

CHAPTER 9



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Marriages in Societal and Individual Perspective

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What Do YOU Think?

Are the following statements **TRUE** or **FALSE**?

You may be surprised by the answers (see answer key at the bottom of the page).

- T** **F** 1 More women than men tend to live with their parents.
- T** **F** 2 Couples who are unhappy before marriage significantly increase their happiness after marriage.
- T** **F** 3 Marriage, more than parenthood, radically affects a woman's life.
- T** **F** 4 The advent of children generally increases a couple's marital satisfaction.
- T** **F** 5 Age at marriage is a strong indicator of later marital success.
- T** **F** 6 In-law relationships tend to be characterized by low emotional intensity.
- T** **F** 7 Asian, Latino, and African American families are more likely than Caucasian families to take in extended family.
- T** **F** 8 The empty nest syndrome, characterized by maternal depression after the last child leaves home, is more a myth than a problem for American women.
- T** **F** 9 Most long-term marriages involve couples who are blissful and happily in love.
- T** **F** 10 The key to marital satisfaction in the later years is continued good health.

Answer Key for What Do You Think

1 False, see p. 350; 2 False, see p. 335; 3 False, see p. 336; 4 False, see p. 344; 5 True, see p. 335; 6 True, see p. 345; 7 True, see p. 352; 8 True, see p. 359; 9 False, see p. 354; 10 True, see p. 353.

I affirm the special bond and unique relationship that exists between us, and promise to keep it always alive. You are my partner in life and my one true love. I will cherish our union and love you more each day than I did the day before. I promise to support you in your goals, to honor, trust and respect you, today and for the rest of my life. I will laugh with you and cry with you, loving you faithfully through good times and bad, regardless of the obstacles we may face together. . . . I promise to always tell you what I feel about you, to leave no room for doubt and take nothing for granted. You will always know how much I love you and how much you have enriched my life and how much you allow me to feel that I never imagined ever again feeling for the rest of my life. I promise to stand with you always even in the darkest, hardest times and never let anyone hurt you. I will be beside you in whatever life throws our way and behind you, should you ever feel that what you need most is to know that there is someone there to catch you should you fall. I give you my hand and my heart. I promise to love you, comfort and encourage you, be open and honest with you, and stay with you from this day forward for as long as we both shall live.

As you no doubt recognize, those words are a version of wedding vows that, in some similar form or fashion, are exchanged between couples as they enter marriage. Some may add more religious language, some may be more or less traditional, some may be briefer and more concise, and others may be more personal and perhaps even playful. It is likely, however, that all will convey an intention to share life's ups and downs *together* for as long as both people live, as such is the essence and expectation of marriage.

Marriage is the foundation upon which American families are constructed. Although we recognize and value the ties connecting us with our wider families, marriage is the centerpiece of family life in the United States. In our nuclear family system, our relationships with our spouses are more important than our relationships with our extended families. In our lives as individuals, the person we marry is expected to be someone with whom we will share everything, a soul mate, and partner "for as long as we both shall live."

Yet the status and the direction of marriage in the United States are subjects of considerable ongoing

controversy and debate. Although most Americans will, at some point, marry, fewer enter and stay in marriage today than did in the recent past. Is marriage less valued than it was in the past? As a society, are we less committed to marriage as a central life goal, and are those who marry less willing or able to work hard to make their marriages work? Is marriage “in trouble,” destined to ever more gradual decline as more people divorce, remain single, live together, and have and raise their children without being married? Or, is marriage “doing just fine,” having changed and adapted to, but having survived, ongoing societal and cultural changes? These “bigger picture” questions are addressed in the first part of this chapter.

In addition, we consider marriage from the vantage point of the married, by describing issues that confront couples as they enter marriage and as they attempt to craft and then share a lifetime together. Along the way we identify some factors that predict marital success, as well as some issues involved in the establishment of marital roles and boundaries. We describe the impact of children on marriages, especially the amount of satisfaction couples feel. We turn next to middle-aged marriages, examining families with young children and adolescents, families as launching centers of the young, and the process of reevaluating married life. Then we review later-life marriages, including connections with extended families, retirement, caregiving, and widowhood. Finally, we survey the different patterns and factors that characterize lasting marriages.

Marriage in Societal Context: The Marriage Debate

When it comes to marriage, these are confusing times. By this we mean that there is much difference of opinion over whether marriage is or isn’t “endangered,” whether it has or hasn’t lost its appeal and its meaning as a major life goal to which people aspire and a relationship around which people build their lives. Even the marriage experts don’t see eye to eye about what’s going on and about whether people are turning from or continuing to value becoming and staying married. Consider, as illustration, the November 2004 issue of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, a special issue of one of the leading scholarly journals that focuses on family life. It contained a series of

articles and commentaries as part of a “Symposium on Marriage and Its Future.” As article after article revealed, evidence can be marshaled on either side of what sociologist Paul Amato (2004) calls the **marriage debate**. As Amato points out, even “New professionals in the family field may find it curious that senior scholars can interpret the data on recent social trends in such strikingly different ways” (2004a, 960). Where some see marriage as “in decline,” others portray it as dynamic, changing, and resilient. Just what is it that is so confusing?

Consider the following, clearly mixed, portrait of marriage in the United States:

- *Behaviorally*, almost three-fifths of adults in the United States are married. Another 17% are formerly married, being either widowed (6.6%) or separated or divorced (10.4%). Thus, three-fourths of adults are or have been married. In addition, 19% are never-married singles and nearly 6% are in cohabiting relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics).
- Over the quarter century from 1970 to 1996, the proportion of 25- to 29-year-olds who had never married *increased dramatically*. In 1970, 11% of 25- to 29-year-old females had never married; by 1996 the percentage had more than tripled, reaching 38%. Among men, the same period saw increases from 19% to 52% (Huston and Melz 2004). If not “foregoing” marriage, clearly people were “forestalling” it, as reflected in the unprecedented increases in the median age at which women and men enter their first marriages (27 years for men and 25 years for women in 2000) (Cherlin 2004).
- As shown in Chapter 3, cohabitation, births to unmarried mothers (either single or cohabiting), and divorces all increased over the last three decades of the twentieth century (though divorce decreased toward the end of the 1990s). Pessimistically, these might suggest that marriage had become less attractive, less essential as a prerequisite for having and raising children, and more fragile. None of these impressions are especially positive statements about the health and vitality of marriage (Huston and Melz 2004; Oropesa and Landale 2004).
- The preceding trends notwithstanding, experts estimate that nearly 90% of Americans will eventually marry.
- *Attitudinally*, marriage remains highly valued, even alongside increased acceptance of nonmarital

lifestyles. Most young adults want to marry someday and recognize that marriage brings benefits to their lives (Amato 2004b).

- Each year for more than a quarter of a century, around 80% of female high school seniors have expressed an expectation to marry someday. Among males, the percentage expecting to marry has increased during this period from 71% to 78% (Cherlin 2004).
- Marriage has been *and continues to be* seen as an “extremely important” part of life. Roughly 80% of young women and 70% of young men express such an attitude.



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■ *Marriage patterns show significant race and ethnic differences in the likelihood of entering and remaining married.*

- Between 1980 and 2000, the norm of marriage as a life-long relationship received increased support (Amato 2004b).
- Marriage is not seen as essential even for those who wish to spend their lives with each other. Only 36% of U.S. adults disagree with the notion that “it is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married” (Cherlin 2004).

Is There a Retreat from Marriage?

In the discussion of the status and vitality of marriage, we often hear that a retreat from marriage has taken place in the United States in recent decades. Just what does this mean, and how accurately does it represent marriage in America? R. S. Oropesa and Nancy Landale (2004) describe the **retreat from marriage** as “evident” in a number of recent and ongoing trends: “historic” delays in the age at which women and men first marry, nearly “unprecedented” proportions of the population never marrying, “dramatic” increases in cohabitation and nonmarital births, and continued high divorce rates. Robert Schoen and Yen-Hsin Alice Cheung (2006, 1) assert that marriage has actually “been in retreat for more than a generation,” as fewer men and women “ever marry,” and that the “U.S. withdrawal from marriage” persisted at least through 2003. The retreat from marriage appears to be associated with increases in employment of women, smaller gender wage gaps in earnings, wider inequality among men, and persistent economic inequality between racial groups (Schoen and Cheung 2006).

Economics and Demographics behind the Retreat from Marriage

Closer inspection of trends indicates that the retreat from marriage has not occurred among all social groups. Instead, both racial and economic differences can be identified. As shown earlier in Chapter 3, there are considerable differences in marital status for different racial, ethnic, and economic groups. Looking again, this time using data from the 1998, 2000, and 2002 *Current Population* surveys, you can see the following differences:

Table 9.1 ■ Marital Status by Ethnicity

Marital Status	White (%)	Hispanic (%)	Asian (%)	African American (%)
Married	57.4	50.9	57.4	34.0
Cohabiting	3.6	4.1	1.9	3.9
Widowed	6.8	3.5	4.1	6.6
Divorced	8.4	6.1	4.0	9.9
Separated	1.4	3.5	1.4	4.6
Never married	22.5	32.0	31.3	41.0

Where nearly three-fifths of Caucasians and Asians and half of Hispanics are married, only about a third of African Americans are married. Adding the widowed, divorced and separated to the portion married, nearly three-fourths of whites, two-thirds of Asians, and nearly two-thirds of Hispanics *are or have been* married, compared to more than half of African Americans (see Table 9.1).

Based on a National Center for Health Statistics report, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States* (Bramlett and Mosher 2002), we see differences in marital experiences for women of different racial backgrounds (Table 9.2).

Hispanic women are the most likely to marry young. By age 25 there is hardly any difference between Caucasians and Hispanics; more than three-fifths of women in both groups are married compared to less than half of Asian women and less than two-fifths of African Americans. By age 30, more than three-quarters of Caucasian, Asian, and Hispanic women are married as compared to just over half of African American women. Even by ages 35–39, only about two-thirds of African American women have married; a third are likely to never marry (Huston and Melz 2004).

The “Hispanic” and “Asian” categories reflect more diversity than can be addressed here. It is worth noting, however, that between 1970 and 2000 the percentage of Chinese American men and women who were married increased (from 50.7% to 63.4% among men and from 56% to 62.8% among women), as did the percentage of Japanese men who were married (from 57.4% to 59%). The percentage of Japanese women who were married decreased slightly (from 61.3% to 59.1%) during this same time period. Chinese men and women are more likely to be married and less likely to be divorced than are Japanese

Table 9.2 ■ Percentage of Women Married, by Age, 1995

Age	18	20	25	30
White, non-Hispanic	8	26	63	81
Black, non-Hispanic	5	16	37	52
Hispanic	13	29	61	77
Asian	3	13	44	77
Total	8	25	59	76

SOURCE: Bramlett and Mosher 2002.

American men and women. More generally, “marriage is still a strong institution for Chinese and Japanese Americans” (Ishii-Kuntz 2004). Among Hispanics, Mexican Americans and Cuban Americans “are generally more supportive of marriage than non-Hispanic whites” and tend to marry at similar levels (Oropesa and Landale 2004:906). Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, are considerably less likely to be married. They also display more acceptance of cohabitation, even without any plans to ever marry (Oropesa and Landale 2004).

One final example about race differences merits our attention. A three-state analysis of the percentage of white and black men and women marrying before age 50 in Virginia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin found the racial differences shown in Table 9.3 (Schoen and Cheng 2006).

In all three states, black women and men were considerably less likely to be married by age 50 than were white women and men. Clearly, three states do not reflect the whole of the United States, and states may differ in important ways in demographic or economic characteristics. Still, all three states have populations in excess of 4 million and represent both regional variation and variation in the proportion of the population

Table 9.3 ■ Percentage Marrying before Age 50

Virginia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin, circa 1990			
Population Group	Virginia	North Carolina	Wisconsin
White men	89.2	82.9	86.8
Black men	85.7	67.6	69.2
White women	92.3	88.4	90.3
Black women	81.9	61.0	59.7

SOURCE: Schoen and Cheng 2006, 1–10.



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■ *Despite data indicating that they are less likely to marry or expect to marry, African Americans express strong belief in the importance of marriage.*

that is African American (Wisconsin's 3–5% to North Carolina's 22%) (Schoen and Cheng 2006).

Some other racial differences to note: Although in general young people expect to marry someday, fewer young African Americans express an expectation to ever marry and report an older desired age at marriage than whites (Crissey 2005). African Americans who marry are more likely to divorce than Caucasians who marry. Divorced African Americans are less likely than divorced Caucasians to remarry. Blacks are also much more likely to bear children outside of marriage. Although a third of all children born in the United States are born to unmarried mothers, the race difference is pronounced: around a quarter of all births to Caucasian women compared to nearly 70% of births among African Americans are to unmarried mothers.

What about Class?

Within the shifts in marriage rates, there are notable socioeconomic differences. For example, although lifetime marriage rates among women have dropped by 5% in the United States, they have declined by 30% for women without a high school diploma (Gibson-Davis,

Edin, and McLanahan 2005). Among college-educated white women, the prospect of marrying has *grown greater*, whereas among those without college degrees it has decreased (Huston and Melz 2004). For both women and men, educational attainment is positively associated with the likelihood of marriage (Schoen and Cheng 2006). In addition, in the 1980s and 1990s, marriages among college-educated women became more stable than they had been in the previous decade; among women at the bottom of the educational distribution, marriage became less stable (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004). In discussions of a retreat from marriage among Hispanics, R.S. Oropesa and Nancy Landale (2004) emphasize how limited economic opportunities may be major barriers or disincentives to marriage.

Look again at the data from Robert Schoen and Yen-Hsin Alice Cheng's study on marriage in Virginia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin, this time examining educational differences (Table 9.4).

As the data indicate, *for both men and women*, the percentages of people marrying by age 50 increased with education in all three states (except for the 13–15 years of education category, possibly indicating that starting but failing to complete college may make one less desirable as a marriage partner). When race and education are combined (not shown), the proportion of blacks with less than high school educations who are married by age 50 ranges from 38% to 65%. For blacks with less than 12 years of education, “never marrying was more likely than ever marrying” (Schoen and Cheng 2006, 9). For whites with college educations or more, the percentage who marry ranges from 89% to 96%.

Table 9.4 ■ Percentage Marrying, Divided According to Education

Population Group	Virginia	North Carolina	Wisconsin
By years of education			
Men, < 12 years	80.5	60.3	64.2
Men, 12 years	95.0	83.2	86.6
Men, 13–15 years	78.6	75.7	80.6
Men, 16 or > years	88.9	88.7	94.8
Women, < 12 years	81.0	55.0	63.8
Women, 12 years	97.0	85.4	91.3
Women, 13–15 years	82.3	75.2	81.5
Women, 16 or > years	92.3	90.8	95.4

Does Retreat from Marriage Suggest Rejection of Marriage?

Even if low socioeconomic status affects the likelihood of marriage, it may not signal an attitudinal rejection of marriage. Quite the contrary: Edin and colleagues (2004, 1,008) assert that “marriage has by no means lost its status as a cultural ideal among low-income and minority populations.” Where only a minority of college graduates disapproved of cohabitation, two-thirds of high school dropouts disapproved or strongly disapproved of living together with no intention to marry. The difference is even more evident in the finding that after controlling for (comparing people of similar) race, age, marital status, presence of children, and religious attendance, individuals who hadn’t completed high school were more than two times more likely to disapprove of cohabitation with no intention to marry than were college graduates (Edin et al. 2004).

