This article explores the process by which two individuals move from a coupled identity to separate, autonomous identities. Through the use of intensive interviews, the essentials of the process are abstracted and described as a series of stages through which the participants negotiate changing definitions of reality, both for themselves and for others. Berger and Kellner's conception of marriage as a socially constructed reality that is "nomos-building" is used as a starting point and is critiqued.

UNCOUPLING
THE PROCESS OF MOVING FROM ONE LIFESTYLE TO ANOTHER

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The notion of an alternative implies the personal freedom to make a choice. Yet in contemplating singlehood as an alternative lifestyle to an on-going intimate involvement with another, the degree of personal freedom and choice bear examining. Some are "thrust into" singlehood, either by the choice or death of their partner. Singlehood never existed for them as an "alternative," in the dictionary sense of the word. Moreover, for those who do perceive singleness to be an alternative, the personal freedom to choose that

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lifestyle is inhibited by a number of things, among them the social expectation that people come in pairs, like the animals on Noah's ark. Thus, for both partners the transition from being coupled to being single can be difficult.

The dynamics of this transition—of becoming uncoupled—and the difficulty therein can be better understood as a process that reaches beyond the intimacy of the two individuals concerned. There is a broader social world involved. Change in intimate lifestyle affects and is affected by an interdependency with this broader social world. Berger and Kellner (1964) explored this interdependency when they examined the social processes invoked when two people marry. Redefinition of self is at the heart of this process, not only at the individual level but also within the broader social sphere.

According to Berger and Kellner, two separate autonomous individuals meet and begin to construct for themselves a subworld in which they will live as a couple. Redefinition of self occurs as the two reconstruct their separate identities into a coupled identity.

Previously, significant conversation for each partner came from nonoverlapping circles, and self-realization came from other sources. Together they begin to construct a private sphere in which much of their significant conversation centers in their relationship with each other. The coupled identity becomes the main source of their self-realization. Their definitions of reality become correlated, for each partner's actions must be projected in conjunction with the other. Their worlds come to be defined around a relationship with a significant other who becomes the significant other. Other significant relationships have to be reperceived, regrouped: "his" friends, "her" friends, "our" friends. As a result, the two construct a joint biography and develop a coordinated common memory based on accumulated shared experiences.

Were this construction of a coupled identity left only to the two participants, the coupling would be precarious
indeed. However, the new reality is reinforced through objectivation, that is, "a process by which subjectively experienced meanings become objective to the individual, and, in interaction with others, become common property, and thereby massively objective" (Berger and Kellner, 1964: 6). In other words, the new definition created by the two becomes public knowledge. Thus, through the use of language in conversation with significant others, the reality of the coupling is constantly confirmed.

Of perhaps greater significance is that this definition of coupledness becomes taken for granted, by the partners and by others. The two are treated as a couple, expected to act as a couple. These social expectations maintain the constructed reality, ordering the individuals' world in such a way that it validates their identities. Marriage, according to Berger and Kellner (1964: 1), is a constructed reality which is "nomos-building." That is, it is a social arrangement that contributes order to individual lives, and therefore should be considered as a significant validating relationship for adults in our society. The interdependency between change of personal lifestyle and the broader social world is apparent throughout the Berger and Kellner analysis.

However, social relationships are seldom static. Not only do we move in and out of relationships but even the nature of a particular relationship, though enduring, varies over time. Given that the definitions we create become socially validated, and hence constraining, how do individuals make the transition from a mutual identity, as in marriage, to singlehood? What is the process by which these new definitions are created and become validated?

The Berger and Kellner analysis describes a number of interrelated yet distinguishable stages that are involved in the social construction of a mutual identity, for example, the regrouping of all other significant relationships. In much the same way, the demise of a relationship should involve distinguishable social processes. Since redefinition of self is basic to both movement into and out of relationships, the
social construction of a singular identity also should follow the patterns Berger and Kellner suggested. This article is a qualitative examination of this process. Hence, the description that follows bears an implicit test of Berger and Kellner's ideas.

Though the focus is on divorce, the process examined appears to apply to any heterosexual relationship in which the participants have come to define themselves and be defined by others as a couple. The work is exploratory and, as such, not concerned with generalizability. However, the process may apply to homosexual couples as well. Therefore, the term uncoupling will be used because it is a more general concept than divorce. Uncoupling applies to the redefinition of self that occurs as mutual identity changes into singularity, regardless of marital status or sex of the participants.

The dimensions of sorrow, anger, personal disorganization, fear, loneliness, and ambiguity that intermingle every separation are well known.¹ Their familiarity does not diminish their importance. Though in real life these cannot be ignored, the researcher has the luxury of selectivity. Here, it is not the pain and disorganization that are to be explored, but the existence of an underlying orderliness.

