sup> Davis, 9, 258.

<sup>1453</sup> Davis, 258, drawing on John Gottman and his body of work around observational-interactive research of couples, has noted that couples counseling repeatedly fails to secure lasting, positive results, noted in Karen S. Paterson, “Caught in the Middle: Criticism, New Ideas Pull Marital Therapists Asunder,” *USA Today*, June 29, 1999, 1D; This is in part because only couples already in a poor relationship head to counseling, and because counselors improperly diagnose the problem of what it takes for couples to reach and maintain relational fulfillment. Gottman notes that, “Only between 11% and 18% of couples maintain clinically meaningful initial gains when

it is nonetheless the case that Americans substantially believe in therapy as avenue for relational aid based on the number who appeal to its help, especially in the case of a dearth of alternatives. Davis writes, “[M]illions of couples head to marriage counseling each year despite its dismal approval ratings because the pursuit of marital satisfaction remains key to their conceptions of both self and community.”<sup>1454</sup> A good psychologist can see the gravity of such conceptions of intimate satisfaction in contrast to how ill prepared and late in the course of their relationship that people take themselves to couples therapy and know that there is much work to be done about this gap between desire and relational reality, particularly in setting up cultural expectations of how a satisfying relationship works and what it involves in terms of practices.

Despite instances of marital delay, research on the contemporary generation of Millennials indicates that this dream of personal and social satisfaction through marriage is still substantially operative today. And yet, as has been noted in earlier chapters, a satisfying intimate relationship correlates statistically with one in which men and women both give and take even though it is often women who must ask for this equality and men who must grant it. In the past and still today, Celeslo notes, women who wanted egalitarian marriages were still the ones responsible for making it happen.<sup>1455</sup>

### **Benefits of psychodynamic couples counseling**

Despite the history of couples counseling being rife with the problems thus far mentioned, I believe that psychodynamic theory, and the couples counseling practices which come out of it, remains a valuable piece of equipment in working toward greater gender mutuality in intimate relationships because it acknowledges and seeks to address our underlying anxieties and motivations. In examining the practical implications of both Benjamin’s theories and the history of gendered asymmetry in counseling, I provide a brief overview of what psychodynamic couples counseling looks like through what primary psychological and interpersonal issues typically need therapeutic resolution (archaic image projections) and how

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treated with our *best* marital therapies,” John Mordechai Gottman, *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), emphasis added, 5.

<sup>1454</sup> Davis, 258.

<sup>1455</sup> Celeslo, 118; Karla Hackstaff, *Marriage in a Culture of Divorce* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999), 53.

therapy, generally, works to achieve resolution or amelioration of these concerns (a process called containment).

Counselors Jim Crawley and Jan Grant outline that the underlying principle of the psychodynamic approach to therapy is the belief that behavior is determined by the unconscious as well as conscious motivations. Thus, it is of primary importance that there is an outlet for exploring the unconscious.<sup>1456</sup> Psychodynamic counselor Albert Brok elucidates further:

psychodynamic couple therapy involves education and elucidation of what goes on for both the couple and each member outside of awareness and its impact on the couple organizational climate. A major principle of all psychodynamic approaches is that only when someone has a sense of what goes on internally can he or she truly have a grip on choices in work, friendship, and love relationships.<sup>1457</sup>

As such, couples counseling helps the individuals understand, reflect, and discuss in session what inhibits the quality of the relationship.<sup>1458</sup>

### *Archaic images and projection*

The intimacy of being family, of being real and dependent upon each other, and thus vulnerable to each other, opens up people who couple to being triggered by what psychodynamic theory calls “archaic images.” These archaic images are patterns of relationships instituted by our caregivers at our earliest stages of dependency. Psychoanalytic theory holds that persons in adulthood unconsciously seek intimacy partners who mimic in some way these earlier patterns of relationship in an effort to “solve” the problem of pain caused by dysfunction in these patterns.<sup>1459</sup> Because of the intensity of the re-activation of archaic images in intimate adult relationships, addressing the unconscious in couples’ therapy is particularly important.<sup>1460</sup> Not all couples therapy, by far, takes the psychoanalytic approach. Emotion-based therapy and

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<sup>1456</sup> Jim Crawley and Jan Grant, *Couple Therapy: The Self in Relationship* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 7, 8.

<sup>1457</sup> Albert J. Brok, “Psychodynamic Couples Counseling,” *Behavioral, Humanistic–existential, and Psychodynamic Approaches to Couples Counseling*, edited by Michael D. Reiter and Ronald J. Chenail (New York: Routledge, 2017), 16.

<sup>1458</sup> Brok, 30.

<sup>1459</sup> Shelley Nathans, “Introduction: Core Concepts of the Tavistock Couple Psychotherapy Model,” *Couples on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Couple Therapy and the Tavistock Model*, edited by Shelley Nathans and Milton Schaefer (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 4-7.

<sup>1460</sup> Nathans, 5.

communicative therapy, two common forms of couples counseling, attempt to address deep standing issues only through addressing present behavior and address how the present is related to the past at an insufficient level, if at all.

Archaic images are almost by definition ones of power imbalance and dependency, for only situations that are overwhelming are internalized to such a degree according to psychodynamic theory. Internalization refers to the psychic usage of an experience to form a template out of which one acts in future situations.<sup>1461</sup> Psychodynamic theory postulates that the stuff which we call “personality,” our preferences, our relationship patterns, our sense of reward and desire, is built up through gradual relationship with the environment around us. Most psychologists today believe that we can internalize both the good and bad, but that bad experiences, especially when we are young, have a particular hold on us in terms of how we react to future situations.<sup>1462</sup>

Psychodynamic theory holds that such intimacy of coupling by adults involves projections, in which qualities of the previous patterns of relationship are assumed to be present in the new one, whether or not they are actually present. Archaic images trigger projections, according to psychodynamic theory, because of the strength of previous wiring as original and as wired when the person involved was helpless and dependent. Coupling requires continuing to deal with these unresolved issues of how previous relationships were or were not healthy via engaging in the new relationship in which the now adult person has more agency and conscious ability to engage in a healthy, mutual way. Yet it is imperative that the adult must use this adult power maturely in order to actualize it and make it real.<sup>1463</sup> Here lays the crux. Without engaging adult power in an adult way, projections and archaic images can actually shut down adult growth or cause the person to leave the contemporary adult relationship out of fear of reverting to a dependent, powerless state of intimacy that they had as a child. Since projections are old relational patterns mimicked in the present, they are unconscious and the original root causes for such behaviors and patterns are deeply repressed. Because they are protective mechanisms, although dysfunctional ones, projections are not easy to bring to light and disentangle from the

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<sup>1461</sup> Poulton, 5; Nathans notes that one will always act unconsciously in the present out of a reaction to past patterns, and that this is unavoidable, thus “determined,” 4.

<sup>1462</sup> Poulton, 4.