Despite what the race data on marriage appear to suggest, African Americans remain “strong believers in the value of marriage” (Huston and Melz 2004). Some researchers have even found that unmarried blacks and Hispanics express greater interest in marrying than unmarried whites (Huston and Melz 2004). Overall, “research indicates very few significant racial or class differences in attitudes regarding the importance of marriage or aspirations toward marriage. . . . Even 70% of welfare recipients . . . say they expect to marry” (Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005, 1,302).

Perhaps, then, a good portion of the “marriage retreat,” at least that portion occurring among the most economically disadvantaged, is not really a *rejection of marriage*. Borrowing from the analysis done by Christina Gibson-Davis, Kathryn Edin, and Sara McLanahan, perhaps we should be asking ourselves, given their attitudes in favor of marriage and their expectations that they will someday marry, what keeps low-income unmarried parents from marrying? Interviews with a sample of low-income unmarried couples with children identified three barriers to marriage: financial concerns, concerns about the quality and durability of their relationships, and fear of divorce.

- **Financial concerns.** These concerns covered four aspects of financial matters: whether couples had the resources to “consistently make ends meet,” whether they could exercise financial responsibility and wisely use what resources they possess, whether they could “work together toward long-term financial

goals,” and whether they’d saved enough or had enough money for a “respectable wedding” (Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005, 1,307).

- **Relationship quality.** Believing that marriage ought to be for life, that it is the “ultimate” relationship, couples want to make sure that their partners are suitable for marriage. One way they believe they can achieve this is by living together long enough to tell that their relationships are “up to the challenge” of marriage, that they can weather any storm, and that they have answered any doubts about whether they and their partners are ready and their relationships are strong enough for marriage.
- **Fear of and opposition to divorce.** Claiming not to believe in divorce as an option, and viewing marriage as somewhat “sacred,” couples wait to marry until they fully believe that their relationships will last.

Expressed so well by Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan, what lies

at the heart of marital hesitancy is a deep respect for the institution of marriage. . . . The bar for marriage has grown higher for all Americans, making it increasingly difficult for those in the lower portions of the income distribution to meet the standards associated with marriage (2005, 1,311).

Religion and Marriage

Part of the supposed retreat from marriage consists of the delayed age at which women and men who marry are first entering marriage. Along with race and social class, religious affiliation is among the factors that may influence whether and when people choose to enter marriage. Religion has been shown to be associated with mate choice, childbearing and child-rearing, the division of housework, domestic violence, marital quality, and divorce (Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2005). Religious traditions and denominations differ in the kinds and degree of emphasis they place on marriage.

Importance of Marriage

Although Judeo-Christian religious groups tend to support marriage, uphold marriage and family as desirable and important lifestyles, and discourage both premarital and extramarital sex, there are differences

among them, especially in the extent to which they support traditional gender roles and relationships and reject divorce, abortion, and homosexuality (Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2005). Conservative Protestant denominations and Latter-day Saints (Mormons), articulate especially strong commitments to marriage, encouraging members to marry and stay married, by portraying marriage as “part of God’s plan for self-development . . . in this life, as well as . . . long term spiritual salvation (Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2005, 589–590).” Although, traditionally strongly pro-marriage, the Catholic Church has a “considerably less robust” promarriage orientation, as evidenced in the tendencies of American Catholics to move from the church’s traditional teachings about marriage and toward a viewpoint that marital matters are subjects of individual choice. Liberal and moderate Protestants do not attach the same importance to marriage as do evangelical Protestants. Among Jews, we find greater emphasis on the importance of marriage and on more traditional gender roles in marriage among Orthodox Jews and considerably less encouragement to marry and bear children, as well as less emphasis on gender differences, among Reform Jews.

Timing of Marriage

Xiaohe Xu, Clark Hudspeth, and John Bartkowski found that women and men affiliated with moderate and conservative Protestant denominations and with the Mormon church are both more likely to marry and to marry young than those unaffiliated with a religious faith. Interestingly, they may face different consequences of early marriage. Baptists, among the most conservative Protestant denominations, have the highest divorce rate in the United States; Mormons are among those with the lowest likelihood of divorce.

Catholics and liberal Protestants also differ from the unaffiliated, but to a lesser extent. By emphasizing marriage as “the joining of two individuals with the goal of living a constructive, harmonious life” and “creating a good environment for rearing children” [(Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2005, 589–590). Judaism, especially Reform Judaism, may encourage people to delay marriage. Indeed, Jews are more likely than Catholics, moderate and conservative Protestants, and Mormons to delay their entry into marriage. Jewish, liberal Protestant, and unaffiliated individuals were found to marry later (Xu, Hudspeth, and Bartkowski 2005, 589–590).

Between Decline and Resiliency

Perhaps the best way to understand what has happened and is happening to marriage is to use Andrew Cherlin’s (2004) argument that marriage has been “deinstitutionalized.” The **deinstitutionalization of marriage** refers to the “weakening of the social norms that define people’s behavior in a social institution such as marriage” (848). As a result of wider social change, individuals can no longer rely on shared understandings of how to act in and toward marriage. Having undergone an earlier transformation from marriage as an institution to marriage as companionship, beginning in the 1960s the companionate marriage began to lose ground to a form of marriage Cherlin calls the **individualized marriage**. In individualized marriage, individual self-fulfillment and personal growth became the objectives people sought to satisfy through marriage. The companionate marriage had been the dominant form for more than half of the last century. Held together by love and friendship between spouses, not social obligations; characterized by egalitarian as opposed to the earlier patriarchal ideals for marriage; and allowing—indeed encouraging—spouses to focus on self-development and expression, the companionate marriage was by the 1950s the widely shared cultural ideal. More recently, partly as a product of “cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s,” the emphasis on the personal fulfillment and personal growth that is to come in marriage and the expectation that our spouses will be facilitators of such growth and sources of unprecedented support have given rise to the individualized marriage (Amato 2004a).

This is where the marriage debate centers. Some scholars see the changes and trends described here as worrisome because they undermine marriage as an institution that meets the needs of society. They believe that we have become too individualistic, too focused on personal happiness, and have less commitment to making our marriages work. Such attitudes help explain the increases in cohabitation, single parenthood, and divorce, as individuals pursue what they most want regardless of their effects on others. To proponents of this viewpoint, we need to enact policies to reinstitutionalize marriage, to restrict and decrease divorce, and to strengthen values such as marital commitment, obligation, and sacrifice.

Others put more emphasis on marriage as a relationship between two individuals and assert the value of such characteristics of contemporary marriage as self-

development, freedom, and equality between spouses. Rejecting the idea that we have grown too individualistic or selfish, they also challenge the idea that ongoing trends should be seen with such negativity. Even the increase in divorce may be seen as an opportunity for happiness for adults and a means of escape for children from dysfunctional or dangerous environments.

As articulated by sociologist Paul Amato, neither the **marital decline perspective** nor the **marital resilience perspective** is consistently or uniformly supported by the variety of available data on marriage. As he says, “Recent social changes appear to have undermined marital unions in some respects and improved marital unions in other respects, with the current status of marriage lying somewhere between ‘decline’ and ‘resilience’” (2004b, 101). Paul Amato, David Johnson, Alan Booth, and Stacy Rogers compared two national surveys of married women and men in the United States, one from 1980 the other from 2000. As expected, given some trends we have already discussed, the demographics of marriage had changed considerably; age at first marriage, the proportion of remarried individuals and couples marrying after first cohabiting, and the proportion of wives in the labor force and the share of household income that they contributed had all increased. Gender relations had changed in less traditional directions. Couples also became more religious and expressed greater support for the norm that marriage was for life.

Linking these sorts of changes to shifts in marital quality, data supported both the marital decline and the marital resilience perspectives. In other words, some changes were associated with declines in marital happiness and interaction and with increases in divorce proneness. Yet other changes were associated with improved marital quality. And the overall effect? Although the average level of marital interaction declined significantly (couples less likely to eat dinner together, go shopping together, visit friends together, and go out for recreation together), as Amato expresses (2004b, 101), “In general, these changes tended to offset one another, resulting in little net change in mean levels of happiness and divorce proneness in the U.S. population.”

Who Can Marry?

Having looked at who is and isn’t marrying (and at what ages or with what consequences they marry), we turn briefly to matters of legality. Not everyone can



AP Images/Mindi Sokolosi

■ Most states have passed laws declaring legal marriage to be available to heterosexuals only. Only Massachusetts allows gay and lesbian couples the legal right to marry.

marry the partner of their choice. In Chapter 1, we looked at some restrictions imposed on our marriage choices. As we noted then, who we are allowed to legally marry has undergone change and challenge over the past 150 years in the United States, over such issues as race and, more recently, over the question of marriage between two people of the same sex. As we remind you, no longer does any state prevent two people of different races from marrying, and *all but one state* restrict marriage to heterosexual couples.

What other criteria do state marriage laws specify regarding eligibility to marry? Each state enacts its own laws regulating marriage, leading to some discrepancies from state to state. Although some restrictions are

uniform across all 50 states, others, such as those specifying minimum ages at which people can marry or addressing the question of cousin marriage, are more variable. As summarized by the Legal Information Institute of Cornell University Law School,

The Supreme Court has held that states are permitted to reasonably regulate the institution by prescribing who is allowed to marry, and how the marriage can be dissolved. Entering into a marriage changes the legal status of both parties and gives both husband and wife new rights and obligations. One power that the states do not have, however, is that of prohibiting marriage in the absence of a valid reason.

All states limit people to one living husband or wife at a time and will not issue marriage licenses to anyone with a living spouse. Once an individual is married, the person must be legally released from the relationship by either death, divorce, or annulment before he or she may remarry. Other limitations on individuals include age and close relationship. Limitations that some but not all states prescribe are: the requirements of blood tests, good mental capacity, and being of opposite sex.

Marriage between Blood Relatives

Nowhere in the United States is marriage allowed between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, brothers and sisters, uncles and nieces, and aunts and nephews. Perhaps this comes as no surprise to you, because such blood relations are clearly considered “too close” and marriage within such relationships is seen as incestuous and unacceptable. Some states disallow all “ancestor/descendant marriages,” and a handful of states explicitly extend the prohibition to marriages between parents and children to parents and their adopted children.

The following example reflect the nature of such legal prohibitions or restrictions:

- New Jersey law uses language common to many other state marriage statutes:

A man shall not marry any of his ancestors or descendants, or his sister, or the daughter of his brother or sister, or the sister of his father or mother, whether such collateral kindred be of the whole or half blood. A woman shall not marry any of her

ancestors or descendants, or her brother, or the son of her brother or sister, or the brother of her father or mother, whether such collateral kindred be of the whole or half blood. A marriage in violation of any of the foregoing provisions shall be absolutely void.

You may have noticed from this statute that New Jersey allows first cousins to marry. Although many other state marriage statutes articulate similarly specific restrictions, some states, such as Ohio or Washington, more simply and generally prohibit marriage between relatives “closer than second cousins.”

Some of you may find these laws surprising, thinking that first cousins can’t marry, shouldn’t marry, and—if they were to have children together—would face risks of passing genetic defects to their children. Although there are sociological and psychological arguments for the existence of incest restrictions, they tend to pertain mostly to the benefit of forcing people outside of their nuclear family of origin for a spouse. Furthermore, there is debate about the justification for prohibiting such marriages, common in many other parts of the world, including the Middle East, Europe, and South Asia. One genetics researcher estimates that as many as 20% of marriages worldwide are between first cousins (Willing 2002). As to the risk to offspring of such marriages, there is only a slightly elevated risk of such children inheriting recessive genetic disorders. Researchers “concluded that children of marriages between cousins inherited recessive genetic disorders, such as cystic fibrosis and Tay-Sachs disease, in 7% to 8% of cases. For the general population, the rate was 5%” (Willing 2002).

Age Restrictions

Although we have talked some and will talk more in later chapters about the effects of age at marriage on later marital success, here we simply note how state laws regulate and restrict marriage based on age. Throughout the United States, 48 of 50 states require both would-be spouses to be at least 18 years old to marry without parental consent. Two states set the age without parental consent higher: in Nebraska it is 19, and in Mississippi 21. Some states will waive the age requirement if the woman is pregnant, but in such instances she may need approval from a court. Many states allow couples to marry in their early to mid teens, providing they secure parental or court consent.

Number of Spouses

No state allows an individual to marry if she or he is already married. In other words, all 50 states consider monogamy the only legally accepted form of marriage. If a divorced or widowed man or woman wishes to remarry, she or he must present evidence of the legal termination of the prior marriage or of the death of her or his former spouse.

Gender of Spouses

In Chapter 1, we already considered the question of same-sex marriage. It is worth noting that many states have added to their state marriage laws explicit and emphatic declarations that same-sex marriage will not be recognized within the state, even if it is legally allowed elsewhere in the United States. A particularly emphatic example is illustrated in Chapter 3101 of Title 31 of the Ohio Revised Code on marriage:

(1) Any marriage between persons of the same sex is against the strong public policy of this state. Any marriage between persons of the same sex shall have no legal force or effect in this state and, if attempted to be entered into in this state, is void ab initio and shall not be recognized by this state. (2) Any marriage entered into by persons of the same sex in any other jurisdiction shall be considered and treated in all respects as having no legal force or effect in this state and shall not be recognized by this state.

Most states have added similar amendments to their marriage laws, although typically in less extensive language. As of this writing, 43 of 50 states have either passed laws banning same-sex marriages or have had such laws approved by voters in ballot initiatives seeking to ban same-sex marriage (<http://www.lambdalegal.org>).

The Essence of Legal Marriage

Marriage creates a legal relationship between two people. As such, it imposes certain responsibilities and obligations but also bestows considerable rights and protections on spouses. As discussed in Chapter 1, marriage confers a wide range of benefits from tax breaks to rights to care for one another if hospitalized or to

inherit. (“Marriage Rights and Benefits,” <http://www.nolo.com>).

Marriage also imposes legal *responsibilities* and *obligations* on spouses, although these may not be spelled out. The “model marriage statute” is intended as a legislative device to provide “firmer guidance to courts and family law as a discipline about the nature and public purposes of marriage.” (http://www.marriedebate.com/ml_marriage/cat03-ml01.php) According to law professor Katherine Spaht, who drafted a “Model Marriage Obligations Statute,” when they marry, husbands and wives owe each other mutual respect, fidelity, mutual support and assistance, and mutual commitment to and responsibility for the joint care of any children they have together (http://www.marriedebate.com/ml_marriage/cat03-ml01.php):

Respect requires each spouse to exhibit regard or esteem for the other. Fidelity is sexual faithfulness, precluding a spouse from sexual intercourse with another person. Support means economic resources sufficient to provide for not only the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and shelter, but also the ordinary conveniences of life, including transportation and labor-saving devices. Assistance is cooperating in the accomplishment of tasks that support the spouses’ life in common, including securing medical assistance for an ill or infirm spouse.

Fidelity, or sexual exclusivity, is described by Spaht as “the hallmark of marriage” and the essence that distinguishes marriage from “mere cohabitation.” Cumulatively, the other designated obligations “embody well-understood community expectations as well as spousal expectations about appropriate marital behavior . . . [and] represent the principal core of a complex set of social norms that promote cooperation between spouses. . . . Other such norms include trust (incorporated within fidelity), reciprocity, and sharing (incorporated within respect, support, and assistance).”

