

A photograph of a family of four outdoors. A man in a black and white striped polo shirt stands in the center, smiling broadly. To his left is a young girl in a white dress with a white flower in her hair, also smiling. To his right is a woman in a white t-shirt, smiling, holding a baby in a white shirt and blue skirt. The background is a blurred natural landscape with greenery and a wooden fence in the foreground.

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FAMILY CONNECTIONS

BYU SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE
ALUMNI MAGAZINE

FALL 2015

SPECIAL ISSUE: THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE MATTERS

Capstones vs. Cornerstones

Permanence vs. Divorce

Gender Complementarity vs. Gender Irrelevance

Message from the Director

DEAN M. BUSBY
DIRECTOR
SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE



Dear School of Family Life Alumni,

Welcome to our Fall issue of Family Connections. In this issue we have our first example of a new emphasis in the School: public scholarship. And we will also introduce you to an initiative to improve our connection to alumni.

Unlike traditional scholarship, which consists of submitting our empirical research to peer-reviewed academic journals, public scholarship goes directly to the public and allows us to focus on issues that might not be emphasized in academic journals as much as we would hope but are issues of serious import to the well-being of families. Early this year, Dr. Jason Carroll and I presented to the Area Committee—a group consisting of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the Presiding Bishopric, and the Presidents of the Quorum of the Seventy—on some of the things we have learned in our research and teaching efforts about understanding and strengthening marriages. During the discussion period after our presentation, we were invited and

encouraged to become more engaged as a school in what we call public scholarship.

This is a challenging and exciting request to the School of Family Life, as we have extensive experience with traditional scholarship but less with public scholarship where the audience is the general public, including those inside and outside the church.

In this issue, you will read abbreviated versions of some public scholarship essays on why “The Meaning of Marriage Matters.” (The report is online at <http://marriagemeaning.org>.) There will be more essays and reports to come over the next few years and we hope they will be helpful for your families, your work, and your civic engagement. Some will disagree with a few of the points we make in these essays and reports. But they are not meant to be the final word; rather, they are a value-based approach coupled with scientific evidence to start a conversation about the crucial issues underlying modern family life.

In addition, with generous funding from the BYU administration and donors, including many of you, we have begun several new projects in the School that address crucial issues facing families today.

One project we started is the Couple Relationship & Transition Experiences (CREATE). In this project, we are conducting a rare type of study in the social sciences: a nationally-representative longitudinal sample of newlywed couples as they begin their relationships and start having children. By following these newly formed families through the transitions that occur in family life, we will be able to understand better what factors lead to successful families.

Another project is called Parents, Children and the Media, and focuses on what is likely the most significant issue that has influenced family life in the last

few decades: changes in media content, delivery, and usage. This project will help us understand patterns of media usage in families from the very beginning of children’s lives and how these patterns influence relationships and child outcomes.

A third project is called Successful Marital and Adult Role Transitions (SMART). In this project, we will explore how young adults navigate the time between their late adolescence and when they form marriages and have children. Individuals are making a wide variety of choices during this time that are likely to positively and negatively influence their attitudes about and success in family life, such as whether to cohabit, when and with whom to be sexual, when to have children, whether to experiment with drugs, alcohol, and other risky behaviors, whether to be connected to a religion, and where to fit school, work, and relationships in their lives.

A fourth project, the Marriage Education and Research Initiative (MERI), will study many issues related to marriages and relationship education. Currently, this project strives to understand the process individuals go through as they make decisions about staying married or divorcing. Although the divorce rate has been high for decades now, we know surprisingly little about the decision-making process that couples go through when they have difficulties that could lead them to thinking about a divorce.

Sincerely,

DEAN M. BUSBY



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**BYU SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE
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BYU SFL ALUMNI CONNECT: A FACEBOOK GROUP FOR SFL ALUMNI

WRITTEN BY COURTNEY D. PARKER, SFL ALUMNA

Did you graduate from BYU with a degree in The School of Family Life and now find yourself saying, “Okay . . . now what?” If you’re questioning why you ever chose SFL as a major, if you’re feeling disconnected, if you’re excited to use your education, but don’t know where to start, we’re here to help you out!

Starting in November, we will be launching a Facebook Group called “BYU SFL Alumni Connect.” Now that we’re no longer students at BYU, the world really is our campus. Our aim is to unite BYU SFL alumni across the nation and around the world—maybe even helping you discover other alumni in your corner of the world!

We hope to send all of our alumni a notification that you’ve been invited to the group, but if you do not receive the notification, you can search for BYU SFL Alumni Connect on Facebook and request to be added. Make sure to visit the group early, as you’ll have a chance to win a prize in our first giveaway. All you need to do is answer the question: “How could BYU SFL Alumni Connect be most helpful to you?”

It’s a closed group, so people can only join if an existing member invites them. It’s intended to be a place for BYU SFL Alumni to exchange ideas, network, ask questions, and share what’s going on with marriage

and family in the community.