<sup>1463</sup> Crawley and Grant. 7.

contemporary relationship. However, it is crucial for this to occur in order for the members of the couple to gain more agency over their own authorship of their intimate relationship so that the relationship is responded to with the greatest possible maturity and health. Therefore, much of couples' therapy is helping couples withdraw from the projections they have made of each other.<sup>1464</sup>

### *Containment*

In order for these archaic projections to be brought to current consciousness, it is necessary to create an emotionally safe enough space through a psychological process called “containment,” in Wilfred Bion’s words, or, in object relations theory following Winnicott, “a holding environment.” Whatever it is called, this procedural space of open inquiry and recognition allows a shift of relational dynamics out of which one operates to a more clear-sighted focus on the dynamics of the actual current relationship. However, to accomplish these two things requires careful attention to what is not being said. It also involves inquiry into the various unconscious possible motivations for behaviors as well as how past relates to present. If possible, the listener, who often has a particular preexisting relationship to the teller, must listen to the pain of the teller without emotionally and psychologically removing their presence from the telling, or immediately defending against any complicity in the pain.<sup>1465</sup> This process of unearthing of pain which is facilitated by a compassionate neutral party is the actual moment of containment in the overall therapeutic process of bringing psychodynamic elements to consciousness.

Containment is hard to facilitate, which is why the presence of an interested yet disinterested party of a therapist is so helpful to providing an empathetic ear. A neutral or disinterested person has less everyday complicity and involvement in the situation, and he or she is deeply trained to help people address their emotions without becoming overrun by it.<sup>1466</sup> This distance further allows a third party to “privilege a stance of inquiry, rather than certainty,” giving hurting people assurance that they will not be further victimized by the authority of

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<sup>1464</sup> Crawley and Grant, 10.

<sup>1465</sup> Alison Lake, Elizabeth R. Goren, and Judith L. Alpert, “Conclusion: Psychoanalysis, Trauma, and Community: Lessons Learned,” *Psychoanalysis, Trauma, and Community: History and Contemporary Reappraisals*, edited by Judith L. Alpert and Elizabeth R. Goren (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 249.

<sup>1466</sup> Lake et al., 242-249.

someone's foregone conclusion or interpretation of their problems. Rather, the hurting person's own problems remain his or hers to name, claim, and resolve, even as recognition of these moves is facilitated by the empathetic listener.<sup>1467</sup>

Psychologist James Poulton describes the roots of containment in both theory and the human lifecycle as involving the “mother's capacity to identify with the unmoderated sensory and affective experiences the infant has projected on to her. Once the mother identifies with those experiences, she then reflects upon, mentalizes and moderates them so that she can return them to the infant in a more tolerable and digestible form.”<sup>1468</sup> Poulton notes that this literal and metaphoric “holding” models an emotional and physical experience for the infant, which eventually allows the infant to develop similar tools as he or she develops by experiencing what it is like to have moderated experience.<sup>1469</sup> He notes that adequate containment involves respect, nonreactive engagement with emotions, acceptance of the development of projections, and thoughtfulness.<sup>1470</sup>

Couples psychoanalyst Mary Morgan notes that a “creative couple” is able to provide containment for each other in healing and productive ways. They are able to take new thoughts and feelings into themselves and deal with them positively to create new experience. This requires disengaging from natural narcissistic tendencies toward what psychoanalysis unfortunately calls the “depressive position” in which one feels concern and regard for another.<sup>1471</sup> This depressive position is possible when one, having had good enough caregiving, is not over-fearful that one's own physical and psychological needs will not be met. Having had needs met, there is no reason to not have the natural space and energy for concern for the other, since energy does not need to be used in self-defense.<sup>1472</sup>

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<sup>1467</sup> Lake et al., 249.

<sup>1468</sup> Poulton, 7.

<sup>1469</sup> Poulton, 7.

<sup>1470</sup> Poulton, 39.

<sup>1471</sup> Mary Morgan, “On being able to be a Couple: The Importance of the ‘Creative Couple’ in Psychic Life,” *Oedipus and the Couple*, edited by Francis Grier (London: Karnac, 2005), 9-30, cited by Nathans, 19; the ability to take the depressive position is also noted as crucial to healthy couple relationships by Stanley Ruzsyczynski, “Couples on the Couch: Working Psychoanalytically with Couple Relationships,” *Couples on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Couple Therapy and the Tavistock Model*, edited by Shelley Nathans and Milton Schaefer (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 33.

<sup>1472</sup> Aleksandra Novakovic, “‘As My Shriveled Heart Expanded:’ The Dynamics of Love, Hate, and Generosity in the Couple,” *Couple Stories: Application of Psychoanalytic Ideas in Thinking about Couple Interaction*, edited by

Relative levels or states of narcissism versus depressive positioning can oscillate with the situation, just like any system of positive or negative feedback can accumulate energy in a certain direction based on the situation of the environment it is in. Generally, a creative couple involves two people who are engaged in a balance between the consideration of self and of intimate other in any given moment. In terms of how a therapist can observe a slip of a creative couple into one member of the partnership retreating to a narcissistic state, psychoanalyst Rachel Cooke comments that it is clear that a person is inhabiting a narcissistic state whenever he or she acts in denial of or protest to consideration of the beloved other, since this is outside the normal state of affairs.<sup>1473</sup> The ability to live more out of one's depressive inclinations rather than one's narcissistic inclinations requires the paradoxical capacities of individuation and intimacy, separation and attachment, self-reflection, among others.<sup>1474</sup> It also requires, as Cooke notes, "an awareness of the fact of dependence," as well as the fact that every couple, no matter how healthy, invariably oscillates between narcissistic and healthier states naturally.<sup>1475</sup>

Therapists create and provide a therapeutic space-holding for clients to feel safely themselves, Poulton comments; I believe that couples can increase their capacity to do this for each other.<sup>1476</sup> Of great importance to translating therapeutic notions to lay person couples engagement, Cooke cautions that often needs of self, relationship, and other will run into conflict with each other in the natural course of a couple's relationship. When this happens there will need to be reflection and resolution of whose needs will come first and how they will be met. This resolution may be ambivalent or tolerant, rather than a situation of full contentment, but it will be a resolution nonetheless which will allow the couple to move on.<sup>1477</sup>

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Aleksandra Novakovic and Marguerite Reid (London; New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, 2018), 7-10.

<sup>1473</sup> Rachel Cooke, "Discussion of 'Couples on the Couch: Working Psychoanalytically with Couple Relationships,'" *Couples on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Couple Therapy and the Tavistock Model*, edited by Shelley Nathans and Milton Schaefer (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 57.

<sup>1474</sup> Mary Morgan, "On Being able to be a Couple," cited by Nathans, 18-19.

<sup>1475</sup> Cooke, 51.

<sup>1476</sup> Poulton, 7.

<sup>1477</sup> Cooke, 51.



Morgan highlights that the cure to narcissistic retrenchment and break down from a relationship of mutuality is to re-inspire curiosity and discovery of the other.<sup>1478</sup> In the safety of contained space, there is the opportunity to re-examine the meaning of an experience and attribute a revised significance to it created out of the imaginative potential of making new meaning with every new interaction.<sup>1479</sup> Yet often this potential is hard to reach for numerous reasons, among them the amount of not good enough caregiving that causes insufficient recognition, or violation of it.

