

**The Marriage-Go-Around: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today - by Andrew J. Cherlin**

By: Mark A. Fine

[Fine, M. A.](#) (2010). *The marriage-go-around: The state of marriage and the family in America today*. By A. J. Cherlin. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(5), 1457-1459.

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**Abstract:**

The Marriage-Go-Around: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today . Andrew J. Cherlin . New York : Alfred A. Knopf . 271 pp. ISBN 9780307266897 . \$25.95 cloth .

The Marriage-Go-Around is a thoughtful and integrative book written by one of the most respected and accomplished scholars on marriage in the world. The book is thoughtful in that Cherlin provides both breadth and depth in his wide-ranging description of marriage and family life in America, with numerous international comparisons sharpening his arguments about aspects of American society. The book is integrative in that, to support his contention that marriage and family life in America is unique, Cherlin weaves together research on a wide array of marriage- and family-related topics, such as legal controversies regarding gay and lesbian marriage, divorce law, religious views of cohabitation, and demographic characteristics of U.S. (and non-U.S.) marriages and families.

**Keywords:** book review | marriage | family | American families | American society

**Article:**

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marriage, divorce law, religious views of cohabitation, and demographic characteristics of U.S. (and non-U.S.) marriages and families.

Cherlin's basic thesis is that Americans endorse two sometimes-contradictory views of how individuals and couples should act: (a) a strong value placed on the institution of marriage and (b) individual freedom. As I discuss further below, the legal system and organized religion both play important roles in the continuation of this basic contradiction.

Cherlin draws on numerous strands of research to show that marriage has been, is, and likely will be a strong “cultural force” in the United States and that it is valued to a greater extent in the United States than in almost all other economically developed countries. As examples of the importance placed on marriage, Cherlin notes that the battles over whether to recognize gay and lesbian marriage are much more fervent and energized in the United States than in other countries and that surveys consistently show that a higher proportion of people in the United States value marriage and actually marry than in other industrialized nations. In addition, he cites a poignant example of an advertisement on a bus showing a smiling couple and the statement “Marriage works.” Cherlin suggests that such an advertisement would not be seen in any other Western country and again suggests that Americans are uniquely focused on the value of being married and on strengthening marriages as opposed to improving romantic partnerships in general.

The other trend that makes American family life so unique and sometimes contradictory is the emphasis on individual freedom. The high value on personal freedoms, fulfillment, and growth, as well as spiritual fulfillment, reflects individualism. (United States residents are more actively involved in organized religion than are individuals from most other developed countries.) According to Cherlin, this high emphasis on personal growth can partially explain the high divorce rate in the United States, as it provides individuals in dissatisfying marriages with a reason to seek a divorce (“I can't grow and develop as a person when I am unhappy in my marriage”). Thus, the contradiction is that the United States has very high rates of both marriage and divorce, which suggests that Americans are both entering and leaving relationships more frequently than are individuals in other cultures. Once again, the acceptance and even encouragement of personal growth explains why individuals in the United States “go through partners at rates that exceed the rates in most other Western countries” (p. 187). Cherlin notes that the United States currently has the “highest level of voluntary partnership turnover ever” (p. 183). If one is not achieving personal fulfillment in one's present relationship, one's individual interests provide a justification for leaving that relationship in search of a more satisfying alternative relationship.

To explain the high rate of marriage and relationship turnover in the United States, Cherlin draws on U.S. historical information. He shows that the roots of the American emphasis on marriage and personal freedoms were in place by 1900. Between 1900 and 1960, marriage changed from an instrumental and practical arrangement to a companionate one, meaning that individuals looked to marriage not just for help in raising a family and sharing a home but also for love, personal growth, and fulfillment. Finally, since 1960, marriage has become more of an individualized institution as increasing number of individuals made unilateral decisions to divorce or separate, and more people made decisions based on what they perceived as best for them rather than for their families as a whole.

As I stated earlier, both the legal system and organized religion reflect the movement toward individual freedoms. In the past 30 years, the legal system, which historically supported the institution of marriage, has moved toward making divorce easier to obtain and supporting individual rights and responsibilities in rearing children. As another example, compared to 30 and 40 years ago, divorce decrees now less often include alimony or spousal maintenance payments from one spouse to another. The legal theory underlying this change is that it is in the best interests of both spouses to become financially and otherwise independent as quickly as possible and that alimony only prolonged the dependence of one spouse on the other.

Organized religion, although it purports to support marriage and professes to discourage divorce, justifies divorce in the name of self-fulfillment and personal satisfaction and supports and ministers to people who divorce to a much greater degree than was true in the past. Religious institutions and clergy have gone out of their way to help divorcing and divorced individuals adjust to their difficult circumstances.

I highly recommend *The Marriage-Go-Around*. It is an engaging read, is filled with a variety of thought-provoking tidbits of knowledge and wisdom, and is clearly not attempting to further any particular political agenda. Although I knew of much of the historical material presented and the data concerning current trends, Cherlin integrated this information into a coherent, compelling, and provocative argument that I had not considered fully before. The book does not emphasize the policy and other implications arising from his thesis, but that is a task that we can hopefully move on to now.

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