The objectives of BYU SFL Alumni Connect are to:

- 1) Help members connect with each other.
- 2) Help members find jobs and volunteer opportunities in the field wherever they may live.
- 3) Help support members in their quest for life-long learning in the field.
- 4) Help support members learning and application of principles of strong families in their own lives.
- 5) Help support and share information between sub-groups of SFL alumni, such as full-time moms (the largest “vocational” subset of SFL alumni!), therapists, family life educators, etc.

At least once each month, we will be spotlighting various alumni who are working in different positions in the field of Family Life—from teachers to Child Life Specialists to Child and Family Services workers and more. Our spotlights will give an overview of the work and his or her experiences in that position. You can then choose to post questions that will be answered by our spotlight candidate!

Also each month, we will spotlight various alumni who are involved in their

communities to strengthen families. And we will also spotlight alumni who have helpful ideas for strengthening our own families.

This is a collaborative effort! If you know of anything related to marriage and family that could help other alumni – job opportunities, volunteer opportunities, certification training opportunities, fun things going on in the community to strengthen families . . . go ahead and post them.

The intent is that this Facebook Group will evolve and shift to suit the needs of the alumni, so let us know how this group would be most useful to you! Who knows? Maybe this group will be the springboard for an annual SFL Alumni Conference. Maybe we’ll receive donations that could turn into scholarship funds for SFL Alumni who want to continue their education.

We are excited to realize the potential this group has and hope you can catch the vision! If you have any ideas on how to accomplish the group’s objectives or have an idea for a new objective, feel free to either post in the group or email us at byusflalumniconnect@gmail.com

As BYU SFL Alumni, we all have a passion for making a difference. We also have the skills, experiences, and education to benefit others. Let’s make things happen!

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BYU SFL ALUMNI CONNECT

🕒 Tuesday at 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. MST

Chat with SFL experts and alumni about topics in this issue. You could also get a \$50 gift card.

More information at: <http://bit.ly/1XClyJ9>

#ASKANFHSSEXPERT

MARRIAGEMEANING.ORG

MARRIAGE MATTERS

It's no secret that marriage has been changing. This issue of Family Connections explores the changing meanings of marriage and their implications for young adults today who aspire to form and sustain healthy, life-long marriages. "Whatever" doesn't work well when it comes to the meaning of marriage because meaning quietly but powerfully shapes our attitudes and behaviors. Yes, people experience marriage in highly personal ways, but it is not just a privatized commodity. It is a public institution that guides our behavior. What marriage means in society matters because it affects the capacity of the institution to bless the lives of children, women, and men. This issue of Family Connections highlights three abbreviated essays on the changing meaning of marriage. More in-depth essays, along with accompanying video materials, can be found on the website:

MarriageMeaning.org

We hope you will check out the website and share it with family and friends.

Hard copies of this issue of Family Connections have been mailed to all of our identified alumni. Many of you have been receiving electronic copies by email over the last few years. However, we know that some of our alumni have not received these emails because they get filtered out as "spam." If this is the case, please check your email spam filter and tell it to accept email that comes with a BYU domain (byu.edu). This should allow our emails with electronic copies of Family Connections to get through to you in the future.

CAPSTONES VS. CORNERSTONES: DIVERGING BLUEPRINTS FOR MODERN MARRIAGE

CONTRIBUTING SCHOLARS: DEAN M. BUSBY, JASON S. CARROLL, ALAN J. HAWKINS, AND BRIAN J. WILLOUGHBY

For many, marriage is changing from a cornerstone to a capstone of young adult life. Rather than building an adult life on a foundation of marital commitment, many young adults postpone marriage until they have accomplished a set of tasks and achieved certain personal marks of success.

A recent national survey of Millennials (ages 18–33) found widespread acceptance of a capstone approach to marriage.¹ Between 70%–80% agreed that later marriage means that both people are more mature, more likely to be good spouses, allows people to achieve personal goals so that they will have no regrets after getting married, and provides more time to get personal finances in order.

Is the capstone approach to marriage a new model best suited to a new time, a sensible evolution of the way we do relationships and family now to fit a new century? Or is it a revolution in the meaning of marriage, one that impacts its capacity to benefit individuals and society? While a capstone model of marriage may work for some, we also see worrisome cracks in this new cement. Specifically, we see three significant engineering flaws in a capstone model of marriage:

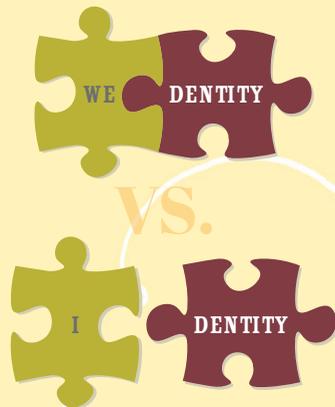
- It can lead to ineffective, even paradoxical preparation, for marriage that may actually diminish eventual marital happiness;
- It elevates the risk of re-sequencing family formation, putting parenting before marriage, thus placing children's well-being at greater risk; and
- It potentially places marriage beyond the perceived reach of many young people.

Ready or Not?

A capstone model of marriage is supposed to lead to establishing a stronger foundation on which to build a marital relationship. But we see several potential relationship engineering problems in how the capstone model may lead to ineffective preparation for marriage:

- Difficulties switching from an individualistic focus to a couple focus;
- Casting marriage as a transition of loss; and
- Creating complex romantic relationship histories that teach the wrong lessons.