### *Challenges to containment*

In regards to certain intense degrees of pain we call trauma, therapists note that even if this holding space is created, those whose patterns of interaction have been deeply affected by significant negative events in their lives may not be able to easily experience safety in such a space because of the depth of their pain and psychic injury.<sup>1480</sup> Trauma theorist Katie Gentile writes, “Trauma can render the precariousness of subjectivity that ideally presents opportunities for innovative re-creation, persecutory and re-traumatizing. Space for reflection can feel intolerable.”<sup>1481</sup> Trauma and pain can make it difficult to self-reflect, or to be comfortable taking the space necessary to see things from any view than the current one, something Benjamin herself later acknowledges as she transfers her theoretical work around moral and symbolic thirds into reparative work.<sup>1482</sup> Trauma theorists note that it takes significant repatterning of relationships of trust and safety for the person to detach from the grasp on the defensive mode

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<sup>1478</sup> Mary Morgan, “Unconscious Beliefs about Being a Couple,” *Couples on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Couple Therapy and the Tavistock Model*, edited by Shelley Nathans and Milton Schaefer (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), 62-81, 78.

<sup>1479</sup> Katie Gentile, “Collectively Creating Conditions for Emergence,” *Wounds of History: Repair and Resilience in the Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma*, edited by Jill Salberg and Sue Grand (New York: Routledge, 2017), 169-188, 172-174.

<sup>1480</sup> As theologian Ellen Charry outlines in regard to the call for Christians to live into a call toward happiness and flourishing, she writes, “Not living within normal circumstances—such as in war, random violence, and the deprivation of normal agency—will, of course, interrupt the ability to live beautifully. Circumstances that cause people to become mean and vicious for a time in order to preserve their own lives and safety are proper self-love as part of the give and take of finding equilibrium in the changes and chances of life. However, when such deprivation is prolonged to such an extent that one loses an identity outside the abuse, and one’s agency is permanently—not just temporarily—damaged, the possibility of happiness in the sense discussed here may be severely limited,” Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010), 275.

<sup>1481</sup> Gentile, 171.

<sup>1482</sup> Benjamin, “Moving Beyond,” 74.

that the trauma forced them into.<sup>1483</sup> On a smaller scale, this is the same way in which situations of anger, worry, and distrust in everyday relationships are repaired, by enough space in someone's emotional system being brought in by an outside party for the person to give space of listening and attention to the intimate other.<sup>1484</sup>

Benjamin and most other counselors note that the ability to frequently engage in a "third space" requires an ability to deal with emotions in one's self to a high degree so that they are accepted, tolerated, and turned into something which promotes relationship. In other words, one must learn to "contain" and "hold" one's unmoderated emotions so that they become moderated. Yet so often, when faced with intense emotion, we are tempted to disassociate, to pull away psychically from being fully present. Benjamin notes that this natural tendency must not engender shame and a feeling of moral fault, at least not for very long. Rather it must be accepted as a step along a constant cycling of acknowledging the presence of suffering so that it can be dealt with rather than avoided.<sup>1485</sup>

As psychoanalytic theorist Nina Thomas summarizes, much of what goes on in a counseling room can be applied, albeit with less expertise, to outside situations in order to broaden the reach and effect of psychoanalytic strategies for healing. She writes, "what constitutes 'the psychoanalytic' [...] is the self-reflectiveness, the processing of multiple threads, as well as the careful attention to our own and others' reactions, thoughts to the extent that we can have them, feelings."<sup>1486</sup> In sum, persons offering each other psychoanalytic attunement and empathy should expect that the telling of painful stories or the claiming of pain will be emotional for the teller. This pain will be indicated through affective changes which are often body-based and non-verbal. It is equally important for the listener to be self-reflective and internally honest about their natural lapses of attunement in listening and desire to engage, accepting them for what they are and recommitting to providing the other the space to heal through such careful

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<sup>1483</sup> See Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul: Surprising Connections between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices that can Transform Your Life and Relationships* (Carol Stream, IL: Salt River, 2010).

<sup>1484</sup> I believe that we all experience an inability and resistance to entering "third spaces" to some degree, and this intolerability can be a result of power imbalances which create unhealthy relationships for all involved. Gentile, notes, as have others previously mentioned, that theories of witnessing and intersubjective engagement do not adequately account for systems of power which need to be acknowledged in treating trauma survivors, Gentile, 173.

<sup>1485</sup> Benjamin, "Moving Beyond," 82-84.

<sup>1486</sup> Nina K. Thomas, "Foreword," *Psychoanalysis, Trauma, and Community: History and Contemporary Reappraisals*, edited by Judith L. Alpert and Elizabeth R. Goren (London; New York: Routledge, 2017), xiv.

engagement. What psychologists offer most as a form of cure Thomas writes, is “our expertise in sensitively attuned moments.”<sup>1487</sup> Lake, Alpert, and Gorden conclude that the quality of listening, whoever is doing it, is the most important thing to psychoanalytic cure.<sup>1488</sup>

### **Feminist counseling strategies for progress in psychodynamic mutual recognition**

Most feminists would say a position of advocacy and active affirmation of the worth of people is additionally necessary to effectively communicate the deep respect necessary to listen and provide emotional containment for others. In addition, counselors seeking to address gender imbalance in the intimate relationships of their clients must further suggest concrete strategies for how to explore this asymmetry and the pain it is causing consciously with clients so that it can then be addressed by them. Among the most blatant of gender inequities that almost every feminist commentator notes first off is that the economic reliance of the woman upon the man. Given the pay differentials between men and women, earnings are the single biggest power differential that needs to be taken into account when assessing the relationship; even if the fruits of this male economic “providership” are shared with the woman and their dependents, her control over and influence of being provided for itself is limited and imbalanced. Furthermore, it remains an often unconscious issue of asymmetry as it is often considered beyond the bounds of analysis or change.<sup>1489</sup>

Counselors Rik Rusovick and Carmen Knudson-Martin note that young adult Americans approach their intimate relationships as a peer relationship these days, but that does not mean there are not underlying gender inequality ideologies at work.<sup>1490</sup> They remark that the difference between what one consciously believes and the psychodynamics of intimate attraction are often at odds in young couples and has to be addressed. Rusovick and Knudson-Martin write, a

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<sup>1487</sup> Thomas, xv.

<sup>1488</sup> Lake et al., 249.

<sup>1489</sup> This is noted as particularly salient in immigrant couples’ relationships because of the standard of the dual-income economy of the contemporary United States by Jose A. Maciel and Zanetta Van Putten, “Pushing the Gender Line: How Immigrant Couples Reconstruct Power” in *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Springer 2009), 237.

<sup>1490</sup> Rik Rusovick and Carmen Knudson-Martin, “Gender Discourse in Relationship Stories of Young American Couples,” *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Springer 2009), 284.

“partner’s frequent focus on individuality complicates the issue. Couples are often drawn to each other because they are better able to know themselves and their own goals through the other.”<sup>1491</sup> They note that the clinical implications of this dynamic requires a therapist to examine gender-difference discourses happening with the relationship, as well as expect contradictions regarding what gender means and does in their context. They note that this does not indicate a confused self necessarily, but that the lived experience of the self and society, to oversimplify it in my opinion, are in conflict over gender and gender roles.

