

SOC 2700
Self and Society

Using Peter Berger's view to study love

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Arranged marriages were very popular in the past, especially in the Chinese society. Neither the man nor the woman had the choice to choose his/her spouse. Usually the parent had the power to select marital partners for their children. But nowadays, due to a combination of factors such as cultural Westernization (Xu and Martin, 1990), arranged marriages are no longer popular. The substitution of arranged marriage is what we usually called free-choice marriage. Individuals can choose others who they really love as their partners. Compare to the past, the romantic relationship nowadays looks very ideal because it seems that every individual have the freedom to choose who to love.

However, it is not necessary the truth. Actually, we are not very free on love because of the presence of the society. In this paper, I would like to consider love as a by-product of society. Firstly, I would like to argue that if there is no society, there is no “love”. Then I would explain how we learn love from the society. Secondly, I would like to discuss how society affects our love behavior by both external and internal influence. Finally, I would like to give suggestions on how should we love in the society so that we do not simply controlled by the society, but we can be unique in the society.

The relation between love and society

What is love? It seems not an easy question to answer. You can find out a lot of

definitions of love from the dictionaries or from the libraries. I am not going to give an absolute definition of love in this paper because it is not important. You can simply consider love as a layman term people often used in daily life. What I concern is the relation between love and society. The very first argument I want to go through is: “Without society, there is no love.”

To explain the above statement, I am going to depict three situations first. You should try to find out does love exists in the situation. Firstly, try to imagine that you got two dogs in your home, one male and one female. They usually eat and sleep together. Later they mate and get their offspring. Do you think that the dogs love each other?

Next, John met a girl in the pub. They chatted and drunk in the pub for the whole night. Then hugged and kissed each other. Finally the man had sex with the girl that night. Afterwards, they had never met again. Do you think that John love the girl?

Lastly, Sam, a 17 years old student, had date Mary in a restaurant. This was the first time he dated a girl. During the dating, he felt that his heart beat was very fast. He felt so nervous that was not usual. When Sam went home, he could not stop thinking about Mary and their dating. When the telephone ringed, he rushed to receive the call. It’ s was Mary and Sam felt very happy. Do you think that Sam love Mary?

Most probably, you will not think that the dogs love each other and you will not

expect John love the girl. You may argue that the dogs mate because of their instinct, John had sex with the girl because he wanted to express his sexual desire only. However, for the last case, you may hold the view that Sam loved Mary because of his behavior and emotion. You feel Sam loved Mary because “his heart beat was very fast, he was nervous...” The symptoms of Sam is related to love, and mostly likely, unconsciously.

Let's move back to the question “What is love?” first. Although we cannot give a definition to love easily, we all have a picture of what love is. Love is a concept. Without give meaning to love, it is meaningless. The question now is who give meaning to love? The society does. So, I would like to explain how we learn love from the society by socialization.

First, suppose the mind of new born infants is blank. They learn only through interacting with others. Infants are usually dependent on their parents, so they started to understand the world from their parents. Parent are the significant others of the babies. Even after the babies grow up, parents still have much impact on the socialization process on the children. As a result, individuals learn love most likely from the parent at the beginning. But how do the parents teach love to their children?

On the one hand, children learn one kind of love from the parent by reviewing how their parent them. When they cry, their parents would come to see what happen.

Parents would satisfy their needs. Sometimes the parents would kiss their children's face, and hold their hands when going out. They would tell their children "I do this and that to you because I love you." The children will then link up some behaviors, such as caring, to love. On the other hand, parents themselves are models to their children when they learn love. When the children start knowing that their parents love each other, they will learn love through observation. For example, they realize that love consist of people of opposite sex. From the family, individuals form a simple image of love.

Apart from parents, the media also exert great influence on socializing individuals to learn love. From the TV program and movie, they learn what people do when they fall in love. For instance, they understand people tend to think of the person they love. They know that people in love would like to hug and kiss their spouse.