However, most states do *not explicitly* define marriage responsibilities and obligations in statute, relying instead on common law understanding of marriage. Louisiana is a notable exception. According to Louisiana *Civil Code Art. 98. Mutual duties of married persons*, “Married persons owe each other fidelity, support, and assistance” (http://www.marriedebate.com/ml_marriage/cat03-ml02.php).

Before we leave the topic of legal marriage, we ought to note that there is much ongoing disagreement and debate about what marriage does or ought to mean

legally; whether legal marriage should or shouldn't be made available to same-sex, as well as heterosexual, couples; and whether its benefits and responsibilities ought to extend to unmarried couples. One way in which the debate has been framed, albeit by those from a more conservative perspective, is as a clash between two views of marriage: a conjugal view of marriage versus a close relationship model.

In a report prepared by the Council on Family Law, titled "The Future of Family Law: Law and the Marriage Crisis in North America," these are described as "dramatically different concepts of marriage and of the role of the state in making family law" (Council on Family Law 2005, 9). The **conjugal model of legal marriage** has at its core a view of marriage defined as "child centered," because it stresses the importance of "sustaining enduring bonds between women and men in order to give a baby its mother and father, to bond them to one another and to a baby" (13). A conjugal marriage is "a sexual union between a man and a woman who promise each other sexual fidelity, mutual caretaking, and the joint parenting of any children they may have" (7). On the other hand, the **close relationship model of legal marriage** sees marriage "as one in a universe of diverse close, private relationships, with intrinsic emotional, psychological, and sexual dimensions." From the conjugal model, only heterosexual legal marriage ought to be recognized in family law. In the close relationship model, the law ought to recognize and protect all relationships in which individuals share intimacy, commitment, interdependence, mutual support, and communication, regardless of whether partners are of the same or opposite sex and regardless of whether they legally marry or not.

Why Marry?

If you stopped each couple just before they exchanged their vows and asked, "Why are you doing this? Why are you getting married?" you would no doubt hear many different answers. You would also receive some baffled looks and possibly be pushed or shoved out of the way. More important for the moment, however, is the many reasons people can give for why they want to marry. You may recall that in the last chapter we identified some "pushes" and "pulls" that propel us either toward or from marriage (meaning from or toward cohabitation or singlehood). The greatest attraction of marriage is probably the love and intimacy

that we expect to find and share there. A nationally representative sample of 1,003 young adults (20–29 years old) demonstrated the extent to which our views about marriage and, perhaps, the appeal of marriage is rooted in the intimacy and love we hope to find there. More than 9 out of 10 never-married respondents endorsed the notion that "when you marry, you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost" (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2001, in Cherlin, 2006). In addition, more than 80% of women surveyed indicated that it was more important to "have a husband who can communicate his deepest feelings" than a husband who is financially successful (Cherlin 2004). Clearly, we are drawn to marriage in pursuit of a level of love and intimacy we believe may not be otherwise possible. As sociologist Paul Amato (2004b) puts it, we tend to see marriage as "the gold standard" for relationships.

Among the many reasons for marriage, we can easily recognize the role of possible economic and social pressures (that is, "pushes" toward marriage), as well as the strong desires to have and raise children, which, for many, seem to be best accomplished in marriage. As Amato (2004b) expresses, "most people will continue to see marriage as the best context for bearing and raising children" and, if they desire to become parents, will marry. Marriage may also symbolize that two people have reached a stage in their lives, as well as in their relationships, and that in it they have attained "a prestigious, comfortable, stable style of life" (Cherlin 2004, 857).

If the practical importance of marriage has diminished, if marriage can no longer be counted on to cement relationships, allowing spouses to confidently invest themselves in each other without fear, invest their time and energy in raising children together, and invest financially in acquiring such goods as cars and homes, the "symbolic significance" of marriage remains considerable and attractive. It has become less a marker of conformity as it has become more a marker of prestige (Cherlin 2004). This can be seen particularly well in the attitudes expressed by low-income, unmarried parents who continue to express a desire to someday marry. Although such women and men expressed economic incentives, more striking were their expectations of the kind of relationship marriage would offer: "a lifetime companion, a partner who will be their confidant and friend" (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004, 1,012). As one woman articulated, "An understanding and loving man . . . that's what I'm looking for. It's like a fairy tale thing. . . ."

I'm looking for that man who is totally devoted to me and is understanding, and has that undying love for me, you know?" (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004, 1,012).

Benefits of Marriage

In what ways does being married benefit the women and men who marry? In comparing cohabitation and marriage in the last chapter, we looked at some advantages people obtain from marriage. We remind you here that marriage confers benefits in economic well-being, health, and happiness. Marriage provides clear economic benefits, and married couples are better off financially than those living in all other types of households (Hirschl, Altobelli, and Rank 2003). Marriage both reduces the risk of poverty and increases the probability of affluence. Defining *affluence* as living in a household that earns 10 times the poverty level, Thomas Hirschl, Joyce Altobelli, and Mark Rank conclude that married-couple households are more likely to attain affluence than those living outside of marriage. Women, in particular, face much greater likelihood of attaining affluence in marriage than outside of marriage (Hirschl, Altobelli, and Rank 2003).

Married people "enjoy better mental and physical health," lower risk of mortality, and lesser likelihood of alcohol problems, obesity, or both than the unmarried, although cohabitants experience similar benefits (Wu and Hart 2002). The Centers for Disease Control concluded that married women and men are less likely to smoke, drink heavily, or be physically inactive and are less likely to suffer from headaches and serious psychological distress. When marriages end, women suffer increased depression and men suffer poorer physical and mental health. Although married people generally report themselves as happier than unmarried people, this effect holds only for those whose marriages are satisfying or happy.

While marriage improves and protects men's physical and mental health, it appears to mostly just improve women's mental health. For men, marriage may have health benefits that are mostly the result of the social and emotional support men receive from wives and the control women exercise over their husbands' lifestyles and health-related behaviors. For women, health benefits of marriage may be more the by-products of their increased economic well-being (Wu and Hart 2002).



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■ *Rocky, high conflict courtships do not typically become smooth and harmonious marriages.*

Is It Marriage?

In considering the benefits that seem to accompany marriage, researchers have been somewhat divided as to whether these benefits truly followed marriage or were instead reflections of differences in the types of people who do and don't marry. Sometimes phrased as a difference between *selection* into marriage and *protection* afforded by marriage, it raises the question of whether there is something unique and beneficial about being married or whether those who marry are somehow unique compared to those who don't marry. In research on health and well being, selection is typically not the major factor, accounting instead for "only a small proportion of the variance in mental and physical health" (Wu and Hart 2002, 421).

For example, research into the effect of marriage and "union formation" on depression looked to differentiate between marriage effects and differences in the types of people who marry and those who don't.

The researchers concluded that marrying was associated with “substantively meaningful reduction” in rates of depression and that there was no indication that marriage was selective of less depressed people (Lamb, Lee, and DeMaris 2003).

Although we have painted these as alternatives—as *either selection or protection*—the two are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that both operate simultaneously. Thus, although healthier and more stable individuals may be more attractive as marriage partners, thus bringing better mental health with them into marriage, a good marriage also has a healthful and stabilizing effect on those who marry.

Experiencing Marriage: A Developmental Approach

Have you ever looked closely at a family photo album, say one that belonged to a parent or grandparent? If you have, you know that these albums are fascinating representations of the dynamics inherent in all families. If you get the chance, study one of your family’s old albums closely. Typically, you’ll find photos of now deceased relatives, which means you can “meet” ancestors that you never got to know in person. Many find it especially interesting to look at wedding photographs of parents or grandparents from years ago, pictures that capture in that instant the excitement and hope that they carried with them as they embarked on a shared married life. Eventually, there are baby pictures, where you may find these same spouses now new parents. As you turn the pages and study the photos, you can see other changes as children grow and parents age.

Understanding the basic truth conveyed by such visual images will enable you to better appreciate and understand the material to which we now turn. Marriages and families are dynamic. They are always changing to meet new situations, new emotions, new commitments, and new responsibilities.

The same can be said of individuals. Our individual identities, our sense of who we are, change as we mature. At different points in our lives, we are confronted with different developmental tasks, such as acquiring trust and becoming intimate. Our growth as humans depends on the way we perform these tasks. Psychologist Erik Erikson (1963) offered one of the most influential models describing human development (see Figure 9.1). In it, he depicted a life

Figure 9.1 ■ Erikson's Stages of the Life Cycle

Infancy: Trust versus mistrust. In the first year of life, children are wholly dependent on their parenting figures for survival. They learn to trust by having their needs satisfied and by being loved, held, and caressed. Without loving care, an infant may develop a mistrusting attitude toward others and toward life in general.

Toddler: Autonomy versus shame and doubt. Between ages 1 and 3, children learn to walk and talk and begin toilet training. They need to develop a sense of independence and mastery over their environment and themselves.

Early childhood: Initiative versus guilt. Ages 4 to 5 are years of increasing independence. The family must allow the child to develop initiative yet direct the child’s energy. The child must not be made to feel guilty about his or her desire to explore the world.

School age: Industry versus inferiority. Between ages 6 and 11, children begin to learn that their activities pay off and that they can be creative. The family needs to encourage the child’s sense of accomplishment. Failing to do so may lead to feelings of inferiority in the child.

Adolescence: Identity versus role confusion. The years of puberty, between ages 12 and 18, may be a time of turmoil, as well as discovery and growth. Adolescents try new roles as they make the transition to adulthood. To make a successful transition, they need to develop goals, a philosophy of life, and a sense of self. The family needs to be supportive as the adolescent tentatively explores adulthood. If the adolescent fails to establish a firm identity, he or she may drift without purpose.

Young adulthood: Intimacy versus isolation. In young adulthood, the adolescent leaves home and begins to establish intimate ties with other people through cohabitation, marriage, or other important intimate relationships. A young adult who does not make other intimate connections may be condemned to isolation and loneliness.

Adulthood: Generativity versus self-absorption. Generativity is the bearing of offspring, productiveness, or creativity. In adulthood, the individual establishes his or her own family and finds satisfaction in family relationships. It is a time of creativity. Work becomes important as a creative act, perhaps as important as family or an alternative to family. The failure to be generative may lead to self-centeredness and an attitude of “what’s in it for me” toward life.

Maturity: Integrity versus despair. In old age, the individual looks back on life to understand its meaning—to assess what has been accomplished and to gauge the meaning of relationships. Those who can make a positive judgment have a feeling of wholeness about their lives. The alternative is despair.

cycle with eight developmental stages, each of which confronts us with an important developmental task to accomplish. Each stage intimately involves the family. As we enter young adulthood, these stages may also involve marriage or other intimate relationships (Nichols and Pace-Nichols 1993).

Throughout our life cycles, our goals and concerns change. Education and family-related goals, such as marriage and having children, are dominant among young adults. Among middle-aged adults, goals shift to concern about children's lives and about property, such as buying or maintaining homes. Among the elderly, health, retirement, leisure activities, and interest in the world predominate (Nurmi 1992).

As discussed in Chapter 2, some family scholars focus attention on how marriages and families predictably change across time. At various stages, the family has different developmental tasks to perform, and much is related to the presence and development of children. Families are often organized around child-rearing responsibilities and marriage relationships often become absorbed in these tasks.

We can use such insights to examine marriage. Spousal roles are different for couples with and without children, and they are different for parents of toddlers compared to parents of teens. Individual members and the family as a unit undergo changes that are better understood by locating the family in a developmental context. For example, couples who are parents of adolescents wrestle with the process of granting their children greater autonomy and independence. Meanwhile, a teenage daughter or son has an individual task of trying to develop a satisfactory identity. Simultaneously, an older sibling may be struggling with intimacy issues as a younger one develops "industry." Parents may struggle with issues of generativity while grandparents confront issues of integrity. A life course emphasis highlights the common experiences families have in the course of their shared lives.

In the Beginning

The marriage process may begin informally with cohabitation or more formally with engagement. Marriage ends with divorce, or continues legally but in a radically altered form with the death of a partner. When we enter marriage, we may find that the reality of marriage requires us to be more flexible than we had anticipated. We need flexibility to meet our needs,

our partners' needs, and the needs of the marriage. We may have periods of great happiness and great sorrow within marriage. We may find boredom, intensity, frustration, and fulfillment. Some of these may occur because of our marriage; others may occur despite it. But as we shall see, marriage encompasses constantly evolving changes and possibilities.

Again, Americans are waiting longer to marry today than in previous generations. Whatever the reasons, increasing age at time of marriage probably results in young adults beginning marriage with more maturity, independence, work experience, and education. Potentially, these are important assets to bring into marriage.

Predicting Marital Success

The period before marriage is especially important because couples learn about each other—and themselves. Courtship sets the stage for marriage. Many of the elements important for successful marriages, such as the ability to communicate in a positive manner and to compromise and resolve conflicts, develop during courtship. They are often apparent long before a decision to marry has been made (Cate and Lloyd 1992). Couples who are unhappy before marriage are more likely to be unhappy after marriage as well (Olson and DeFrain 1994).

Ted Huston and Heidi Melz (2004) describe three "prototypical courtship experiences," each of which has different likely consequences for couples who marry. Of critical importance in differentiating these courtships are personality characteristics of partners, which affect "both the dynamics of their courtships and the success of their marriages" (952). Some qualities, such as warmheartedness or an even temper, are important determinants of whether people create happy and stable marriages. Other qualities, such as being less stubborn, less independent minded, and more conscientious, are important factors in determining whether couples stay married. These personality characteristics are associated with the three courtships and marital outcomes that Huston and Melz identify as follows:

- *Rocky and turbulent courtships.* Such courtships are characterized by periods of upset and anger, distress and jealousy over potential rivals, and uneasiness about placing love in "undeserving hands" (950). They are more typically experienced

by “difficult” personalities, people who are exceedingly independent minded, who lack conscientiousness, and who have high anxiety. If men are excessively independent, they may make poor husbands and their marriages are likely to be “brittle.” If men and women high in anxiety marry each other, their marriages tend to be unhappy but lasting marriages.

- *Sweet and undramatic courtships.* Partners are people with “good hearts” who are helpful, sensitive to the needs of others, gentle, warm, and understanding. Good-hearted couples find enjoyment and pleasure in each other’s company. Their marriages are more likely to be satisfying and enduring.
- *Passionate courtships.* These are characterized by partners “plunging into love, having sex early in the relationship, and deciding to marry one another within a few months” (950). Such couples begin marriage as “star-crossed lovers” sharing far more affection than typical of even newly married couples, “but over the first two years, much of the sizzle fizzles” (950). They are also vulnerable to divorce.

Huston and Melz contend that we can tell “from the psychological make-up of partners and how their courtships unfolded, whether they would be delighted, distressed or divorced years later” (2004, 949). How couples reach marriage, as well as what types of personal traits they bring into marriage, are important. We are not all of equal quality “marriage material” (Huston and Melz 2004).

Whether marriage is an arena for growth or disenchantment depends on the individuals and the nature of their relationship. It is a dangerous myth that marriage will change a person for the better: An insensitive single person simply becomes an insensitive husband or wife. Undesirable traits tend to become magnified in marriage because we must live with them in close, unrelenting, and everyday proximity.

