UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Case number: 09-2292

PLTF/DEFT EXHIBIT NO. DIX49

Date admitted: _______________

By: ___________________________

ANDREW J. CHERLIN *Johns Hopkins University*

The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage

This article argues that marriage has undergone a process of deinstitutionalization—a weakening of the social norms that define partners' behavior—over the past few decades. Examples are presented involving the increasing number and complexity of cohabiting unions and the emergence of same-sex marriage. Two transitions in the meaning of marriage that occurred in the United States during the 20th century have created the social context for deinstitutionalization. The first transition, noted by Ernest Burgess, was from the institutional marriage to the companionate marriage. The second transition was to the individualized marriage in which the emphasis on personal choice and self-development expanded. Although the practical importance of marriage has declined, its symbolic significance has remained high and may even have increased. It has become a marker of prestige and personal achievement. Examples of its symbolic significance are presented. The implications for the current state of marriage and its future direction are discussed.

A quarter century ago, in an article entitled "Remarriage as an Incomplete Institution" (Cherlin, 1978), I argued that American society lacked norms about the way that members of stepfamilies should act toward each other. Parents and children in first marriages, in contrast, could rely on well-established norms, such as when it is appropriate to discipline a child. I predicted that, over time, as remarriage after divorce became common, norms would begin to emerge concerning proper behavior in stepfamilies—for example, what kind of relationship a stepfather should have with his stepchildren. In other words, I expected that remarriage would become institutionalized, that it would become more like first marriage. But just the opposite has happened. Remarriage has not become more like first marriage; rather, first marriage has become more like remarriage. Instead of the institutionalization of remarriage, what has occurred over the past few decades is the deinstitutionalization of marriage. Yes, remarriage is an incomplete institution, but now, so is first marriage—and for that matter, cohabitation.

By deinstitutionalization I mean the weakening of the social norms that define people's behavior in a social institution such as marriage. In times of social stability, the taken-for-granted nature of norms allows people to go about their lives without having to question their actions or the actions of others. But when social change produces situations outside the reach of established norms, individuals can no longer rely on shared understandings of how to act. Rather, they must negotiate new ways of acting, a process that is a potential source of conflict and opportunity. On the one hand, the development of new rules is likely to engender disagreement and tension among the relevant actors. On the other hand, the breakdown of the old rules of a gendered institution such as marriage could lead to the creation of a more egalitarian relationship between wives and husbands.

This perspective, I think, can help us understand the state of contemporary marriage. It

Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University, 556 Mergenthaler Hall, Baltimore, MD 21218 (cherlin@jhu.edu).

Key Words: cohabitation, marriage, remarriage, same-sex marriage.

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may even assist in the risky business of predicting the future of marriage. To some extent, similar changes in marriage have occurred in the United States, Canada, and much of Europe, but the American situation may be distinctive. Consequently, although I include information about Canadian and European families, I focus mainly on the United States.

The Deinstitutionalization of Marriage

Even as I was writing my 1978 article, the changing division of labor in the home and the increase in childbearing outside marriage were undermining the institutionalized basis of marriage. The distinct roles of homemaker and breadwinner were fading as more married women entered the paid labor force. Looking into the future, I thought that perhaps an equitable division of household labor might become institutionalized. But what happened instead was the "stalled revolution," in Hochschild's (1989) well-known phrase. Men do somewhat more home work than they used to do, but there is wide variation, and each couple must work out their own arrangement without clear guidelines. In addition, when I wrote the article, 1 out of 6 births in the United States occurred outside marriage, already a much higher ratio than at midcentury (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 1982). Today, the comparable figure is 1 out of 3 (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2003). The percentage is similar in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003) and in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Kiernan, 2002). In the Nordic countries of Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, the figure ranges from about 45% to about 65% (Kiernan). Marriage is no longer the nearly universal setting for childbearing that it was a half century ago.

Both of these developments—the changing division of labor in the home and the increase in childbearing outside marriage—were well under way when I wrote my 1978 article, as was a steep rise in divorce. Here I discuss two more recent changes in family life, both of which have contributed to the deinstitutionalization of marriage after the 1970s: the growth of cohabitation, which began in the 1970s but was not fully appreciated until it accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, and same-sex marriage, which emerged as an issue in the 1990s and has come to the fore in the current decade.

The Growth of Cohabitation

In the 1970s, neither I nor most other American researchers foresaw the greatly increased role of cohabitation in the adult life course. We thought that, except among the poor, cohabitation would remain a short-term arrangement among childless young adults who would quickly break up or marry. But it has become a more prevalent and more complex phenomenon. For example, cohabitation has created an additional layer of complexity in stepfamilies. When I wrote my article, nearly all stepfamilies were formed by the remarriage of one or both spouses. Now, about one fourth of all stepfamilies in the United States, and one half of all stepfamilies in Canada, are formed by cohabitation rather than marriage (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Statistics Canada, 2002). It is not uncommon, especially among the low-income population, for a woman to have a child outside marriage, end her relationship with that partner, and then begin cohabiting with a different partner. This new union is equivalent in structure to a stepfamily but does not involve marriage. Sometimes the couple later marries, and if neither has been married before, their union creates a first marriage with stepchildren. As a result, we now see an increasing number of stepfamilies that do not involve marriage, and an increasing number of first marriages that involve stepfamilies.