The formal basis from which this article developed was exploratory in-depth interviews. The interviews, ranging from two to six hours, were taped and later analyzed. All of the interviewees were at different stages in the uncoupling process. Most were divorced, though some were still in stages of consideration of divorce. Some of the interviews were based on long-term relationships that never resulted in marriage. All of the relationships were heterosexual. The quality of these interviews has added much depth to the understanding of the separation process. The interviewees were of high intellectual and social level, and their sensitivity and insight have led to much valuable material, otherwise unavailable.
A more informal contribution to the article comes from personal experiences and the experiences of close friends over the years. Further corroboration has come from autobiographical accounts, films, newspapers, periodicals, and conversations, which have resulted in a large number of cases illustrating certain points. Additional support has come from individuals who have read or heard the article with the intent of proving and disproving its contentions by reference to their own cases.

Since the declared purpose here is to abstract the essential features of the process of uncoupling, some simplification is necessary. The separation of a relationship can take several forms. To trace all of them is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, to narrow the focus, I will first consider the possible variations.

Perhaps the coupled identity was not a major mechanism for self-validation from the outset of the union. Or, the relationship may have at one time filled that function; but as time passed, this coupled identity was insufficient to meet individual needs. Occasionally this fact has implications for both partners simultaneously and the uncoupling process is initiated by both. More frequently, however, one partner still finds the marriage a major source of stability and identity, while the other finds it inadequate. In this form, one participant takes the role of initiator of the uncoupling process. However, this role may not consistently be held by one partner, but instead may alternate between them, due to the difficulty of uncoupling in the face of external constraints, social pressure not to be the one responsible for the demise of the relationship, and the variability in the self-validating function of the union over time. For the purpose of this study, the form of uncoupling under consideration is that which results when one partner, no longer finding the coupled identity self-validating, takes the role of initiator in the uncoupling process. The other partner, the significant other, still finds the union a major source of stability and identity.
UNCOUPLING: THE INITIATION OF THE PROCESS

I was never psychologically married. I always felt strained by attempts that coupled me into a marital unit. I was just never comfortable as "Mrs." I never got used to my last name. I never wanted it. The day after my marriage was probably the most depressed day of my life, because I had lost my singularity. The difference between marriage and a deep relationship, living together, is that you have this ritual, and you achieve a very definite status, and it was that that produced my reactions—because I became, in the eyes of the world, a man's wife. And I was never comfortable and happy with it. It didn't make any difference who the man was. [Teacher, age 26, divorced after one year of marriage.]

An early phase in the uncoupling process occurs as one of the partners begins to question the coupled identity. At first internal, the challenging of the created world remains for a time as a doubt within one partner in the coupling. Though there is a definition of coupledness, subjectively the coupledness may be experienced differently by each partner. Frequently, these subjective meanings remain internal and unarticulated. Thus, similarly, the initial recognition of the coupling as problematic may be internal and unarticulated, held as a secret. The subworld that has been constructed, for some reason, does not "fit."

A process of definition negotiation is begun, initiated by the one who finds the mutual identity an inadequate definition of self. Attempts to negotiate the definition of the coupledness are likely to result in this subjective meaning becoming articulated for the first time. The secret, held by the initiator, is shared with the significant other. When this occurs, it allows both participants to engage in the definitional process.

Though the issue is made "public" in that private sphere shared by the two, the initiator frequently finds that a lack of shared definitions of the coupled identity stalemates the negotiations. While the initiator defines the marriage as a problem, the other does not. The renegotiation of the coupled
identity cannot proceed unless both agree that the subworld they have constructed needs to be redefined. Perhaps for the significant other, the marriage as it is still provides important self-validation. If so, the initiator must bring the other to the point of sharing a common definition of the marriage as "troubled."

**ACCOMPANYING RECONSTRUCTIONS**

Though this shared definition is being sought, the fact remains that for the initiator the coupled identity fails to provide self-validation. In order to meet this need, the initiator engages in other attempts at redefining the nature of the relationship. Called "accompanying reconstructions," these may or may not be shared with the significant other. They may begin long before the "secret" of the troubled marriage is shared with the other, in an effort to make an uncomfortable situation more comfortable without disrupting the relationship. Or, they may occur subsequent to sharing the secret with the significant other, as a reaction to the failure to redefine the relationship satisfactorily. Time order for their occurrence is not easily imposed—thus, "accompanying reconstructions."

The initiator's accompanying reconstructions may be directed toward the redefinition of (1) the coupledness itself, (2) the identity of the significant other, or (3) the identity of the initiator. A change in definition of any of the three implies a change in at least one of the others. Though they are presented here separately, they are interactive rather than mutually exclusive and are not easily separable in real life.