One of the primary ways of opening up this exploration they recommend, as I highlight and model in my own analysis of gender inequality, is to bring to conscious and precise analysis the “dominant-male discourse” in which men take the responsibility for many things, including relationship initiation and progression.<sup>1492</sup> Knudson-Martin notes that the therapist in question must also be particularly aware of how he or she enacts these contradictions unconsciously, even when trying not to do so. She cites a 2015 study in which therapists of both genders in sessions with heterosexual couples were found to be reinforcing male privilege by encouraging women to accommodate themselves to men in order to protect men from shame at the woman’s expense.<sup>1493</sup>

Maciel and Van Putten add that moving the balance of gender equality in client relationships can be facilitated by encouraging couples to see present culture as changing and fluid rather than fixed and helping both partners feel comfortable as the women in the relationship come to new voice.<sup>1494</sup> Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney add that change can also occur if four interpersonal patterns are explored and worked toward by the couple and the therapist: “1) active negotiation about family life, 2) challenging gender entitlement, 3) development of new competencies, 4) and mutual attention to relationships and family tasks.”<sup>1495</sup>

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<sup>1491</sup> Rusovick and Knudson-Martin, 293.

<sup>1492</sup> Rusovick and Knudson-Martin, 293.

<sup>1493</sup> J.L. ChenFeng and A. Galick, “How Gender Discourses Hijack Couples Therapy—And How to Avoid It.” *Socio-Emotional Relationship Therapy: Bridging Emotion, Societal Context, and Couple Interaction*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin, M. Wells, and S.K. Samman (New York: Springer, 2015), 41-52, cited by Carmen Knudson-Martin, “Gender in Couple and Family Life: Toward Inclusiveness and Equality,” *Diversity in Couple and Family Therapy: Ethnicities, Sexualities, and Socioeconomics*, edited by Shalonda Kelly (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2017), 166; Mahoney and Knudson-Martin, “Gender Equality,” 7.

<sup>1494</sup> Maciel and Van Putten, 251-252.

<sup>1495</sup> Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney, “Beyond Gender: The Processes of Relationship Equality” in *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009). 64-78, 72-73.

In the counseling room specifically, this involves everyone developing consciousness of how gender expectations can limit and inhibit balances of power. It also demands learning to deal with conflict in order for inequalities to be expressed so that they can be challenged and changed. This change requires both partners to develop new competencies and focus on gender equality as a process that can be operationalized and investigated in order to break the patterns that have facilitated to the maintenance of gender inequality.<sup>1496</sup>

Knudson-Martin and Mahoney note that couples are often unaware of the power imbalances of their relationship until a therapist “asks a key question.”<sup>1497</sup> They further remark that this inequality compounds upon itself in the counseling room, as research shows that when power is unequal, both partners are inclined to hide their emotions and thoughts because neither feel they can afford to be vulnerable.<sup>1498</sup> Knudson-Martin therefore advocates for an intentional and explicit therapy model of a “circle of care” which emphasizes a) mutual vulnerability, b) mutual attunement, c) mutual influence, and d) shared relational responsibility.<sup>1499</sup>

### **Chapter conclusion: Lassiter’s call to claim our “wildness” of desire and complexity**

Thoroughly understanding the struggle between couples for mutual psychological recognition is a necessary first step before such learnings can be translated into broad cultural use. In this chapter, I have reviewed the basic tenets of feminist relational psychology through the work of Jessica Benjamin and how such ideas have been put into therapeutic application by feminist and couples therapists. I highlight that theories of misrecognition and constrained agency are insufficiently developed in the current body of literature and need to be addressed in

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<sup>1496</sup> Knudson-Martin and Mahoney, “Beyond,” 76-7.

<sup>1497</sup> Anne Rankin Mahoney and Carmen Knudson-Martin, “Gender Equality in Intimate Relationships,” *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 6.

<sup>1498</sup> W. Robert Beavers, *Successful Marriage: A Family Systems Approach to Couples Therapy* (New York: Norton, 1985) cited by Mahoney and Knudson-Martin, “Gender Equality,” 8; Mahoney and Knudson-Martin note “When power differences are well ingrained, compliance occurs without overt power struggles and conflict,” Mahoney and Knudson-Martin, “The Social Context of Gendered Power” in *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 19.

<sup>1499</sup> Knudson-Martin, “Gender in Couple and Family Life,” 166; Dryden cautions that opening up questions of power and gender to investigation and greater thought in intimate relationships can have the transitional effect of making them more reified, so patient commitment to push through this transitional moment is important, Dryden, 61.

order to further articulate the moral nature of repair and surrender. What is crucially generative about the psychodynamics of couple relationships is the ability to repair excess projections. However, this can only be done if moral complicity and solidarity in interpersonal acts are better theorized.

I hope I have made my case in this chapter that psychoanalysts and counselors are useful persons couples can engage toward psychological growth. Yet following human development theorist Robert Kegan's proposition that culture needs more scaffolding in order for people to develop and advance their psychological capacity, I propose that greater conceptualizing of what it would take for couples to more readily experience this development in the extra-counseling spaces in which they spend most of their lives would be highly beneficial.<sup>1500</sup> I believe it is possible—and entirely necessary—for everyday people without extensive connection to psychotherapeutic resources to be able to engage with and practice intersubjective concepts “across the curriculum,” as Kegan calls it, of all aspects of life.<sup>1501</sup>

Yet to do so requires a leap of faith. Kegan does not articulate well what causes the demands of modern society to be beyond that of its preparation (although he says habit and cultural lag are a large part of it). Having experienced personal and couples relational growth myself, as well as having studied it extensively, I would guess that this gap comes about because what is needed to relate on an inter-individual level requires a level of what Lassiter calls “sacred wilderness.” Lassiter writes:

Embracing the wilderness [...] is vital to living into the tension of optimal recognition and assertion. Optimal recognition is ultimately about learning to love differently: in freedom, in openness, acknowledging the danger that we cannot escape from because we live our lives on a horizon of care in which we are failed and in which we also fail others, especially those we care about. Failures in recognizing and asserting may be failures in care, but they are not irreparable.<sup>1502</sup>

We need to be willing to live in this unknown, more worried about the needs and callings of our inner selves than fearing social rules and regulations of the known. As a postmodern Millennial

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<sup>1500</sup> Davis noted in her historical work on the influences and efficacy of couples counseling that it took about two years of weekly appointments with a therapist for couples to have significant changes to their behavior, Davis, 231. This indicates how many hours of direct effort (often several hours of “homework” throughout the week are concomitant to a single therapy hour) it takes to begin to consistently re-pattern a behavior or relationship.

<sup>1501</sup> See Robert Kegan, *In Over our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>1502</sup> Lassiter, 170.

would be likely to argue, I agree with Lassiter and others who hold this thought: it is in this wilderness that our true selves come out.<sup>1503</sup> We need to practice self-reflection, discernment, and loving communication of ourselves with those closest to us to truly experience and embrace this wilderness. Otherwise, the intimates we claim to know we can hardly claim as intimate.

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<sup>1503</sup> Lassiter, 167.