Family researchers have found numerous premarital factors to be important in predicting later marital happiness and satisfaction. Although they may not necessarily apply in all cases—and when we are in love, we believe we are the exceptions—they are worth thinking about. According to Rodney Cate and Sally Lloyd (1992), these premarital characteristics include background, personality, and relationship factors.

Background Factors

Age at marriage is important. Adolescent marriages (where either party is younger than 20) are especially likely to end in divorce. Young marriages may be more divorce prone because of the immaturity and impulsivity of the partners (Clements, Stanley, and Markman 2004). Marriage age seems to have less effect as once people are past adolescence. In other words, differences between those who marry in their mid- to late 20s and those who marry in their 30s are slight. Length of courtship is also related to marital happiness. The longer you date and are engaged to someone, the more likely you are to discover whether you are compatible with each other. But you can also date “too long.” Those who have long, slow-to-commit, up-and-down relationships are likely to be less satisfied in marriage. They are also more likely to divorce. Such couples may torture themselves (and their friends) with the familiar dilemma of whether to split up or marry—and then marry, to their later regret.

Level of education seems to affect both marital adjustment and divorce. Education may give us additional resources, such as income, insight, or status, that contribute to our ability to carry out our marital roles. Similarly, level of religiousness is a factor in shaping marital outcomes; higher religiousness, especially by wives, is associated with greater probability of happy and stable marriages (Clements, Stanley, and Markman 2004). Childhood environment, such as attachment to family members, parents’ marital happiness and marital outcomes, and low parent–child conflict, is associated with marital happiness. This is especially true for women: some studies indicate that the woman’s relationship with her family of orientation is crucial to later marital happiness. It may spell trouble if the man is too close to his family of orientation. Most studies on childhood environment, however, are based on men and women who came of age before the 1960s. The social context of marriage has changed dramatically since then, with the rise of divorce, smaller families, and changing gender roles. Parental divorce may cause someone either to shy from marriage or to marry with the determination not to repeat the parents’ mistakes. Once married, the likelihood of success is negatively affected by parental divorce. Parental divorce increases risks to married children; those who grew up in households where parents divorced are more likely to experience a divorce themselves.

Personality Factors

How does having a flexible personality affect marital success? How about a contentious personality? A giving one? An obnoxious one? As you can imagine, your partner's personality will affect your life, your relationship, and your marriage considerably. We bring with us into our marriages personality characteristics, attitudes and values, habits and preferences, and unique personal histories and early experiences. Such characteristics are relatively stable and likely exert influence on the quality and outcomes of our marriages (Bradbury and Karney 2004).

We do know, however, that opposites do not usually attract; instead, they repel. We choose partners who share similar personality characteristics because similarity allows greater communication, empathy, and understanding (Antill 1983; Buss 1984; Kurdek and Smith 1987; Lesnick-Oberstein and Cohen 1984). It may be that personality characteristics are most significant during courtship. It is then that those with undesirable or incompatible personalities are weeded out—or ought to be—at least in theory.

Researchers tend to focus more attention on relationship process and change than on personality. Personality seems fixed and unchanging. Nevertheless, it clearly affects marital processes. For example, a rigid personality may prevent negotiation and conflict resolution and a dominating personality may disrupt the give-and-take necessary to making a relationship work, whereas warmth, an even temperament, a forgiving and generous attitude toward ones spouse contribute to happy, stable marriages. In Ted Huston's longitudinal study, following couples from courtship through early marriage and into "whatever destinations they arrived at nearly 14 years after they were wed," there was notable stability to assessments of spouses' personalities made when couples were first married. These early assessments predicted how these couples "behaved and felt about their marriages *almost 14 years later*" (Huston and Melz 2004, 953, emphasis added). Thus, such attributes and characteristics matter greatly in shaping marital outcomes.

Relationship Factors

Besides personality characteristics, researchers have also examined other aspects of premarital interaction and relationships that might predict marital success.

Loving each other did not seem to have much impact on whether couples fought. Couples who had other partners simultaneously prior to marriage or who compared their partners with others had lower levels of marital satisfaction. Another study on communication and marital satisfaction examined the same couples after 1, 2.5, and 5.5 years of marriage (Markman 1981, 1984). During the first year, there was no relationship between communication and marital satisfaction, but after 2.5 and 5.5 years, the more negative the communication, the less satisfactory the marriage.

Not all research substantiates the "intrinsically appealing" idea that marital success or failure is determined by how spouses communicate and solve problems (Bradbury and Karney 2004). Problem-solving skills are important, but not as important as the emotional climate within which such skills are implemented. "If spouses have a reservoir of good will and they show their affection regularly, they are more likely to be able to work through their differences, to warm to each other's point of view, and to cope effectively with stress" (Huston and Melz 2004).

If couples can maintain humor, express "genuine enthusiasm for what the partner is saying," and convey their continued affection for each other, couples with low levels of problem-solving ability will experience similar outcomes (in terms of shifts in marital satisfaction) as couples more skilled at problem solving (Bradbury and Karney 2004).

The same holds for conflict. The absence of conflict does not automatically result in positive feelings of warmth or more affection, nor does the presence of conflict early in marriage spell doom for couples. Researchers suggest that negative interactions did not significantly affect the first year of marriage because of the *honeymoon effect*, the tendency of newlyweds to overlook problems (Huston, McHale, and Crouter 1986; see also Chapter 7). Failure to fulfill a partner's expectations about marital roles, such as intimacy and trust, predicted marital dissatisfaction (Kelley and Burgoon 1991).

David Olson and John DeFrain (1994) asserted that we could predict an engaged couple's eventual marital satisfaction based on their current relationship. The factors they find significant in reviewing the research literature include the ability to do the following:

- Communicate well with each other
- Resolve conflicts in a constructive way
- Develop realistic expectations about marriage

- Like each other as people
- Agree on religious and ethical issues
- Balance individual and couple leisure activities with each other

In addition, how each person's parents related to each other and to their daughter or son is an important predictor. It is in our families of orientation that we learn our earliest (and sometimes most powerful) lessons about intimacy and relationships (Larsen and Olson 1989).

Engagement, Cohabitation, and Weddings

The first stage of the **family life cycle** may begin with engagement or cohabitation followed by a wedding, the ceremony that represents the beginning of a marriage.

Engagement

Engagement is the culmination of the premarital dating process. Today, in contrast to the past, engagement has more significance as a ritual than as a binding commitment to be married. Engagement is losing even its ritualistic meaning, however, as more couples start out in the less formal patterns of “getting together” or living together. These couples are less likely to become formally engaged. Instead, they announce that they “plan to get married.” Because it lacks the formality of engagement, “planning to get married” is also less socially binding.

Engagements typically average between 12 and 16 months (Carmody 1992). They perform several functions:

- Engagement signifies a commitment to marriage and helps define the goal of the relationship as marriage.
- Engagement prepares couples for marriage by requiring them to think about the realities of everyday married life: money, friendships, religion, in-laws, and so forth. They are expected to begin making serious plans about how they will live together as a married couple.
- Engagement is the beginning of kinship. The future marriage partner begins to be treated as a



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■ *Weddings carry multiple meanings, both about the individuals marrying and the nature of their commitment.*

member of the family. He or she begins to become integrated into the family system.

- Engagement allows the prospective partners to strengthen themselves as a couple. The engaged pair begin to experience themselves as a social unit. They leave the youth or singles culture and prepare for the world of the married, a remarkably different world.

Men and women may need to deal with a number of social and psychological issues during engagement, including the following (Wright 1990):

- *Anxiety.* A general uneasiness that comes to the surface when you decide to marry.
- *Maturation and dependency needs.* Questions about whether you are mature enough to marry and to be interdependent.
- *Losses.* Regret over what you give up by marrying, such as the freedom to date and responsibility for only yourself.
- *Partner choice.* Worry about whether you're marrying the right person.
- *Gender-role conflict.* Disagreement over appropriate male and female roles.
- *Idealization and disillusionment.* The tendency to believe that your partner is “perfect” and to become disenchanted when she or he is discovered to be “merely” human.

- *Marital expectations.* Beliefs that the marriage will be blissful and conflict free and that your partner will be entirely understanding of your needs.
- *Self-knowledge.* An understanding of yourself, including your weaknesses as well as your strengths.

Reflections

As you look at the factors predicting marital success, consider your past relationships. Retrospectively, what factors, such as background, personality characteristics, and relationship characteristics, might have predicted the quality of your relationship? Were any particular characteristics especially important for you? Why?

Cohabitation

The rise of cohabitation has led to a new chapter in the story of contemporary families (Glick 1989; Surra 1991). As shown in the last chapter, for some people cohabitation is an alternative way of *entering marriage*. More than half of first unions result from cohabitation (Seltzer 2000; London 1991). For still others, cohabitation is an alternative *to marrying*.

Although cohabiting couples may be living together before marriage, their relationship is not legally recognized until the wedding, nor is the relationship afforded the same social legitimacy. For example, most relatives do not consider cohabitants as kin. As discussed in Chapter 8, there is evidence that marriages that follow cohabitation have a higher divorce rate than do marriages that begin without cohabitation (DeMaris and Rao 1992; Hall and Zhao 1995). Cohabitation does, however, perform some of the same functions as engagement, such as preparing the couple for some realities of marriage and helping them think of themselves as a couple.

Weddings

Weddings are ancient rituals that symbolize a couple's commitment to each other. The word *wedding* is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *wedd*, meaning "pledge." It included a pledge to the bride's father to pay him in money, cattle, or horses for his daughter (Ackerman 1994; Chesser 1980). When the father received his pledge, he "gave the bride away." The exchanging of rings dates back to ancient Egypt and symbolizes trust, unity, and timelessness because a

ring has no beginning and no end. It is a powerful symbol. To return a ring or take it off in anger is a symbolic act. Not wearing a wedding ring may be a symbolic statement about a marriage. Another custom, carrying the bride over the threshold, was practiced in ancient Greece and Rome. It was a symbolic abduction growing out of the belief that a daughter would not willingly leave her father's house. The eating of cake is similarly ancient, representing the offerings made to household gods; the cake made the union sacred (Coulanges 1960). The African tradition of jumping the broomstick, carried to America by enslaved tribespeople, has been incorporated by many contemporary African Americans into their wedding ceremonies (Cole 1993).

The honeymoon tradition can be traced to a pagan custom for ensuring fertility: Each night after the marriage ceremony, until the moon completed a full cycle, the couple drank mead, honey wine. The honeymoon was literally a time of intoxication for the newly married man and woman. Flower girls originated in the Middle Ages; they carried wheat to symbolize fertility. Throughout the world, gifts are exchanged, special clothing is worn, and symbolically important objects are used or displayed in weddings (Werner et al. 1992).

Wedding ceremonies, celebrations, and rituals such as those described are rites of passage encompassing rites of separation (for example, the giving away of the bride), aggregation, and transition. It is especially noteworthy as a rite of transition, wherein it marks the passage from single to married status. The wedding may also reflect the degree to which both the bride and groom's "social circles" are part of the transition into marriage. As such, weddings vary. As Matthijs Kalmijn (2004, 583) describes, they range from highly public to highly private:

At one extreme is the lavish public wedding ceremony of a member of the royal family; at the other extreme is the Las Vegas wedding in a quarter of an hour at a wedding chapel without a best man or bridesmaids, without announcements or invitations, and without the parents' consent. The former . . . is extremely social and public, the latter . . . is socially isolated and almost private.

Kalmijn further elaborates, noting that in celebrating their marriage with a wedding ceremony and party, the "bride and groom show their friends and relatives the kind of spouse they have chosen, and they show others that they have chosen to go through life as a married couple (584)."

Marriage is a major commitment, and entering marriage may provoke considerable anxiety and uncertainty. Is this person right for me? Do I really want to get and be married? What is married life going to be like? Will I be a good wife or husband? These are examples of the kinds of anxieties brides and grooms might feel as they approach marriage. Kalmijn suggests that “by creating an audience that is witness to their decision, the couple may increase the commitment they have toward each other and to their new role. By increasing commitment, the couple also reduces the uncertainty they may feel about their marriage” (584).

Andrew Cherlin suggests that where weddings had historically been celebrations of a kinship alliance between two kin groups and later a reflection of parental “approval and support” for their child’s marriage, today’s weddings are more a symbolic demonstration of “the partners’ personal achievements and a stage in their self-development” (2004, 856). A wedding is, in part, a statement, as is the buying of a house. It says, “look at what I have achieved. Look at who I have become.” Seen this way, we can understand why, despite the economic obstacles they face, low-income couples can honestly contend that a major barrier preventing them from marrying is insufficient money to have a “real wedding” (that is, a church wedding and reception party). “Going down to the courthouse” is not a real or sufficient wedding (Smock 2004). A big wedding means a couple “has achieved enough financial security to do more than live from paycheck to paycheck” (Cherlin 2004, 857). Both “the brides and grooms of middle America” and low-income, unmarried parents alike desire “big weddings,” even if the nature of “big” varies between the two (Edin, Kefalas, and Reed 2004). This is all part of the deinstitutionalization of marriage raised earlier. Marriage and the wedding that signifies its beginning has become more of a symbol of individual achievement and development. If it is no longer the foundation of adult life, it still serves as a capstone (Cherlin 2004).

To other analysts, weddings are seen as mostly “occasions of consumption and celebrations of romance” (Cherlin 2004, 857). Indeed, weddings of today are big business. Not all couples, however, have formal church weddings. Civil weddings now account for almost one-third of all marriage ceremonies (Ravo 1991). Because of the expense, some couples opt for civil ceremonies, which sometimes cost no more than \$30, in addition to the marriage license.

Whether a first, second, or subsequent marriage, a wedding symbolizes a profound life transition. Most significantly, the partners take on marital roles. For young men and women entering marriage for the first time, marriage signifies a major step into adulthood. Some apprehension felt by those planning to marry may be related to their taking on these important new roles and responsibilities. Many will have a child in the first year of marriage. Therefore, the wedding must be considered a major rite of passage. When they leave the wedding scene, the couple leave behind singlehood. Transformed, they are now responsible to each other as fully as they are to themselves and more than they are to their parents.

However, if we focus too much on the ceremonial aspect of marriage, we overlook two important points. First, marrying is a process that begins well before and continues after the couple exchanges their vows. Second, the legal or ceremonial aspect of marrying may not be the most profound part of the transition.

The Stations of Marriage

Past analyses of both divorce and remarriage have used the concept of the stations of marriage to represent the dynamic and the multidimensional nature of transitions out of and back into marriage (Bohannon 1970; Goetting 1982). Yet these analyses work equally well to depict the multidimensional, complex process of marrying. (See Chapter 14 for further discussion of Bohannon’s stations of divorce.) A decade later, Ann Goetting applied this same framework, with the same “six stations,” to depict the complexities of remarriage.

Both Bohannon and Goetting stressed that that marital transitions are thick with complexity. Applying their notions of “stations,” we can say that marrying consists of the following:

- *Emotional marriage.* The experiences associated with falling in love and the intensification of an emotional connection between two people. In the love-based marriages forming our society, as people fall in love they may contemplate an eventual marriage.
- *Psychic marriage.* The change in identity from an autonomous individual to a partner in a couple. As this occurs, we may encounter shifts in priorities, sense of self, perceptions of social reality, and expectations for the future (Berger and Kellner 1970).

