

Degrees of Change: An Assessment of the Deinstitutionalization of Marriage Thesis

This article reexamines the thesis that marriage is becoming deinstitutionalized. It first reviews relevant theoretical literature on social institutions, including the “new institutionalism” and the work of Bourdieu on cultural capital. It addresses the great social class differences that have emerged in American family life over the past few decades and their implications for the deinstitutionalization thesis. It then evaluates the thesis, with these conclusions: What has happened in recent years to the place of marriage in the broader field of intimate partnerships is consistent with the deinstitutionalization thesis, although primarily among the non-college-educated. In contrast, marriage still plays a central role in the field of intimate partnerships among the college-educated. Moreover, the behavior of partners within marriage has not change enough to conclude the deinstitutionalization has occurred. The article also examines related claims about marriage and individualism, the concept of capstone marriage, and same-sex marriage.

In “The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage” (Cherlin, 2004), I proposed that marriage was declining as a social institution although it remained important on a symbolic level. Since the article was published, new understandings of marriage have arisen. In

2004, Sara McLanahan had just published her “diverging destinies” article (McLanahan, 2004) on children’s well-being. It led to a surge of research on the growing social class differences in marriage (Carbone & Cahn, 2014; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis & Rackin, 2014; Kalmijn, 2013; Lundberg, Pollak, & Stearns, 2016; Wu, 2017), a topic that I did not address. A few years later, scholars began to write about a possible new egalitarian bargain between husbands and wives that had the potential to stabilize marriage (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). Moreover, when the article appeared, same-sex marriage was only legal in the state of Massachusetts, three Canadian provinces, and a few foreign nations. Almost noone expected the issue to be resolved anytime soon; yet by 2015 a Supreme Court decision (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015) had legalized it nationwide, thereby expanding the scope of marriage. It may be timely, then, to investigate which parts of the deinstitutionalization thesis have fared the best, which parts have not stood the test of time as well, and which developments I failed to anticipate.

Moreover, in theoretical terms, scholars have questioned whether a framework based on institutional decline is useful at all in understanding contemporary family change (Knapp & Wurm, 2019). In thinking about this question, it would help to have a stronger theoretical basis than I provided. In fact, there is almost no discussion of the theory of institutions in the article. I merely defined deinstitutionalization as the

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“the weakening of the social norms that define people’s behavior in a social institution such as marriage” (Cherlin, 2004, p. 848), and in particular, the loss of taken-for-granted norms that allow individuals to go about their daily family lives without questioning their actions. Undeniably, taken-for-granted norms constitute part of our understanding of the nature of social institutions, but leaving it at that is insufficient. As critics have argued (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010, 2011; Yodanis & Lauer, 2014), I did not consider a large and influential literature on institutions that has emerged during the past few decades under the general label of the “new institutionalism” (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Institutional theorists tend to argue that institutions remain stable, which would suggest that deinstitutionalization is rarely achieved. Yet the new institutionalism also identifies mechanisms that can produce change (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). It is therefore a useful perspective that deserves close attention.

In any case, institutional theory provides little guidance in making sense of the great social class differences that have emerged in American family life during the past few decades. This class gap complicates the assessment of any across-the-board institutional persistence versus decline. More useful in this regard is the theoretical work of Bourdieu. His concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1985) and its potential conversion into economic capital is helpful when theorizing about the more central place of marriage in the lives of Americans with a college education than among the less educated. (By the terms *college education* or *college degree*, which I will use interchangeably, I mean a course of study leading to a degree at the bachelor’s level or higher, which usually takes after at least 4 years. It corresponds to Levels 6, 7, or 8 on the International Standard Classification of Education scale.) Let me examine these theoretical viewpoints—the new institutionalism and the Bourdieusian approach—and then proceed to evaluate the deinstitutionalization thesis.

MARRIAGE AND INSTITUTIONAL THEORY

Most of the writings in new institutional theory are aimed at understanding formal organizations such as firms and bureaucracies. One might read this literature and conclude that it is irrelevant to understanding social institutions such as

marriage. Indeed, few instructors in family studies courses would think to include any of it, and few instructors in courses on organizations would think to say anything about marriage. Yet this literature can provide insights about family life. I use the term *marriage* for the social institution I am interested in because that is the term I used in my article, but some institutional theorists might prefer the term *conjugal family* (Parsons, 1943) or *nuclear family* (Friedland & Alford, 1991), which essentially carry the same meaning: a marriage-based unit of a wife and husband in a different-sex marriage or, more recently, two spouses in a same-sex marriage, and the children they are raising.

The Regulative Pillar

According to Scott (2014), institutions are supported by the following three “pillars” or basic elements: regulative systems, normative systems, and cultural-cognitive systems. Sociologists have long engaged in analyses of the first two systems: regulative and normative. The regulative pillar consists of the ability to establish rules and to enforce them. Until about a half century ago, American law recognized marriage as the sole form of intimate partnership that provided clear responsibilities and rights to parents. For instance, men who fathered children outside of marriage not only had no responsibility to support them but also lacked the legal stature to request custody. In the early 1970s, the Supreme Court began to extend rights to these fathers and to their children (*Stanley v. Illinois*, 1972; *Weber v. Aetna Casualty, & Surety Co.*, 1972). By the 1980s, the United States and most European nations had also eliminated laws that treated children born outside of marriage differently from children born to married couples (Perelli-Harris & Gassen, 2012). The manifest function of these legal changes was to provide support to children who are not living with both parents, but a latent function was to formally recognize alternatives to marriage for bearing and raising children. All of these legal changes presumed that the spouses were of different sexes. Beginning in Massachusetts in 2003 (*Goodrich v. Department of Public Health*, 2003) and culminating 12 years later in a landmark Supreme Court decision (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015), American law extended the rights and responsibilities of marriage to same-sex couples.