The first form of accompanying reconstruction to be considered is the initiator's redefinition of the coupledness itself. One way of redefining the coupledness is by an unarticulated conversion of the agreed-upon norms of the relationship.
I had reconceptualized what marriage was. I decided sexual fidelity was not essential for marriage. I never told her that. And I didn't even have anyone I was interested in having that intimate a relationship with—I just did a philosophical thing. I just decided it was OK for me to have whatever of what quality of other relationships I needed to have. Something like that—of that caliber—was something I could never talk to her about. So I did it all by myself. I read things and decided it. I was at peace with me. I knew that we could stay married, whatever that meant. OK, I can stay legally tied to you, and I can probably live in this house with you, and I can keep working the way I have been. I decided I can have my life and still be in this situation with you, but you need some resources, because I realize now I'm not going to be all for you. I don't want to be all for you, and I did tell her that. But I couldn't tell her this total head trip I'd been through because she wouldn't understand. [Researcher, age 26, divorced after four years of marriage.]

Or, the coupledness may be redefined by acceptance of the relationship with certain limitations. Boundaries can be imposed on the impact that the relationship will have on the total life space of the initiator.

I finally came to the point where I realized I was never going to have the kind of marriage I had hoped for, the kind of relationship I had hoped for. I didn’t want to end it, because of the children, but I wasn’t going to let it hurt me anymore. I wasn’t going to depend on him anymore. The children and I were going to be the main unit, and if he occasionally wanted to participate, fine—and if not, we would go ahead without him. I was no longer willing to let being with him be the determining factor as to whether I was happy or not. I ceased planning our lives around his presence or absence and began looking out for myself. [Student, age 39, divorced after 20 years of marriage.]

A second form of accompanying reconstruction occurs when the initiator attempts to redefine the significant other in a way that is more attractive. The initiator may direct efforts toward specific behaviors, such as drinking habits,
temper, sexual incompatibilities, or finance management. Or, the redefinition attempt may be of a broader scope.

I was aware of his dependence on the marriage to provide all his happiness and it wasn’t providing it. I wanted him to go to graduate school, but he postponed it, against my wishes. I wanted him to pursue his own life. I didn’t want him to sacrifice for me. I wanted him to become more exciting to me in the process. I was aware that I was trying to persuade him to be a different person. [Teacher, age 26, divorced after one year of marriage.]

Redefinition of the significant other may either be directed toward maintaining the coupling, as above, or uncoupling, as is the case below.

The way I defined being a good wife and the way John defined being a good wife were two different quantities. He wanted the house to look like a hotel and I didn’t see it that way. He couldn’t see why I couldn’t meet his needs. . . . When he first asked for a divorce and I refused, he suggested I go back to school. I remembered a man who worked with John who sent his wife back to school so she could support herself, so he could divorce her. I asked John if he was trying to get rid of me. He didn’t answer that. He insisted I go, and I finally went. [Artist, age 45, divorced after 16 years of marriage.]

A third form of accompanying reconstruction may be directed toward the redefinition of the initiator. This partner seeks alternatives outside the union for self-validation. A whole set of other behaviors may evolve that have the ultimate effect of moving the relationship away from the coupledness, toward singularity.

**SELF-VALIDATION OUTSIDE THE MARRIAGE**

What was at first internally experienced and recognized as self-minimizing takes more concrete form and becomes
externally expressed in a search for self-maximization. Through investment of self in career, in a cause requiring commitment, in a relationship with a new significant other, in family, in education, or in activities and hobbies, the initiator develops new sources of self-realization. These alternatives confirm not the coupled identity but the singularity of the initiator.

Furthermore, in the process of becoming more autonomous, the initiator finds ideological support that reinforces the uncoupling process. Berger and Kellner (1964) note the marriage as a significant validating relationship in our society. That is, the nuclear family is seen as the site of love, sexual fulfillment, and self-realization. In the move toward uncoupling, the initiator finds confirmation for a belief in self as a first priority.

I now see my break with religion as a part of my developing individuality. At the time I was close friends with priests and nuns, most of whom have since left the church. I felt a bitterness toward the church for its definition of marriage. I felt constrained toward a type of marriage that was not best for me. [Psychologist, age 37, married 15 years at time of interview.]

The supporting ideology may come from the family of orientation, the women’s movement, the peer group, or a new significant other. It may grow directly, through interaction, or indirectly, as through literature. No matter what the source, the point is that when the initiator turns away from the marriage, this change is strengthened by a supporting belief system (see also Atwater, 1979; Stein, 1975).

The initiator moves toward construction of a separate subworld wherein significant conversation comes from circles which no longer overlap with those of the significant other. And, the significant other is excluded from that separate subworld.
I shared important things with the children that I didn't share with him. It's almost as if I purposefully punished him by not telling him. Some good thing would happen and I'd come home and tell them and wouldn't tell him. [Psychologist, age 37, married 15 years at time of interview.]

The definition of the marriage as problematic becomes more public as the secret—once held only by the initiator, then shared with the significant other—moves to a sphere beyond the couple themselves. It may be directly expressed as a confidence exchanged with a close friend, family member, or children, or it may be that the sharing is indirect. Rather than being expressed in significant conversation, the definition of the marriage as troubled is created for others by a variety of mechanisms that relay the message that the initiator is not happily married.