## Project Conclusion: Love's Intuition? Making it Mutual in Christian Intimacy

*My denomination often asks how we might better welcome young adults. It's a complex question with many responses, but my experience may be illustrative. My withdrawal from the church was partly a result of my longing to be a part of the church that had room for my whole self. I couldn't be involved if I constantly felt shamed by my questions in my identity. Eventually, I understood the welcome, and came to recognize God's love was big enough for me. God can handle my tensions, and questions, and doubts.*

Kyle J. Thorson, Millennial gay man<sup>1504</sup>

*Love is not a natural aptitude, it is an acquired skill, a virtue or habitus that characterizes persons who consistently are able to attend to the needs, well-being, and concerns of others, and find joy in doing so.*

Ethicist Paul Wadell<sup>1505</sup>

### STILL SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Feminist journalist Jill Filipovic writes in *The H-Spot: The Feminist Pursuit of Happiness* that it is highly important as a feminist cause for women to emphasize their right to achieve happiness. She uses each chapter to point out a main theme of how women are, in fact, discouraged and structurally prevented from pursuing happiness through the continuation of the practice of dropping their family-of-origin surname upon marriage, the encouragement to lose oneself in parenting yet assert one's self in work to the detriment of people liking them, and the pressure to find yet more simultaneous paradoxical perfection—but not pleasure—in food and staying fit. Among the paradoxes Filipovic explores is the contradiction of wanting and expecting equality in intimate relationships, but reconciling this desire with the fact that most Americans come nowhere near it in real practice.<sup>1506</sup> In short, Filipovic is saying that contemporary women are encouraged to be perfect, sacrifice, *and* seek equality. If something has to fall short—and it inevitably does without *something* shifting — the neoliberal, postfeminist woman is still supposed to give up equality for the sake of grasping other successes.

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<sup>1504</sup> Kyle J. Thorson, "Out of the Closet and Back to Church," *Kissing in the Chapel, Praying in the Frat House: Wrestling with Faith and College*, edited by Adam J. Copeland (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 124.

<sup>1505</sup> Paul J. Wadell, "The Family as a Crucible of Love: Finding God in the Mutuality of Love," *Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith, and Just Love*, edited by Edward Foley (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 16.

<sup>1506</sup> Jill Filipovic, *The H-Spot: The Feminist Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Nation Books, 2017).



Stay-at-home father and journalist Jeremy Adam Smith echoes how difficult it is for women and men to balance themselves, family, and employment. This is an era in which couples raising young children experience more isolation, choice and ambiguity than young adults did in previous generations, in part because a two-incomes standard without reasonable quality childcare. Many parents find themselves forced into either work or care when they rather have a more comfortable blend of both if it were available.<sup>1507</sup> While I am researching young adults who by and large do not have children yet, the data presented on them must be read to account for the narrowness of their considerations due to their lack of experience, but also what they are planning to do because of what they see as their projected futures in terms of what kind of work-life integration and intimate equity and flexibility will be possible.

The narrative that something has to give, and that it is usually both intimacy and equity that gets dropped, was repeated throughout the sociological review of adults done by researchers I cite such as Kathleen Gerson and Joan Williams. Adults who were slightly older than millennials, and thus had had more time to experience the difficulty of two or more partners engaging in work-life integration, fulfillment, and child-rearing, sought greater flexibility (that is, stable flexibility) from their workplaces and in themselves and their partners as working units, as the solution to balancing it all, yet seldom found it.<sup>1508</sup>

My project has been an attempt to bridge-build between epistemological cultures – the established church, young adults from the Millennial generation (within this particularly highlighting the raw experiences of straight, white college students), and the experiences queer communities of color in order to highlight noteworthy examples and dialogue about relational intimacy and equity. What these groups have in common is needing to address a late modern situation in which more relationships than ever are defined by a cobbled together, informal and fluid intimacy and equity that many within them view as morally right and generative even though such qualities may not have the luxury or formality of being codified by marriage vows.

When I started researching the potential of young adults to reach greater relational equity than previous generations had accomplished, I wanted a more clear, concrete of advancement on

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<sup>1507</sup> Jeremy Adam Smith, *The Daddy Shift: How Stay-at-Home Dads, Breadwinning Moms, and Shared Parenting are Transforming the American Family* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2009), xvii-xviii.

<sup>1508</sup> Joan C. Williams, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010)107; Allison Pugh, *The Tumbleweed Society: Working and Caring in an Age of Insecurity* (New York: Oxford, 2015), 171, 179.

gender progress between men and women than I found. As a researcher and pastoral theologian, I mainly ended up with more specific questions to ask in future research and the desire to work intensely with local communities, à la Susan Mann's philosophy of a postmodern micro-politics for a postfeminist age. This micro-politics is quieter, more elusive, and definitely more controversial because of these qualities than with which I wish I were truly comfortable. Having done the research and writing for this dissertation, I think the best I can offer in terms of pastoral prescription is for people to facilitate processes of moving from the embedded theology they have inherited from previous generations to an intentional theology that pays more attention to evaluating and pursuing what is life-giving in the current situation. On the most concrete level, I can imagine developing a resource used to guide church small-group discussion on these big issues. Such discussion would help church members engage big values of love, justice and intimacy so that these values can both be imagined more broadly on the meta-level as well as how they can and should inform everyday behavior on a practical, concrete level.

As I mention in my introduction, I argue that this move toward intentional theology for both practitioners and scholars of religion—as well as young adults—requires that they know what is actually happening in the intimate lives of young adults. Such persons must also come to understand how postindustrial increase in levels of precariousness influences the worldview, psychology, and behavior of young adults as a baseline level of stress and anxiety that complicates the already tenuous human developmental position they have as emerging adults. Finally, scholars, practitioners, and young adults themselves must appreciate how these factors require incorporating notions of reflexivity, self-reflection, self-assertion, reception of others, mutuality, and moral improvisation into discussions of ethical relationship. These methods, which I describe in the latter portions of my dissertation, serve to bolster people's psychological resilience and moral creativity through processes of auto-ethnographic reflexivity.

Primarily in the middle of my dissertation, I point to the fact that some people however, for reasons of economic and cultural survival—as well as distance from heterosexual gender norming—already practice relationships which are much more egalitarian and flexible in how each member of the partnership gives and takes. There are different reasons for this, some of which is addressed in Chapter Five. Yet it bears repeating that statistically LGBTQ couples often place greater emphasis on the satisfaction of emotional needs over moral obligation and societal needs. This results in high levels of equality across multiple measures of status and

interaction.<sup>1509</sup> In terms of African American families, there is myriad evidence that the need to provide a solid front in order to survive racial justice leads to a form of “pragmatic equality” and flexibility of roles and duties between heterosexual couples.<sup>1510</sup> There are groups of African Americans who say that they believe in male headship, but the actual reality is not an economic possibility for them. Many African Americans report that certainly gender and gender equality is an issue for them, but it is not pressing compared to the overwhelming impact that racism and discrimination have upon their lives.<sup>1511</sup>

An elucidation of examples of family ethics from the margins shown in Thelathia Nikki Young’s research can serve as alternative models of love, justice, value, and desire for persons who find themselves more close to the normative ideal of a heterosexual, white, middle class nuclear family unit. Young claims in her book *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* that “[t]he American family is a queer family. The idea, therefore, of queer family life relative to black queer subjectivity and sexuality/gender is consistent with the social trends.”<sup>1512</sup> She adopts the moniker of queer for families that are interreligious, immigrant, transnational, single, multigenerational, co-parenting, divorced, same-sex, interracial, and probably many formulations yet unnamed. Her ethical frameworks of disruption, resistance, and imagination provide a method with which “to critically engage the norms invoked in conversations on relationality,” away from gender and power and toward values of “justice, love, liberty, and growth.”<sup>1513</sup> By using black queer experiences as case study material for analyzing

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<sup>1509</sup> Naveen Jonathan, “Carrying Equal Weight: Relational Responsibility and Attunement among Same-Sex Couples,” *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 79-80.