More generally, cohabitation is becoming accepted as an alternative to marriage. British demographer Kathleen Kiernan (2002) writes that the acceptance of cohabitation is occurring in stages in European nations, with some nations further along than others. In stage one, cohabitation is a fringe or avant garde phenomenon; in stage two, it is accepted as a testing ground for marriage; in stage three, it becomes acceptable as an alternative to marriage; and in stage four, it becomes indistinguishable from marriage. Sweden and Denmark, she argues, have made the transition to stage four; in contrast, Mediterranean countries such as Spain, Italy, and Greece remain in stage one. In the early 2000s, the United States appeared to be in transition from stage two to stage three (Smock & Gupta, 2002). A number of indicators suggested that the connection between cohabitation and marriage was weakening. The proportion of cohabiting unions that end in marriage within 3 years dropped from 60% in the 1970s to about 33% in the 1990s (Smock & Gupta),

suggesting that fewer cohabiting unions were trial marriages (or that fewer trial marriages were succeeding). In fact, Manning and Smock (2003) reported that among 115 cohabiting working-class and lower middle-class adults who were interviewed in depth, none said that he or she was deciding between marriage and cohabitation at the start of the union. Moreover, only 36% of adults in the 2002 United States General Social Survey disagreed with the statement, "It is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married" (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2003). And a growing share of births to unmarried women in the United States (about 40% in the 1990s) were to cohabiting couples (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). The comparable share was about 60% in Britain (Ermisch, 2001).

Canada appears to have entered stage three (Smock & Gupta, 2002). Sixty-nine percent of births to unmarried women were to cohabiting couples in 1997 and 1998 (Juby, Marcil-Gratton, & Le Bourdais, in press). Moreover, the national figures for Canada mask substantial provincial variation. In particular, the rise in cohabitation has been far greater in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada. In 1997 and 1998, 84% of unmarried women who gave birth in Quebec were cohabiting (Juby, Marcil-Gratton, & Le Bourdais). And four out of five Quebeckers entering a first union did so by cohabiting rather than marrying (Le Bourdais & Juby, 2002). The greater acceptance of cohabitation in Quebec seems to have a cultural basis. Francophone Quebeckers have substantially higher likelihoods of cohabiting than do English-speaking Quebeckers or Canadians in the other English-speaking provinces (Statistics Canada, 1997). Céline Le Bourdais and Nicole Marcil-Gratton (1996) argue that Francophone Quebeckers draw upon a French, rather than Anglo-Saxon, model of family life. In fact, levels of cohabitation in Quebec are similar to levels in France, whereas levels in English-speaking Canada and in the United States are more similar to the lower levels in Great Britain (Kiernan, 2002).

To be sure, cohabitation is becoming more institutionalized. In the United States, states and municipalities are moving toward granting cohabiting couples some of the rights and responsibilities that married couples have. Canada has gone further: Under the Modernization of Benefits and Obligations Act of 2000, legal distinctions between married and unmarried same-sex and opposite-sex couples were eliminated for couples who have lived together for at least a year. Still, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in 2002 that when cohabiting partners dissolve their unions, they do not have to divide their assets equally, nor can one partner be compelled to pay maintenance payments to the other, even when children are involved (*Nova Scotia [Attorney General] v. Walsh*, 2002). In France, unmarried couples may enter into Civil Solidarity Pacts, which give them most of the rights and responsibilities of married couples after the pact has existed for 3 years (Daley, 2000). Several other countries have instituted registered partnerships (Lyall, 2004).

The Emergence of Same-Sex Marriage

The most recent development in the deinstitutionalization of marriage is the movement to legalize same-sex marriage. It became a public issue in the United States in 1993, when the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that a state law restricting marriage to opposite-sex couples violated the Hawaii state constitution (*Baehr* v. *Lewin*, 1993). Subsequently, Hawaii voters passed a state constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriage. In 1996, the United States Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which allowed states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages licensed in other states. The act's constitutionality has not been tested as of this writing because until recently, no state allowed same-sex marriages. However, in 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court struck down a state law limiting marriage to opposite-sex couples, and same-sex marriage became legal in May 2004 (although opponents may eventually succeed in prohibiting it through a state constitutional amendment). The issue has developed further in Canada: In the early 2000s, courts in British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec ruled that laws restricting marriage to opposite-sex couples were discriminatory, and it appears likely that the federal government will legalize gay marriage throughout the nation. Although social conservatives in the United States are seeking a federal constitutional amendment, I think it is reasonable to assume that same-sex marriage will be allowed in at least some North American jurisdictions in the future. In Europe, same-sex marriage has been legalized in Belgium and The Netherlands.