Other moves away occur that deeply threaten the coupled identity for the significant other, while at the same time validating the autonomy of the initiator.

I remember going to a party by myself and feeling comfortable. She never forgot that. I never realized the gravity of that to her. [Researcher, age 26, divorced after four years of marriage.]

Graduate school became a symbolic issue. I was going to be a separate entity. That's probably the one thing I wanted to do that got the biggest negative emotional response from him. [Nurse, age 26, divorced after four years of marriage.]

All that time I was developing more of a sense of being away from him. I didn't depend on him for any emotional feedback, companionship. I went to plays and movies with friends. [Psychologist, age 37, married 15 years at time of interview.]

Friendship groups, rather than centering around the coupledness, come from splintered sources, supporting separate identities. Though this situation can exist in relationships in which the coupled identity is confirming for both participants, the distinction is that in the process of
uncoupling there may not be shared conversation to link the separate subworld of the initiator with that of the significant other.

These movements away by the initiator heighten a sense of exclusion for the significant other. Deep commitment to other than the coupled identity—to career, to a cause, to education, to a hobby, to another person—reflects the lessened commitment to the marriage. The initiator’s search for self-validation outside the marriage may even be demonstrated symbolically to the significant other by the removal of the wedding ring or by the desire, if the initiator is a woman, to revert to her maiden name. If the initiator’s lessened commitment to the coupled identity is reflected in a lessened desire for sexual intimacy, the challenge to the identity of the significant other and the coupledness becomes undeniable. As the significant other recognizes the growing autonomy of the initiator, he, too, comes to accept the definition of the marriage as troubled.

Most important, the roles assumed by each participant at this point have implications for the impact of the uncoupling on each. While the initiator has found other sources of self-realization outside the marriage, usually the significant other has not. The marriage still performs the major self-validating function. The significant other is committed to an ideology that supports the coupled identity. The secret of the troubled marriage has not been shared with others as it has by the initiator, meaning for the significant other the relationship in its changed construction remains unobjectivated. The challenge to the identity of the significant other and to the coupledness posed by the initiator may result in increased commitment to the coupled identity for the significant other. With the joint biography already separated in these ways, the couple enters into a period of “trying.”
TRYING

Trying is a stage of intense definition negotiation by the partners. Now both share a definition of the marriage as troubled. However, each partner may seek to construct a new reality that is in opposition to that of the other. The significant other tries to negotiate a shared definition of the marriage as savable, while the initiator negotiates toward a shared definition that marks the marriage as unsavable.²

For the initiator, the uncoupling process is well underway. At some point this partner has experienced "psychological divorce." Sociologically, this can be defined as the point at which the individual’s newly constructed separate subworld becomes the major nomos-building mechanism in his life space, replacing the nomos-building function of the coupled identity.

The initiator tries subtly to prepare the significant other to live alone. By encouraging the other to make new friends, find a job, get involved in outside activities, or seek additional education, the initiator hopes to decrease the other’s commitment to and dependence upon the coupled identity and move the other toward independence. This stage of preparation is not simply one of cold expediency for the benefit of the initiator but also is based on concern for the significant other and serves to mitigate the pain of the uncoupling process for both the initiator and the other.

For both, there is a hesitancy to sever the ties. In many cases, neither party is fully certain about the termination of the marriage. Mutual uncertainty may be more characteristic of the process. The relationship may move back and forth between active trying and passive acceptance of the status quo, due to the failure of each to pull the other to a common definition and the inability of either to make the break.

I didn’t want to hurt him. I didn’t want to be responsible for the demise of a marriage I no longer wanted. I could have
forced him into being the one to achieve the breach, for I realized it was never going to happen by itself. [Graduate student, age 26, divorced after two years of marriage.]

I didn't want to be the villain—the one to push her out into the big, bad world. I wanted to make sure she was at the same point I was. [Professor, age 35, divorced after 10 years of marriage.]

I kept hoping some alternative would occur so that he would be willing to break. I kept wishing it would happen. [Psychologist, age 37, married 15 years at time of interview.]

Frequently, in the trying stage, the partners turn to outside help for formal negotiation of the coupled identity. Counseling, though entered into with apparent common purpose, becomes another arena in which the partners attempt to negotiate a shared definition, but they each have separate goals. For the initiator, the counseling may serve as a step in the preparation of the significant other to live alone. Not only does it serve to bring the other to the definition of the marriage as unsavable, but also the counseling provides a resource for the significant other, in the person of the counselor. Often it happens that the other has turned to no one for comfort about the problem marriage. The initiator, sensitive to this need and unable to fill it himself, hopes the counselor will fill this role. The counseling has yet another function. It further objectivates the notion that the relationship is troubled.