First, the capstone model, with its hallmark of delayed marriage, creates a longer period of individualistic focus in young adulthood that may be challenging to flip to a relationship-centered, couple focus at marriage. If marriage requires more of a “we-identity” than an “I-identity,” how straightforward is the transition to marriage and how easy is it to blend two different lifestyles together?



Second, finding the compatible partner to match one’s strong lifestyle preferences can be a challenge, like fitting complex jigsaw puzzle pieces together. Megan McArdle writes in Newsweek, “when you’ve spent decades building a life, it can be hard to find someone who fits with all the choices you’ve already made about where to live, what hobbies and interests you will pursue, what sort of hours you will work, and so forth.”² And maybe those more-settled selves are averse to the personal remodeling that seems to be an inevitable part of building a functional marriage. Of course, one argument for giving young people more time to focus on themselves is that they will get the typical young

adult angst and adventure out of their system, so that they are ready for the responsibilities of marriage. Yet this logic has some rough edges to it, too. For one thing, it can make marriage look as much like a transition of loss as a transition of gain; marriage is the end of youthful fun rather than the beginning of a grand adult adventure. Viewing marriage as a net loss might make divorce seem more like a net gain when couples experience hard times. Moreover, some research suggests that extensive premarital sexual experience, instead of satiating desire for post-marital sexual adventure, is a risk factor for future infidelity.

A third potential problem with a capstone approach to marital preparation comes from the relationship history that accumulates over a prolonged period of single young adult years. Not surprisingly, a longer period of time before marriage often comes with an eventful history of romantic and sexual relationships.³ On the one hand, this would seem to present a valuable love lab in which to learn and practice needed intimate relationship skills. But what may seem like a process for gaining valuable relationship experience may be more

“Full commitment to the future is what transforms a relationship.”

akin to painting a room than remodeling a home. What is being learned in the series of romantic relationships common to the young adult years that precede marriage is usually not enough to help couples create a strong marriage. Despite its outward



similarities of sharing a bed and possibly a residence, full commitment to the future is what transforms a relationship. A non–full-commitment relationship is not much like a full-commitment marriage, especially for men.⁴ To date, no study has found premarital cohabitation to reduce the risk of divorce. Research has yet to confirm that pre-engagement cohabitation without a full commitment to a future together is an effective marriage-preparation strategy. In fact, it appears to be a risk factor for future marital problems.⁵

We know there is a broad belief in our society that marrying young puts you at high risk for divorce. This isn't one of those obtuse social science statistics that never goes beyond the pages of stuffy academic journals. It has sunk deeply into our cultural knowledge and practice. This belief has fed a widespread reluctance to consider marrying before the late 20s.

But this risk comes primarily from those who marry before the age of 21, not from marriage among 21–25 year olds. Moreover, this correlation—observed in the past—may be disappearing with

contemporary couples.⁶ We suspect that the couples who choose to marry at younger ages these days are very different from those 30–40 years ago who married at young ages. In the past, many early marriages were so-called “shotgun weddings.” Today, shotgun marriages have been replaced with shotgun cohabitations or single parenting. Today, those who marry at earlier ages probably do so not because they have to but because they want to, and they probably bring strong views about the importance and value of marriage to their union.

Also, researchers now are finding an interesting association between the age of partners when they marry and marital happiness. A number of studies now are finding that the sweet spot for maximizing marital quality may be marriage in the early-to-mid-20s. Marriages that occur between 22–25 are a little happier, on average, compared to late-20s marriages.⁷ Why? Perhaps it is easier to mold two lives together at earlier ages. Or maybe those who marry earlier put more priority on marriage in ways that make it more

satisfying. Whatever the reason for this happiness bonus, the popular bias against earlier marriage may be misplaced.

Re-sequencing, Not Delaying

Another reason for a concern about the structural engineering of the capstone model of marriage comes from the real-life experiences of most people in our society who delay marriage. A capstone marriage is often talked about as simply a delayed cornerstone marriage, a longer, scenic path to get to the same destination. However, delaying marriage in our culture today is rarely about just pushing back the wedding date. This is because, while the typical age of first marriage keeps getting pushed later and later, few are pushing back sexual coupling. Keep the sex and companionship; delay the commitment and the sacrifice.

But sex is not the only thing fragmented from marriage in this new arrangement. For many, the delay of marriage means a fundamental re-sequencing of family formation. As a great deal of research is showing, marriage, if it

comes, comes out of place in an optimal sequence for forming stable, healthy families in which to rear children.⁸ And this re-sequencing of family formation is becoming our new normal. More than 40% of all U.S. children are born to unwed parents.⁹ And more than 50% of first births are now to unwed parents. The majority of young adults are not able to follow effectively the capstone model's blueprint for marriage success. When the bricks that build these families are placed awkwardly, the structure is rickety and a capstone, if it comes at all, is likely to fall off.