One could also include religion in the regulatory pillar of family life. Religious doctrine establishes rules that, although they lack legal force, provide rewards for those who follow them and sanctions for those who do not. These rules may address matters such as whether the partners may use contraception, whether a pregnant woman may seek an abortion, and whether, and in what circumstances, it is permissible to seek a divorce. Here, too, there has been an evolution in the United States, which is one of the most religious countries in the Western world (World Values Survey, 2017). For instance, the Catholic Church does not allow for divorce; if, however, a marriage was not properly begun under Church law (such as if the spouses were related to each other or if their decision to marry was not freely made), the couple may be granted an annulment (a ruling that a marriage is null and void). Prior to the Second Vatican Council, which met from 1962 to 1965, annulments were very difficult to obtain. But soon after Vatican II, the American Catholic Church liberalized its criteria for annulments (e.g., to include whether the spouses were psychologically suited for each other at the time they made the decision to marry), and the number rose spectacularly from 400 per year prior to 1970 to 64,000 in 1991 before declining to 35,000 in 2007 (Allen, 2012; Wilde, 2001). Mainline Protestant denominations are tolerant toward divorced persons (Wilcox, 2002). Conservative Protestant denominations, although opposed to divorce, welcome divorced persons if they wish to heal and recover (Ammerman, 2005; Edgell, 2006). Although the freer availability of divorce can strengthen marriages by ending dysfunctional ones, it also allows for alternatives to lifelong marriage. Thus, in the regulative realm, we have seen a loosening of the rules that had narrowly defined marital obligations and had restricted divorce.

The Normative Pillar

The second source of support for institutions consists of values and norms. This system was the domain of the “old” institutional theorists in sociology, who viewed social institutions as arising from the internalization of powerful values and norms—a process that, in the case of the family, began with childhood socialization (Parsons, 1951). The cascade of messages, rewards, and sanctions from parents, peers, teachers, and

the media left individuals highly socialized (one might say oversocialized) by adulthood and hence left little room for variation and innovation in adult family roles. An emphasis on values and norms seemed apt in the 1950s, when Parsons was still writing, because marriage was nearly universal, and no other way of bearing and raising children was morally acceptable. When values and norms are widely agreed upon, as was the case at that time, individuals typically conform to them without contestation and without really thinking about whether they are valid. In circumstances such as these, we can say that the behaviors are institutionalized. For instance, prior to 1980, the rules followed by the U.S. Bureau of the Census stipulated that in households maintained by married couples, the husband must be listed as the household head (Schwede, 2003). There were only the following three allowable relationship categories in married-couple households: household head, wife of head, and son or daughter of head. In using these terms, the Census Bureau was merely reflecting taken-for-granted assumptions about the husband’s role in marriage, but as people began to question the assumption that the husband is necessarily the head of the household, the Census Bureau changed its procedure. In 1980 it allowed either the husband or wife to be listed as the “householder.” Habituated understandings such as the husband-as-head rule used in the censuses prior to 1980 may constrain family members in ways that reflect social power (such as men’s power to make decisions as household heads), yet they may also provide what Berger and Luckmann (1966) called “the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed” (p. 53). With choices limited, family members can go about their daily lives with fewer areas that could be subject to disagreement and debate.

The Cultural-Cognitive Pillar

A focus on Scott’s (2014) third source of support for institutions, the cultural-cognitive pillar, is the main contribution of the new institutional theorists. Borrowing from cognitive science, the new institutionalists argue that institutions encourage people to develop cognitive schemata: mental maps that organize behavior in a particular context without requiring individuals to explicitly consider the rules of the

situation (DiMaggio, 1997). A cognitive schema is said to operate within a cultural framework that guides proper behavior. Institutions provide that framework. Similar to the old theorists (Parsons, 1954), the new theorists (Zucker, 1977) argue that institutionalized behavior becomes taken for granted: It requires little conscious thought on the part of the actor, who relies on cognitive schemata as a routine part of life. The newer view of cognition and culture, however, also suggests that institutional actors have more than one cultural framework to choose from and that, as a consequence, their actions are not fully determined by the cultural environment they live in (Berk & Galvan, 2009). Rather, culture is seen as similar to a toolkit, to use the well-known metaphor of Swidler (1986), from which individuals can choose the most appropriate tool. As conditions change, so can the choice of which tool—which schema—to use. In this way, the new institutional theory is more open to the possibility of institutional change than are the older normative or regulative theories, which emphasized strict rules and a seemingly irreversible process of socialization into proper behavior. The possibility of change that the new institutionalists acknowledge is important for the deinstitutionalization thesis.

To be sure, the newer theorists believe that institutional change is slow and difficult because the social context in which individual actions are embedded is generally resistant to modification. When people act in ways that could alter an institution, forces such as laws, social norms, and access to economic resources counteract their efforts. They therefore tend to revert to previously institutionalized forms of behavior, as argued by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) in one of the founding articles of the new institutionalism. Nevertheless, many theorists have written about how change occurs, even if slowly and with resistance. Building on the cultural-cognitive pillar, one framework for change focuses on institutional logics—the sets of cultural symbols and material practices by which people organize and provide meaning to their daily activities (Knapp & Wurm, 2019; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). From this perspective, the family can be seen as having an institutional logic that differs from the logics of other institutions such as the labor market or the bureaucratic state. Thornton et al. (2012) suggest the following three circumstances under which the logic of an institution such as the family can be altered:

a change in the logic of surrounding institutions, a change in the resource environment on which the institutions draws, and internal contradictions within the institution.

One can conceive of ways in which changes in all three of these circumstances may have affected marriage in recent years and hence made change in the institution of the family more likely. Consider, first, changes in surrounding institutions. The logic of the labor market has changed greatly. Once seen as the domain of men, working for pay outside the home became much more common among women starting in the mid-20th century (Carter et al., 2006). Moreover, starting around 1980, the availability of industrial jobs that had supported husbands in many working-class marriages declined as factories moved out of the country or were automated (Cherlin, 2014). As for changes in the resource environment, arguably the most consequential was the introduction of the birth control pill and other medical means of contraception, which allowed women (and their partners) to control fertility to a much greater extent than in the past (Goldin & Katz, 2002). As for internal contradictions, these developments and others created contradictions within marriage between the role of full-time housewife, on one hand, and greater opportunities in the labor market and a lower level of, and more controlled timing of, births on the other hand. These theoretical considerations clearly allow for more institutional change in the family than did the older institutional theories.

Yet an important question still remains: How much change—and what kind of change—must occur before one can meaningfully speak of deinstitutionalization? Answering this question is not simply a matter of determining whether the institution still exists because the new institutional theorists suggest that institutions rarely disappear during the process of change. Rather, layering occurs as “the old institution remains in place but is amended through the introduction of new rules” alongside of the existing ones (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 22). Even if deinstitutionalization has occurred, the old institution may continue in a weakened state (Dacin & Dacin, 2008). For instance, cohabitation has been layered on marriage as an acceptable living arrangement. Dual-earner marriages have been layered on top of breadwinner-homemaker. Scott (2014) wrote that the signs of deinstitutionalization include

rarely enforced laws, increased noncompliance, contested cultural norms, and the questioning of practices that were once taken for granted. One could certainly find examples of all these signs in the changing beliefs and practices of marriage in the recent past. Nevertheless, the literature provides no fixed rules for distinguishing between deinstitutionalization and more moderate decline. Rather, the decision is in the hands of the analyst and the reader.