Using Becker's(1953) view on how people become marijuana users, we can divide how we learn love from the society into three steps. Firstly, the society helps individuals to recognize the physiological and psychological effects of love. Secondly, we associate these effects with love. Using passion love as an example, the two-component theory proposed by Schachter and Singer explains how we feel love. Lippa(1990) state that we experience passionate love by labeling our physiological

arousal as being due to love. Using Sam's case as an illustration, we conclude that Sam loved Mary because we explain the physiological arousals of Sam, such as heart bumping and nervous, by being love. Finally, we define the effects of love as pleasurable, so we try to fall in love with others. That's the procedure of how we learn love.

We can then see what will happen if an individual is isolated by the society. Macionis(2003) described the case of an isolated child, Anna. She was trapped in a storage room where her mother only provides enough milk for her to survive. The poor girl received no caring, no hugs, no smile and no play for five years. Of course, she was not socialized. When the girl was rescued, sociologist Kingsley Davis went to see her and discovered that she "could not laugh, speak, or even smile. Anna was completely unresponsive." (Macionis, 2003, P.61) This case illustrates the effect of socialization to individuals. Without society, Anna learned almost nothing. Obviously, she did not understand what love is.

Since society is prior to love, it inevitably affects our love behaviors. As you learned love from the society, the society started to control you. Love is not as free as what you have imagined. The society not only control you externally, but also invaded to you mind and control you internally. I am going to explain how the society controls us in the following sections..

External controls on love behavior of the society

There are many kinds of social control in the society. I would select some social controls and explain how the controls affect our love behaviors.

Berger(1986) suggested that we are located at the center of a set of concentric circles and each circle is a social control system. These control systems are outside us and exert pressure on us, so I call these system external controls.

One of the systems is the legal system. The most obvious element in this system is the law. Law requires us to obey it, no matter we want to follow it or not. For example, you love a girl who is aged 15 and you want to have sex with her. She accepts it. However, her assent does not mean that you can have sex with her as you wish because the law does not allow people to have sex with youngster who is less than 16 years old. If you violate the law, you will be punished, probably being sent to the prison. In addition to such direct control, the law also executes indirect control. Marriage, which is protected by the law, can also control individuals' love behaviors. After you sign the contract of marriage, you cannot do what you want to do anymore. You cannot have extramarital sex because you would be caught. Even you do not love your spouse you cannot simply pack your belongings and leave. The law prevents you to do so. You may have to pay your partner before you can go because of the law.

Another control system is the stratification system. The tradition Hindu caste

society is a good example of stratification. In that society, mobility does not exist. If you were born in the lowest class, you whole life must be spend in that class. You can never marry others in other class. Although caste society is no longer exists in general, stratification is still exist as the modern class system. Social mobility is allowed for individuals, but class still has a very important effect on our life chance. If you are born as a lower class male, the chance that you can marry a rich girl is less than that of a man from higher class.

Beside the legal system and the stratification, Berger(1986) suggested other social controls which are also very powerful. Cuzzort and King (1980) summarized the view of Berger and stated that ridicule and ostracism can affect individuals deeply also.

Ridicule is one kind of external control. Ridicule can control people because people do not want to be laughed by others. Because of ridicule, a man cannot choose a partner who is taller than him because others will laugh at him. A handsome guy cannot choose a very ugly girl because others will treat him stupid. A 40 years old woman cannot marry an 18 years old boy because others think that it is not suitable. In short, love should follow the norm of the society. You cannot do what you want in love although the law allows you to do so.

Ostracism is another common social control. The principal of ostracism is to

remove you from the group if you do not follow the norm of the group. For example, a man sharking his friend's girlfriend may be ignored by the group. A rich girl who loves a poor guy may be sent out by her family. Ostracism works well because most people do not want to be isolated.

To summarize the external social control on love behavior, people try to avoid negative consequences due to their behaviors. Being punished, laughed and ignored are negative to them. Because people have the ability to think twice before they do, they can imagine the negative consequences if they do not love probably. This is how external social control affects people love behaviors.

Internal controls on love behavior of the society

We had gone through how the society controls our love behaviors externally. It seems that the society is very powerful in controlling us. But this is not the end. Although external social controls are powerful, you still can recognize them. You know that you are controlled by them. I would like to call them conscious controls. In my opinion, internal social controls are much more powerful because you do not know you are controlled by them. I call them unconscious controls. Now, I would like to discuss how those controls invaded your mind.