- *Community marriage.* The changes in social relationships and social network that accompany the shift in priorities and identity described earlier. It is a two-way process of redefining and being redefined by others. Friends may perceive themselves as no longer able to make the same claims or hold the same expectations about a formerly single or unattached friend. People may begin to refer to each partner only as a couple. In other words, *Matt and Jen* replaces *Matt* or *Jen*. As relationships become even more serious, the couple will be introduced to each other's family and may also find a partner being incorporated into their own family events. This certainly occurs as couples become engaged and proceed toward marriage. Once married, new spouses are unquestionably looked on differently *because they are married*. They may even find their single friends becoming less interesting to or interested in them.
- *Legal marriage.* The legal relationship that—as we have seen—provides a couple with a host of rights and responsibilities. Clearly, legal marriage also restricts the individual's right to marry again without first ending the current marriage. However, aside from these and restrictions on whom we may marry (which, granted, are not insignificant matters), there are few legal interventions into marriage as long as both parties remain content with their marriage. We may not notice changes in our daily relationship exclusively caused by this dimension of marriage.
- *Economic marriage.* The variety of economic changes that people experience when they marry. If both are employed, they now have more financial resources that need to be managed and allocated in ways that differ from their single days. Whether the decision they face is which overdue bill to pay or whether to buy a Lexus or an SUV, they will have to change the way they previously made economic decisions and decide as part of a couple. Typically, there are stylistic differences in spending or money management that require some compromise.
- *Coparental marriage.* The changes induced in marriage relationships by the arrival (birth, remarriage, or adoption) of children. Important in both Bohannon's and Goetting's analyses, coparental marriage is not part of becoming married per se. With regard to divorce, the coparental station includes attending to such issues as daily care and custody,

financial support, and visitation. In the coparental remarriage, the primary issue is to establish step-parenting roles and relationships (see Chapter 15). As far as a “station of marriage,” we might say that if one party has any children, both partners will need to establish routines and share responsibilities. If childless at marriage, the coparental station would refer to those issues that change married relationships once children arrive (see Chapter 11).

Although neither Bohannon nor Goetting described a seventh station, we might include a *domestic marriage*—all of the negotiating, dividing, managing, and performing of daily household chores. Couples must establish a working division of household labor. Even if they have cohabited before marriage, there is no guarantee that their “cohabiting division of labor” will be sustained in marriage.

By conceptualizing becoming married in these terms, we can state the following important points. We may indeed feel and function as married before being legally married. That in no way guarantees success in marriage, because the research on cohabitants who marry is fairly pessimistic. But it does mean that when people think about the process of marrying, if they think in terms of before versus after wedding (essentially the legal station), the transition may seem less sweeping than it is.

Becoming married transforms lives in all of the ways depicted here. However, because you will likely encounter at least the emotional, psychic, and community (or some of it) stations of marriage by the time you enter legal marriage, you have an opportunity to begin to remake your life for marriage without yet being married. Bear in mind, too, that couples may experience these stations in different sequences. Cohabitants may experience all of these stations of marriage before legally marrying. Marriages entered into because of pregnancy or as escape from a single lifestyle will encounter these dimensions in a different order than those who marry out of first dating and falling in love. What's useful, however, about the concept of stations is how it helps us appreciate how broadly and deeply marriage changes two people.

Early Marriage

Ted Huston and Heidi Melz (2004) contend that early in marriage, newly married couples are affectionate, very much in love, and relatively free of excessive conflict, a state that might be called “blissful harmony.”

Within a year, this affectionate climate “melts” into a more genial partnership. As they point out, “One year into marriage, the average spouse says, ‘I love you,’ hugs and kisses their partner, makes their partner laugh, and has sexual intercourse about half as often as when they were newly wed” (951). Even though conflict is not necessarily more frequent or intense, when it occurs it is less likely to be embedded in the highly affectionate climate of new marriage. Thus, it may feel worse.

Huston and Melz also found that couples establish a “distinctive emotional climate” from the outset that does not change over the initial 2 years of marriage; they are either happy or unhappy. Thus, it is not the case that unhappy couples begin on a blissful happy note and see things fail; instead, “most unhappy yet stable marriages fall short of the romantic ideal” from the beginning. All couples, even happy ones, have their ups and downs. Happy couples, however, typically contain two people who are both warm and even tempered (952).

Establishing Marital Roles

The expectations that two people have about their own and their spouse’s marital roles are based on gender roles and their own experience. There are four traditional assumptions about husband or wife responsibilities: (1) the husband is the head of the household, (2) the husband is responsible for supporting the family, (3) the wife is responsible for domestic work, and (4) the wife is responsible for childrearing. More than mere expectations, these assumptions reflect traditional legal marriage (Weitzman 1981).

The traditional assumptions about marital responsibilities do not necessarily reflect marital reality, however. For example, the husband traditionally may be regarded as head of the family, but power tends to be more shared, although perhaps not equally. In dual-earner families, both men and women contribute to the financial support of the family. Although responsibility for domestic work still tends to reside largely with women, men are gradually increasing their involvement in household labor, especially childcare. The mother is generally still responsible for childrearing, but fathers are participating more.

Marital Tasks

Newly married couples need to begin a number of marital tasks to build and strengthen their marriages. The failure to complete these tasks successfully

may contribute to what researchers identify as the **duration-of-marriage effect**—the accumulation over time of various factors such as unresolved conflicts, poor communication, grievances, role overload, heavy work schedules, and childrearing responsibilities that might cause marital disenchantment (see the “Issues & Insights” box in this section that examines marital satisfaction). These tasks are primarily adjustment tasks and include the following:

- *Establishing marital and family roles.* Discuss marital-role expectations for self and partner; make appropriate adjustments to fit each other’s needs and the needs of the marriage; discuss childbearing issues; and negotiate parental roles and responsibilities.
- *Providing emotional support for the partner.* Learn how to give and receive love and affection, support the other emotionally, and fulfill personal identity as both an individual and a partner.
- *Adjusting personal habits.* Adjust to each other’s personal ways by enjoying, accepting, tolerating, or changing personal habits, tastes, and preferences, such as differing sleep patterns, levels of personal and household cleanliness, musical tastes, and spending habits.
- *Negotiating gender roles.* Adjust gender roles and tasks to reflect individual personalities, skills, needs, interests, and equity.
- *Making sexual adjustments.* Learn how to physically show affection and love, discover mutual pleasures and satisfactions, negotiate timing and activities, and decide on the use of birth control.
- *Establishing family and employment priorities.* Balance employment and family goals; recognize the importance of unpaid household labor as work; negotiate childcare responsibilities; decide on whose employment, if either, receives priority; and divide household responsibilities equitably.
- *Developing communication skills.* Share intimate feelings and ideas with each other; learn how to talk to each other about difficulties; share moments of joy and pain; establish communication rules; and learn how to negotiate differences to enhance the marriage.
- *Managing budgetary and financial matters.* Establish a mutually agreed-upon budget; make short-term and long-term financial goals, such as saving for vacations or home purchase; and establish rules for resolving money conflicts.

- *Establishing kin relationships.* Participate in extended family and manage boundaries between family of marriage and family of orientation.
- *Participating in the larger community.* Make friends, nurture friendships, meet neighbors, and become involved in community, school, church, or political activities.

As you can see, a newly married couple must undertake numerous tasks as their marriage takes form. Marriages take different shapes according to how different tasks are shared, divided, or resolved. It is no wonder that many newlyweds find marriage harder than they expected. But if the tasks are undertaken in a spirit of love and cooperation, they offer the potential for marital growth, richness, and connection (Whitbourne and Ebmeyer 1990). If the tasks are avoided or undertaken in a selfish or rigid manner, however, the result may be conflict and marital dissatisfaction.

Identity Bargaining

People carry around idealized pictures of marriage long before they meet their marriage partners. They have to adjust these preconceptions to the reality of the partner's personality and the circumstances of the marriage. The interactional process of role adjustment is called **identity bargaining** (Blumstein 1975). The process is critical to marriage. A study of African American and Caucasian newlyweds, for example, found that marital interactions that affirmed a person's identity predicted marital well-being (Oggins, Veroff, and Leber 1993). Mirra Komarovsky (1987) points out that a spouse has a "vital stake" in getting his or her partner to fulfill certain obligations: "Hardly any aspect of marriage is exempt from mutual instruction and pressures to change."

Identity bargaining is a three-step process. First, a person has to identify with the role he or she is performing. A man must feel that he is a husband, and a woman must feel that she is a wife. The wedding ceremony acts as a catalyst for role change from the single state to the married state.

Second, a person must be treated by the other as if he or she fulfills the role. The husband must treat his wife as a wife; the wife must treat her husband as a husband. The problem is that partners rarely agree on what constitutes the roles of husband and wife. This is especially true now as the traditional content of marital roles is changing.

Third, the two people must negotiate changes in each other's roles. A woman may have learned that she is supposed to defer to her husband, but if he makes an unfair demand, how can she do this? A man may believe that his wife is supposed to be receptive to him whenever he wishes to make love, but if she is not, how should he interpret her sexual needs? A woman may not like housework (who does?), but she may be expected to do it as part of her marital role. Does she then do all the housework, or does she ask her husband to share responsibility with her? A man believes he is supposed to be strong, but sometimes he feels weak. Does he reveal this to his wife?

Eventually, these adjustments must be made. At first, however, there may be confusion; both partners may feel inadequate because they are not fulfilling their role expectations. Although some may fear losing their identity in the give and take of identity bargaining, the opposite may be true: a sense of identity may grow in the process of establishing a relationship. In the process of forming a relationship, we discover ourselves. An intimate relationship requires us to define who we are.

Establishing Boundaries

When people marry, many still have strong ties to their parents. Until the wedding, their family of orientation has greater claim to their loyalties than their spouse-to-be. After marriage, the couple must negotiate a different relationship with their parents, siblings, and in-laws. Loyalties shift from their families of orientation to their newly formed family. The families of orientation must accept and support these breaks. Indeed, opening themselves to outsiders who have become in-laws places no small stress on families (Carter and McGoldrick 1989). However, many so-called in-law problems may actually be problems between the couple. It's easier to complain about a mother-in-law, for example, than it is to deal with troubling issues in your own relationship (Silverstein 1992).

The new family must establish its own boundaries. The couple should decide how much interaction with their families of orientation is desirable and how much influence these families may have. The addition of extended family can bring into contact people who are very different from one another in culture, life experiences, and values. There are often important ties to the parents that may prevent new families from achieving their needed independence. First is the tie of habit. Parents are used to being superordinate; children are

Issues and Insights Examining Marital Satisfaction



Because marriage and the family have moved to the center of people's lives as a source of personal satisfaction, we generally evaluate them according to how well they fulfill emotional needs (although such fulfillment is not the only measurement of satisfaction). Marital satisfaction influences not only how we feel about our marriages and our partners but also how we feel about ourselves. If we have a good marriage, we tend to feel happy and fulfilled (Glenn 1991).

Considering the various elements that make up or affect a marriage—from identity bargaining to economic status—it should not be surprising that marital satisfaction ebbs and flows. Studies consistently indicate that marital satisfaction changes over the family life cycle, following a U-shape or curvilinear curve (Finkel and Hansen 1992; Glenn 1991; Sutor 1991; but see Vaillant and Vaillant 1993). Satisfaction is highest during the initial stages and then begins to decline, but it rises again in the later years.

Decline in Marital Satisfaction

Why does marital satisfaction tend to decline soon after marriage?

Researchers have suggested two explanations: the presence of children, and the effects of time on marital satisfaction.

Children and Marital Satisfaction

Traditionally, researchers have attributed decline in marital satisfaction to the arrival of the first child: Children take from time a couple spends together, are a source of stress, and cost money. When children begin leaving home, marital satisfaction begins to rise again.

This seems paradoxical since for many people, children are among the things they value most in their marriages. First, attributing the decline to children creates a single-cause fallacy—that is, it attributes a complex phenomenon to one factor when there are probably multiple causes. Second, the arrival of children at the same time that marital satisfaction declines may be coincidental, not causal. Other undetected factors may be at work.

Although many societal factors make childrearing a difficult and sometimes painful experience for some families, it is also important to note that children create parental roles and the family in its most traditional sense. For some, the marital relationship may be less than fulfilling with children present, but many couples may make a trade-off for fulfillment in their parental roles. In times of marital crisis, parental roles may be

the glue that holds the relationship together.

The Duration of Marriage Effect and Marital Satisfaction

More recently, researchers have looked for other factors that might explain decline in marital satisfaction. The most persuasive alternative is the duration-of-marriage effect.

The duration-of-marriage effect is most notable during the first stage of marriage rather than during the transition to parenthood that follows (White and Booth 1985). This early decline may reflect the replacement of unrealistic expectations with more realistic ones.

Social and Psychological Factors in Marital Satisfaction

Social factors such as income level are a significant factor. Lower income creates financial distress. If a person is deeply in debt, how to allocate resources—for rent, repairing the car, or paying dental bills—becomes critical, sometimes involving conflict-filled decisions.

Psychological factors also affect marital satisfaction (London, Wakefield, and Lewak 1990). Although it was once believed that marital satisfaction depended on a partner fulfilling complementary needs and qualities (an introvert marrying an extrovert, for example), research has failed to substantiate this assertion. Instead,

used to being subordinate. The tie between mothers and daughters is especially strong; daughters often experience greater difficulty separating themselves from their mothers than do sons. The adult child may feel conflicting loyalties toward parents and spouse (Cohler and Geyer 1982). Much conflict occurs when a spouse feels that an in-law is exerting too much influence on a partner (for example, a mother-in-law insisting that her son visit every Sunday and the son accepting

despite the protests of his wife). If conflict occurs, husbands and wives often must put the needs of their spouses ahead of those of their parents.

Also, newly married couples often have little money or credit, and ask parents to loan money, cosign loans, or obtain credit. But financial dependence keeps the new family tied to the family of orientation. The parents may try to exert undue influence on their children because their money is being spent.

marital success seems to depend on partners being similar in their psychological makeup and personalities. Outgoing people are happier with outgoing partners; tidy people like tidy mates. Furthermore, a high self-concept (how a person perceives himself or herself), as well as how the spouse perceives the person, contributes to marital satisfaction. Finally, similarity in perception, such as “seeing” events, relationships, and values through the same lenses, may be critical in marital satisfaction (Deal, Wampler, and Halverson 1992).

Attitudes toward gender and marital roles may affect marital satisfaction. One study found that the discrepancy between how you expect your partner to behave and his or her actual behavior could predict marital satisfaction. Discrepancies in expectations were particularly significant in terms of intimacy, equality, trust, and dominance. Interestingly, discrepancies were more important in predicting dissatisfaction than was the fulfillment of expectations (Kelley and Burgoon 1991). This finding is not entirely surprising. We seem to take for granted that our partner will fulfill our expectations, so it may be an unpleasant surprise to discover that our spouse is not interested in (or lacks the ability for) intimacy or that he or she is untrustworthy.

Expressiveness seems to be an important quality in marital satisfaction (L. King 1993). Wives whose husbands

discussed their relationships tended to be more satisfied with their marriages than other wives (Acitelli 1992).

Even though much of the literature points to declines in marital satisfaction over time, we must remember that not all marriages suffer a significant decline. Even when there is a decline in marriage satisfaction, that may be offset by other satisfactions, such as pleasure in parental roles or a sense of security.