If one is dissatisfied with the slipperiness of the idea of deinstitutionalization, an alternative distinction regarding the degree of change in institutions may be helpful: what Thornton et al. (2012) call *developmental* versus *transformational* change. In the more modest case of developmental change, a majority of the original practices and beliefs of the institution are retained, but new ones appear. In transformational change, on the other hand, a radical restructuring occurs, and the practices and beliefs surrounding the institution change greatly. For instance, change in the acceptability of sexual intercourse prior to marriage has clearly been transformational. In a 1963 national survey, adults were asked to respond to the statement, "I believe that full sexual relations are acceptable for the male/female before marriage," in several contexts (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2017). The most radical was "even if they do not feel particularly affectionate toward their partner." Only 11% approved of full sexual relations in that context for men, and only 7% thought so for women. But even in the least radical context, "when they are engaged to be married," only 19% thought that full sexual relations were acceptable for men who were engaged, and 17% thought so for women. Some change was evident in 1972, when the General Social Survey began to ask, "There's been a lot of discussion about the way morals and attitudes about sex are changing in this country. If a man and woman have sex relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?" Respondents were split: 47% thought it was always or almost always wrong, whereas 53% thought that it was wrong only sometimes or not at all. By the time of the 2018 General Social Survey, just 24% thought that it was always or almost always wrong (Smith, Davern, Freese, & Morgan, 2019).

In about a half century, then, attitudes toward premarital sex had swung from widely

unaccepting to widely accepting. This is transformational change. It greatly weakened the norm that unmarried people should abstain from sexual intercourse and therefore eroded the institutional power of marriage to organize sexual behavior. In contrast, change in attitudes toward extramarital sex have been more modest and have moved in the opposite direction. When asked in the 1973 General Social Survey, "What is your opinion about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner," 70% of respondents said that it was "always wrong." That percentage increased to a peak of 84% in 2008 before falling back somewhat to 75% in 2018 (Smith et al., 2019). This more modest degree of change is developmental rather than transformational: At all times, 70% to 84% of people disapproved of extramarital sex. The institutional power of marriage remained strong.

Transformational change, I would submit, is more consistent with the idea of deinstitutionalization than is developmental change. It does not, however, always imply deinstitutionalization. The behavior of individuals within a social institution could change greatly while acquiring new support for their transformed behaviors from changes in the law, religious doctrine, social norm, or cognitive schemata. Yet in the short term this rarely happens; it takes time for new cultural understandings to develop—a phenomenon similar to what Ogburn (1957) famously called cultural lag. In the interim, at least, transformational change is often consistent with deinstitutionalization. Still, it can be more difficult to decide whether change is transformational or developmental than in the case of premarital sex versus extramarital sex. The literature offers no clear formula. How, then, are we to tell? In this article, I use an operational definition of transformational change: A change in which an attribute that reflects the power of marriage to organize people's beliefs and behavior goes from being the experience of a large majority of the population to being the experience of a minority. There have been many instances of change of this nature in the past half century or so, but note that in the example I have used here, greater change is apparent in intimate behavior outside of marriage (premarital sex) than within marriage (extramarital sex). This is a pattern we will reencounter later in this article.

MARRIAGE AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Other aspects of my article suggest the usefulness of drawing on the writings of Bourdieu and his followers. In the article, I addressed the declining place of marriage within the larger system of intimate partnerships. For instance, I discussed the rise of cohabitation extensively. Marriage, I claimed, “has become a choice, rather than a necessity” (p. 853). I wrote, “individuals now experience a vast latitude for choice in their personal lives. More forms of marriage and more alternatives to marriage are socially acceptable” (p. 853). What I did not anticipate was the way in which this process would work differently for college-educated Americans than for the less educated. Even though marriage is indeed a choice rather than a necessity, more college-educated Americans are choosing to center their family lives around marriage than are the less educated. College graduates are more likely to ever marry, less likely to divorce, and more likely to have all of their children within marriage. Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1985) is helpful in understanding this pattern.

Cultural capital is a complex of attitudes, inclinations, and behaviors that provide an individual with resources that have the potential to be turned into economic capital. For instance, in her study of class differences in childrearing styles, Lareau (2011) described how college-educated parents actively enhance their children’s talents and opinions and emphasize autonomy and self-direction. Among married couples, college-educated parents spend more money on their children than do less-educated parents, and that difference has been increasing: The gap between what the top 20% of parents spend on their children and what the bottom 20% spend tripled between the early 1970s and the mid-2000s (Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013). Furthermore, between 1985 and 2012, college-educated married men increased the amount of time they spent caring for their children more than did lesser educated married men (Sayer, 2016). In fact, some scholars have argued that marriages among the better educated have become engines for privileged childrearing, as married couples pool two typically high incomes and invest heavily in their children (Lundberg et al., 2016).

This style of parenting among the well-educated may be driven by the increasing competition to position one’s children to receive

the material rewards in adulthood that are so unequally distributed across social strata. In fact, parental financial investments in children in the United States appear to be higher in states that have greater income inequality (Schneider, Hastings, & LaBriola, 2018). This strategy seems to work well for spouses who can bring steady, substantial incomes into their marriages, a standard that college-educated adults can more easily attain. Being married is valuable for parents who wish to pursue a high-investment strategy because it provides what I called in the article “enforceable trust” and that economists would call lower transaction costs (Pollak, 1985). It requires a public commitment, and it triggers the legal protections of marriage and divorce law. It therefore facilitates large investments of time and money by a parent who might be sacrificing her or his potential career in the labor market to devote more time to parenting. One set of investments centers on developing their children’s cultural capital through after-school activities, private lessons, practice in speaking to authority figures, and so forth. These cultural experiences and competencies make their children, when they reach adulthood, better suited for high-paying professional and technical occupations (Waithaka, 2014). Hence, the children can eventually turn their cultural capital into economic capital. In the aggregate, the process of college-educated parents conveying cultural capital to their children acts to reproduce the class structure in the next generation.

