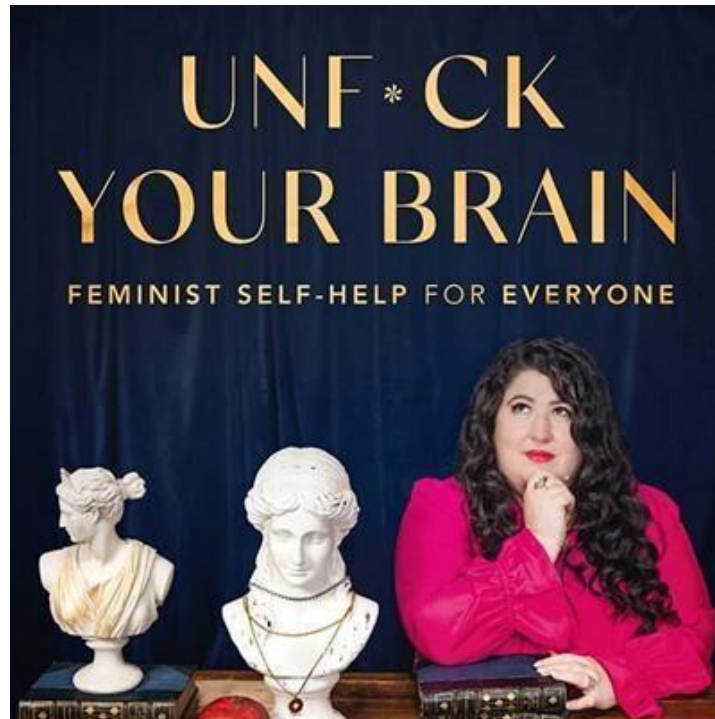


UFYB 307: Feminist Marriage Brain Part 2 – Marriage Ambivalence



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *Unf*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms. One that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Hello, my chickens, and welcome to the second part of this two part series I'm doing about my experience getting engaged, contemplating marriage, and how that's unfolded for me from the feminist thought work perspective.

So in the last episode I talked about where our expectations around engagement come from, and how to coach yourself if you're having drama around those expectations. In this episode, I want to talk about the decision to get married itself and the complicated feelings that so many of us, I think, have about that decision.

And I talked through engagement because I think it's a microcosm of how we're socialized to think about romance and worth and value in this kind of time of social transition, in terms of the longer term transition of women's roles in society and how we think about ourselves. And I want to talk through my thoughts about marriage because it's a microcosm, I think, of how we deal with engaging with patriarchal institutions or structures.

So it's a lens for talking about the ambivalence and confusion that comes up as women living in this process of social transition from pure patriarchy to a somewhat more equitable society. Although obviously, we still have a long way to go on a lot of fronts.

Marriage itself is historically a patriarchal institution, right? And there isn't something inherent about marriage that it has to be patriarchal, like two people agreeing to commit to a certain kind of life and or romantic partnership, relationship structure could be equitable and equal. But in

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reality in our social context and the social context from which our culture evolved, marriage is patriarchal.

The first recorded marriage ceremony between a man and a woman is from about 2350, the year 2350. That seems specific to me, I'm surprised it can be that specific. But a couple of millennia before the common era in Mesopotamia. One theory is that as cultures developed agriculture, they developed more stationary civilizations in which one could amass land or property, which meant that inheritance began to matter, right?

If you could own land, own property, build up possessions, then who you were going to give it to mattered. And if inheritance passed along the paternal line, from the father, that meant that you needed to know who had fathered which children.

So the theory is that marriage was an answer to that. By creating a cultural or legal ceremony around sexual interaction and procreation, you created a way of knowing whose sons were whom. You created a way of knowing in terms of legal fiction, obviously, on a factual level people have been having sex outside of marriage, probably from the first time there was marriage, right? But there's a legal structure to know whose sons are legally whom, right, even when the actual paternity might be different.

This is a very broad brush story. There are debates among anthropologists about how to define marriage or its purposes, right? Some people think that beyond the sort of child legitimacy issue, some of the reasons for marriage are sexual monopoly, right? Or property control or accumulation or labor exchanges between families. There's a lot of different theories.

Treating women as property exchange for economic benefit and political alliances probably predates marriage, but marriage certainly canonized it. In ancient Greece the betrothal ceremony involves a father giving his

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daughter to her husband, with the words I pledge my daughter for the purpose of producing legitimate offspring.

So people didn't marry for love mostly, historically. They married because their families arranged it, and they didn't have much of any choice. And in addition to procreation, the social order depended on women's unpaid labor in the home, in housekeeping, in childbearing, in child raising and sexual labor, right? And marriage was the vehicle for requiring and enforcing that labor.

As Christianity arose in the west and became religiously and politically predominant, marriage became understood as a religious matter, in the Christian West at least. And women's legal rights in Europe depended on their marital status. The concept of coverture, which was the legal framework in much of Europe, meant that a wife and a husband became one legal entity, but that entity was the husband, right? A wife got absorbed into, covered by the legal entity of her husband in some of Europe.