Lesbian and gay couples who choose to marry must actively construct a marital world with almost no institutional support. Lesbians and gay men already use the term "family" to describe their close relationships, but they usually mean something different from the standard marriage-based family. Rather, they often refer to what sociologists have called a "family of choice": one that is formed largely through voluntary ties among individuals who are not biologically or legally related (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991). Now they face the task of integrating marriages into these larger networks of friends and kin. The partners will not even have the option of falling back on the gender-differentiated roles of heterosexual marriage. This is not to say that there will be no division of labor; one study of gay and lesbian couples found that in homes where one partner works longer hours and earns substantially more than the other partner, the one with the less demanding, lower paying job did more housework and more of the work of keeping in touch with family and friends. The author suggests that holding a demanding professional or managerial job may make it difficult for a person to invest fully in sharing the work at home, regardless of gender or sexual orientation (Carrington, 1999).

We might expect same-sex couples who have children, or who wish to have children through adoption or donor insemination, to be likely to avail themselves of the option of marriage. (According to the United States Census Bureau [2003b], 33% of women in same-sex partnerships and 22% of men in same-sex partnerships had children living with them in 2000.) Basic issues, such as who would care for the children, would have to be resolved family by family. The obligations of the partners to each other following a marital dissolution have also yet to be worked out. In these and many other ways, gay and lesbian couples who marry in the near future would need to create a marriage-centered kin network through discussion, negotiation, and experiment.

Two Transitions in the Meaning of Marriage

In a larger sense, all of these developments—the changing division of labor, childbearing outside of marriage, cohabitation, and gay marriage—are the result of long-term cultural and material trends that altered the meaning of marriage during the 20th century. The cultural trends included, first, an emphasis on emotional satisfaction and romantic love that intensified early in the century. Then, during the last few decades of the century, an ethic of expressive individualism—which Bellah, Marsden, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton (1985) describe as the belief that "each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized" (p. 334)—became more important. On the material side, the trends include the decline of agricultural labor and the corresponding increase in wage labor; the decline in child and adult mortality; rising standards of living; and, in the last half of the 20th century, the movement of married women into the paid workforce.

These developments, along with historical events such as the Depression and World War II, produced two great changes in the meaning of marriage during the 20th century. Ernest Burgess famously labeled the first one as a transition "from an institution to a companionship" (Burgess & Locke, 1945). In describing the rise of the companionate marriage, Burgess was referring to the single-earner, breadwinner-homemaker marriage that flourished in the 1950s. Although husbands and wives in the companionate marriage usually adhered to a sharp division of labor, they were supposed to be each other's companions—friends, lovers—to an extent not imagined by the spouses in the institutional marriages of the previous era. The increasing focus on bonds of sentiment within nuclear families constituted an important but limited step in the individualization of family life. Much more so than in the 19th century, the emotional satisfaction of the spouses became an important criterion for marital success. However, through the 1950s, wives and husbands tended to derive satisfaction from their participation in a marriage-based nuclear family (Roussel, 1989). That is to say, they based their gratification on playing marital roles well: being good providers, good homemakers, and responsible parents.

During this first change in meaning, marriage remained the only socially acceptable way to have a sexual relationship and to raise children in the United States, Canada, and Europe, with the possible exception of the Nordic countries. In his history of British marriages, Gillis (1985) labeled the period from 1850 to 1960 the "era

of mandatory marriage." In the United States, marriage and only marriage was one's ticket of admission to a full family life. Prior to marrying, almost no one cohabited with a partner except among the poor and the avant garde. As recently as the 1950s, premarital cohabitation in the United States was restricted to a small minority (perhaps 5%) of the less educated (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991). In the early 1950s, only about 4% of children were born outside marriage (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 1982). In fact, during the late 1940s and the 1950s, major changes that increased the importance of marriage occurred in the life course of young adults. More people married—about 95% of young adults in the United States in the 1950s, compared with about 90% early in the century (Cherlin, 1992)—and they married at younger ages. Between 1900 and 1960, the estimated median age at first marriage in the United States fell from 26 to 23 for men, and from 22 to 20 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003a). The birth rate, which had been falling for a century or more, increased sharply, creating the "baby boom." The post-World War II increase in marriage and childbearing also occurred in many European countries (Roussel, 1989).