Marriage Missed

The capstone model of marriage emphasizes achieving certain milestones and getting your life together before making the big commitment to a life-long union. But what about those who struggle to get it all together? Among the educated and well-off, marriage rates are high and divorce rates are low. But this is not the case among the disadvantaged.¹⁰ Nearly 25% of U.S. men and 20% of U.S. women ages 40–44 have never married. Thirty percent of men and nearly 25% of women with just a high school diploma have never married by the time they reach their 40s. And more than a third of Black men and women have never married by age 44.¹¹ One research organization projects that 25% of today's young adults will never marry by about age 50.¹²

For many young adults today, marriage seems to be more of a dream than a feasible possibility. When marriage is closer to fantasy than reality, it means something much different. It is hardly a foundation, or as one scholar calls it, a life script for how to construct and live an adult life.¹³

The problem is that the capstone model for building a marriage may be becoming dominant in our society at a time when far too many can't or don't follow

the capstone blueprint for success. This does not mean that the capstone model should be demolished and hauled off to the social history dump; it does work for some. Instead, an additional workable model is needed.

A 21st-Century Cornerstone Model of Marriage

How would making marriage a cornerstone and guiding the life script of early adult life work for more young adults?

First, a contemporary cornerstone model does not dismiss the need for a certain maturing before marriage. A great

“When the bricks that build these families are placed awkwardly, the structure is rickety and a capstone, if it comes at all, is likely to fall off.”

deal of maturing and personal growth occurs from 18–21.

Next, a key element of the contemporary cornerstone model would be careful mate selection and intentional preparation for marriage. This would involve spending time and socializing in more productive places when searching for a potential partner and then investing in a good marriage preparation education program.

In addition, young married couples will probably need to accept a longer period of financial austerity in the early years of marriage. Exotic and elaborate weddings will need to be shelved in favor of more modest plans. Some continued parental support of married children in the early years of marriage would help too.

When couples marry in their 30s or later, the biological clock can lead to pressure to have children right away.

Marrying earlier can ease the pressure to bear children in the early years of marriage, allowing both spouses to pursue educational or early work goals, reduce financial debts, and further strengthen the foundations of their relationship before children come along.

Another important element of a functional 21st-century cornerstone model of marriage is a greater emphasis on mutual growing together beginning in the more formative, soft-clay years. A cornerstone model of marriage emphasizes molding a “we-identity” rather than connecting “I-identities.” In mathematical terms, a cornerstone model of marriage is closer to $2 \div 2 = 1$ than $1 + 1 = 2$.

A cornerstone model of marriage is not without its potential weaknesses (discussed more in the accompanying longer essay). Still, those problems are not so daunting that they prevent all young adults from making the commitment to marriage in their early years. In fact, a substantial minority of young adults marry in their early and mid-20s, embracing a counter-cultural pattern of building a life on a foundation of marriage rather than crowning a successful young adult life with a matrimonial capstone. At age 25, more than 30% of young adults have married (and another 25% desire to be married).¹⁴ The capstone model is not completely hegemonic; there is room for those who see young adult life differently, who want to make marriage the adventure of their young lives rather than a settling down from youthful adventures.

Opening up more cultural space, social permission, and support for young adults to marry at different (and younger) ages makes sense. Why would we think that one set of blueprints for building a successful marriage should work for all? Many are willing and able to make the commitment to marriage before their late 20s. Telling them they should wait until they have checked off

a uniform list of individual accomplishments and 20-something adventures is strangely conformist. Marriage doesn't have to be a crowning capstone that signals a status of successful young adult achievement, a status that many will find difficult to attain. For some, it can be the foundation on which to build together all the walls and windows and rooms of a successful and happy life.

Endnotes

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⁶ We examined the association between age at marriage and risk of divorce in the

American Community Survey and found no strong relationship between age of marriage and risk of divorce.

⁷ Hymowitz, K., Carroll, J. S., Wilcox, W. B., & Kaye, K. (2013). Knot yet: The benefits and costs of delayed marriage in America. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, The Relate Institute, and The National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. Retrieved from <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/KnotYet-FinalForWeb.pdf>

⁸ Sawhill credits Marlene Pearson and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead with inventing the term "success sequence." See Whitehead, B. D., & Pearson, M. (2006). *Making a love connection: Teen relationships, pregnancy, and marriage*. Washington D.C.: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Available for download at <http://thenationalcampaign.org/resource/making-love-connection-0>

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PERMANENCE VS. DIVORCE: FINDING A SAFE PLACE TO KEEP OUR HEARTS

CONTRIBUTING SCHOLARS: DEAN M. BUSBY, JASON S. CARROLL, ALAN J. HAWKINS, AND BRIAN J. WILLOUGHBY

A high divorce rate makes it harder for us all to aspire to forever. We come to see marriage as fragile rather than strong, as something that succumbs instead of overcomes. It's harder to trust that marriage is a safe place to keep our hearts. As a result, the decision to marry is bigger and harder to make and the fear that marriage may not be permanent may restrict our ability to fully commit.

Researchers tell us that 40%–50% of first marriages—and 60%-plus of second marriages—fall short of forever.¹ That figure is too high, especially for the more disadvantaged in our society and for the million-plus children each year whose lives, on average, are negatively affected by divorce.² How have the high rates of divorce over the past 50 years affected the meaning of marriage today? And how does this change behavior, especially for young people in the prime marrying years?