And then the United States, women could not own their own property. They couldn't hold a profession. They couldn't have their own money. They couldn't make legal decisions for themselves or their children. Single women had more rights, but there was enormous social stigma against being a single woman, especially in the middle and upper classes, so marriage was essentially kind of compulsory.

And changing that took a surprisingly long time. It was not until 1974 that a woman could open a credit card without a male guarantor in every state in the US. It took a federal law to achieve that. And that is not that long ago. And we still see huge inequities among married couples and how much time women spend on housework, childbearing and child rearing, right?

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Statistics show that single, childless women are the happiest demographic in society. They have the most free time and the most discretionary income. And yet, while it's better than it used to be in that you can now legally and financially and socially choose to be a single woman and have a job and live on your own, there's still a lot of social pressure to get married, or at least to get long term monogamously partnered.

We're still socialized to see marriage as a required part of life for a woman. And we're taught that marriage is something that women want and men resist, even though actually men benefit from marriage in terms of physical health, emotional health, finances and longevity, while women usually worsen on some or all of those metrics through marrying, having children and or getting divorced.

But women are still socialized to believe that being chosen by a man for marriage is the highest form of validation you can have, and that it's required for your life to really start. Obviously, some people have no interest in marrying men at all, either because they have no interest in men or no interest in marriage. But many women have interest in both these things.

So what happens when you know all of the statistics and all the history and yet, you think you might want to get married? And you're dating, and you're trying to figure out, are you looking for someone who wants to get married? Is that part of what you're trying to match up on? Or maybe you're in a relationship and you want to get married, but you feel conflicted about it. Or your partner wants to get married, and you feel conflicted about it.

It would be great if I could give you a three part test to know, right? But I can't. This episode is really more an invitation to be with ambivalence and ambiguity in our relationship to our society and our own minds. We cannot ever completely desocialize our brains. And we shouldn't, even if we could, right?

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Socialization is how we know how to behave in all ways. What foods are safe to eat, how to make friends, when we need to wear pants, that's all socialization. So we cannot approach some kind of state of mental purity. We're always working with and living with brains that have been impacted by socialization.

Feminist coaching and feminist self-help are about rewiring the socialization that is most harmful and most actively holding us back. It's about changing the way we talk to and judge and evaluate ourselves. If you tell yourself that you're an unlovable loser because you aren't married, yes, definitely coach yourself on that. That is a clear situation, that's not a place to be like, let me sit with the ambiguity of shitting on myself about this.

But if you've worked through your self-judgment or your attachment of your worth to getting married, you may be left with a mix of thoughts and emotions that can't necessarily be reconciled. And that's how I felt when my partner and I started talking about it.

I knew that marriage was historically an institution for the oppression and subjugation of women. I had done a lot of work to release attaching my worth or value to my relationship status or whether or not I ever got married. I'd gotten to 40 without being engaged or married. And I was single when I turned 40. Or I had actually just met my partner like a month before, so essentially single. And I really lived my life that way.

And yet, as I met this person and made the decisions that brought our relationship together, I felt a desire to kind of have this more public acknowledgment of this milestone in my life. I had met someone who I rather unexpectedly wanted to be with enough to accept a more traditional life than I had planned. Putting down roots in New York City, staying here, helping raise his kids part time, being the sort of more or less very

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normative structure, even though we make it our own and there are things about it that aren't normative. From the outside, it certainly looks normative.

And all of the work that I had had to do to get there emotionally for myself. So there was something about formalizing our commitment and community that felt important to me. And I think this is actually a good example of intersectionality in some ways, because this particular desire of kind of formalizing the commitment and community, I don't think was patriarchal socialization. I think that part was Jewish socialization.

My partner did not share this desire for a big community celebration. He wanted to get married, but he didn't really understand this idea of having a bigger wedding. In fact, he initially found it very strange that my parents cared about us having a wedding and wanted to invite their friends, that that was important to them. He sort of felt like, I don't think I'll care who goes to my kids' wedding.

But Jews are originally a tribal society. And because of, I think, millennia of persecution and multiple attempts of genocide, there's just a different kind of feeling around celebrating in community, especially celebrating rituals that are connected to continuing the Jewish lineage, right? There's something about every Jewish marriage celebration that feels like it's snatched from the jaws of threat and defeat in some way, that so many people have tried to stamp us out and we're still here.

And I feel that even though I don't plan to have my own biological children. So in some way, this marriage isn't really continuing the Jewish people. But that feeling is still there a little bit, of like celebrating in community and the importance of that in our culture and in our kind of traditions in a way that my partner maybe didn't feel. And also because his children are Jewish, I sort of feel like I'm contributing to continuing that.

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But I also know there's no way to separate those thoughts and feelings from my gender socialization, right? I can say that it's about community and milestones and celebration, and I think that's true. I think it's about all those things. But, obviously, a wedding is a very specific way of celebrating those things. I've chosen I'm not going to wear white. And I'm not walking down the aisle. And I'm not doing some of the other traditional wedding things. We both have engagement rings.