At some point during this period of trying, the initiator may suggest separation. Yet, frequently separation is not suggested as a formal leave-taking, but as a temporary separation meant to clarify the relationship for both partners. Again, the concern on the part of the initiator for the significant other appears. Not wanting to hurt, yet recognizing the coupled identity as no longer valid, the temporary separation is encouraged as a further means of bringing the other to accept a definition of the marriage as unsavable, to increase reliance of the other on outside resources of self-realization, and to initiate the physical breach gently.
Even at that point, at initial separation, I wasn’t being honest. I knew fairly certainly that when we separated, it was for good. I let her believe that it was a means for us first finding out what was happening, and then eventually possibly getting back together. [Architect, age 34, divorced after eight years of marriage.]

Should the initiator be hesitant to suggest a separation, the significant other may finally tire of the ambiguity of the relationship. No longer finding the coupling as it exists self-validating, the significant other may be the one to suggest a separation. The decision to separate may be the result of discussion and planning, or it may occur spontaneously, in a moment of anger. It may be mutually agreed upon, but more often it is not. However it emerges, the decision to separate is a difficult one for both partners.

**OBJECTIVATION**

**RESTRUCTURING OF THE PRIVATE SPHERE**

The separation is a transitional state in which everything needs definition, yet very little is capable of being defined. Economic status, friendship networks, personal habits, and sex life are all patterns of the past which need simultaneous reorganization. However, reorganization is hindered by the ambiguity of the relationship. The off again, on again wearing of the wedding rings is symbolic of the indecision in this stage. Each of the partners searches for new roles, without yet being free of the old.

For the initiator, who has developed outside resources, the impact of this uncertainty is partially mitigated. For the significant other, who has not spent time in preparation for individual existence, the stability of the marriage is gone and nothing has emerged as a substitute.

I had lost my identity somewhere along the way. And I kept losing my identity. I kept letting him make all the decisions.
I couldn’t work. I wasn’t able to be myself. I was letting someone else take over. I didn’t have any control over it. I didn’t know how to stop it. I was unsure that if anything really happened, I could actually make it on my own or not. [Graduate student, age 30, married 12 years at time of interview.]

The separation precipitates a redefinition of self for the significant other. Without other resources for self-validation and with the coupled identity now publicly challenged, the significant other begins a restructuring of the private sphere. This restructuring occurs not only in the social realm but also entails a form of restructuring that is physical, tangible, and symbolic of the break in the coupled identity. For instance, if the initiator has been the one to leave, at some point the significant other begins reordering the residence they shared to suit the needs of one adult, rather than two. Furniture is rearranged or thrown out. Closets and drawers are reorganized. A thorough house-cleaning may be undertaken. As the initiator has moved to a new location that reinforces his singularity, the significant other transforms the home that validated the coupling into one that confirms the new definition. Changes in the physical appearance of either or both partners may be a part of the symbolic restructuring of the private sphere. Weight losses, changes of hair style, or changes in clothing preferences further symbolize the yielding of the mutual identity and the move toward autonomy.

Should the significant other be the one to leave, the move into a new location aids in the redefinition of self as an autonomous individual. For example, the necessity of surviving in a new environment, the eventual emergence of a new set of friends that define and relate to the significant other as a separate being instead of as half of a couple, and the creation of a new residence without the other person all are mechanisms which reinforce autonomy and a definition of singularity.
Though the initiator has long been involved in making public a separate reality, frequently for the significant other this stage is just beginning. Seldom does the secret of the troubled marriage become shared with others by this partner until it can no longer be deferred. While the initiator actively has sought objectivation, the significant other has avoided it. Confronted with actual separation, however, the significant other responds by confiding in others, perhaps by writing in letters or in diaries—any means which helps the other to deal with the new reality.

There are some who must be told of the separation—children, parents, best friends. Not only are the two partners reconstructing their own reality but also they now must reconstruct the reality for others. This is accomplished through conversation. Common definitions are created. The result is a stabilization of the new reality for the two individuals and for others, as the new definition of uncoupledness becomes increasingly public.

Uncoupling precipitates a reordering of all other significant relationships. As in coupling, in which all other relationships are reperceived and regrouped to account for and support the emergence of the union, in uncoupling the reordering supports the singularity of each partner. Significant relationships are lost, as former friends of the couple now align with one or the other or refuse to choose between the two. Ties with families of orientation, formerly somewhat attenuated because of the coupling, are frequently renewed. For each of the partners, pressure exists to stabilize characterizations of others and of self so that the world and self are brought toward consistency. Each partner approaches groups that strengthen the new definition each has created and avoids those that weaken it. The groups with which each partner associates help codefine the new reality.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The uncoupling is further objectivated for the participants as the new definition is legitimized in the public sphere.
Two separate households demand public identification as separate identities. New telephone listings, changes of mailing address, separate checking accounts, and charge accounts, for example, all are mechanisms by which the new reality become publicly reconstructed.