But beginning in the 1960s, marriage's dominance began to diminish, and the second great change in the meaning of marriage occurred. In the United States, the median age at marriage returned to and then exceeded the levels of the early 1900s. In 2000, the median age was 27 for men and 25 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003a). Many young adults stayed single into their mid to late 20s, some completing college educations and starting careers. Cohabitation prior to (and after) marriage became much more acceptable. Childbearing outside marriage became less stigmatized and more accepted. Birth rates resumed their long-term declines and sunk to all-time lows in most countries. Divorce rates rose to unprecedented levels. Same-sex unions found greater acceptance as well.

During this transition, the companionate marriage lost ground not only as the demographic standard but also as a cultural ideal. It was gradually overtaken by forms of marriage (and nonmarital families) that Burgess had not foreseen, particularly marriages in which both the husband and the wife worked outside the home. Although women continued to do most of the housework and child care, the roles of wives and husbands became more flexible and open to negotiation. And an even more individualistic perspective on the rewards of marriage took root. When people evaluated how satisfied they were with their marriages, they began to think more in terms of the development of their own sense of self and the expression of their feelings, as opposed to the satisfaction they gained through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent. The result was a transition from the companionate marriage to what we might call the *individualized marriage*.

The transition to the individualized marriage began in the 1960s and accelerated in the 1970s, as shown by an American study of the changing themes in popular magazine articles offering marital advice in every decade between 1900 and 1979 (Cancian, 1987). The author identified three themes that characterized beliefs about the post-1960-style marriage. The first was self-development: Each person should develop a fulfilling, independent self instead of merely sacrificing oneself to one's partner. The second was that roles within marriage should be flexible and negotiable. The third was that communication and openness in confronting problems are essential. She then tallied the percentage of articles in each decade that contained one or more of these three themes. About one third of the articles in the first decade of the century, and again at mid-century, displayed these themes, whereas about two thirds displayed these themes in the 1970s. The author characterized this transition as a shift in emphasis "from role to self" (Cancian).

During this second change in the meaning of marriage, the role of the law changed significantly as well. This transformation was most apparent in divorce law. In the United States and most other developed countries, legal restrictions on divorce were replaced by statutes that recognized consensual and even unilateral divorce. The transition to "private ordering" (Mnookin & Kornhauser, 1979) allowed couples to negotiate the details of their divorce agreements within broad limits. Most European nations experienced similar legal developments (Glendon, 1989; Théry, 1993). Indeed, French social demographer Louis Roussel (1989) wrote of a "double deinstitutionalization" in behavior and in law: a greater hesitation of young adults to enter into marriage, combined with a loosening of the legal regulation of marriage.

Sociological theorists of late modernity (or postmodernity) such as Anthony Giddens

(1991, 1992) in Britain and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim in Germany (1995, 2002) also have written about the growing individualization of personal life. Consistent with the idea of deinstitutionalization, they note the declining power of social norms and laws as regulating mechanisms for family life, and they stress the expanding role of personal choice. They argue that as traditional sources of identity such as class, religion, and community lose influence, one's intimate relationships become central to self-identity. Giddens (1991, 1992) writes of the emergence of the "pure relationship": an intimate partnership entered into for its own sake, which lasts only as long as both partners are satisfied with the rewards (mostly intimacy and love) that they get from it. It is in some ways the logical extension of the increasing individualism and the deinstitutionalization of marriage that occurred in the 20th century. The pure relationship is not tied to an institution such as marriage or to the desire to raise children. Rather, it is "free-floating," independent of social institutions or economic life. Unlike marriage, it is not regulated by law, and its members do not enjoy special legal rights. It exists primarily in the realms of emotion and self-identity.

Although the theorists of late modernity believe that the quest for intimacy is becoming the central focus of personal life, they do not predict that *marriage* will remain distinctive and important. Marriage, they claim, has become a choice rather than a necessity for adults who want intimacy, companionship, and children. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), we will see "a huge variety of ways of living together or apart which will continue to exist side by side" (pp. 141–142). Giddens (1992) even argues that marriage has already become "just one life-style among others" (p. 154), although people may not yet realize it because of institutional lag.

The Current Context of Marriage

Overall, research and writing on the changing meaning of marriage suggest that it is now situated in a very different context than in the past. This is true in at least two senses. First, individuals now experience a vast latitude for choice in their personal lives. More forms of marriage and more alternatives to marriage are socially acceptable. Moreover, one may fit marriage into one's life in many ways: One may first live with a partner, or sequentially with several partners, without an explicit consideration of whether a marriage will occur. One may have children with one's eventual spouse or with someone else before marrying. One may, in some jurisdictions, marry someone of the same gender and build a shared marital world with few guidelines to rely on. Within marriage, roles are more flexible and negotiable, although women still do more than their share of the household work and childrearing.