There are things we're doing differently, but I'm still choosing a wedding as the container for this public commitment and celebration. And that's obviously not in a vacuum, that's partially socialization. And we're getting legally married, not just having a party. So I'm also entering into a legal institution and structure that has historically been oppressive to women.

And that's also nuanced and complicated, in our case. The Gentleman Consort is the one who has more to gain through legal marriage because I have more assets. So he's the one who would be gaining kind of, right? And we also will have a prenup, as I think everyone should. Listen to my episode with my ACFC student, Bonnie Koo about that, because the state always has a prenup for you, so you should have one for yourself.

So we're structuring our own legal arrangements, but nevertheless I'm participating in a legal institution that has been used to oppress women for centuries. And I'm choosing to do it. We could have a wedding and not get legally married. And there's something about that that feels incomplete to me in a way that I know is socialization. It's not somehow an objective truth about the world. It is how I've been taught to think about marriage and commitment. It's how I've been taught to accept the legal and political structure being enmeshed in my private life.

That is all socialization. I see that and it's true. And I also am not choosing to change those thoughts. I would if I had to. If we couldn't get legally

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married for some reason, I would change my thoughts about it. But instead, I'm choosing to go through with it.

I don't have a way of totally resolving these ambivalences. I don't have some kind of test that I can use to say, "Okay, well, it's 49% socialization, but it's 51% freewill, so I'll do it," right? I cannot be absolutely sure what percentage of my attraction to the experience of a wedding or to the decision to get legally married is created by socialization, because that's not how the brain works.

Your brain is always thinking and processing, and evolving and absorbing what's around you. And your thoughts can't always be sorted into neat buckets and then compared or contrasted and resolved. Sometimes you just have to live with ambiguity and ambivalence.

This is something that I coach on all the time in my Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching, because I think women in particular are socialized to not trust our own judgment, discretion, decision making, because we're socialized to not see ourselves as leaders or responsible or reliable. And so we just want to have the right answer and that black and white test, and it doesn't exist.

And like a lot of feminist coaching is learning how to help your clients and yourself give yourself the gift of the full human spectrum of certainty and ambivalence and ambiguity and not being sure, right? Things that sort of full human subjects are allowed to experience without having to get it right.

And how you decide to resolve these will also be very personal. Someone else might have my same thoughts and decide the other way. Maybe they would have a wedding for no legal marriage or they'd have a legal marriage but no wedding, or they do neither one, right? There's no way to know.

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This is an incredibly important skill to build, this ability to sit with ambiguity and ambivalence because we can't get our brains to zero socialization. We can't get to this pre-socialization, natural state. So whenever you're dealing with an area where you've been deeply socialized based on gender or other factors, you're never going to have pure, clean, quote, unquote, thinking. You're never going to know what you would have been like, if you'd been socialized totally differently.

You have to negotiate it on an ongoing basis, using your own discretion to guide you. And like I said, that's very hard for us because we're socialized not to trust ourselves and we want clear rules so that we know the right thing to do. But there isn't a right thing to do here. It all depends on what your thoughts are about it all.

And even our anti patriarchy thoughts, right? Even thoughts that don't have anything to do with patriarchy are influenced by other aspects of our culture. For instance, someone might decide they're going to have a wedding because even though they don't care about having a wedding, that's important to their family.

Someone coming from one cultural perspective might look at that and say, well, that's oppressive. You're doing something you don't want to do, just to make your family happy. You're sacrificing your individuality to please other people. That's an unmanaged mind you're displaying.

And someone from a different cultural context might think, well, family harmony and unity is a really important goal. And that matters more than individual preferences. And a wedding is really for the family, it's not even for you, right? So this makes total sense.

It's all just how you're thinking about it. I originally wanted to have a smaller wedding and my parents wanted to be able to invite their friends and

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extended family. And this is all relative, right? Like I said, The Gentleman Consort didn't want a big wedding, like he would have had like 15 people. And I would maybe have had 50 people. And then now it's bigger than that.

But my parents, it really mattered to them to be able to invite their friends and to have their extended family there. And when I thought about it, I just was like, okay, that's okay with me, right? I don't actually care that much about this.

Now, did I make that decision because I'm socialized to people please and because of the socialization around weddings, and maybe the Jewish socialization on big weddings? Maybe, but I made it feeling empowered. I didn't feel anxious, and so I feel solid about it.

There's no purity or perfection in this work, there are a lot of gray areas. So this episode will probably not help you decide whether to have a wedding, or whether to shave your legs or have kids or do anything else that you've been socialized to value and have conflicted feelings about.

But I hope it helps you to be able to sit with the ambiguity and the ambivalence, whatever area you have it in. To not beat yourself up for the thoughts and feelings you have in either direction or in any direction. And to allow yourself to make imperfect choices in an imperfect world with an imperfect brain. And then to just enjoy them, because once the decision is made, you may as well have fun with it.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Feminist Self-Help Society*. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life along with a library of next level blow your mind coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode. It's also where you can hang out, get coached and nerd out about all things

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