<sup>1510</sup> Scholars note that while African Americans are more likely to hold strongly to a traditional gender ideology than white persons, the economic necessities of survival in a racist culture does not allow African Americans to practice gender role segregation in reality. Yet despite the ability of these families to practice male headship in belief while not in practice to a fairly tenable level, the oppression of racism is nonetheless identified as a leading cause for what causes African American families to experience stress as individuals and as an interactive intra and inter-family unit. Randi S. Cowdery, Norma Scarborough, Monique E. Lewis, and Gita Seshadri, “Pulling Together: How African American Couples Manage Social Inequalities,” in *Couples, Gender, and Power: Creating Change in Intimate Relationships*, edited by Carmen Knudson-Martin and Anne Rankin Mahoney (Thousand Oaks: Calif.: Springer, 2009), 222-227; See also Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997), 10.

<sup>1511</sup> Evelyn Parker, *Trouble Don’t Always Last: Emancipatory Hope among African American Adolescents* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003), viii, ix; Tricia Rose Farrar, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 2003).

<sup>1512</sup> Thelathia Nikki Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

<sup>1513</sup> Young, 8, xvi.

the values and practices of relationality she can describe and argue for the continuation of relational ethics tied to actual practice and praxis. Many womanists have stated that black women's experiences of relational treatment can serve as a moral barometer of society for they often endure multiple oppressions from identities as both black and female. Therefore, a pattern of life that is generative and loving for black women can generally be recommended for all.<sup>1514</sup>

The goal of gender equality in intimacy is neither always a goal nor a difficulty for all groups of Americans, but seems to be related to the relative privilege of (white) men to serve as ideal workers, setting up expectations that, in cases of heterosexual relationships at least, women would carry the familial and domestic balance. As privilege goes, this pertains to white women in some cases as well, since the families of female breadwinners, who are likely to fit the ideal worker model of putting in immense hours at work around the clock, are more likely to outsource domestic labor to another woman than require the man pick up the balance.<sup>1515</sup> Millennials as a generational cohort bear an odd mix of educational privilege, economic precariousness, and hybridization, factors which fail to conclusively indicate the direction of how they will live out their lives.

As alluded to in the dissertation introduction, Millennials represented in the majority of social scientific research on the generation are by and large of European American heritage, college-educated, and middle class (even as the generational cohort loses economic footing as a whole). The millennial generation on a whole, however, is historically more ethnically and culturally diverse than any previous American generation.<sup>1516</sup> Moreover, the intimate relationships which develop among Millennials have higher indices of interracial and interfaith connections than before, indicating openness in the generation to a fluid, boundary-crossing potentiality, yet in reality still considerably constricted by the patterns of particular social identities.<sup>1517</sup>

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<sup>1514</sup> Young, 21.

<sup>1515</sup> In Darcy Lockman's *All the Rage: Mothers, Fathers, and the Myth of Equal Partnership* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), she reports that men and women remain trapped in perpetuating outdated gender role scripts at home in which men are less willing to say explicitly that an equal relationship is a goal of theirs, nor build up the awareness and attunement of others necessary when it costs their peace of mind or performance on the job.

<sup>1516</sup> Pew Research Forum, "Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next." February 2010. <https://www.pewinternet.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/>.

<sup>1517</sup> Susan Katz Miller, *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013).

This is, of course, a materialist and yet normative reading of the situation to claim that intimate gender equality most strongly is a result of the middle-class, white, masculine ideology of an “ideal worker.” I noted in my introduction that I planned to be guided by Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s postcolonial idea of “feminist solidarity” in which historically marginalized social positions speak to and with those which are in a social position of greater power and voice. This mutual, dialogical situation which simultaneously recognizes historic inequities while acknowledging inherent equity of dignity and agency of everyone is but an ideal. While it did guide me through this project, and still guides me, nonetheless using research which largely focuses on white, often educated and middle-class millennials (because little else on relationships and gender exists) still re-inscribes and does little to significantly depart from mirroring research and theoretical traditions which speak from—and back to—the privileged.

Given the many theoretical pieces I attempted to include in this dissertation, from human development theory to sociological description and ethical perspectives, I was not able to substantially dialogue between diverse perspectives on intimacy, relational struggle, and relational joy. I drew on a dizzying number of scholars across a wide array of disciplines to connect intimacy to gender equity to social anxiety around change and responsibility. I only covered developmental and psychological scholars well in the evolution of their thought, contributions and context because they were my foundation and primary discipline; all other scholars deserved greater attention to their work than I was able to give.

While I often do not go as far as some queer theorists would want me to go in terms from departing from the normative grasp of gender heteronormativity as constricting concepts and the need for “moral development” to be a process one can work on rather than simply a fact of being which one embraces, I do think I have moved considerably in the direction of recognizing and embracing tactical, micro-political methods of agency more than I ever thought I would. I was challenged by queer theory when I was first introduced to it during my Women and Gender Studies coursework. I did not expect when I started my doctoral study to end up writing on and championing queer theory, as I had been raised on ideas of theological sovereignty that did not coalesce with more fluid ideas of meaning. Yet the repeated turn to experience, embodiment, accountability, inclusivity, and access in the values of Millennials and those coming up behind them in the next generation has made me put down my hope of a grand narrative or at least a brighter red thread through my work than there turns out to be. I do, however, hope that my

objective to outline a case for why scholars and practitioners of mainstream religions should shift from a commitment perspective on relationships to one of intimacy was fully made, and how the Christian ethicists I have highlighted have offered steps for conceptualizing moral evaluation that can help churches as a whole move in that direction.

### **INTIMACY: RECOGNITION, PARTICIPATION, CREATION**

As I noted in my introduction, it is rare for relationships and marriage to be treated fully as places of theological fruition in terms of as participation and creation, justice and love, rather than as a covenant primarily of fidelity.<sup>1518</sup> I suggest that we can help culture at large redirect how we think about relationships by switching from defining them by their legal and sexual fidelity, which is largely based on a notion of ownership, to viewing intimacy as the relational cornerstone to which we ought to aspire and evaluate relationships of personal, social, and sexual closeness.<sup>1519</sup> This latter notion is morally generative, whereas the former is not.

Many human development scholars believe that interaction with others is in fact the only way we grow psychologically. Furthermore, interaction done in an environment which has a balance of safety, recognition, and challenge allows someone to grow well in the confidence and right-relation of self to others that is necessary for true intimacy and mutuality. As human development theorists Evelyn and James Whitehead note, true intimacy cannot help but be generative, for knowing and being known, being encouraged to grow and widen in capacity via an ongoing relationship, this leads to progress of self and relationship. Thus, *achieving true intimacy is one and the same with engaging in generativity and practicing love.*<sup>1520</sup> While I believe this to be true, I nonetheless admonish that we pay careful attention to whether or not we are engaged in true intimacy, or a lesser, pseudo form of intimacy that allows us to know the other just enough to call a truce on knowing anymore.<sup>1521</sup> I contend that the prevalence of

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<sup>1518</sup> For someone who does do this, see Kathlyn Breazeale, *Mutual Empowerment: A Theology of Marriage, Intimacy, and Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 51.

<sup>1519</sup> Intimacy from a psychological perspective is defined as involving a sense of connectedness, shared understandings, mutual responsiveness, self-disclosure, and interdependency, as described by Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron, "Introduction," *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, ed. Debra J. Mashek and Arthur Aron (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 1-5.