In terms of cultural capital, however, marriage is less valuable to parents without college degrees because they invest less money and time in cultivating their children’s development. This is not to say that marriage is without economic value to them, nor to deny the noneconomic benefits they may find in married life. Nevertheless, the high-investment parenting of the college educated implies that they may hold onto the institution of marriage and center their family lives around it to a more greater degree than the less-educated population. It suggests a reason why we have seen less movement toward alternative family forms among the college educated than among those not college educated.

A SUMMATION

Overall, a consideration of new institutional and Bourdieusian social theory suggests the

following for an analysis of the deinstitutionalization of marriage:

1. Similar to any institution, marriage should be biased toward stability. Institutions are supported by social forces that make substantial change difficult. When a stimulus is introduced that could produce change, the institution is likely to fend it off and remain largely the same.
2. Nevertheless, change can occur. It can be set in motion by changes in other institutions, in resources and technology, or by internal contradictions. It is facilitated by the multiple, overlapping cognitive and cultural frameworks that may be available to individuals.
3. In the event of substantial change, the institution is more likely to continue in an altered, weakened state than to disappear. Newer forms may be layered on top of existing forms instead of replacing them. Older forms may still be recognizable.
4. Change may be developmental or transformational; that is to say, it may be apparent to a moderate degree that preserves the general contours of the institution or to a notably higher degree that changes the fundamental structure of the institution. Transformational change is more consistent with the idea of deinstitutionalization.
5. An institution could remain the dominant arrangement for some social classes while weakening in other social classes. Its structure could be more advantageous to individuals with more income and education than to those with fewer resources.

THE DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION THESIS

With this theoretical background, let us now proceed to evaluate the deinstitutionalization thesis. As I conceived of it, the thesis has two components. The first is that alternatives to marriage are more acceptable and more prevalent than in the past, with the result that marriage is much less dominant as a context for intimate partnerships, childbearing, and family life. Until the last third of the 20th century, marriage was the only acceptable context in the United States for a long-term intimate partnership and for having children except among the poor and the avant-garde. In the 1950s, only about 5% of people, nearly all of them without college educations, ever cohabited (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991), and only about 4% of children were

born outside of marriage (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 1982). According to the deinstitutionalization thesis, since that time the social norms that constrained partnering and parenting to marriage have substantially weakened. I noted in the article that by 2003 the proportion of births that took place outside of marriage was one of three in the United States and was similar or greater in many other Western countries. I argued that the connection between cohabitation and marriage was weakening as the former evolved from being a testing ground for marriage to being an acceptable alternative to marriage. Although marriage is still valued and a majority of adults marry at some point in their lives, marriage is now a choice rather than a requirement. As a result, the process of finding a long-term partner and having children is less routinized and calls for more conscious consideration. It is therefore less institutionalized.

The second component of the thesis is that change within marriage has occurred to the point where one can speak of a deinstitutionalization of how spouses should act and what they should expect. Roles must be negotiated rather than taken for granted. Fewer daily behaviors have the habitual character that is associated with institutionalized activity. I wrote about a transition to what I called "individualized marriage" in which the spouses pursue their own senses of self through more open communication and deeper intimacy (Cherlin, 2004, p. 852). Their behavior toward each other therefore becomes a matter of personal choice driven by their quest for self-development. As a result of these developments, I argued, social norms about how to behave in everyday married life have become less powerful and personal choice has become increasingly important. Overall, so the argument goes, we see less habitual behavior and more choices in everything from the timing of marriage to how to divide the labor at home to how to pursue growth as an individual within the relationship.

Alternatives to Marriage

I would argue that recent developments support the first component of the thesis—that marriage has become much less dominant as a context for family life—although more so for individuals who do not have college educations. That is to say, deinstitutionalization, or transformational change that has weakened the place of

marriage, has occurred. The clearest example of a transformational change in the United States across nearly all social groups is the rise of cohabitation. To be sure, early in the nation's history, cohabiting relationships, which courts sometimes recognized as "common-law marriages," were well known among the poor and in frontier areas beyond the reach of clergy (Grossberg, 1985), but most such couples thought of themselves, and publicly presented themselves, as married. Common-law marriages were not considered as an alternative to marriage but rather as another form of marriage. By the 20th century, legal regulation of marriage had tightened and informal marriage declined. Yet in the second half of the century, cohabitation increased sharply. By 1987, one third of women age 19 to 44 had ever cohabited, and by 2013 nearly two thirds had cohabited (Hemez & Manning, 2017a). Sharp increases occurred among Whites, African Americans, and Hispanics and among all educational groups. Moreover, the link between cohabitation and marriage weakened (Guzzo, 2014; Kuo & Raley, 2016). Never-married women who began a cohabiting union in the mid-1980s were more likely to end the union by marriage than by dissolution, but those who began a cohabiting union in the years around 2010 were more likely to dissolve the union than to marry (Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2019). The duration of cohabiting unions increased during the same interval: The percent that lasted at least 5 years rose from 22% to 42% (Lamidi et al., 2019). The longer durations of cohabiting unions and the lower propensity to marry suggest that for an increasing share of unmarried couples, cohabitation is an alternative to marriage (although the decades-long cohabiting unions common in some European nations are still rare in the United States).

In the United States, cohabitation is less institutionalized than is marriage: It lacks support from both the legal and normative pillars of social institutions. The legal rights and obligations of cohabiting couples are still lightly regulated; for example, the protections that divorce laws provide to parents and children in the event of breakup do not extend, as a rule, to cohabiting couples (Katz, 2015). Moreover, cohabiting couples are still excluded from most of the legal benefits that accrue to married couples, such as the ability to lower their taxes by filing a joint federal tax return. Religious laws do not recognize the status of cohabiting couples and remain

focused on marriage. In many European countries, cohabitation has gained legal regulation, but in no country is the legal status of cohabitation equivalent to the legal status of marriage (Perelli-Harris & Gassen, 2012). Normatively,

there is little consensus on the how cohabiting partners should behave with respect to each other. For instance, pooling one's income with one's partner's income may be a marker of institutionalization because it suggests a joint family enterprise with an indefinite time horizon, but there is no strong norm that cohabiting couples should pool their incomes; in fact, several studies show that they are substantially less likely to pool all of their money than are married couples (Eickmeyer, Manning, & Brown, 2019; Hamplová, Le Bourdais, & Lapierre-Adamczyk, 2014; Heimdal & Houseknecht, 2003; Kenney, 2004).