The second difference is in the nature of the rewards that people seek through marriage and other close relationships. Individuals aim for personal growth and deeper intimacy through more open communication and mutually shared disclosures about feelings with their partners. They may feel justified in insisting on changes in a relationship that no longer provides them with individualized rewards. In contrast, they are less likely than in the past to focus on the rewards to be found in fulfilling socially valued roles such as the good parent or the loyal and supportive spouse. The result of these changing contexts has been a deinstitutionalization of marriage, in which social norms about family and personal life count for less than they did during the heyday of the companionate marriage, and far less than during the period of the institutional marriage. Instead, personal choice and self-development loom large in people's construction of their marital careers.

WHY DO PEOPLE STILL MARRY?

There is a puzzle within the story of deinstitutionalization that needs solving. Although fewer Americans are marrying than during the peak years of marriage in the mid-20th century, most—nearly 90%, according to a recent estimate (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001)—will eventually marry. A survey of high school seniors conducted annually since 1976 shows no decline in the importance they attach to marriage. The percentage of young women who respond that they expect to marry has stayed constant at roughly 80% (and has increased from 71% to 78% for young men). The percentage who respond that "having a good marriage and family life" is extremely important has also remained constant, at about 80% for young women and 70% for young men (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). What is more, in the 1990s and early 2000s, a strong promarriage

movement emerged among gay men and lesbians in the United States, who sought the right to marry with increasing success. Clearly, marriage remains important to many people in the United States. Consequently, I think the interesting question is not why so few people are marrying, but rather, why so *many* people are marrying, or planning to marry, or hoping to marry, when cohabitation and single parenthood are widely acceptable options. (This question may be less relevant in Canada and the many European nations where the estimated proportions of who will ever marry are lower.)

The Gains to Marriage

The dominant theoretical perspectives on marriage in the 20th century do not provide much guidance on the question of why marriage remains so popular. The structural functionalists in social anthropology and sociology in the early- to mid-20th century emphasized the role of marriage in ensuring that a child would have a link to the status of a man, a right to his protection, and a claim to inherit his property (Mair, 1971). But as the law began to recognize the rights of children born outside marriage, and as mothers acquired resources by working in the paid work force, these reasons for marriage become less important.

Nor is evolutionary theory very helpful. Although there may be important evolutionary influences on family behavior, it is unlikely that humans have developed an innate preference for marriage as we know it. The classical account of our evolutionary heritage is that women, whose reproductive capacity is limited by pregnancy and lactation (which delays the return of ovulation), seek stable pair bonds with men, whereas men seek to maximize their fertility by impregnating many women. Rather than being "natural," marriage-centered kinship was described in much early- and mid-20th century anthropological writing as the social invention that solved the problem of the sexually wandering male (Tiger & Fox, 1971). Moreover, when dependable male providers are not available, women may prefer a reproductive strategy of relying on a network of female kin and more than one man (Hrdy, 1999). In addition, marriages are increasingly being formed well after a child is born, yet evolutionary theory suggests that the impetus to marry should be greatest when newborn children need support and protection. In the 1950s, half of all unmarried pregnant women in the United States married before the birth of their child, whereas in the 1990s, only one fourth married (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999). Finally, evolutionary theory cannot explain the persistence of the formal wedding style in which people are still marrying (see below). Studies of preindustrial societies have found that although many have elaborate ceremonies, others have little or no ceremony (Ember, Ember, & Peregrine, 2002; Stephens, 1963).

The mid-20th century specialization model of economist Gary Becker (1965, 1981) also seems less relevant than when it was introduced. Becker assumed that women were relatively more productive at home than men, and that men were relatively more productive (i.e., they could earn higher wages) in the labor market. He argued that women and men could increase their utility by exchanging, through marriage, women's home work for men's labor market work. The specialization model would predict that in the present era, women with less labor market potential would be more likely to marry because they would gain the most economically from finding a husband. But several studies show that in recent decades, women in the United States and Canada with less education (and therefore less labor market potential) are *less* likely to marry (Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Oppenheimer, Blossfeld, & Wackerow, 1995; Qian & Preston, 1993; Sweeney, 2002; Turcotte & Goldscheider, 1998). This finding suggests that the specialization model may no longer hold. Moreover, the specialization model was developed before cohabitation was widespread, and offers no explanation for why couples would marry rather than cohabit.

From a rational choice perspective, then, what benefits might contemporary marriage offer that would lead cohabiting couples to marry rather than cohabit? I suggest that the major benefit is what we might call *enforceable trust* (Cherlin, 2000; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Marriage still requires a public commitment to a long-term, possibly lifelong relationship. This commitment is usually expressed in front of relatives, friends, and religious congregants. Cohabitation, in contrast, requires only a private commitment, which is easier to break. Therefore, marriage, more so than cohabitation, lowers the risk that one's partner will renege on agreements that have been made. In the language of economic theory, marriage

lowers the transaction costs of enforcing agreements between the partners (Pollak, 1985). It allows individuals to invest in the partnership with less fear of abandonment. For instance, it allows the partners to invest financially in joint long-term purchases such as homes and automobiles. It allows caregivers to make relationship-specific investments (England & Farkas, 1986) in the couple's children—investments of time and effort that, unlike strengthening one's job skills, would not be easily portable to another intimate relationship.