Imagine that you are a Chinese man. Have you ever think of marry a Philippine girl? If you have thought about it and you do not mind marrying a Philippine girl, you

are luckily because you are not controlled by the society. If you have thought about it and you do not want to marry a Philippine girl because you are afraid of others' pressure, you are controlled by the external social control. But as my prediction, most of you have never thought of marrying a Philippine girl. This is how the society controls you internally and unconsciously. But what is the mechanism of such internal controls?

As I mentioned before, we learned love from the society by socialization. So, it is very easy for the society to invade our mind through socialization. Simply speaking, you have very little chance to watch a TV program talking about love between a Chinese and a Philippine girl. Your parents are very likely to be both Chinese if you were a Chinese. If you live in a Chinese society, the couples within it usually consist of two Chinese. You see this pattern as nature. You may have never realized the situation if I do not mention it.

To understand more about how the society invaded our mind, we can look at the role theory. Berger(1986) suggested that "every role in society has attached to it a certain identity" (Berger, 1986, P.98). As a male, you have to be responsible for your family. As a female, you have to be responsible for the housework. As a Chinese, you have to find a Chinese partner. The roles and their identities are correlated very deeply in our mind. Such ideologies limit your choice of spouse and define your behaviors in love. But you are unconscious to them.

Are we unique in the society?

We have discussed how the society controls individuals both externally and internally, both consciously and unconsciously. Our love behaviors are determined by the society to certain extent. It is not so romantic to hear that kissing is not a behavior to show our love, but it is only a symbol represent love in the society. The society shaped our characteristics, personality and behaviors since we entered it. It seems that every individual in the society is only a puppet, of the same kind, in the society. However, in my point of views, we are not the same kind of puppet due to two reasons. Firstly, although we cannot avoid socialized by the society, no two individuals undertake same socialization process. Secondly, individuals are actually free in the society because they have choices. These choices and the ability of human to think make us unique in the society.

As I mentioned before, socialization is a crucial process for individuals to learn love. It is important to know that different individuals undergo different socialization process. Society is not an absolute object. Every individual has its own society, so everybody is socialized by different society. For example, even you and I are born in the same country, we are growing in different family. Even we are living in the same family, we may be different in gender or birth order. Even we are identical twins, we can have our own peer groups. As love is learned by socialization, no two individuals

share the same perception of love. Love is a different concept to different people.

That's why I suggest that no two individuals are the same.

We are not exactly the same is not sufficient to say we are unique. Another important factor is that we have choices in the society. If people do not have any options in the society, they are only puppets controlled by the society because everybody follows the same action announced by the society. However, individuals do have infinite amount of options to choose to react to the society. According to Berger(1986), to say "I have no choices" is actually in "Bad faith"

The term "Bad faith" can be simply explained as people who actually have choices say that they have no choices. For example, a professor loves one of his students said that they cannot be together because the society does not allow them to do so is in "Bad faith". A Philippine girl who said she has no opportunity to fall in love with a Chinese are also in "Bad faith". In reality, both the professor and the Philippine girl have choices, although the choices may not be solutions to the problem. But once you have the insight that you are not totally passive to the society, you have a chance to find ways to cope with it. Berger(1986) suggested that you can negotiate with it, detach from it, or manipulate it, etc.

Let's use the professor's case as an example. Role theory suggested that different roles have attached to certain identities. Such identities are "socially bestowed,

socially sustained and socially transformed.” (Berger, 1986). The norm in the society do not allow the professor to love his student at this moment, but it may not necessary be true forever. The norms, as well as the identities of professor, are constructed by the society, so they can be reconstructed, or simply dismantled (Berger and Kellner, 1986). As a result, the professor is not hopeless. He can challenge the traditional norm and try to reconstruct the identity of professor. Of course, to rebel the society by his own power is not likely to be success. If he feels that reconstruct them are so difficult, he still has a choice to resign from his role.