In considering alternatives to marriage, however, we must take note that, across a number of indicators, the importance of marriage is stronger among the college educated.

For instance, with respect to having children outside of marriage, transformational change has occurred among the non-college-educated population, but not among the college educated. A majority of all births, 55%, to women aged younger than 40 without college degrees occurred outside of marriage in the 2010 to 2014 period (Wu, 2017). This is a major shift from a generation ago: In the early 1990s, only the least-educated women—those without high school degrees—had a majority of their children outside of marriage (Wu, 2017). The largest increases in nonmarital childbearing since then have occurred among women with a moderate amount of education: a high school degree or some college education, but not a bachelor's degree (Cherlin, 2014). By 2010 to 2014, college-educated women were starkly different from all those without college degrees: Only 12% of their births occurred outside of marriage. In other words, although both college-educated and non-college-educated adults commonly cohabit with partners, the college-educated are much more likely to wait until marriage to have and raise children.

In fact, when we attempt to view the American family system today, we see something close to two different subsystems, one primarily involving individuals with college degrees and the other primarily involving those without college degrees. Marriage remains more central to the practices of college-educated adults

than to the practices of adults without college degrees. A larger percentage of college-educated women and men marry during their lifetimes than do those with less education (Anderson & Payne, 2016). According to one projection, 84% of adults with college degrees will ever marry compared with 72% of those without college degrees (Martin, Astone, & Peters, 2014). Moreover, trends in divorce show strong differences by education. During the society-wide increase in divorce in the 1960s and 1970s, the rates rose for all education groups and peaked around 1980 (Martin, 2006). Since then, however, divorce rates have declined much further among the college educated than among those with less education (Schwartz & Han, 2014). As a result of their higher levels of marriage and lower levels of divorce, the percentage of adults who are currently married is higher for the college educated. In 2017, according to the American Community Survey, 63% of college graduates were currently married compared with 52% of those with some college education, 48% of those with a high school degree, and 49% of those without a high school degree (Ruggles et al., 2019). The dividing line here, as in many similar statistics about family life, is between those with a college degree and those without.

In sum, among Americans with college degrees, we see a much greater centering of family life around marriage, whereas for those with less education we see a greater reliance on alternatives to marriage, such as cohabiting unions and lone parenthood, as well as a higher rate of marital dissolution. Virtually all of the characteristics that I presented as related to deinstitutionalization are visible to a much greater extent among Americans without college degrees. It seems clear that among the non-college-educated group we have seen transformational change that has weakened the place of marriage in the field of intimate partnerships. Marriage is much diminished. I would argue that deinstitutionalization has occurred.

Among the college educated, on the other hand, we have seen a lesser degree of change. It is true that they are more likely to have cohabited with their partners prior to marriage than were previous generations of the college educated. They take longer to marry as they complete their education, establish careers, and live with partners (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). Yet their lifetime levels of marriage are higher than among the noncollege graduates

(although lower than the levels of either educational group during the mid-20th century), and lifetime levels of divorce are lower. The overwhelming majority of their children are born within marriages. Consequently, the changes among the college educated in the place of marriage seem developmental rather than transformational. The label of deinstitutionalization does not fit.

One also finds strong racial-ethnic differences in alternatives to marriage in the United States: In particular, the family lives of African Americans have moved sharply away from marriage. Although the rate of increase in non-marital births has been greater for Whites in recent decades (Furstenberg, 2009), a large absolute difference in rates still exists. Of African American births in 2016, 70% were to unmarried women, whereas for non-Hispanic Whites, the figure was 29% (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2018). Among all women giving birth outside of marriage, African American mothers were more likely to be unpartnered (as opposed to cohabiting) than were non-Hispanic White mothers (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015). Of African American households with children younger than age 18 in 2018, 60% were headed by a single (unpartnered) parent compared with 26% of non-Hispanic Whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2018a). As for marriage itself, only 51% of African American women are projected to ever marry; the corresponding figure for non-Hispanic White women is 84% (Martin et al., 2014). In 2017, only 33% of African Americans were currently married, as opposed to 57% of non-Hispanic Whites. Even among college-educated African Americans, less than half (44%) were currently married in 2017 (Ruggles et al., 2019). The weakening of the place of marriage in the field of intimate partnerships has been transformational among African Americans; in this sense, marriage has been deinstitutionalized among them. (Hispanics occupy a middle position between African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites. The same sources referenced in this paragraph show that 53% of all births to Hispanics were to unmarried women in 2016; 33% of households with a child younger than age 18 were headed by a single parent in 2018, and 70% of Hispanics are projected to marry. It is more difficult, therefore, to make an assessment of deinstitutionalization among Hispanics.)

Change Within Marriage

The other component of the deinstitutionalization thesis was that behaviors and expectations within marriage have been altered to the extent that, even among people who are married, one can speak of deinstitutionalization. Here I must conclude that the thesis has not fared as well. In the article, I linked deinstitutionalization to a growing emphasis on individualized rewards in marriage such as personal growth and deeper intimacy (see also Amato, 2009). In contrast, there is less emphasis on the rewards for playing socially valued roles. I wrote, “The result of these changing contexts has been a deinstitutionalization of marriage, in which social norms about family and personal life count for less than they did during the heyday of the companionate marriage” (Cherlin, 2004, p. 853), but one could object that to conclude that deinstitutionalization within marriage has occurred, we would need to see transformational change—a thorough undermining of conventional roles and a preponderance of individualized behavior by spouses—and that we have not witnessed that degree of change. If we have not, then deinstitutionalization has not occurred in any meaningful sense. In a series of articles, Lauer and Yodanis (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010, 2011; Yodanis & Lauer, 2014) have criticized the idea that changes within marriage are large enough to justify the term *deinstitutionalization*. Until and unless we reach the tipping point where individualized behaviors are more common than not, “all we can accurately conclude is that individualized behaviors in marriage are somewhat more common now than they have been in past decades” (Yodanis & Lauer, 2014, p. 188). To support their argument, they examine whether married persons pool their incomes with their spouses using survey data from 30 countries collected in 2002 by the International Social Survey Program. Across all of the country samples, only 6% of married persons said that they kept all of their money separate, and another 11% said that they kept some money separate; 83% pooled all of their money (Lauer & Yodanis, 2011). On this indicator of pooling resources for joint household production, behavior within marriage still seems institutionalized. There is evidence, nevertheless, of some variation in the extent to which beliefs and practices concerning finances within marriage are institutionalized: The authors found that the less traditional a country’s marital practices were, the greater

was the likelihood that a survey respondent in that country would keep some or all of his or her money separate (Lauer & Yodanis, 2011). Moreover, in another study (Eickmeyer et al., 2019) the presence of a stepchild, a potential indicator of a lack of institutionalized rules of family behavior (Cherlin, 1978), was associated with less income pooling of funds among married couples.