Nevertheless, the difference in the amount of enforceable trust that marriage brings, compared with cohabitation, is eroding. Although relatives and friends will view a divorce with disappointment, they will accept it more readily than their counterparts would have two generations ago. As I noted, cohabiting couples are increasingly gaining the rights previously reserved to married couples. It seems likely that over time, the legal differences between cohabitation and marriage will become minimal in the United States, Canada, and many European countries. The advantage of marriage in enhancing trust will then depend on the force of public commitments, both secular and religious, by the partners.

In general, the prevailing theoretical perspectives are of greater value in explaining why marriage has declined than why it persists. With more women working outside the home, the predictions of the specialization model are less relevant. Although the rational choice theorists remind us that marriage still provides enforceable trust, it seems clear that its enforcement power is declining. Recently, evolutionary theorists have argued that women who have difficulty finding men who are reliable providers might choose a reproductive strategy that involves single parenthood and kin networks, a strategy that is consistent with changes that have occurred in low-income families. And although the insights of the theorists of late modernity help us understand the changing meaning of marriage, they predict that marriage will lose its distinctive status, and indeed may already have become just one lifestyle among others. Why, then, are so many people still marrying?

The Symbolic Significance of Marriage

What has happened is that although the practical importance of being married has declined, its symbolic importance has remained high, and may even have increased. Marriage is at once less dominant and more distinctive than it was. It has evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige. Marriage is a status one builds up to, often by living with a partner beforehand, by attaining steady employment or starting a career, by putting away some savings, and even by having children. Marriage's place in the life course used to come before those investments were made, but now it often comes afterward. It used to be the foundation of adult personal life; now it is sometimes the capstone. It is something to be achieved through one's own efforts rather than something to which one routinely accedes.

How Low-Income Individuals See Marriage

Paradoxically, it is among the lower social strata in the United States, where marriage rates are lowest, that both the persistent preference for marriage and its changing meaning seem clearest. Although marriage is optional and often foregone, it has by no means faded away among the poor and near poor. Instead, it is a much sought-after but elusive goal. They tell observers that they wish to marry, but will do so only when they are sure they can do it successfully: when their partner has demonstrated the ability to hold a decent job and treat them fairly and without abuse, when they have a security deposit or a down payment for a decent apartment or home, and when they have enough in the bank to pay for a nice wedding party for family and friends. Edin and Kefalas (forthcoming), who studied childbearing and intimate relationships among 165 mothers in 8 low- and moderate-income Philadelphia neighborhoods, wrote, "In some sense, marriage is a form of social bragging about the quality of the couple relationship, a powerfully symbolic way of elevating one's relationship above others in the community, particularly in a community where marriage is rare."

Along with several collaborators, I am conducting a study of low-income families in three United States cities. The ethnographic component of that study is directed by Linda Burton of Pennsylvania State University. A 27-year-old mother told one of our ethnographers:

> I was poor all my life and so was Reginald. When I got pregnant, we agreed we would marry some day in the future because we loved each other and wanted to raise our child together. But

> we would not get married until we could afford to get a house and pay all the utility bills on time. I have this thing about utility bills. Our gas and electric got turned off all the time when we were growing up and we wanted to make sure that would not happen when we got married. That was our biggest worry. … We worked together and built up savings and then we got married. It's forever for us.

Another woman in our study, already living with the man she was engaged to and had children with, told an ethnographer she was not yet ready to marry him:

> But I'm not ready to do that yet. I told him, we're not financially ready yet. He knows that. I told him by the end of this year, maybe. I told him that last year. Plus, we both need to learn to control our tempers, you could say. He doesn't understand that bills and kids and [our relationship] come first, not [his] going out and getting new clothes or [his] doing this and that. It's the kids, then us. He gets paid good, about five hundred dollars a week. How hard is it to give me money and help with the bills?

Note that for this woman, more is required of a man than a steady job before he is marriageable. He has to learn to turn over most of his paycheck to his family rather than spending it on his friends and himself. He must put his relationship with his partner ahead of running with his single male friends, a way of saying that a husband must place a priority on providing companionship and intimacy to his wife and on being sexually faithful. And he and his partner have to learn to control their tempers, a vague referent to the possibility that physical abuse exists in the relationship. In sum, the demands low-income women place on men include not just a reliable income, as important as that is, but also a commitment to put family first, provide companionship, be faithful, and avoid abusive behavior.