It is important to understand that marital satisfaction fluctuates over time, battered by stress, enlarged by love. The couple continuously maneuvers through myriad tasks, roles, and

activities—from sweeping floors to kissing each other—to give their marriages form. Children, who bring us both delight and frustration, constrain our lives as couples but challenge us as mothers and fathers and enrich our lives as a family. Trials and triumphs, laughter and tears punctuate the daily life of marriage. If we are committed to each other and to our marriage, work together in a spirit of flexibility and cooperation, find time to be alone together, and communicate with each other, we lay the groundwork for a rich and meaningful marriage.



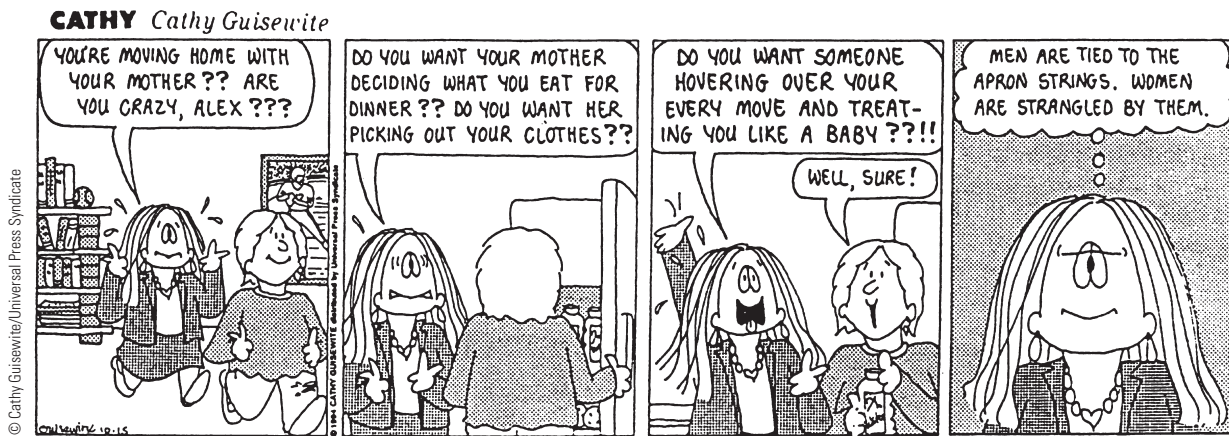
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■ *The arrival and presence of children profoundly affect marital relationships*

A review of research on in-laws found that in-law relationships generally had little emotional intensity (Goetting 1989). The relationship between married women and their mothers-in-law and mothers seems to change with the birth of a first child (Fischer 1983). Mother–daughter relationships seem to improve as the mother shifts some of her maternal role to the grandchild. In-laws give minimal direct support. Bonding between in-laws tends to be between women, and

if there is a divorce, divorced women are more likely than their ex-husbands to maintain supportive ties with former in-laws (Serovich, Price, and Chapman 1991).

The critical task is to form a family that is interdependent rather than independent or dependent. It is a delicate balancing act as parents and their adult children begin to make adjustments to the new marriage. We need to maintain bonds with our families of



■ Cathy

orientation and to participate in the extended family network, but we cannot let those bonds turn into chains.

Social Context and Social Stress

Even with all the attention paid to the dynamics of spousal relationships, marital success may rest largely on things that happen outside of and around the married couple (Bradbury and Karney 2004). Marriages are affected by the wider context in which we live, including “the situations, incidents, and chronic and acute circumstances that spouses and couples encounter,” as well as the developmental transitions they undertake (Bradbury and Karney 2004). Changes in employment, the transition to parenthood, health concerns, friends, finances, in-laws, and work experiences, can all affect the quality of marriage relationships. As Thomas Bradbury and Benjamin Karney (2004, 872) express, “Theoretically identical marriages are unlikely to achieve identical outcomes if they are forced to contend with rather different circumstances.”

Similarly, they contend that marriages that are “rather different” in their internal dynamics may reach similar outcomes in quality depending on whether the wider context is especially healthy or especially “toxic” (Bradbury and Karney 2004). From their research on married couples, Bradbury and Karney offer the following points to consider:

- Marital quality was lower among couples experiencing higher average levels of stress.

- Marital quality dropped more quickly among couples reporting high levels of chronic stress.
- During times of elevated stress, more relationship problems were perceived and partner’s negative behaviors were more often viewed as selfish, intentional, and blameworthy.

Incorporating research findings from other studies, they also offer the following especially supportive evidence of the importance of social context on marital interaction and quality:

- Observational research found that because of greater job stress, blue-collar husbands were more likely than white-collar husbands to respond with negative affect to negative affect from their wives in problem-solving discussions.
- Among married male air-traffic controllers, on high stress days in which they received support from their wives they expressed less anger and more emotional withdrawal.
- Among a sample of more than 200 African American couples, those living in more distressed neighborhoods (as measured by a composite that included such things as income and the proportion of the neighborhood on public assistance, living in poverty, unemployed, and in single parent households) experienced less warmth and more overt hostility.

Cumulatively, findings such as these remind us that improving the quality of marriage may require us to attend to and “fix” contextual circumstances, even if it means “bypassing couples and lobbying for

change in environments and conditions that impinge on marriages and families” (Bradbury and Karney 2004, 876).

Marital Commitments

How often do we hear the statement, “marriage is a (lifelong) commitment”? What does that mean? Is it something internal to an individual, a reflection of attitudes, values, and beliefs, or is it something external, the outcome of constraints that keep us within a relationship? Just what does the commitment to marriage entail?

Trying to sort out the meaning and experience of **marital commitment**, Michael Johnson identifies three major types of commitment, each of which operates within marriage:

- *Personal commitment.* In essence, this is “the extent to which one wants to stay in a relationship” (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston 1999, 161). It is affected by how strongly we are attracted to a spouse, how attractive our relationship is, and how central the relationship is to our concept of self.
- *Moral commitment.* This is the feeling of being “morally obligated” to stay in a relationship, resulting from our sense of personal obligation (“I promised to stay forever and I will”), the values we have about the lifelong nature of marriage (a “relationship-type obligation”), and a desire to maintain consistency in how we act in important life matters (“I am not a quitter, I have never been a quitter, I won’t quit now”).
- *Structural commitment.* This is feeling constrained from leaving a relationship, even in the absence of a strong sense of personal or moral obligation. It consists of the awareness and assessment we make of alternatives, our sense of the reactions of others and the pressures they may put on us, the difficulty we perceive in ending and exiting from a relationship, and the feeling that we have made “irretrievable investments” into a relationship and leaving the relationship would mean we had wasted our time and lost opportunities all for nothing.

Personal commitment is more a product of love, satisfaction with the relationship, and the existence of a strong couple identity. Moral commitment is the product of our attitudes about divorce, our sense of a personal “contract” with our spouse, and the desire



AP Images/The Index-Journal, Sharonne Potts

■ *Marriage relationships continue to face new challenges and circumstances as couples age.*

for personal consistency. Finally, structural commitment a product of attractive alternatives, social pressures, fear of termination procedures, and the feeling of sacrifices we have made and can’t recover. Johnson and colleagues contend that in our efforts to understand why marriages do or don’t last, we tend to look mostly at personal commitment. We need to move beyond that narrower focus and look at how all three types are experienced and how each influences the outcome and experience of marriage (Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston 1999).

Marital Impact of Children

Typically, husbands and wives both work until their first child is born; about half of all working women leave the workplace for at least a short period to

attend to childrearing responsibilities after the birth of the first child. The husband continues his job or career. Although the first child makes the husband a father, fatherhood generally does not visibly alter his relationship with his work. For example, it may redefine his motivation for work and the responsibility he feels to provide. Thus, even if he appears to continue at work relatively unaffected, he may be experiencing important changes.

The woman's life, however, changes more dramatically and visibly with motherhood. If she continues her outside employment, she is usually responsible for arranging childcare and juggling her employment responsibilities when her children are sick, and if her story is like that of most employed mothers, she continues to have primary responsibility for the household and children. If she withdraws from the workplace, her contacts during most of the day are with her children and possibly other mothers. This relative isolation requires her to make a considerable psychological adaptation in her transition to motherhood, leading in some cases to unhappiness or depression.

Typical struggles in families with young children concern childcare responsibilities and parental roles. The woman's partner may not understand her frustration or unhappiness because he sees her fulfilling her roles as wife and mother. She herself may not fully understand the reasons for her feelings. The partners may increasingly grow apart during this period. During the day they move in different worlds, the world of the workplace and the world of the home; during the night they cannot relate easily because they do not understand each other's experiences. Research suggests that men are often overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of this and other types of conflict (Gottman 1994). With all that accompanies the transition to parenthood (see the next two chapters), it is unsurprising that more frequent conflict and tension ensue and that couples often change the ways in which they handle or resolve conflict (Crohan 1996).

For adoptive families, the transition to parenthood may differ somewhat from that of biological families (Levy-Shiff, Goldschmidt, and Har-Even 1991). Adoptive parents report more positive expectations about having a child, as well as more positive experiences in their transition to parenthood. This may be explained partly by adoptive parents' ability to fulfill parental roles that they vigorously sought. For them, parenting is a more conscious decision than for many biological parents; for biological parents, a pregnancy sometimes just "happens." For adoptive parents to be-

come parents, considerable effort and expense must be undertaken; they are less likely to question their decision to become parents.

Individual Changes

Around the time people are in their 30s, the marital situation changes substantially. If there are children, they have probably started school and the mother begins to have more freedom from childrearing responsibilities. She evaluates her past and decides on her future. Most women who left jobs to rear children return to the workplace well before their children reach adolescence. By working, women generally increase their marital power.

Husbands in this period may find that their jobs have already peaked; they can no longer look forward to promotions. They may feel stalled and become depressed as they look into the future, which they see as nothing more than the past repeated for 30 more years. However, their families may provide emotional satisfaction and fulfillment as a counterbalance to workplace disappointments.

Middle-Aged Marriages

Middle-aged marriages, in which couples are in their 40s and 50s, are typically families with adolescents and/or young adults leaving home (stages 6 and 7 of Erikson's life cycle). Some parents may continue to raise young children; others, especially if one partner is considerably younger than the other, may choose to start a new family.

Matter of Fact

Family values, such as support, communication, and respect, along with marital satisfaction, face their greatest challenge in families with adolescent children (Larson and Richards 1994).

Families with Young Children

Increasing dramatically since 1970 are the women over 35 who have chosen to postpone childbearing until they are emotionally or financially ready. In 2000, more than 546,000 babies were born to women over 35 and

Understanding Yourself

Marital Satisfaction

An important question in studying marital satisfaction is how to measure it (Fincham and Bradbury 1987). One measure widely used is Graham Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale, which we have included a sample of here. This scale is an example of the type of questionnaire scholars use as they examine marital adjustment. What are the advantages of a

questionnaire such as this? What are the disadvantages?

Answer the questions that follow and then ask yourself if you think they can measure marital satisfaction. (*Hint:* You must first define what marital satisfaction is.) If you are involved in a relationship or marriage, you and your part-



ner might be interested in answering the questions separately and comparing

your answers. Do you have similar perceptions of your relationship? At the end of this course, answer the questions again without referring to your first set of answers. Then compare your responses. What do you infer from this comparison?

The Marital Satisfaction Survey

	Always agree	Almost always agree	Occasionally agree	Frequently disagree	Almost always disagree	Always disagree
1. Handling family finances	5	4	3	2	1	0
2. Matters of recreation	5	4	3	2	1	0
3. Religious matters	5	4	3	2	1	0
4. Demonstrations of affection	5	4	3	2	1	0
5. Friends	5	4	3	2	1	0
6. Sex relations	5	4	3	2	1	0

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94,000 to women over 40 (U.S. Census Bureau 2002, Table 68). Although there have always been older women having children, in the past these mothers were having their last child, not their first. Because most of these women have a higher education, job status, and income, they also experience a lower divorce rate, are more stable, and are often more attentive to their young.

Families with Adolescents

Adolescents require considerable family reorganization on the part of parents: They stay up late, play loud music, infringe on their parents' privacy, and leave a trail of empty pizza cartons, popcorn, dirty socks, and Big Gulp cups in their wake. As Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick (1989) point out:

Families with adolescents must establish qualitatively different boundaries than families with younger children. . . . Parents can no longer

maintain complete authority. Adolescents can and do open the family to a whole array of new values as they bring friends and new ideas into the family arena. Families that become derailed at this stage are frequently stuck at an earlier view of their children. They may try to control every aspect of their lives at a time when, developmentally, this is impossible to do successfully. Either the adolescent withdraws from the appropriate involvements for this developmental stage or the parents become increasingly frustrated with what they perceive as their own impotence.

Although the majority of teenagers do not cause "storm and stress" (Larson and Ham 1993), increased family conflict may occur as adolescents begin to assert their autonomy and independence. Conflicts over tidiness, study habits, communication, and lack of responsibility may emerge. Adolescents want rights and privileges but have difficulty accepting responsibility. Conflicts are often contained, however, if both parents and adolescents tacitly agree to avoid "flammable"

topics, such as how the teenager spends time or money. Such tactics may be useful in maintaining family peace, but in the extreme they can backfire by decreasing family closeness and intimacy. Despite the growing pains accompanying adolescence, parental bonds generally remain strong (Gecas and Seff 1991).

Families as Launching Centers

Some couples may be happy or even grateful to see their children leave home, some experience difficulties with this exodus, and some continue to accommodate their adult children under the parental roof.

The Empty Nest

As children are “launched” from the family (or “ejected,” as some parents wryly put it), the parental role becomes increasingly less important in daily life. The period following the child’s exit is commonly known as the **empty nest**. Most parents make the transition reasonably well (Anderson 1988). Marital satisfaction generally begins to rise for the first time since the first stage of marriage (Glenn 1991). For some parents, however, the empty nest is seen as the end of the family. Children have been the focal point of much family happiness and pain, and now they are gone.

Traditionally, it has been asserted that the departure of the last child from home leads to an “empty nest syndrome” among women, characterized by depression and identity crisis. However, there is little evidence that the syndrome is widespread. Rather, it is a myth that reinforces the traditional view that women’s primary identity is found in motherhood. Once deprived of their all-encompassing identity as mothers, the myth goes, women lose all sense of purpose. (In reality, mothers may be more likely to complain when faced with adult children who have not left home.)

The couple must now re-create their family minus their children. Their parental roles become less important and less stressful on a day-to-day basis (Anderson 1988). The husband and wife must rediscover themselves as man and woman. Some couples may divorce at this point if the children were the only reason the pair remained together. The outcome is more positive when parents have other more meaningful roles, such as school, work, or other activities, to turn to (Lamanna and Riedmann 1997).

The Not-So-Empty Nest: Adult Children at Home

Just how empty homes are after children reach age 18 is open to question. Census data revealed that in 2000 56% of 18- to 24-year-old males and 43% of 18- to 24-year-old females were living with one or both parents (Fields and Casper 2001). Some are not moving out before their mid-20s, and many are doing an extra rotation through their family home after a temporary or lengthy absence. This later group is sometimes referred to as the **boomerang generation**.

In a 1995 survey of first-time college freshmen, 19% said wanting to leave home was an important reason to go to school. A larger share (25%) were living at home while they attended school, according to University of California at Los Angeles’ Annual American Freshman Study.