Other important norms still support institutionalized behavior within marriage. The norm that men must have steady jobs to be considered as good husbands remains strong. It may be desirable for wives to work, too, but it is not required. In a 2014 national survey, 78% of never-married women said that whether a man had a steady job would be a very important criterion for them in choosing a spouse or partner, whereas just 46% of never-married men said it would be important that their spouse or partner have a steady job (Pew Research Center, 2014). This norm also seems to hold in many European nations (Kurz, Steinhage, & Golsch, 2005; Liefbroer, Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005). Men’s labor market success also is associated with divorce in different-sex marriages. Killewald (2016) examined the Panel Study of Income Dynamics data and found that whether a different-sex married couple will get divorced depends in part on whether the husband has a full-time job, regardless of the wife’s earning potential in the labor market. Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan (2015) analyzed data on the distribution of household income and found evidence that wives appear to avoid situations in which they would earn more than their husbands. It seems that the norm that a husband must be the main breadwinner still exists.

Overall, the internal workings of the institution remain recognizable across social classes. Marriage still is an intimate partnership based on cooperative market and home work and is usually focused on raising children. The division of labor may be different from the breadwinner–homemaker model, but this distinction does not rise to the level of redefining our understanding of marriage. This conclusion suggests that, in the terms of Thornton et al. (2012), changes within the institution have been developmental rather than transformational. That is to say, new practices and beliefs have been layered upon, but have not fundamentally altered, the internal logic of the institution. Within marriage, then, the extent of

change does not seem sufficient to be labeled as deinstitutionalization.

Moreover, some scholars are suggesting a possible reorganization of norms and practices around an even more egalitarian sharing of both paid work and domestic work by wives and husbands (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Goldscheider et al., 2015; Goldscheider & Sassler, 2018). They argue that this development is best understood by postulating three periods of marital life between the mid-20th century and the current day. The first period was characterized by an equilibrium based on gender-role specialization, with the husband doing labor market work and the wife doing domestic work. Then, in a second period, the rising labor force participation of wives disrupted the old equilibrium and ushered in a several-decades-long period of conflict and dissension, as employed wives urged their husbands to do more housework and child care and as many husbands resisted. During this period, family life was buffeted by phenomena such as rising union dissolution rates, falling fertility, and declining marriage. According to these theorists, we are now entering a third period in which a new equilibrium is becoming established. Men in different-sex marriages are doing more work in the home, thus satisfying the wishes of their partners, and the spouses are creating egalitarian partnerships based on the sharing of both market and domestic work. The partners rely on expanded welfare state supports for two-earner families. One might even call it a reinstitutionalization of marriage—and of long-term stable partnerships in many European countries.

It is questionable whether this new equilibrium in which men and women share home and market work in an almost 50–50 fashion will come to dominate family life in the United States. Even in marriages where wives and husbands bargain as equals, some wives choose to take on a larger share of child care. Ridgeway (2011) suggests that deeply ingrained cognitive schemata support a gender essentialism, in which both women and men believe that women are better suited to do the work of caring. Others observers suggest that given an unconstrained choice of roles, some women may simply prefer to do a larger share of child care and may see doing so as displaying autonomy in decision-making (Orloff, 2009). Knight and Brinton (2017) examined gender role attitudes in 17 European countries and found evidence

that survey respondents exhibited more than one kind of egalitarianism with regard to the division of labor. These include a “liberal egalitarianism,” as might be expected, in which both men and women do not believe that the role of housewife is as fulfilling as working outside of the home. They also include an “egalitarian familism” in which individuals believe that both women and men should contribute to the household income but also believe in the importance of motherhood; and they include a “flexible egalitarianism,” in which individuals support women’s autonomous choices about how much paid work and home work to do.

In an informative analysis that speaks to both components of the deinstitutionalization thesis, Treas, Lui, and Gubernskaya (2014) examined trends in responses to the questions on marriage and relationships in the International Social Survey Program from 1988 to 2008. They found consistent evidence confirming the first component of the thesis: Alternatives to marriage were increasingly likely to be endorsed by individuals over time. Across 21 industrialized countries, they found growing support over time for statements such as, “It is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married” and declining support for statements such as “People who want children ought to get married.” For questions relevant to the second component of the thesis—deinstitutionalization within marriage—the evidence was mixed: Only about half of the statements indicating approval of change within marriage showed an increase. For instance, consistent with deinstitutionalization, support dropped for “All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job”; but there was more support over time for the proposition that “a married person having sexual relations with someone other than his or husband or wife” is wrong. The authors conclude, “In general, the change toward deinstitutionalization was more widespread for attitudes about behavior outside than inside the marital institution” (p. 1513).

MARRIAGE AND INDIVIDUALIZATION

Yet even if change in the relations between spouses has been merely developmental, it could still have implications for our understanding of the larger process of the individualization of personal life—the gradual replacement of behavior based on norms, traditions, and laws with behavior based on choices that maximize autonomy

and personal satisfaction. Individuals choose a course of action, then reflect on the consequences of their actions and the actions of those around them, and then choose further action. The social theorists Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have written about the replacement of socially structured personal life with a “do-it-yourself biography”: a personal life that one constructs through one’s own actions and reactions (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In the realm of marriage and family, orderly, predictable sequences of behavior are replaced by the “normal chaos of love” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Similarly, Giddens has written about the “transformation of intimacy,” as relationships that were held together by social norms are replaced by pure relationships that are held together only as long as the individuals involved find it rewarding to maintain them (Giddens, 1992).