The decision to initiate legal proceedings confirms the uncoupling by the formal negotiation of a heretofore informally negotiated definition. The adversary process supporting separate identities, custody proceedings, the formal separation of the material base, the final removal of the rings all act as means of moving the new definition from the private to the public sphere. The uncoupling now becomes objectivated not only for the participants and their close intimates but also for casual acquaintances and strangers.

Objectivation acts as a constraint upon whatever social identity has been constructed. It can bind a couple together or hinder their recoupling, once the uncoupling process has begun. Perhaps this can better be understood by considering the tenuous character of the extramarital affair. The very nature of the relationship is private. The coupling remains a secret, shared by the two, and seldom becomes objectivated in the public realm. Thus, the responsibility for the maintenance of that coupling usually rests solely with the two participants. When the relationship is no longer self-validating for one of the participants, the uncoupling does not involve a reconstruction of reality for others. The constraints imposed by the objectivation of a marital relationship which function to keep a couple in a marriage do not exist to the same extent in an affair. The fragility of the coupling is enhanced by its limited objectivation.

Berger and Kellner (1964: 6) note that the “degree of objectivation will depend on the number and intensity of the social relationships that are its carriers.” As the uncoupling process has moved from a nonshared secret held within the initiator to the realm of public knowledge, the degree of objectivation has increased. The result is a continuing decline in the precariousness of the newly constructed reality over time.
Yet, a decrease in precariousness is not synonymous with a completion of the uncoupling process. As marriage, or coupling, is a dramatic act of redefinition of self by two strangers as they move from autonomous identities to the construction of a joint biography, so uncoupling involves yet another redefinition of self as the participants move from mutual identity toward autonomy. It is this redefinition of self, for each participant, that completes the uncoupling. Divorce, then, may not be the final stage. In fact, divorce could be viewed as a nonstatus that is at some point on a continuum ranging from marriage (coupling) as an achieved status, to autonomy (uncoupling), likewise an achieved status. In other words, the uncoupling process might be viewed as a status transformation which is complete when the individual defines his salient status as single, rather than divorced. When the individual’s newly constructed separate subworld becomes nomos-building—creates for the individual a sort of order in which he can experience his life as making sense—the uncoupling process is completed.

The completion of the uncoupling does not occur at the same moment for each participant. For either or both of the participants, it may not occur until after the other has created a coupled identity with another person. With that step, the tentativeness is gone.

When I learned of his intention to remarry, I did not realize how devastated I would be. It was just awful. I remember crying and crying. It was really a very bad thing that I did not know or expect. You really aren’t divorced while that other person is still free. You still have a lot of your psychological marriage going—in fact, I’m still in that a little bit because I’m still single. [Artist, age 45, divorced after 16 years of marriage.]

For some, the uncoupling may never be completed. One or both of the participants may never be able to construct a
new and separate subworld that becomes self-validating. Witness, for example, the widow who continues to call herself Mrs. John Doe, who associates with the same circle of friends, who continues to wear her wedding ring, and observes wedding anniversaries. For her, the coupled identity is still a major mechanism for self-validation, even though the partner is gone.

In fact, death as a form of uncoupling may be easier for the significant other to handle than divorce. There exist ritual techniques for dealing with it, and there is no ambiguity. The relationship is gone. There will be no further interaction between the partners. With divorce, or any uncoupling that occurs through the volition of one or both of the partners, the interaction may continue long after the relationship has been formally terminated. For the significant other—the one left behind, without resources for self-validation—the continuing interaction between the partners presents obstacles to autonomy.

There’s a point at which it’s over. If your wife dies, you’re a lot luckier, I think, because it’s over. You either live with it, you kill yourself, or you make your own bed of misery. Unlike losing a wife through death, in divorce she doesn’t die. She keeps resurrecting it. I can’t get over it, she won’t die. I mean, she won’t go away. [Professor, age 35, divorced after 10 years of marriage.]

CONTINUITIES

Continuities are linkages between the partners that exist despite the formal termination of the coupled identity. Most important of these is the existence of shared loved ones—children, in-laws. Though in-laws may of necessity be excluded from the separately constructed subworlds, children can rarely be, and in their very existence present continued substantiation of the coupled identity.
In many cases continuities are actively constructed by one or both of the participants after the formal termination of the relationship. These manufactured linkages speak to the difficulty of totally separating that common biography, by providing a continued mechanism for interaction. They may be constructed as a temporary bridge between the separated subworlds or may come to be a permanent interaction pattern. Symbolically, they seem to indicate caring on the part of either or both of the participants. Some examples:

The wife moves out. The husband spends his weekend helping her get settled—hanging pictures, moving furniture.

The husband moves out, leaving his set of tools behind. Several years later, even after his remarriage, the tools are still there, and he comes to borrow them one at a time. The former wife is planning to move within the same city. The tools are boxed up, ready to be taken with her.