Hispanics are more likely than other young adults to take a traditional route of staying home until they marry. Blacks are less likely than whites or Hispanics to leave home before marriage. Although family income may influence nest leaving, ethnic or racial tradition seems to be more important in determining whether young adults will leave home (American Demographics 1996). Most, however, move from home when they marry.

Researchers note that there are important financial and emotional reasons for this trend (Mancini and Blieszner 1991). High unemployment, expensive housing, and poor wages are factors causing adult children to return home. High divorce rates, as well as personal problems, push adult children back to the parental home for social support and childcare, as well as cooking and laundry services.

Reflections

Recall your family of orientation when you were an adolescent. How did you and your parents deal with establishing new family boundaries and with issues of autonomy and independence? What was the process of “launching” like? Has it been completed? If you continue to live at home, what difficulties has it caused you and your parents?

Young adults at home are such a common phenomenon that one of the leading family life cycle scholars suggests an additional family stage: *adult children at home* (Aldous 1990). This new stage generally is not one that parents have anticipated. Almost half

reported serious conflict with their children. For parents, the most frequently mentioned problems were the hours of their children's coming and going and their failure to share in cleaning and maintaining the house. Most wanted their children to be "up, gone, and on their own."

Reevaluation

Middle-aged people find that they must reevaluate relations with their children, who have become independent adults, and must incorporate new family members as in-laws. Some must also begin considering how to assist their own parents, who are becoming more dependent as they age.

Couples in middle age tend to reexamine their aims and goals (Steinberg and Silverberg 1987). On the average, husbands and wives have 13 more years of marriage without children than they used to, and during this time their partnership may become more harmonious or more strained. The man may decide to stay at home or not work as hard as before. The woman may commit herself more fully to her job or career, or she may remain at home, enjoying her new child-free leisure. Because the woman has probably returned to the workplace, wages and salary earned during this period may represent the highest amount the couple will earn.

Matter of Fact

Average life expectancy is 74.4 years for men and 79.8 years for women. By the time individuals reach 65, their life expectancy rises to 81.4 years for men and 84.4 years for women. If they reach 75, they can anticipate living a decade (men) or dozen (women) years more (National Center for Health Statistics, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/tables/2003/03hus027.pdf>).

As people enter their 50s, they probably have advanced as far as they will ever advance in their work. They have accepted their own limits, but they also have an increased sense of their own mortality. They not only feel their bodies aging but also begin to see people their own age dying. Some continue to live as if they were ageless—exercising, working hard, and keep-

ing up or even increasing the pace of their activities. Others become more reflective, retreating from the world. Some may turn outward, renewing their contacts with friends, relatives, and especially their children and grandchildren.

Later-Life Marriages

Later-life marriages represent the last two stages (stages 7 and 8) of the family life cycle. In families with children, a later-life marriage is one in which the children have been launched and the partners are middle age or older. Later-life families tend to be significantly more satisfied than families at earlier stages in the family life cycle (Mathis and Tanner 1991). Compared with middle-aged couples, older couples showed less potential for conflict and greater potential for engaging in pleasurable activities together and separately, such as dancing, travel, or reading (Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman 1993). Research in the 1990s showed that older people without children experienced about the same level of psychological well-being, instrumental support, and care as those who have children (Allen, Bleiszner, and Roberto 2000).

During this period, the three most important factors affecting middle-aged and older couples are health, retirement, and widowhood (Brubaker 1991). In addition, these women and men must often assume roles as caretakers of their own aging parents or adjust to adult children who have returned home. Later-middle-aged men and women tend to enjoy good health, are firmly established in their work, and have their highest discretionary spending power because their children are gone (Voydanoff 1987). As they age, however, they tend to cut back on their work commitments for both personal and health reasons.

As they enter old age, men and women are better off, on the average, than young Americans (Peterson 1991). Beliefs that the elderly are neglected and isolated tend to reflect myth more than reality (Woodward 1988). Over half of all people age 65 and older live in either the same house or in the same neighborhood as one of their adult children (Troll 1994). In addition, a national study of people over 65 found that 41% of those with children see or talk with them daily, 21% do so twice a week, and 20% do so weekly. Over half have children within 30 minutes' driving time (U.S. Census Bureau 1988).

The Intermittent Extended Family: Sharing and Caring

Although many later-life families contract in size as children are launched, pushed, or cajoled out of the nest, other families may expand as they come to the assistance of family members in need. Families are most likely to become an intermittent extended family during their later-life stage (Beck and Beck 1989). An **intermittent extended family** takes in other relatives during a time of need. Such a family “shares and cares” when younger or older relatives are in need or crisis: It helps daughters who are single mothers; a sick parent, aunt, or uncle; or an unemployed cousin. When the crisis passes, the dependent adult leaves, and the family resumes its usual structure.

The incidence of intermittent extended families tends to be linked to ethnicity. Using national population studies, researchers estimate that the families of almost two-thirds of African American women and one-third of Caucasian women were extended for at least some part of the time during their middle age (Beck and Beck 1989; Minkler and Roe 1993). Latina women are more likely than non-Latina women to form extended households (Tienda and Angel 1982). Asian American families are also more likely to live at some time in extended families. There are two reasons for the prevalence of extended families among certain ethnic groups. First, extended families are by cultural tradition more significant to African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans than to Caucasians. Second, ethnic families are more likely to be economically disadvantaged. They share households and pool resources as a practical way to overcome short-term difficulties. In addition, there is a higher rate of single parenthood among African Americans, which makes mothers and their children economically vulnerable. These women often turn to their families of orientation for emotional and economic support until they are able to get on their own feet.

The Sandwich Generation

A relatively new phenomena, now referred to as the **sandwich generation**, are those middle-aged (or older) individuals who are sandwiched between the simultaneous responsibilities of caring for both their dependent children and their aging parents. Given the number of baby boomers now in their middle years, coupled with the increased longevity among their par-

ents, we can anticipate that this type of dual care will become increasingly common. As many as 20% to 30% of workers over age 30 may find themselves involved in caregiving to their parents, and this percentage is expected to grow (Field and Minkler 1993). Daughters outnumber sons as caretakers by more than three to one (Allen, Blieszner, and Roberto 2000; Cox 1993), although among Asian Americans, the eldest son may be expected to be responsible for his elders (Kamo and Zhou 1994). When sons are caretakers, whether in families with only sons or with sons and daughters, it is often daughters-in-law or granddaughters who actually provide the care (Allen, Blieszner, and Roberto 2000).

As people live longer, their disabilities, dependency, and the number of their long-term chronic illnesses increases. Complicating this is the shrinking number of young workers, facilities, and resources to care for the old and frail. All of this puts additional pressure on families to provide support for their elders. Care traditionally handled by health-care professionals—injections, monitoring of medications, bathing, and physical therapy—is now often in the hands of family members.

The trend today, whenever possible, is for the dependent aged to be cared for in the home (Freedman 1993). Placing added demands on family members’ time, energy, and emotional commitment often results in exhaustion, anger, and in some cases, violence. Most people, however, are amazingly adept at meeting the needs of both their parents and their children. It is going to be an increasing challenge for society to acknowledge this phenomenon and provide services and support to both the elderly and those who care for them.

Retirement

Retirement, like other life changes, has the potential for both satisfactions and problems. In a time of relative prosperity for the elderly, retirement is an event to which older couples generally look forward. One key to marital satisfaction in these later years is continued good health (Brubaker 1991).

Widowhood

Marriages are finite; they do not last forever. Eventually, every marriage is broken by divorce or death. Despite high divorce rates, most marriages end with

death, not divorce. “Till death do us part” is a fact for most married people.

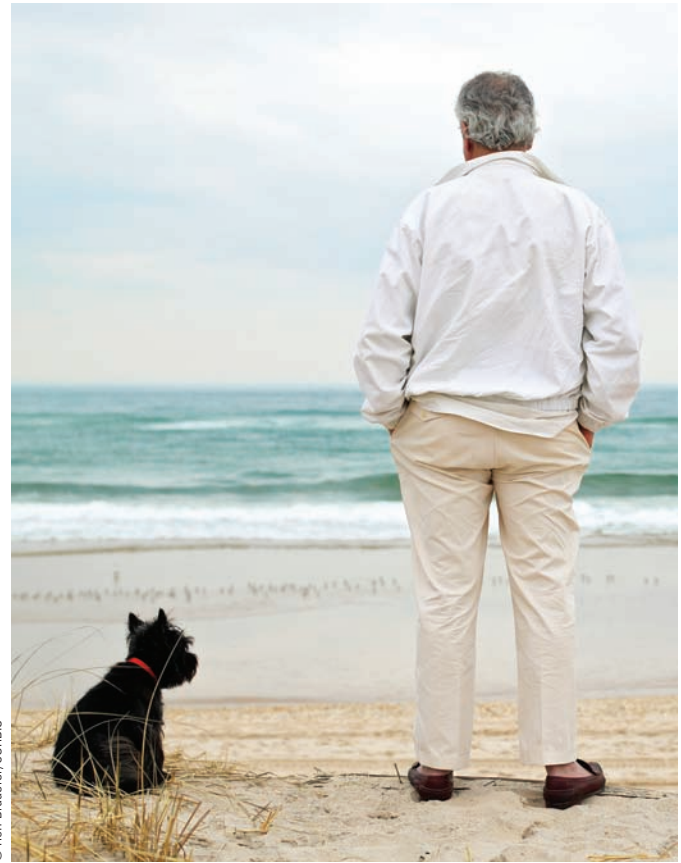
In 2000, 66.5% of those between ages 65 and 74 were married. Among those 75 years old and older, however, only 46% were married; 46% were widowed. Because women live about 7 years longer on average than men, most widowed people are women. Women over 65 years of age outnumber men by a ratio of roughly 1.5 to 1. By age 85, this ratio has increased to approximately 4 women to every 1 man (Carr 2004).

These demographic facts of life expectancy yield many more widows than widowers, thus creating for men “many more opportunities to date and remarry should they choose to” (Carr 2004, 1,052). Indeed, greater proportions of older men than older women are married. Among women from 65 to 74 years old, 56% were married, but only 31% over age 75 had a spouse. In contrast, among men 65 to 74 years old, 79.6% lived with their wives; among those over 75, 69.3% lived with a spouse (U.S. Census Bureau 2001, Table 51). Three out of four wives will become widows.

Widowhood is often associated with a significant decline in income, plunging the grieving spouse into financial crisis and hardship in the year or so following death. This is especially true for poorer families (Smith and Zick 1986). Feelings of well-being among both elderly men and elderly women are related to their financial situations. If the surviving spouse is financially secure, she or he does not have the added distress of a dramatic loss of income or wealth.

Recovering from the loss of a spouse is often difficult and prolonged. A woman may experience considerable disorientation and confusion from the loss of her role as a wife and companion. Having spent much of her life as part of a couple—having mutual friends, common interests, and shared goals—a widow suddenly finds herself alone. Whatever the nature of her marriage, she experiences grief, anger, distress, and loneliness. Physical health appears to be tied closely to the emotional stress of widowhood. Widowed men and women experience more health problems over the 14 months following their spouses’ deaths than do those with spouses. Over time, however, widows appear to regain much of their physical and emotional health (Brubaker 1991).

One common response of widowed women and men is to glorify or “sanctify” their marriages and their deceased spouses. This is especially true shortly after a spouse’s death. Oftentimes, the “newly bereaved” retrospectively construct and offer “unrealistically positive portrayals” of their marriages (Carr 2004). One



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■ *The loss of one’s spouse confronts women and men with a variety of deep and painful losses. Although both women and men lose their chief source of emotional support, women typically have wider and deeper friendship networks to turn to for support.*

way in which women and men differ in their reactions is that women who had close marriages may feel less open to seeking and forming a new relationship with another man, retaining the feeling that they are “still married” to their late husbands. Men who were in close marriages may be especially motivated to establish another marriage. Having experienced and grown dependent on the emotional support and intimacy of their marriages, they may have few other alternative sources for support to whom they can turn. Thus, they have greater incentive to form a new emotionally supportive marriage or partner relationship (Carr 2004).

Eventually widowed women and men must in some way adjust to the loss. Some remarry; 2% of older widows and 20% of older widowers remarry. Each year, 3 of every 1,000 widows and 17 of every 1,000 widowers marry (Carr 2004). Many others adjust by learning to

enjoy their new freedom. Others believe that they are too old to date or remarry; still others cannot imagine living with someone other than their former husband. (Those who had good marriages think of remarrying more often than those who had poor marriages.) A large number of elderly men and women live together without remarrying. For many widows, widowhood lasts the rest of their lives.

For both widowed women and men, remarriage and repartnering may be desired—but for different reasons. Given the multiple benefits men gain from marriage and the supportive presence of a wife, men may desire remarriage more, especially those men who were socially and emotionally dependent on their wives. The emptiness left by their wife's death and absence may be too great to bear. In addition to the loss of their confidant and chief source of emotional support, they may have limited experience managing households, cooking, and cleaning and as a result suffer from poor nutrition and distress over the conditions in which they live (Carr 2004). Widows certainly suffer, too, although they may be beneficiaries of more practical help from their children and draw on emotional support from a wider and deeper network of friends.

Enduring Marriages

Examining marriages across the family life cycle is an important way of exploring the different tasks we must undertake at different times in our relationships. A number of those who have studied long-term marriages lasting 50 years or more have discovered several common patterns. Two researchers (Rowe and Lasswell, cited in Sweeney 1982) have divided relationships into three categories: (1) couples who are happily in love, (2) unhappy couples who continue marriage out of habit and fear, and (3) couples who are neither happy nor unhappy and accept the situation. Lasswell and Rowe found that approximately 20% of long-term marriages were very happy and 20% were very unhappy.

Another way to look at marriage is according to stability rather than satisfaction. In other words, which marriages last? What researchers find is what many of us already know: little correlation exists between happy marriages and stable ones. Many unhappily married couples stay together, and some happily married couples undergo a crisis and breakup. In general, however, the quality of the marital relationship appears to show

continuity over the years. Much of the discrepancy between happiness and stability results because happiness or satisfaction is an evaluative judgment of a marriage relative to what we expected from marriage and what better alternatives are available. Stability results more from assessments of the costs and rewards of staying in or leaving a marriage. Unhappy marriages may be enduring ones because there are no better alternatives, because the costs of leaving exceed the costs of staying married, or both.