In my article, I proposed that an individualistic form of marriage was emerging in the United States. Its key characteristic is the self-development of each spouse: a focus on one’s personal growth and the expression of one’s feelings, as opposed to the satisfaction gained through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent. It requires open communication with one’s partner and flexible, negotiable roles. I think this style is indeed visible in young adults’ search for intimate relationships and their actions within cohabitation and marriage, but an unexpected inversion of the social class differences I have discussed so far has occurred: An inwardly directed, therapeutic language focusing on self-development is now emerging among non-college-educated adults. They tell interviewers of the pain that their upbringing has caused them and of their need to overcome it (Cherlin, 2014; Silva, 2012). They talk about individualistic goals of achieving adulthood, such as recovering not only from childhood trauma but also from recent struggles with drugs and alcohol rather than about conventional goals such as achieving a successful marriage (Silva, 2013, 2019). Nonresident fathers speak of developing their relationships with their children but with little mention of their relationships with their children’s mothers (Edin, Nelson, Cherlin, & Francis, 2019). This self-development-oriented language is surprising because it is the kind of postmaterialist thinking about family and personal life that has been associated in the literature with adults who are affluent enough that they need

not focus on material needs (Inglehart, 1977; Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988). One would expect to find it among more economically advantaged, college-educated young adults, but instead it is also evident among the less economically advantaged.

In the meantime, college-educated spouses seem to have become more committed to their marriages. As I noted earlier, the disproportionately large drop in divorce risk that began in the 1980s among the college educated continued at least through marriages begun in the early 2000s (Schwartz & Han, 2014). We do not know why this large drop in the risk of divorce among the college educated has occurred. I would speculate that it is connected to the high-investment parenting style that requires the time, earnings, and energy of two parents to carry out well. As parents, and particularly mothers, sacrifice success in the labor market to increase the cultural capital of their children in a Bourdieusian sense, they may require a commitment that their partners will remain with them in the long term. In any case, the individualistic character of intimate unions may have peaked among the college educated a few decades ago while continuing, or even increasing, among Americans without college degrees.

CAPSTONE MARRIAGE

Other claims in the article are worth examining. For instance, I wrote that the position of marriage in the transition to adulthood has changed. Whereas in the mid-20th century, when ages at marriage were at historical lows, marriage was the cornerstone—the foundation—of adult personal life; currently it is the capstone: the last piece put in place. In the former period, it was necessary for a couple to marry to have children respectably, it was necessary for them to be married to rent an apartment or buy a home together, and a married man may have been taken more seriously than an unmarried man when applying for a job. In the current period, these activities can be accomplished without marrying, and many couples marry after succeeding in them.

I also claimed that as the practical importance of being married has declined, its symbolic value has remained high and may even have increased. It has become a marker of a successful personal life. This characterization of marriage still seems valid. Ages at marriage have continued

to rise in most Western countries. In the United States, the median age at marriage in 2018 was 29.8 for men and 27.8 for women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2018b)—the highest ages ever recorded by the Census Bureau since it began to keep track in 1890. Even in the interval from 2004, when my article was published, to 2018, the median age at marriage rose more than 2 years for men and for women. On average, marriage comes after the first birth in the United States: Since 1992, the median age at first marriage has been older than the median age at first birth; the gap in 2010 was about 1 year (Arroyo, Payne, Brown, & Manning, 2013). In a comparative perspective, this is actually a modest gap. In Sweden and Norway, a majority of the population still marries, and marriage seems to have gained popularity in Sweden in the 2000s (Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011). However, marriage often occurs well after childbearing starts or even after it is completed. In Norwegian focus groups, participants viewed marriage in symbolic terms, as a way to demonstrate love and commitment and to celebrate the building of a family with a wedding in front of family and friends (Lappegård & Noack, 2015). In the 2002 to 2008 period, the median age at marriage for Norwegian men was 39, 6 years older than the median age of becoming a parent for first time. The median age at marriage for Norwegian women was 38, 8 years older than the age of becoming a parent (Andersson, Thomson, & Duntava, 2017). In Sweden, Holland (2013) noted an increase in marriages in which couples marry after having two children; 17% of married women had followed this pattern by age 50 in the most recent birth cohort she considered. In the 2007 to 2013 period, the median age at marriage in Sweden was 5 years older than the age of becoming a parent for both men and women (Andersson et al., 2017).

Consequently, an observation I made in the article would seem to apply not only to the United States but also to Sweden and Norway: “People marry now less for the social benefits that marriage provides than for the personal achievement it represents” (Cherlin, 2004, p. 857). It may also apply to several other European nations in which the median age at marriage is at least 3 years greater than the median age at first childbirth, including Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, and Georgia (Andersson et al., 2017; Ohlsson-Wijk, 2011). Elsewhere in Europe there is less evidence of caststone marriage. For instance,

focus groups showed little mention of the symbolic value of marriage in Eastern Germany, where the former socialist regime may have devalued marriage (Klärner, 2015). In nations where marriage still has a high value but is no longer a practical necessity, the symbolic value of marriage may be the main reason that couple still wed.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE AND LGBTQ FAMILY LIFE

In the article, I maintained that the growing acceptance of same-sex marriage contributed to deinstitutionalization because it was well outside of the norms for marriage up to that time. However, subsequent events have shown that I underestimated the extent to which the legalization of same-sex marriage could serve as an endorsement of the continuing salience of marriage as an institution, thereby strengthening social norms pertaining to the institution and maintaining and even increasing its symbolic value. Indeed, same-sex marriage was more contentious in the United States than in some other countries because marriage mattered a great deal on a symbolic level. Supporters and opponents fought over whether, on legal and normative levels, marriage should be reserved for different-sex couples. Certainly, there were practical considerations, but advocates for same-sex marriage rejected domestic partnership laws that would have provided same-sex couples with the legal benefits of marriage but reserved marriage itself for different-sex couples. The issue culminated in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), in which Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the majority, proclaimed, “Rising from the most basic human needs, marriage is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations” (p. 3). To exclude same-sex couples, he argued, “thus conflicts with a central premise of the right to marry” (p. 15). To Justice Kennedy, marriage as a legal category rested not on its economic benefits, although those benefits were part of the picture, but on the level of values and norms: Marriage satisfied a basic human need and therefore people should have access to it regardless of sexual orientation.

By 2017, a majority of all same-sex couples who were living together—61%, by one estimate (Gallup Organization, 2017)—had taken advantage of changes in state laws and then in the nation after *Obergefell* by marrying. This

high take-up rate suggests that marriage is a meaningful marker of a successful personal life for many LGBTQ Americans. By extending the laws pertaining to marriage to same-sex couples, *Obergefell* provided them not only with the rights and protections to which married persons are entitled but also with access to the social status of being married. The campaign to legalize same-sex marriage in the United States underscored the extent to which Americans hold marriage in high esteem.