The wife has moved out, but is slow to change her mailing address. Rather than marking her forwarding address on the envelopes and returning them by mail, the husband either delivers them once a week or the wife picks them up.

The wife moves out. The husband resists dividing property with her that is obviously hers. The conflict necessitates many phone calls and visits.

The husband moves out. Once a week he comes to the house to visit with the children on an evening when the wife is away. When she gets home, the two of them occasionally go out to dinner.

A nice part of the marriage was sharing shopping trips on Sunday afternoons. After the divorce, they still occasionally go shopping together.

The holidays during the first year of separation were celebrated as they always had been—with the whole family together.

During a particularly difficult divorce, the husband noted that he had finally succeeded in finding his wife a decent lawyer.
Continuities present unmeasurable variables in the uncoupling process. In this article, uncoupling is defined as a reality socially constructed by the participants. The stages that mark the movement from a coupled identity to separate autonomous identities are characterized, using divorce for an ideal-type analysis. Yet, there is no intent to portray uncoupling as a compelling linear process from which there is no turning back. Such conceptualization would deny the human factor inherent in reality construction. Granted, as the original secret is moved from private to public, becoming increasingly objectivated, reconstructing the coupled identity becomes more and more difficult.

Each stage of objectivation acts as the closing of a door. Yet, at any stage the process may be interrupted. The initiator may not find mechanisms of self-validation outside the coupling that reinforce his autonomy. Or, the self-validation found outside the coupling may be exactly what allows the initiator to stay in the relationship. Or, continuities may intervene and reconstruction of the coupled identity may occur, despite the degree of objectivation, as in the following case.

Ellen met Jack in college. They fell in love and married. Jack had been blind since birth. He had pursued a college career in education and was also a musician. Both admired the independence of the other. In the marriage, she subordinated her career to his and helped him pursue a master's degree, as well as his musical interests. Her time was consumed by his needs—for transportation and the taping and transcribing of music for the musicians in his group. He was teaching at a school for the blind by day and performing as a musician at night. They had a son. The wife's life, instead of turning outward, as the husband's, revolved around family responsibilities. She gained weight. Jack, after 12 years of marriage, left Ellen for his high school sweetheart. Ellen grieved for a while, then began patching up her life. She got a job, established her own credit, went back to college, and lost weight. She saw a lawyer, filed for divorce, joined Parents Without Partners, and began searching out singles
groups. She dated. Throughout, Jack and Ellen saw each other occasionally and maintained a sexual relationship. The night before the divorce was final, they reconciled.

The uncoupling never was completed, though all stages of the process occurred, including the public objectivation that results from the initiation of the legal process. Ellen, in constructing an autonomous identity, became again the independent person Jack had first loved. This, together with the continuities that existed between the two, created the basis for a common definition of the coupling as savable.

**DISCUSSION**

Berger and Kellner describe the process by which two individuals create a coupled identity for themselves. Here, I have started from the point of the coupled identity and examined the process by which people move out of such relationships. Using interview data, I have found that although the renegotiation of separate realities is a complex web of subtle modifications, clear stages emerge which mark the uncoupling process. The emergent stages are like benchmarks which indicate the increasing objectivation of the changing definitions of reality, as these definitions move from the realm of the private to the public.

Beginning within the intimacy of the dyad, the initial objectivation occurs as the secret of the troubled marriage that the initiator has held is shared with the significant other. With this, the meaning has begun to move from the subjective to the objective. Definition negotiation begins. While attempting to negotiate a common definition, the initiator acts to increase the validation of his identity and place in the world by use of accompanying reconstructions of reality. The autonomy of the initiator increases as he finds self-validation outside the marriage, and an ideology that supports the uncoupling. The increased autonomy of the initiator brings the significant other to accept a definition of the marriage as troubled, and they enter into the stage
of trying. The process continues, as counseling and separation further move the new definition into the public sphere.

The telling of others, the symbolic physical signs of the uncoupling, and the initiation of formal legal proceedings validate the increasing separation of the partners as they negotiate a new reality which is different from that constructed private sphere which validated their identity as a couple. Eventually, a redefinition of the mutual identity occurs in such a way that the joint biography is separated into two separate autonomous identities. As Berger and Kellner state that marriage is a dramatic act of redefinition of self by two individuals, so uncoupling is characterized by the same phenomenon. Self-realization, rather than coming from the coupledness, again comes from outside sources. Significant conversation again finds its source in nonoverlapping circles. The new definition of the relationship constructed by the participants has, in interaction with others, become common property.

Language is crucial to this process. Socially constructed worlds need validation. As conversation constantly reconfirms a coupled identity, so also does it act as the major validating mechanism for the move to singularity, not by specific articulation, but by the way in which it comes to revolve around the uncoupled identity as taken for granted.