How Young Adults in General See It

The changing meaning of marriage is not limited to the low-income population. Consider a nationally representative survey of 1,003 adults, ages 20–29, conducted in 2001 on attitudes toward marriage (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001). A majority responded in ways suggestive of the view that marriage is a status that one builds up to. Sixty-two percent agreed with the statement, "Living together with someone before marriage is a good way to avoid an eventual divorce," and 82% agreed that "It is extremely important to you to be economically set before you get married." Moreover, most indicated a view of marriage as centered on intimacy and love more than on practical matters such as finances and children. Ninety-four percent of those who had never married agreed that "when you marry, you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost." In contrast, only 16% agreed that "the main purpose of marriage these days is to have children." And over 80% of the women agreed that it is more important "to have a husband who can communicate about his deepest feelings than to have a husband who makes a good living." The authors of the report conclude, "While marriage is losing much of its broad public and institutional character, it is gaining popularity as a Super-Relationship, an intensely private spiritualized union, combining sexual fidelity, romantic love, emotional intimacy, and togetherness" (p. 13).

The Wedding as a Status Symbol

Even the wedding has become an individual achievement. In the distant past, a wedding was an event at which two kinship groups formed an alliance. More recently, it has been an event organized and paid for by parents, at which they display their approval and support for their child's marriage. In both cases, it has been the ritual that provides legal and social approval for having children. But in keeping with the deinstitutionalization of marriage, it is now becoming an event centered on and often controlled by the couple themselves, having less to do with family approval or having children than in the past. One might assume, then, that weddings would become smaller and that many couples would forgo a public wedding altogether. But that does not appear to have happened for most couples. The wedding, it seems, has become an important symbol of the partners' personal achievements and a stage in their self-development (Bulcroft, Bulcroft, Bradley, & Simpson, 2000).

A 1984 survey of 459 ever-married women in the Detroit metropolitan area provided information on trends in wedding practices in the United States during much of the 20th century. Whyte (1990) divided the women into a prewar group who married between 1925 and 1944, a baby boom group who married between 1945 and 1964, and a more recent group who married between 1965 and 1984. Across the more than

a half century of life history that this survey elicited, several indicators of wedding rituals and activities increased over time. The percentage of women who reported a wedding in a religious institution (e.g., church or synagogue) increased from 68 to 74 across the three groups; the percentage who had a wedding reception increased from 64% to 88%; the percentage who had bridal showers or whose spouses had bachelor parties increased sharply; and the percentage who took a honeymoon rose from 47% to 60%. Some of these trends could be caused by increasing affluence, but not all. It is not obvious why affluence should lead to more religious weddings. In fact, one might have expected affluence to lead to a secularization of the marriage process and an increase in civil weddings.

In recent decades, then, when partners decide that their relationship has finally reached the stage where they can marry, they generally want a ritual-filled wedding to celebrate it. A small literature on contemporary weddings and honeymoons is developing in North America and Europe, and it treats them as occasions of consumption and celebrations of romance (Boden, 2003; Bulcroft et al., 2000; Bulcroft, Bulcroft, Smeins, & Cranage 1997; Ingraham, 1999). Even low- and moderate-income couples who have limited funds and who may already have children and may be living together seem to view a substantial wedding as a requirement for marriage. Many of the women in our study said that they would not get married without a church wedding. Just going to city hall and having a civil ceremony was not acceptable to them. Similarly, some of the working-class and lower middle-class couples in the Manning and Smock (2003) study said that merely going "downtown" for a civil ceremony did not constitute an acceptable wedding (Smock, 2004; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2004). Edin and Kefalas (forthcoming) write of the attitudes among the mothers they studied, "Having the wherewithal to throw a 'big' wedding is a vivid display that the couple has achieved enough financial security to do more than live from paycheck to paycheck."

The couples in our study wanted to make a statement through their weddings, a statement both to themselves and to their friends and family that they had passed a milestone in the development of their self-identities. Through wedding ceremonies, the purchase of a home, and the acquisition of other accoutrements of married life, individuals hoped to display their attainment of a prestigious, comfortable, stable style of life. They also expected marriage to provide some enforceable trust. But as I have argued, the enforcement value of marriage is less than it used to be. People marry now less for the social benefits that marriage provides than for the personal achievement it represents.

Alternative Futures

What do these developments suggest about the future of marriage? Social demographers usually predict a continuation of whatever is happening at the moment, and they are usually correct, but sometimes spectacularly wrong. For example, in the 1930s, every demographic expert in the United States confidently predicted a continuation of the low birth rates of the Depression. Not one forecast the baby boom that overtook them after World War II. No less a scholar than Kingsley Davis (1937) wrote that the future of the family as a social institution was in danger because people were not having enough children to replace themselves. Not a single 1950s or 1960s sociologist predicted the rise of cohabitation. Chastened by this unimpressive record, I will tentatively sketch some future directions.