<sup>1520</sup> Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Marrying Well: Possibilities in Christian Marriage Today* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 106.

<sup>1521</sup> J. Kroger and J.E. Marcia, "The Identity Statures: Origins, Meanings, and Interpretations," *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, edited by S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx, and V. Vignoles (New York: Springer, 2011): 31-54, cited

pseudo-intimacy in relationships today (and expectations of relationships) plays a large role in not examining further how benefits and burdens are distributed across the relationship.

A true intimacy requires that we be psychologically differentiated from others such that we join their lives in healthy ways that are neither suffocating nor isolating to our beloveds or ourselves. Rather, a person engaged in true intimacy listens to and engages the other such they learn about themselves in a unique, generative, and affirming way. This is why intimacy is valuable in all relationships, but particularly those of young adults in which people have so much to learn about themselves. As noted in Chapters One, Two, and Three, the youngest of emerging adults are so unsure of their own worth and internal identity that they describe any interdependency or vulnerability associated with romantic, psychological love as “weakness.”<sup>1522</sup> This is a place for older generations and the wisdom of the church to step in. They can encourage and enact healthy interdependency with and support for young adults. People in these communities can mentor young adults in career decisions, and share their own pathways to love and life. Telling their own stories of what was possible and not by gender in the past can offer new reflection and creativity around potentialities for today. It is a pull toward greater collectivity and collaboration and away from isolation that pastoral theologian Bruce Rogers-Vaughn ultimately recommends in his book *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*.<sup>1523</sup>

I realize that I am optimistically outlining the *possibility* for intimacy and its close twin, mutuality, *not* their probability. Yet the issue of believing men and women, as well as those who resist gender binaries, to be of fundamentally different value has an immense gravity in culture still today. *As long as it is untenable that it cost men something to achieve equality, platitudes of equality will remain lip service.* For, as Herbert Anderson and his colleagues in the book *Mutuality Matters* write, “Mutuality is only possible when people can empathetically imagine the world of another without fear of losing their own voice and when they are able to change their

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by Pratt and Matsuba, 230; J.L. Orlofsky, “Intimacy Status: Theory and Research,” *Ego Identity: A Handbook for Psychosocial Research*, edited by J.E. Marcia, A.S. Waterman, D.R. Matteson, S.L. Archer, and J.L. Orlofsky (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993), 111-133, cited by Pratt and Matsuba, 230; Pratt and Matsuba, 46; Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 135-136, cited by Pratt and Matsuba, 230.

<sup>1522</sup> Donna Freitas, *Consent on Campus: A Manifesto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 90-91.

<sup>1523</sup> Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, *New Approaches to Religion and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

mind or be changed by another as a result.”<sup>1524</sup> Right now we as a general culture are not yet at that stage.

It may be that mutuality and equality in intimate life is hard to value, at least for those progressives and moderates who say that they value it, in part because it is hard to envision. As Filipovic notes in *The H-Spot*, this lack of vision and its fulfillment can be attributed to a variety of sources: lack of appropriately disseminated knowledge, or having the knowledge in general as to what makes people have stable and fulfilling marriages. Yet counselors of all backgrounds iterate that flexibility, communication skills, centered people, unified vision, and many more factors do decisively contribute to stability and marital happiness. Perhaps it is the case that we have the knowledge, yet we do not pursue this happiness as much as we could, in part because we fall short of changing the patterns and habits of our lives toward interactions that inculcate more equity because change and charting new territory is hard.<sup>1525</sup>

Too often we do not have generous spaces for this teaching and exploration, for both culture and church are not prone in practice to welcome our whole selves with the complex tensions and doubts that gay Millennial Kyle Thorston mentions above. Whether someone is gay or not, the question of self-love that truly embraces, rather than denies, our anxieties and perfections, is not an easy one. It underlies the entirety of this project: it starts with the ways in which researchers of religion and youth such as Christian Smith and Patricia Snell are curious about young adult morality, but stop short of moving themselves (and their ideas about religion) to meet their respondents in the uncharted wilderness of a postmodern embodiment in which spirituality and meaning is localized and eclectic, but nonetheless meaningful. It ends with my final pages in which I articulate how gender-aware feminist counseling practices can use attuned listening and understanding of psychodynamic challenges to move persons toward a more consciously chosen and agential intimate relationship.

My dissertation is somewhat situated between British feminist pastoral theologian Elaine Graham’s postmodern idea that our theology is whatever we actually do and that of Don Browning’s four-part fundamental practical theology of description, history, systematic, and

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<sup>1524</sup> Herbert Anderson, Edward Foley, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, and Robert Schreiter, “Introduction,” *Mutuality Matters: Family, Faith, and Just Love*, edited by Edward Foley (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 8.

<sup>1525</sup> Filipovic, 148.



strategic-practical.<sup>1526</sup> Pastoral theology in its multicultural, postmodern paradigm pays attention to the everyday, makes room for the fluid, and seeks practical enactment. As Graham writes, “The task of care is thus to equip individuals and communities with the resources by which they might be able to respond to such complexity –be it in the form of changing conditions of work, citizenship, and relationships or gender roles.”<sup>1527</sup> I have argued that rooting meaning in the self as worthy of fulfillment and a decent moral evaluator is the way to address, in a postmodern context, the constant complexity and change of society. Following Graham, I suggest that whatever gives women more chance for greater generativity in tandem with those they love is our best subjective measuring stick of liberation, flourishing, and success.<sup>1528</sup> From the position of being a pastoral theologian reflecting upon and researching these issues, some of my guiding principles have been to pay as close attention to the needs and self-reports of the people I seek to help, to believe in their own ability to be involved in the solution, and to wrestle the tradition for a blessing of its wisdom for today through a form of revised critical method applied to theological ethics.<sup>1529</sup>

On a strategic-practical theological level, my concluding chapter on Jessica Benjamin’s suggestion that our most moral state is one of surrender to the other, in which we acknowledge the right of the other to be affirmed and loved while simultaneously acknowledging it in ourselves, and therefore maintaining our agency in balance with the other, points to an area of research worthy of significant additional exploration. Some readers of my dissertation have suggested that the ways in which surrender is discussed by Benjamin, in comparison to other models of submission or sacrifice, can speak back to big theological themes of how we are supposed to view the model actions of God and Jesus. While some theologians speak of Jesus Christ surrendering on the cross, most often the term used to describe his crucifixion and death is one of sacrifice.

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<sup>1526</sup> Elaine L. Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Mowbray, 1996); Don M. Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

<sup>1527</sup> Graham, 52.

<sup>1528</sup> Graham, 128, 173.

<sup>1529</sup> As Don Browning puts it in *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, “[T]he revised correlational method as applied to a practical moral theology means a critical correlation between such norms for human action and fulfillment as are revealed in interpretations of the Christian witness and those norms for human action and fulfillment that are implicit in various interpretations of ordinary human experience,” Don Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 50.