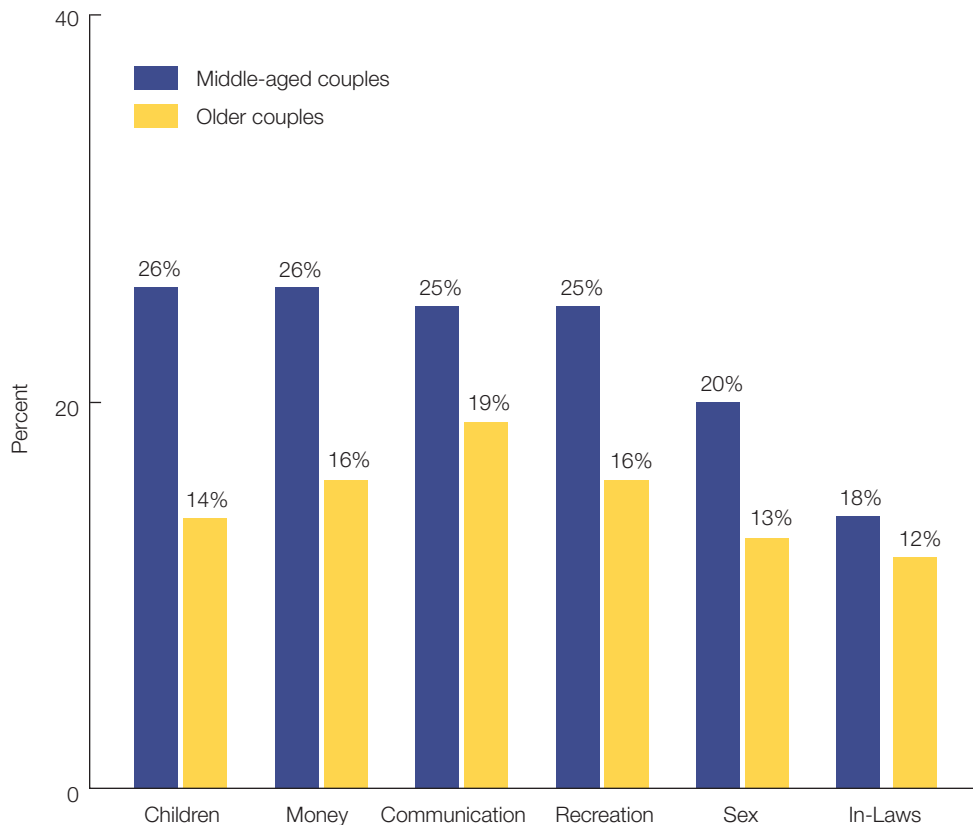
Long-term marriages are not immune to conflict. As Figure 9.2 illustrates, as many as one-fourth of middle-aged couples, and between 12% and 20% of older couples, acknowledge engaging in conflict over such issues as children, money, communication, recreation, sex, and in-laws. Surviving together does not require couples to eliminate or avoid conflict.

A study by Robert and Jeanette Lauer used a more modest definition of *long term* to look at marriages that last. Their study of 351 couples married at least 15 years (most were married a good deal longer) found the following to be the “most important ingredients” identified by men and women to explain their marital success: “my spouse is my best friend,” “I like my spouse as a person,” “marriage is a long-term commitment,” “marriage is sacred,” “we agree on aims and goals,” and “my spouse has grown more interesting” (Lauer and Lauer 1986). The correlation between husbands’ and wives’ lists was over 0.90, a remarkable consensus across gender lines. Summing up their results, the Lauers specify four keys to long-term satisfying marriages:

1. Having a spouse who is a best friend and whom you like as a person
2. Believing in marriage as a long-term commitment and sacred institution
3. Consensus on such fundamentals as aims and goals and philosophy of life
4. Shared humor

When assessing marriages, keep in mind that there is considerable diversity in married life. Thus, attempts have been made to document some types of marriages that couples construct (Cuber and Harroff 1965; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995; Schwartz 1994). One popular typology details five types of marriage, each of which could either last “till death do us part” or end in divorce. Thus, these are not degrees of marital success but rather different kinds of marriage relationships (Cuber and Harroff 1965).

Figure 9.2 ■ Sources of Marital Conflict for Middle-Aged and Older Couples



SOURCE: Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman 1993, 307.

- **Conflict-habituated marriages** are relationships in which tension, arguing, and conflict “permeate the relationship” (Cuber and Harroff 1965). One informant characterized his conflict-habituated marriage as a “long-running guerilla war” yet acknowledged that neither he nor his wife had ever thought of ending the marriage. It may well be that conflict is what holds these couples together. It is at least understood to be a basic characteristic of this type of marriage.
- **Passive-congenial marriages** are relationships that begin without the emotional “spark” or intensity contained in our romantic idealizations of marriage. They may be marriages of convenience that satisfy practical needs in both spouses’ lives. Couples in which both spouses have strong career commitments and value independence may construct a passive-congenial marriage to enjoy the benefits of married life and especially parenthood. In some ways, these marriages are, and have been since their beginning, “emotional voids” (Cuber and Harroff 1965).
- **Devitalized marriages** begin with high levels of emotional intensity that over time has dwindled. From the outside looking in, they may closely resemble passive-congenial relationships. What sets them apart is that they have a history of having been in a more intimate, sexually gratifying, emotional relationship that has become an emotional void. Obligation and resignation may hold such couples together, along with the lifestyle they have built and the history they have shared.
- **Vital marriages** appeal more to our romantic notions of marriage because they begin and continue with high levels of emotional intensity. Such couples spend much of their time together and are “intensely

bound together in important life matters” (Cuber and Harroff 1965). The relationship is the most valued aspect of their lives, and they allocate their time and attention based on such a priority. Conflict is not absent, but it is managed in such a manner as to make quick resolution likely.

- **Total marriages** are relationships in which characteristics of vital relationships are present and multiplied. In some ways they may be seen as multifaceted vital relationships where the “points of vital meshing” extended across more aspects of daily coupled life.

Differentiating between these five types, John Cuber and Peggy Harroff noted that the first three types were more common than the last two. As many as 80% of the relationships among their sample were of one of the first three types. Both vital and total marriages (what they called *intrinsic marriages*) were relatively rare. Again, we must remember that the researchers were not sorting relationships into “successful” versus “unsuccessful” or “good” versus “bad.” Marriages of all five types were enduring marriages, and any of the five types could end in divorce, although the reasons for divorce would differ.

More recently, a seven-type typology was constructed by Yoav Lavee and David Olson (1993) from an analysis of the marriages of more than 8,000 couples voluntarily in marriage enrichment programs or marital therapy. Although such a sample may be more difficult to generalize, Lavee and Olson suggested that we could differentiate couples based on their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with nine areas of married life: personality issues, conflict resolution, communication, sexual intimacy, religious beliefs, financial management, leisure, parenting, and relationships with friends and family. Of their types, *vitalized couples* (9% of sample) reported themselves satisfied with all nine areas. At the opposite end, *devalitized couples* reported problems in all nine areas. Keeping in mind that the sample was drawn from either clinical or enrichment intervention, the devalitized were by far the most common type, representing 40% of their sample.

The remainder of the sample was relatively evenly divided across the other types: *balanced*, *harmonious*, *traditional*, *conflicted*, and *financially focused*. All types except the vitalized reported problems, although the areas and extent of problems differed across these types.

The financially focused (11%) had problems in all areas but financial matters. Traditional couples (10%) reported problems in their handling of conflict, com-

munication, sexual intimacy, and parenting. The conflicted (14%) reported themselves generally satisfied with only their parenting, leisure activities, and religious beliefs. Even those couples designated as harmonious (8%) tended to have difficulties in areas such as religious beliefs, parenting, and relations with family and friends. Balanced couples (8%) were generally satisfied with all areas except financial matters.

For different reasons, we need to be cautious about generalizing too far from either Cuber and Harroff or Lavee and Olson. Nonetheless, in both typologies, 75% or more of the sample couples were in marriages that many would define as unattractive, seeming to be held together by something other than a deep emotional connection. In addition, both typologies should keep us from assuming that marriage has to be free of conflict to last. Most obviously, both typologies illustrate that marriages are not all alike. This is a simple and obvious but important point.

Throughout marriage, from the earliest most hopeful and optimistic beginning till death or divorce do us part, we are presented with opportunities for growth and change as we enter our roles as husbands or wives, become parents or stepparents, and still later become grandparents. Throughout all of these stages, marriage requires a deep commitment. As David and Vera Mace (1979) observe:

Until two people, who are married, look into each other's eyes and make a solemn commitment to each other—that they will stop at nothing, that they will face any cost, any pain, any struggle, go out of their way so that they may learn and seek so that they may make their marriage a continuously growing experience—until two people have done that they are not in my judgment married.

As we have seen, marriages and families never remain the same. They change as we change; as we learn to give and take; as children enter and exit our lives; as we create new goals and visions for ourselves and our relationships. In our intimate relationships, we are offered the opportunity to discover ourselves.

As marriage continues to undergo changes, we are left to wonder about what the future holds. There is enough reason to believe, even in the face of the striking and sometimes troubling trends, that we have addressed that marriage will survive. We will not likely see a return to traditional marriages any more than we should expect a disappearance of marriage. If anything,

we agree with Paul Amato's (2004b, 102) assessment that the future likely contains more of the same:

Alternatives to marriage will be accepted and widespread. People will continue to have sex prior to marriage, live together without being married, have children outside of marriage, avoid marriage altogether, and divorce if their marriages are flawed.

At the same time, most people will continue to view marriage as the "gold standard" for relationships . . . [and] to view marriage as the best context for bearing and rearing children. Helping more people to achieve healthy and stable marriages will require the efforts of marriage educators, counselors, therapists, and policy makers.

Summary

- Marriage is the foundation and centerpiece of the American family system.
- There is an ongoing *marriage debate* over the status and future of marriage. The two extreme positions in this debate are the *marital decline* and *marital resilience positions*.
- Behavioral indicators of a *retreat from marriage* include increasing percentages adults remaining unmarried, living together, having children outside of marriage, and divorcing. However, approximately 90% of Americans are expected to someday marry.
- The retreat from marriage varies considerably by race and economic status. African Americans are much less likely to marry, to stay married, and to have their children inside of a marriage than are other racial and ethnic groups. Socioeconomic factors are also important, as indicated by lower marriage rates among those with less education.
- Even those most likely to retreat from marrying continue to articulate support for and a desire to marry. Barriers to marriage for low-income, unmarried parents include financial concerns, concerns about relationship quality, and fear of divorce.
- There are religious differences in the importance of marriage and the push toward early marriage. Conservative Protestants and Latter-day Saints are most likely to marry young.
- The *deinstitutionalization of marriage* refers to weakening of the social norms that define people's behavior in a social institution such as marriage. In the move from companionate to *individualized marriage*, new emphases on personal self-fulfillment and freedom of choice become more important than marital commitment and obligation.
- Legal limits imposed on choice of marriage partner include gender, age, family relationship, and number of spouses.
- Marriage confers both rights and responsibilities onto married couples. Most states do not explicitly state what legal responsibilities are expected of married people. Benefits include tax benefits, government benefits, employment benefits, medical benefits, and housing and consumer benefits.
- Reasons to marry include both attractions of marriage and rejection of singlehood. Marital intimacy is the biggest attraction of marriage.
- Marriage provides various benefits to married people, including economic benefits, health benefits, and psychological benefits. Research supports both a selection effect (healthier and better adjusted people are more likely to marry) and a protection effect (marriage provides a range of protective resources enabling people to prosper).
- The eight developmental stages of the human life cycle described by Erik Erikson are (1) infancy: trust versus mistrust; (2) toddler: autonomy versus shame and doubt; (3) early childhood: initiative versus guilt; (4) school age: industry versus inferiority; (5) adolescence: identity versus role confusion; (6) young adulthood: intimacy versus isolation; (7) adulthood: generativity versus self-absorption; and (8) maturity: integrity versus despair. Each stage is intimately interconnected with family.
- The relationships that precede marriage often predict marital success because marital patterns emerge during these times. Premarital factors correlated with marital success include (1) background factors (age at marriage, length of courtship, level of

- education, and childhood environment), (2) personality factors, and (3) relationship factors (communication, self-disclosure, and interdependence).
- Engagement is the culmination of the formal dating pattern. It prepares the couple for marriage by involving them in discussions about the realities of everyday life, it involves family members with the couple, and it strengthens the couple as a social unit. Individuals must deal with key psychological issues, such as anxiety, maturation and dependency needs, losses, partner choice, gender-role conflict, idealization and disillusionment, marital expectations, and self-knowledge. Cohabitation serves many of the same functions as engagement.
 - A wedding is an ancient ritual that symbolizes a couple's commitment to each other. About two-thirds are formal church weddings. The wedding marks a major transition in life as the man and woman take on marital roles. Marriage involves many powerful traditional role expectations, including assumptions that the husband is head of the household and is expected to support the family and that the wife is responsible for housework and childrearing.
 - The process of marrying and becoming spouses consists of six dimensions of experience that can be classified as the stations of marriage: emotional, psychic, community, economic, legal, and parental. We should also recognize the domestic responsibilities that marriage introduces as another part of becoming married.
 - Gender-role attitudes and behaviors contribute to marital roles. Women are more egalitarian than men in marital-role expectations, but both genders expect men to earn more money. Marital tasks include establishing marital and family roles, providing emotional support for the partner, adjusting personal habits, negotiating gender roles, making sexual adjustments, establishing family and employment priorities, developing communication skills, managing budgetary and financial matters, establishing kin relationships, and participating in the larger community.
 - Couples undergo *identity bargaining* in adjusting to marital roles. This is a three-step process: (1) the person must identify with the role, (2) the person must be treated by the other as if he or she fulfills that role, and (3) both people must negotiate changes in each other's roles.
 - Marital success is affected by the wider social context and the extent and kind of social stresses couples face.
 - Marital commitments consist of personal commitments, moral commitments, and structural commitments. Personal commitment is a product of love, satisfaction with the relationship, and the existence of a strong couple identity; moral commitment is the product of our attitudes about divorce, our sense of a personal "contract" with our spouse, and the desire for personal consistency; and structural commitment a product of attractive alternatives, social pressures, fear of termination procedures, and the feeling of sacrifices we have made and can't recover.
 - A critical task in early marriage is to establish boundaries separating the newly formed family from the couple's families of orientation. Ties to the families of orientation may include habits of subordination and economic dependency. In-law relationships tend to have little emotional intensity.
 - In youthful marriages, about half of all working women leave the workforce to attend to childrearing responsibilities. Motherhood more radically alters a woman's life than fatherhood changes a man's life. Parental roles and childcare responsibilities need to be worked out.
 - Middle-aged families must deal with issues of independence in regard to their adolescent children. Most women do not suffer from the *empty nest* syndrome. For many families, there is no empty nest because of the increasing presence of adult children in the home. As children leave home, parents reevaluate their relationship with each other and their life goals.
 - In later-life marriages, usually no children are present. Marital satisfaction tends to be highest during this time. The most important factors affecting this life cycle stage are health, retirement, and widowhood. As a group, the aged have regular contact with their children, the lowest poverty level of any group, and good health through the early years of old age. Many families, especially among African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, become *intermittent extended families* in which aging parents, adult children, or other relatives periodically live with them during times of need. This differs from the *sandwich generation*, which finds itself caring for children and aging parents at the same time.

- Long-term marriages may be divided into three categories: (1) couples who are happily in love, (2) unhappy couples who stay together out of habit or fear, and (3) couples who are neither happy nor unhappy. The percentage of couples who are happily in love is approximately 20%, the same percentage found for those who are unhappy.
- Some factors associated with long-term marriages are liking your spouse as a person, thinking of your spouse as your best friend, believing in marriage as a commitment, spousal agreement on life's goals, and a sense of humor.
- Marriages differ from one another. One popular typology contrasts five types of marriage: *conflict-habituated*, *devalitized*, *passive-congenial*, *vital*, and *total*. These reflect different conceptualizations and experiences of marriage, not different degrees of marital success.

Key Terms

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close relationship model of legal marriage 332	devalitized marriages 356
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<http://www.thomsonedu.com/sociology/strong>

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