The first alternative is the reinstitutionalization of marriage, a return to a status akin to its dominant position through the mid-20th century. This would entail a rise in the proportion who ever marry, a rise in the proportion of births born to married couples, and a decline in divorce. It would require a reversal of the individualistic orientation toward family and personal life that has been the major cultural force driving family change over the past several decades. It would probably also require a decrease in women's labor force participation and a return to more gender-typed family roles. I think this alternative is very unlikely—but then again, so was the baby boom.

The second alternative is a continuation of the current situation, in which marriage remains deinstitutionalized but is common and distinctive. It is not just one type of family relationship among many; rather, it is the most prestigious form. People generally desire to be married. But it is an individual choice, and individuals construct marriages through an increasingly long process that often includes cohabitation and childbearing beforehand. It still confers some of

its traditional benefits, such as enforceable trust, but it is increasingly a mark of prestige, a display of distinction, an individualistic achievement, a part of what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) call the "do-it-yourself biography." In this scenario, the proportion of people who ever marry could fall further; in particular, we could see probabilities of marriage among Whites in the United States that are similar to the probabilities shown today by African Americans. Moreover, because of high levels of nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation, and divorce, people will spend a smaller proportion of their adult lives in intact marriages than in the past. Still, marriage would retain its special and highly valued place in the family system.

But I admit to some doubts about whether this alternative will prevail for long in the United States. The privileges and material advantages of marriage, relative to cohabitation, have been declining. The commitment of partners to be trustworthy has been undermined by frequent divorce. If marriage was once a form of cultural capital—one needed to be married to advance one's career, say—that capital has decreased too. What is left, I have argued, is a display of prestige and achievement. But it could be that marriage retains its symbolic aura largely because of its dominant position in social norms until just a half century ago. It could be that this aura is diminishing, like an echo in a canyon. It could be that, despite the efforts of the wedding industry, the need for a highly ritualized ceremony and legalized status will fade. And there is not much else supporting marriage in the early 21st century.

That leads to a third alternative, the fading away of marriage. Here, the argument is that people are still marrying in large numbers because of institutional lag; they have yet to realize that marriage is no longer important. A nonmarital pure relationship, to use Giddens's ideal type, can provide much intimacy and love, can place both partners on an equal footing, and can allow them to develop their independent senses of self. These characteristics are highly valued in late modern societies. However, this alternative also suggests the predominance of fragile relationships that are continually at risk of breaking up because they are held together entirely by the voluntary commitment of each partner. People may still commit morally to a relationship, but they increasingly prefer to commit voluntarily rather than to be obligated to commit by law or social norms. And partners feel free to revoke their commitments at any time.

Therefore, the pure relationship seems most characteristic of a world where commitment does not matter. Consequently, it seems to best fit middle-class, well-educated, childless adults. They have the resources to be independent actors by themselves or in a democratic partnership, and without childbearing responsibilities, they can be free-floating. The pure relationship seems less applicable to couples who face material constraints (Jamieson, 1999). In particular, when children are present—or when they are anticipated anytime soon—issues of commitment and support come into consideration. Giddens (1992) says very little about children in his book on intimacy, and his brief attempts to incorporate children into the pure relationship are unconvincing. Individuals who are, or think they will be, the primary caregivers of children will prefer commitment and will seek material support from their partners. They may be willing to have children and begin cohabiting without commitment, but the relationship probably will not last without it. They will be wary of purely voluntary commitment if they think they can do better. So only if the advantage of marriage in providing trust and commitment disappears relative to cohabitation—and I must admit that this could happen—might we see cohabitation and marriage on an equal footing.

In sum, I see the current state of marriage and its likely future in these terms: At present, marriage is no longer as dominant as it once was, but it remains important on a symbolic level. It has been transformed from a familial and community institution to an individualized, choice-based achievement. It is a marker of prestige and is still somewhat useful in creating enforceable trust. As for the future, I have sketched three alternatives. The first, a return to a more dominant, institutionalized form of marriage, seems unlikely. In the second, the current situation continues; marriage remains important, but not as dominant, and retains its high symbolic status. In the third, marriage fades into just one of many kinds of interpersonal romantic relationships. I think that Giddens's (1992) statement that marriage has already become merely one of many relationships is not true in the United States so far, but it could become true in the future. It is possible that we are living in a transitional phase in which marriage is gradually losing its uniqueness. If Giddens and other

modernity theorists are correct, the third alternative will triumph, and marriage will lose its special place in the family system of the United States. If they are not, the second alternative will continue to hold, and marriage—transformed and deinstitutionalized, but recognizable nevertheless—will remain distinctive.

Note

I thank Frank Furstenberg, Joshua Goldstein, Kathleen Kiernan, and Céline Le Bourdais for comments on a previous version, and Linda Burton for her collaborative work on the Three-City Study ethnography.

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