It's not that we take divorce lightly. More than 90% of Americans believe that divorce is a major problem in society and nearly 60% believe that it should be harder than it is to get a divorce.³ Yet on a personal level, our attitudes are more accepting. For instance, among Millennials, nearly half (44%) believe that the institution of marriage is becoming optional or obsolete in society,

even while they still personally aspire to marry.⁴

The point is not that any specific divorce is wrong. Quite the contrary, the option of divorce is necessary to be able to end a dangerous or unhealthy or dead marriage. Yes, a weakened norm of permanence in marriage makes it easier for those in unhealthy relationships to exit the institution. But that is not the end of it. It also makes it harder for people to stay committed and work through their challenges. Like impatient investors, those without a sense of permanence in marriage find it harder to absorb the short-term relational ups and downs and to trust the long-term prospects of the investment.

Greater acceptance of divorce means more divorces occur not just among unhealthy marriages but for those on the margins, as well. And there are many at the margins. Research suggests that about half of all married couples at some point have experienced a significant problem and thought their marriage was in trouble, and a third have seriously considered a divorce at some point in their marriage. About one in four married individuals (ages 25–50) have recently had thoughts about divorce.⁵ Research also finds that most divorces come from marriages that were not experiencing

“A good marriage is really the most important personal goal in life.”

particularly low levels of happiness or high levels of conflict.⁶

When marriage no longer has a strong sense of permanence, it not only changes how young adults approach marriage, but when they do marry it becomes easier to exit than to endure, even when circumstances are not extreme. And usually they are not. The harder reasons that people give for divorce, such as abuse and addiction that indicate unhealthy or dangerous relationships, are not the reasons most people give for divorce. The most common reason that divorced individuals give for their divorce is lack of commitment.⁷

The idea that divorce should never be an option, even though sometimes it's a necessity, is eroding, and thus our ability to sustain a marriage is weakened. The sense that one can deposit one's heart in an institution for safekeeping and earn a lifetime of interest is diminishing.

To feel safe, a healthy marriage needs a feeling of psychological safety.⁸ This safety is harder to find when divorce seems so common. And a lack of trust in permanence can make unhappy spouses quicker to assume the worst. When permanence feels like a fading feature of the institution, we will come to expect it less. Importantly, we will be less able to ask for it.

The meaning of marriage matters for our abilities to form and sustain a healthy, stable marriage. "Whatever" doesn't work that well when it comes to marriage. As individuals and as a society, we need to engineer ways to reinforce the waning sense that marriages are forever.

Public Proposals and Personal Plans

Our no-fault divorce laws have abandoned the concept of marital permanence, but most people still want to believe in forever, and we can implement a series of feasible public policies that will

support and reinforce those beliefs and reduce the legal necessity of divorce. The overall goal of marital stability policies would be to reduce the need for divorce by providing more help to couples forming marriages and supporting more services for couples struggling to hold their marriages together.

1. We can start by helping couples be better prepared for a healthy, enduring marriage. We know a lot about why marriages succeed and why they fail. We can do more to teach young people, to give them the knowledge and skills and motivations

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needed to form a healthy marriage and avoid the problematic paths that will bring people to marriage with a lot of relationship baggage that makes it harder to get to their desired destinations.

2. When couples commit to marriage, we can provide better premarital education to build a stronger foundation for a healthy, enduring marriage. The reality is that the relational seeds of most divorces are present even before the marriage begins,⁹ so we need to improve couples' skills at dealing with those issues from the start. Once married, couples will benefit from greater access to effective educational services that will help them fight off the inevitable forces of marital entropy and keep their relationships vital.

Overall, we can build a smart marriage culture, with a strong understanding that healthy, stable marriages are built on a

known foundation of correct knowledge and motivations, as well as a set of effective skills that can be learned, practiced, and improved.

3. When they are struggling, some couples find themselves thinking that divorce might be the answer to their problems, but we can do more as a civil society than throw our hands up in the air. For those who are doubting their marriages but are not experiencing insurmountable problems, we can provide better educational and counseling options to help them assess more clearly their circumstances and the prospects of repairing the marriage.¹⁰

4. Of course, everything we can do indirectly to make it easier for marriages to thrive—from more good-paying jobs, to better educational opportunities, to help for overcoming addictions, to workplaces that help couples balance work and family demands—will help prevent the need for divorce.

While we can imagine a better world that helps to reduce the necessity for divorce, the reality is that we live in the present, imperfect one. What can young adults do to minimize the risk of divorce, to act with more confidence in forever?

1. They can start by developing a long-term perspective. Together, couples can approach a marriage like seasoned, long-term investors who ride out the frequent market undulations knowing the likelihood that a good investment will pay off in the long run. Marriage, like financial markets, is no place for the short-sighted and impatient.

2. Next, they can reject the notion that divorce is a random accident waiting to happen. Divorce happens for reasons, most of which are understandable and predictable, many of them in plain sight even before lovers exchange wedding vows. And this understanding leads to the next action point:

3. They can take a proactive approach to building and sustaining a healthy,

stable marriage. They can take a marriage preparation class to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their future spouse, and their relationship, and take it early enough to learn and practice the skills and motivations that create healthy relationships. After the wedding, they can keep investing energy in the marriage, finding a way amidst all the other demands of life to demonstrate that a good marriage is really the most important personal goal in life.