That the stages uncovered do broadly apply needs to be further confirmed. We need to know whether the process is invariant regardless of the heterosexuality, homosexuality, or social class of couples. Does it also apply for close friends? The influence of gender and its implications for uncoupling should be examined. Furthermore, in what ways might the gender of the interviewer bias the data? Additionally, the stages in the process should be confirmed by interviews with both partners in a coupling. Due to the delicacy of the subject matter, this is difficult. In only one instance were both partners available to be interviewed for this study. Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings which emerge deserve consideration.
Most significant of these is the existence of an underlying order in a phenomenon generally regarded as a chaotic and disorderly process. Undoubtedly the discovery of order was encouraged by the methodology of the study. The information was gained by retrospective analysis on the part of the interviewees. Certainly the passage of time allowed events to be reconstructed in an orderly way that made sense. Nonetheless, as was previously noted, the interviewees were all at various stages in the uncoupling process—some at the secret stage and some five years hence. Yet, the stages which are discussed here appeared without fail in every case and have been confirmed repeatedly by the other means described earlier. In addition to this orderliness, the examination of the process of uncoupling discloses two other little-considered aspects of the process that need to be brought forth and questioned.

One is the caring. Generally, uncoupling is thought of as a conflict-ridden experience that ends as a bitter battle between two adversaries intent on doing in each other. Frequently, this is the case. Yet, the interviews for this study showed that in all cases examined, even the most emotion-generating, again and again the concern of each of the participants for the other revealed itself. Apparently, the patterns of caring and responsibility that emerge between the partners in a coupling are not easily dispelled, and in many cases persist throughout the uncoupling process and afterward, as suggested by the concept of continuities.

A second question that emerges from this examination of uncoupling is related to Berger and Kellner’s thesis. They state that, for adults in our society, marriage is a significant validating relationship, one which is nomos-building. Marriage is, in fact, described as “a crucial nomic instrumentality” (1964: 4). Though Berger and Kellner at the outset do delimit the focus of their analysis to marriage as an ideal type, the question to be answered is to what degree is this characterization of marriage appropriate today?

Recall, for example, the quote from one interviewee: “I was never psychologically married. I always felt strained
by attempts that coupled me into a marital unit. I was just never comfortable as 'Mrs.' The interviews for this study suggest the nomos-building quality assumed to derive from marriage to the individual should be taken as problematic, rather than as given. Gouldner (1959) suggests the parts of a unit vary in the degree to which they are interdependent. His concept of functional autonomy may be extended to illuminate the variable forms that marriage, or coupling, may take, and the accompanying degree of nomos. A relationship may exist in which the partners are highly interdependent; and the coupled identity does provide the major mechanism for self-validation, as Berger and Kellner suggest. Yet it is equally as likely that the participants are highly independent, or "loosely coupled" (Weick, 1976; Corwin, 1977), wherein mechanisms for self-validation originate outside the coupling rather than from the coupling itself. The connection among the form of the coupling, the degree to which it is or is not nomos-building, and the subsequent implications for uncoupling should be examined in future research.

The uncoupling process has research implications that extend even beyond the realm of intimate relationships. Implicit in the dynamicity of life is that we, as individuals, do move on. We are constantly "uncoupling," not only from individuals but from situations and organizations as well. We leave behind colleagues, parents, neighborhoods, hospitals, mentors, jobs, schools and universities, clubs, prisons, loved ones. Though each of these instances is unique, there is a common thread among them. That is, whenever a change in lifestyle occurs, social processes are invoked which have implications for definition of the self.

Continued research into the social processes associated with changing lifestyles can contribute to both basic and applied sociology. Should the stages found in the process of uncoupling be confirmed to occur in other leaving situations, a theoretical framework could be developed for a sociology of life cycles. At the applied level, the information gained from research on moving from one lifestyle to an-
other has practical relevance for the individuals whose lifestyles are changing. The response of those uncoupled or in the process of uncoupling who have read or heard earlier versions of this article supports this. Sociologists interested in the sociology of life cycles may find there are rewards in becoming (in a sense) sociological counselors through dissemination of research findings to those participating in life changes.

NOTES

1. For a sensitive and thought-provoking examination of these as integral components of divorce, see Waller’s beautiful qualitative study, The Old Love and the New.

2. This statement must be qualified. There are instances when the partners enter a stage of trying with shared definitions of the marriage as savable. The conditions under which the coupling can be preserved have to be negotiated. If they can arrive at a definition of the coupling that is agreeable to both, the uncoupling process is terminated. But this analysis is of uncoupling, and there are two alternatives: (1) that they enter with common definitions of the marriage as savable but are not able to negotiate the conditions of the coupling so that the self-validation function is preserved or (2) that they enter the period of trying with opposing definitions, as stated here.

3. Waller interprets this phenomenon by using Jung’s conceptualization of the container and the contained, analogous to the roles of initiator and significant other, respectively, in the present discussion. Notes Waller, "Or the contained, complicated by the process of divorcing, may develop those qualities whose lack the container previously deplored" (Waller, 1930:163).

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