Another way an individual can choose is detachment from the society. If we consider the society is as large as the sea, we can build a sub world in an island. (Berger, 1986) The subworld has its own culture and norms which are different from the society. For instance, homosexuals were totally not accepted by the society in the past. If those people simple gave up and resigned from the society, the situation would never be changed. They struggled by building a subworld in the society. They did not escape from the society. But once they entered the subworld, the social controls seem to be not effective to them. A subworld can even grow and that the society cannot simply ignore it. The society has to be changed to adapt the new situation which is created by the subworld.

If people cannot detach from the society or are not willing to do so, they can try

to manipulate it. For example, in Hong Kong, the law does not allow homosexual couples to apply public house. However, two homosexual couples, one with both male and one with both female, cooperate to pretend two heterosexual marriages. Then, each “heterosexual couple” sends application to the government to apply for public house. This is a way to fight against the law, which is a kind of social control.

By the above explanation, to say individuals have options in the society is not vague. External and internal social controls seem to exert great pressure on us, but if we noticed that we have choices, we can reject what the society require us to do. As a human being, we can think of infinite ways to react to the society. We do not simply follow the social norms or social controls. We are not puppets in the society. We have our own mind to decide what to do and what not to do, and thus we are unique in the society.

To summarize, I would treat love as a game. Every game has its rule. The society is the rule of the game. Without the rule, people do not know how to play the game. The rule is very powerful that it controls how we play the game. If we violate the rule, we may be ignored and isolated by other players. However, the rule does not lead us to unconscious following. Base on the rule, every player can develop million of strategies to play the game. If some players do not agree to the rule, they can negotiate with other players to modify the rule. They may also resign from the game and

construct a new game of love, with totally different rules. Every player is unique in the game.

Conclusion

The paper had given a very brief introduction on how the two-way relationship between individual and society affect people love behavior. We learned love from the society, so the society has great impacts to us. On the one hand, the society shapes us by socialization and controls us by external and internal social controls. It seems that the society is above us. On the other hand, we have many options to cope with the society. Each of us has our own mind. It enables us to think of infinite ways to react to the society. We do not simply obey the society likes puppets, but we can control how we love in the society.

Before the end of the paper, I would like to recall an important point. Without society, there is no love. The presence of love makes us distinguishable from other animals, and makes our world more colorful. We should not blame the society just because the society constrains us. We should be happy with the society because it enables us to love uniquely within it.

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Self Reflection

I do not include this part in the paper because I want to talk about my feeling on this paper, which is not related to the paper.

Most of the people nowadays choose career success as their goal. Unlike them, I treat successful of love as my goal. However, the society frustrated me a lot. I think I am so weak that I cannot run away from the society. No matter how hard I try to maintain a good relationship with my girlfriend, I still think that our relationship is large determined by the society. So I try to use Peter Berger's view on society to study love to see if I can find new ways to step out of the society.

I would like to talk about my experience now. I want to marry my girlfriend as soon as possible because I don't know what will happen tomorrow. I may be accidentally died tonight. Nobody knows about future. So I want to do something meaningful before I die. Professor Chan said that he likes the good feeling after he did something. Then, for me, the feeling of falling in love is what I want to enjoy in my life.

However, I thought that the society controls me. I have no money to marry her and I have to finish my study. I started to blame the society. I would ask questions like "Why I need to have so much money to marry her?" or "Why do I need to study and cannot go to work now to earn money?"

I enjoyed writing this paper very much. The style of this paper is not similar to my previous paper. In the previous paper, I liked to integrate ideas of different writers and make my interpretation. But in this paper, I thought a lot to form my own ideas. Although I did no formal interviews to people because I thought it is useless to me, I talked to many friends to discuss about this topic. The process of writing this paper was really happy to me.

Actually, although I spent a lot of time to write this paper, I do not really satisfy with it. I am not good at thinking and I don't like thinking very much. However, I spent most of my time thinking and I really enjoyed it. I have the feeling that I am learning what I want to know during I write the paper. The feeling encourages me to finish the paper.

I was pessimistic about the society. I didn't really believe in voluntarism. But after writing this paper, I feel I little bit more optimistic about the society. That's already enough for me. I am happy that I have the chance to take "Self and Society" and writing about love using an optimistic perspective.