Sacrifice is often understood as the giving of the self in which one's self or at least one's needs are somehow turned over or denied for a higher purpose. Theologian David Weddle indicates that such a higher purpose, often a promise of somehow transcending the physical, is frequently amorously calculated and therefore risky in terms of guaranteeing that the sacrifice was worthwhile.<sup>1530</sup> Feminists have also long stated that encouragement of sacrifice for the overall moral good of society and family has often unduly cost the women who were asked to sacrifice more of themselves than others. Yet others argue that in "sacrifice cultures" there is not the negative, self-denying aspect to sacrifice that the West has adopted. Instead, sacrifice in these cultures result in blessings and a pro-body celebratory sensibility that does not prey upon the weak and exacerbate negative power dynamics.<sup>1531</sup>

An interrogation into what contemporary young adults thought about the role of sacrifice in intimate relationship was one of the goals of my project, although I doubted how much research would focus on these exact points. There is in fact little explicit, clear data indicating this beyond psychologist Varda Konstam's chapter on Millennial views of sacrifice in her latest book, in which they indicate that they are dubious as to whether it is necessary or possible.<sup>1532</sup> Other recent scholarship on emerging adults, such as Brian Willoughby and Spencer James' *The Marriage Paradox*, also indicates an underlying theme of doubt around sacrifice as their respondents note that something of a well-balanced life will have to give as they age and take on more responsibility and relationship.<sup>1533</sup>

Despite the lack of direct research on the subject outside of a few studies conducted by scholars of emerging adults, I nonetheless argue that young adult reluctance to marry until they have an emotional, educational, and financial foundation to be rooted in both neoliberal inclinations toward privatization and personal responsibility, but also a sense that the unconditional marital "fusion" in which wife subsumes her identity into the man's is one that offers an amorphous and perhaps raw deal. I point to how relationships of cohabitation involve a

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<sup>1530</sup> David L. Weddle, *Sacrifice in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York University Press, 2017), 9-11.

<sup>1531</sup> John Dunnill, *Sacrifice and the Body: Biblical Anthropology and Christian Self-Understanding* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013).

<sup>1532</sup> Varda Konstam, *The Romantic Lives of Emerging Adults: Moving from I to We* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>1533</sup> Brian Willoughby and Spencer James, *The Marriage Paradox: Why Emerging Adults Love Marriage Yet Push it Aside*, Oxford University Press Emerging Adulthood Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

more even responsibility for finances, family decisions, and household responsibilities than marital relationships. I relay much of what other researchers have found about how both young adult men and women expect to take care of themselves financially. Sociologist Kathleen Gerson's work to dig deeper than this "plan A" reveals that if things go wrong with young people's idealistic plans to share things evenly, "plan B"s for men and women diverge greatly.<sup>1534</sup> It is in the common constraints of life that continuing structural inequities and the common pathways by which people respond to them differentially out of their gender identities comes to bear.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

In this dissertation I have outlined the major challenges of "predictive horizon[s] of impermanence" for contemporary young adults leading to an overreliance on the self and an anxiety rooted in fear of financial and social instability. I have argued that the landscape of what is possible and probable in terms of agency and authentic spirituality for young adults as inhabitants of a neoliberal and postfeminist culture is one bent, at its best, toward localized, perhaps fragmented, yet inclusive participation.<sup>1535</sup> I assert in my dissertation introduction that, for reasons such of these, it is the better moral position for scholars and practitioners of religion to advocate for conceptualizing the good of an intimate relationship by the quality of its intimacy, not the formality of its members' promises of unconditional support. Otherwise, the localized, more inclusive and equitable good of what Millennials are doing in their intimate lives will go unrecognized, and the rift between what they intimate (often tacitly) as life-giving in how they lead their intimate lives and the narrowness of relationship the formal church is comfortable talking about in terms of marriage, or hopes toward marriage, will remain. This rift does no one any good pastorally. Moreover, it prevents the established church from retaining or recouping

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<sup>1534</sup> This type of idealistic openness was evident in some of Barbara Risman's respondents as well, yet the majority of them did experience pressure and gendered expectations from family and peers that resulted in their behavior being more stereotypical than necessarily their beliefs in *Where the Millennials Will Take Us: A New Generation Wrestles with the Gender Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Kathleen Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>1535</sup> While many of my authors nod toward this point, it most clearly articulated by feminist philosopher Patricia Mann in *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

young adults who need the church to shift to “traditioned innovation” rather than remain in its ideological fortress defending against the tides of change.

This encouragement of shifting to a focus on intimacy rather than formal, unconditional commitment comes with risk. It is responding to a need for design change without knowing what will actually be the end result. It is particularly risky in that intimacy for Millennials is defined as “when someone’s got your back,” because they know and support the person, yet at the same time this form of support is something a person cannot necessarily hope for or expect given the depth to which young adult Millennials believe that they should be able to do life on their own. It bears repeating that it is here that the church as a place of collectivity and participation can help bend young adult experience away from this belief and into a tactile involvement in a world in which people can and do rely upon each other for companionship, aid, and growth. Theologian and minister Carol Howard Merritt in *Tribal Church* offers concrete recommendations on how churches can acknowledge the loneliness and precariousness of young adults who have moved away from home and family for education and work by hosting them for holiday meals, mentoring them inter-generationally in career and life discernment, and providing a safety net for material needs such as help with rent check or transportation when suddenly needed.<sup>1536</sup>

In my early chapters, I describe how contemporary young adults, as “purposeful nomads” as Eric Atcheson puts it, are seeking ways to connect intimately that relieve pressure in the early years of young adulthood.<sup>1537</sup> As rocky and dangerous as college sexual interactions are according to the available literature, the fact that these alcohol-laden interactions are disassociated and compartmentalized from the rest of life has its strength: delaying more complex and fruitful intimate commitment until the end of early adulthood allows young adults to enter into partnerships, whether in dating, cohabitation, or marriage, that have a greater potential to be more gender equitable and fulfilling for each partner because they bring greater life experience, maturity, and resources to their intimate lives at this later point.

In the second half of the project I examine a variety of theoretical approaches that might make visible our blind spots on the issue, our motivations for resisting change, and our dominant

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<sup>1536</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007).

<sup>1537</sup> Eric Atcheson, *Oregon Trail Theology: The Frontier Millennial Christians will Face—And How We are Ready* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018).

ethical and theological conditioning that subtly, and not so subtly, work against coming to claim the self and a radical commitment to self-love. Arguing in contradiction to male interpretation of Christian ethical tradition, I engage numerous feminists from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives to argue that such self-love and flourishing does not *destroy*, but rather *enhances* and *advances* the ethical. Self-love does so by believing and acting upon the belief that generative self-transformation occurs by going deeper into the self and self-in-relationship. This depth acknowledges the benefits and burdens of one's place in society and in relationship of a particular person to other particular persons. It is for these reasons that I conclude by suggesting that people question sacrifice, but demand a goal of generativity, measurement of accommodation, and adjudication of balance between persons. I encourage people to assess whether they are being as intimate with themselves and their partner as they can be, and figure out if this balance requires them personally giving or receiving more.

Feminist reflection, in the spirit of Gloria Andzaldúa and other path-bearers like her, concludes that a rightly ordered love is one of justice and interdependence, not self-evacuation and abnegation of the complexity of humanity. While young adults are hardly issuing an explicit manifesto along these lines, they are voting quietly with their feet that they would rather take life in a slower, more fragmented fashion that allows them the space to at least potentially embrace the complexity of their desires and the promotion of their humanity rather than the sacrifice of it in the name of an older generation's idea of responsible adulthood through a shutting down of life options prematurely. They have an intuition, and it is the job of the greater community to help them analyze such an intuition, articulate, evaluate, and bring it further into being.

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