All such efforts—personal and societal, direct and indirect—communicate support for the aspiration of marital permanence. They reinforce that there are ways to make marriage a safer place to keep our hearts.



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SAME-SEX MARRIAGE: GENDER COMPLEMENTARITY VS. GENDER IRRELEVANCE

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The tremors you felt on June 26, 2015, were aftershocks from the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that the constitutional right to marry includes same-sex couples. As a result, same-sex marriage is now legal in all U.S. states (and 20 other countries).¹ This essay raises the question of what it means when marriage no longer solely means the union of a man and a woman.

As the Court admitted, marriage may be society's most enduring and essential institution. As with any institution, changing the basic definition and social understanding of marriage will change the behavior of its members. The gender composition of marriage is now a private matter, a personal choice, and not a legal requirement or even a public expectation. "Whatever" is now the answer to the question, "What is the gender composition of marriage?" What does whatever mean? If there are benefits to this change for same-sex individuals and their families, are there also risks for heterosexual society that accompany this redefinition of marriage?

A Supreme Court Vision of Marriage

Before exploring these questions, it may help to clarify briefly what the five Supreme Court justices said about the

institution of marriage in their opinion that legalized same-sex marriage. First, Justice Kennedy, who wrote the majority opinion, wanted to make clear that the Court treats marriage as a central social institution crucial to the well-being of individuals and the nation:

"From their beginning to their most recent page, the annals of human history reveal the transcendent importance of marriage."²

"This Court's cases and the Nation's traditions make clear that marriage is a keystone of our social order."³

Also, the Court asserts that same-sex couples seeking marriage do so with respect for the importance of the institution:

"Far from seeking to devalue marriage, the petitioners seek it for themselves because of their respect—and need—for its privileges and responsibilities. And their immutable nature dictates that same-sex marriage is their only real path to this profound commitment."⁴

The majority of the Court ruled to legalize same-sex marriage largely because of its high esteem for the institution. Nevertheless, the Court reasoned that the gender composition of marriage is not an essential element of marriage's meaning and purpose. In effect, the Court removed gender or biological sex as a defining

pillar, replacing it with sexual orientation or preference—sexual attraction and love—as a more fundamental structural post. The five justices argued that marriage has not been a fixed institution over time:

“The ancient origins of marriage confirm its centrality, but it has not stood in isolation from developments in law and society. The history of marriage is one of both continuity and change. That institution—even as confined to opposite-sex relations—has evolved over time.”⁵

The Court reasoned that, “changed understandings of marriage are characteristic of a Nation where new dimensions of freedom become apparent to new generations.”⁶ The Court majority asserted that times have changed and most people now accept homosexual relationships as morally equal to heterosexual relationships.

We think the Court’s understanding of the complex social history of marriage is selective, but certainly the five justices are correct that societies evolve and change in ways that sometimes make clear the need for important changes in human institutions more consistent with enlightened understanding. Nevertheless, just as not all historical elements of marriage were wise and good, not all social change is progress, and not all changes in our understanding of the meaning of marriage have resulted in unalloyed good. The Court curiously omits mention of more recent legal and social changes in the meaning of marriage and the complex consequences these changes have had for modern marriage.

For instance, the Court did not discuss how legally eliminating the concept of permanence from marriage in the 1960s and 1970s changed the meaning of marriage. While there were some specific benefits to no-fault divorce laws, which established an individual right to divorce

for any reason at any time, the legal understanding of marriage as a permanent union was deleted. Now the law is indifferent to the notion that marriage is a life-long union. The freedom and ease of divorce helped some, but it changed the nature of marriage in ways that made marriage a more fragile institution for all, a less safe place to invest our hearts.

“One has to look beyond the effects on same-sex families to accurately gauge the full impact of a de-gendered understanding of marriage.”

High divorce rates and other trends, such as non-marital childbearing, have thinned the meaning of marriage. And they have changed how people behave in intimate relationships. Along with any personal good these changes may have facilitated, these trends also are linked to negative consequences for children, adults, and society.⁷ These are crucial omissions in the Court’s analysis of how marriage has changed.

Note that the Court assumes that its ruling merely opens and expands the institution of marriage to include same-sex couples without altering its fundamental meaning or function. The new members only enlarge the institution and add to its membership rolls. But the Court fails to acknowledge how changing a fundamental aspect of marriage—the union of a man and a woman—profoundly impacts its meaning, or how that meaning may be central to producing some of the most important benefits of marriage.⁸

So what is the enlightened essence of marriage, according to Justice Kennedy and the consenting justices? Scattered about the

opinion is soaring but abstract rhetoric that provides some clues as to their perception of the remaining essence of marriage: it bestows adults with dignity and hope; it creates human synergy and togetherness; it molds identity; it embodies high ideals; it is the first bond of society and a fundamental societal institution. What is notably absent is any reflection on the traditional notion that marriage links a man and a woman together, whose sexual union creates life that is best nurtured by the investment of both the mother and the father.⁹