Within marriage, I wrote, same-sex couples had little guidance for what roles to play because most social norms were gendered. I also think that this assessment was questionable. For one thing, there is no reason why same-sex couples cannot negotiate the kind of egalitarian division of labor that seems to be increasing among different-sex couples. In fact, studies suggest that same-sex couples divide housework and child care more equally than do different-sex couples (Goldberg, Smith, & Perry-Jenkins, 2012). Still, many same-sex couples do show of a division of labor when they have children present, with one partner doing more paid work and the other doing more child care (Antecol & Steinberger, 2013; Schneebaum, 2013). Although same-sex couples support the symbolic importance of marriage by choosing to marry, their actions may also broaden some of the taken-for-granted norms about behavior within marriage.

Nevertheless, the percentage of LGBTQ individuals who ever marry may never become as high as among heterosexuals. The substantial amount of same-sex marriage that has occurred in the aftermath of recent court decisions may reflect a backlog of couples who had lived together for many years and were inclined to take advantage of the opportunity to marry; younger couples may not marry in such large numbers in the future. In addition, queer theorists have mounted a challenge to the centrality of marriage and have urged instead a “decentering” of marriage in personal life, that is to say, moving marriage out of the central place it occupies in family life (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Willey, 2016). Indeed, some have questioned the norm of monogamy itself, whether in same-sex or different-sex partnerships, and they have argued that the definition of the family should be expanded to include networks of people who establish close bonds, some of them sexual, but who are not related by

the Bureau of the Census rules of blood, marriage, or adoption—and who do not necessarily live together (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; Schippers, 2016). Currently, we do not have the demographic data to determine what proportion of the gender and sexual minority population have family ties of that decenter marriage and monogamy. Should their numbers prove to be substantial, their family lives would contribute to the deinstitutionalization of marriage.

AN EVALUATION OF THE THESIS

What has happened in recent years to the place of marriage in the broader field of intimate partnerships is consistent with the deinstitutionalization thesis, although primarily among those not college educated. Alternatives to marriage for raising children are more prevalent than in the past. Yet the regulative pillar of law and religious doctrine remains focused on marriage, leaving cohabiting and lone parents without clear guidelines and legal protections. Marriage is a choice, not a requirement; other paths for finding partners and raising children are available. This process has advanced even further elsewhere in the West, such as in Northern Europe, where cohabitation has become an acceptable lifelong alternative to marriage—so much so that family researchers now focus on long-term partnerships rather than on marriages per se. In other areas, such as in Southern Europe, the process is less advanced.

The diminished place of marriage is most striking among Americans without college degrees. They are less likely than college graduates to ever marry and much more likely to have children outside of marriage. Nonmarital childbearing is the majority experience not only among the least educated but also among high school graduates, and it is close to the majority experience among people with some further education but not a college degree. Increasingly, the children of those not college educated are born to couples who are in cohabiting relationships that, unlike long-term stable partnerships in Europe, have high rates of dissolution. A focus on how individuals navigate the field of intimate partnerships therefore reveals a clear social class divide: Change has been transformational among the non-college-graduate adults who, despite increases in the educational attainment of the population, still greatly outnumber college graduates. (According to the Current Population

Survey, 62% of 25- to 44-year-olds did not have a bachelor's degree or higher in 2017 [author's calculations].) If the phrase "deinstitutionalization of marriage" fits anywhere, it is here.

In contrast, marriage still plays a central role in the field of intimate partnerships among the college educated. Granted, some change has occurred: Most college-educated young adults now cohabit with a partner prior to marrying, and their lifetime levels of marriage are lower than in the mid-20th century. Yet most still marry, although they do so at later ages than in the past. They overwhelmingly wait until after marrying to have their first child. They pool two incomes and invest heavily in activities that increase their children's cultural capital. College-educated husbands have increased their share of domestic work, although even among them, women still do more than half of the housework and child care (Sayer, 2016). Change has occurred, but it has been developmental rather than transformational; marriage is still an integral part the life course.

As for the second part of the thesis—whether behavior within marriage has changed to the extent that one can speak of deinstitutionalization—one must conclude that, on balance, it has not. To be sure, married partners (as well as long-term cohabiting partners) have a greater choice in how to structure their relationships than in the past, when a gendered division of labor was normative. Among different-sex couples, men do more work in the home than in the past, and women do more work for pay outside the home. The available options include lifestyles that few married couples in the past followed, such as living-apart relationships. Public opinion increasingly rejects the view that wives' employment is detrimental to family life. Although male dominance and family violence have not disappeared, bargaining between the spouses is the more common way that decisions are made. The mixture of persistence and change that we have witnessed within marriage suggests more modest developmental change rather than transformational change.

Nevertheless, the idea of capstone marriage, which I introduced in the article, still seems relevant. The median ages at marriage of American women and men have continued to rise and now stand at historically unprecedented levels. Pre-marital cohabitation has become the norm: 70% of women who first married between 2010 and

2014 cohabited with their spouses beforehand (Hemez & Manning, 2017b). Among women who are cohabiting with the father of their child at the time they first give birth, there is a slow but steady transition to marriage: 11% marry the father within a year, 44% within 5 years, and 63% after 10 years (Musick & Michelmore, 2018). Having a first child occurs before marriage for a majority or near majority of all educational groups except college graduates. Young adults tell sociologists that they do not want to marry until they are sure it will work financially (Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). They tend to see an economic bar that they must clear before marrying (Ishizuka, 2018; Watson & McLanahan, 2011). Marriage for many is the last step into adulthood rather than the first, unlike in the mid-20th century. It becomes a celebration of their personal achievements, a symbol of their success that they can celebrate with family and friends.

Overall, we have seen profound change in the place of marriage in the broader field of intimate partnerships but more moderate change in how spouses act within marriages. This contrast suggests that change can occur in the relationship between a social institution and its alternatives without as much change in how the institution functions internally. Marriage is one of many paths to adulthood today, but we still recognize what goes on within it despite social change. What has happened to marriage also suggests that the nature and extent of change in an institution can vary by the social class of the individuals involved. As classes struggle to maintain advantages, to be freed of constraints, or to obtain greater power, institutional change can occur in an asymmetric way that produces advantages for some classes and disadvantages for others. Although the deinstitutionalization of American marriage—or of intimate partnerships more broadly—may not have occurred across the board, as I claimed, a close study of the what has transpired during the past decade and a half may still help us to better understand how social institutions evolve.

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