So the Court still sees the essence of marriage in grand and noble terms. Yet clearly they are also abstract terms. The language summons a picture of a grand open-air vista rather than a stately building with walls and a roof; a vision rather than an institution. Supreme Court Justice Alito, in his dissenting opinion, summarizes the five justices’ grand and abstract portrait of marriage this way: “Although the Court expresses the point in loftier terms, its argument is that the fundamental purpose of marriage is to promote the well-being of those who choose to marry.”¹⁰ Justice Alito continues:

“This understanding of marriage, which focuses almost entirely on the happiness of persons who choose to marry, is shared by many people today, but it is not the traditional one. For millennia, marriage was inextricably linked to the one thing that only an opposite-sex couple can do: procreate.”¹¹

Weakening the link between marriage and procreation allows the Court to exclude biological sex—gender complementarity—from the meaning of marriage. Something so central to its meaning for society and for individuals for countless generations is now deemed a vestige of the less enlightened past, irrelevant to the true essence of modern marriage.

Marriage as a Social Institution

Five Supreme Court justices (and many lower court justices) believe that gender has been drained of its meaning to marriage in modern society. They believe that, eliminating gender from the legal definition will not change the essence of marriage in any substantive way. Respectfully, we disagree. A fundamental social institution has been redefined. Social institutions shape human behavior. They provide human relationships with meaning, norms, and patterns; they encourage and guide conduct. And when the definitions and norms of a social institution are altered, the human behaviors and interactions that the institution shapes also change. Whether deemed good or bad, legally necessary or unnecessary, redefining marriage away from its historically gendered purposes will have significant consequences.

We don't claim prophetic-like insight into the future. We agree with Justice Alito's point in his dissenting opinion: "The long-term consequences of this change are not now known and are unlikely to be ascertainable for some time to come."¹² This is because, "the process by which such consequences come about is complex, involving the interaction of numerous factors, and tends to occur over an extended period of time."¹³ Many people think removing gender from the legal meaning of

marriage will have no effect. But, like trying to imagine what it would be like to live in a world without gravity or friction, it will be hard to understand a change in something that we have hardly ever given a second thought to.

So even though it is too early to know exactly how redefining marriage to include same-sex couples will change marriage over time, we think there are some reasonable guesses. In trying to predict the future, our focus will not be on homosexuals but on heterosexuals, who will continue to make up all but a few percentage points of the married population. Same-sex couples who legalize their relationships may benefit from doing so, and if it brings greater stability and more social support to their children, it may benefit those children, as well. Still, as the history of no-fault divorce suggests, there are also reasons to expect that there will be unanticipated negative consequences to marriage from changing its gendered meaning. And importantly, one has to look beyond the effects on same-sex families to accurately gauge the full impact of a de-gendered understanding of marriage.

Justice Kennedy, and many justices in lower-court opinions, have asserted that, "it is unrealistic to conclude that an opposite-sex couple would choose not to marry simply because same-sex couples may do so."¹⁴

They assert this even though we know that some heterosexual couples over the past 15 years chose not to solemnize their union with marriage vows because marriage was an "unjust" institution that excluded same-sex couples.¹⁵ Similarly, it seems likely to us that some traditionalists, offended at the secular redefinition of marriage, will eschew entering its state-sanctioned doors and will seek only a religious solemnization of their union. Still, as long as Justice Kennedy includes the word "simply" in that sentence, he may be right. The actions of a homosexual individual down the block or three cubicles over at work probably will not simply and directly affect heterosexuals' actions toward marriage. But it isn't that simple. And here Justice Kennedy's arguments are simply simplistic. He and the assenting justices are thinking about marriage here only in private terms, not institutional terms.

Going back to a previous point, human institutions shape human thinking and behavior. That is what they are designed to do. When an institution changes—and in this case, changes in such a prominent way—it is reasonable and logical to expect that people will think and behave differently. To assert otherwise is to believe that meaning doesn't matter or that gender already was an empty element of marriage. Neither of

"Even in our progressive twenty-first century, marriage is the most important social mechanism we have."



those beliefs is reasonable. Far from being a relic of history or a quaint custom that has outgrown its usefulness in modern society, gender is a crucial component of not only the meaning of marriage for most people, but also of how marriage produces its benefits for children and society.

Marriage and Masculinity

How might the de-gendering of marriage impact the institution of marriage? *Marriage has been an important way that adult men establish their masculinity in a way that benefits women, children, communities, and society.* The eminent, late family sociologist Steven L. Nock argued: “In their marriages, and by their marriages, men define and display themselves as masculine.”¹⁶ A de-gendered conception of marriage—a public rejection that biological sex is a defining pillar of marriage—may weaken the institution’s power to channel men’s generative masculinity in child- and family-centered ways.¹⁷ When maleness is an unnecessary and legally excluded feature of the institution—a luxury—then we are likely to see less of it in marriage. As a result, more children of heterosexual parents will be raised without the manifest benefits of marriage and its ability to get fathers involved day-to-day in their children’s lives.

Even in our progressive twenty-first century, marriage is the most important social mechanism we have to channel young men’s adult identity into other-oriented behaviors of sacrifice, generosity, and protection of their own children and even of all children in society. Marriage is a transformative act, but especially so for men, because it funnels men’s adult

identity into service to their families and to society. *We believe any societal signal that men’s contributions are not central to children’s daily well-being threatens to further decrease the likelihood that men will channel their masculine identities into responsible fathering. And we believe that the official de-gendering of marriage sends just such a signal.* The state, in essence, now says the terms *husband* and *father* (and *wife* and *mother*) are relics. (Note that a number of states are removing these terms from their laws, replacing them with gender-neutral terms.)

Yes, gay men (and lesbian women) who so choose will now have clearer legal

“Both mothers and fathers are needed to create life, and both are needed to facilitate the optimal nurturing of that life.”

pathways to marriage and parenthood. But for the vast majority, marriage is sheared of its connection to the idea that gender is a defining pillar of the institution and that men are essential parts. We fear this will only add to the deinstitutionalization of marriage and the many problems that have flowed from that. Foremost among those problems is a decreasing likelihood that children will be reared by a father and a mother together.

But Do Fathers Really Matter?

Do men really matter to family life, or has twenty-first century enlightenment taught us that fathers are fungible even if marriage still matters? Two bodies of

research give insight into this question of men’s special contribution to parenting, looking at (1) what happens to children when fathers are largely absent from their children’s day-to-day lives, and also at (2) how present and involved paternal parenting supports children’s healthy development and well-being.

First, an enormous body of scholarship has tried to document what happens when fathers are not involved in meaningful ways in the day-to-day lives of their children. This research has shown consistently that children, generally, are at 2–3 times the risk of a wide range of problems growing up without regular involvement with their father.¹⁸ A second large body of scholarship looks directly at fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives and how that impacts their development and well-being. This body of research also finds consistent positive effects of men’s day-to-day engagement in the lives of their children.¹⁹ Fathers are not a luxury; they make vital contributions to children’s lives.

Fathers and mothers bring similar capacities to the task of parenting. But like the complementarity of the left and right halves of the brain, they also seem to bring distinct capacities that provide crucial, complementary contributions to children’s healthy development. Both mothers and fathers are needed to create life, and both are needed to facilitate the optimal nurturing of that life.

We want to be clear, however, that we are not asserting that fathers and mothers are non-overlapping contributors to child development. Clearly, mothers and fathers often do many of the same things, parent in similar ways, and often have similar impacts on their child’s development.²⁰

Our argument is not that fathers and mothers parent in ways fully distinct from the opposite-sex parent, or even, strictly speaking, that they make essential contributions to child development that the opposite-sex parent cannot make.

Still, the importance of complementary gendered parenting—the parenting of both a biological father and a mother—doesn’t need to rest on a strong empirical base that shows fathers and mothers make unique,

“Fathers are not a luxury; they make vital contributions to children’s lives.”

essential, non-overlapping contributions to their children’s positive development. Our primary point is that fathering matters to children’s healthy development and the legalization of same-sex marriage may change the meaning of marriage in ways that diminish men’s motivations for involved fathering.

The law now has removed gender complementarity from the meaning of marriage. This ruling goes against the grain of our understanding of the ideal parenting environment for children’s social, emotional, intellectual, and moral development. If the legalization of same-sex marriage over time diminishes men’s connection to marriage and fatherhood, it will mean more children growing up without a present and engaged father. As a society, this is not something we should naïvely embrace.

Endnotes

¹ For updated information on countries where same-sex marriage is legalized, see <http://www.freedomtomarry.org/landscape/>

[entry/c/international](#)

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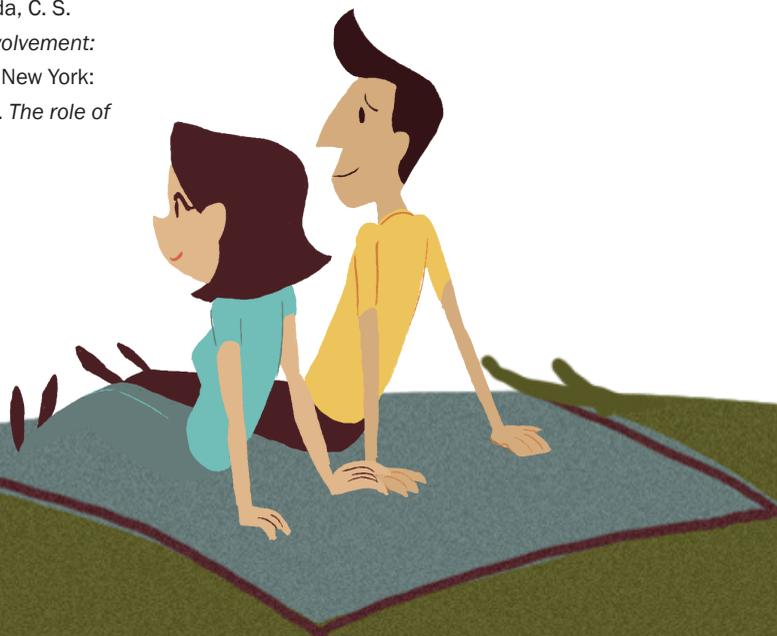
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