Who would have guessed that the institution of marriage was in so much trouble? In the midst of the battle over same-sex marriage, which seems to be all about declaring marriage something worth fighting for, everyone else seems to be worrying about whether the family as a social institution, and marriage along with it, are collapsing into nothingness, dragging with them all that we value in our daily lives. Most of the articles prepared for this issue try to address this issue, arguing that marriage is evolving out of existence, that it is being replaced by cohabitation or some other domestic configuration, or that it can readily adapt to any challenges being thrown its way. Reading these essays was a bit like being surrounded by children battling over their mothers' virtues—"your mama's never getting married," versus "she is too." So is this a real issue, or are academics who specialize in the study of marriage and the family just trying to drum up business? A number of themes present themselves in these contributions, and I tackle them one by one, adding my comments to the mix as I proceed.

I come to this topic from two perspectives, first as a cultural anthropologist, and second as a specialist in U.S. cultures, particularly in ethnographic studies of lesbian and gay families. That background colors my reading of the articles in a number of ways. As an anthropologist, I find it problematic to universalize from patterns that obtain in U.S. cultures, or to assume American cultural formations as normative in any way. Even when studying middle-class Americans, the questions I ask are filtered through the cross-cultural lens that is the hallmark of anthropology as much as they are shaped by a commitment to an ethic of cultural relativism. Although this relativism is not absolute and can permit for public intervention, it does mean that I assume that people's real lives and their accounts of those lives *make sense* in some way, particularly if one takes the time to understand them contextually.

My location in cultural anthropology also commits me to research methods that are based in ethnographic fieldwork and that depend on long-term participant observation undertaken in natural settings. It generally precludes experimental methods and particularly leads me to question the validity of research that occurs in artificial locations such as laboratories. Although some anthropologists conceptualize their work as social science and make use of forms of measurement and statistical verification that are familiar to sociologists and demographers, I consider myself a practitioner of an interpretive discipline, and, insofar as the ethnographic product is highly contingent and situationally variable, emphatically not a scientist.

I also come to these articles after a long career of studying family formations that seemingly hover at the margins of culture, and with a commitment to understanding how agency and pragmatic action motivates conditions often taken to be simply "natural." My first book, *Lesbian Mothers: Accounts of Gender in American Culture* (Lewin, 1993), compared the narratives produced by lesbian mothers and heterosexual single mothers, locating their stories in themes that revealed shared cultural phrasings of motherhood. In that work, my concern was to understand how lesbian mothers, who most people saw as a bundle of cultural contradictions—if not outright oxymoronic—constructed their identities and made sense of their dual position as lesbians and as mothers. I sought to document the narrative strategies they used in this process, and to describe how they

responded to the varied challenges they faced as mothers, particularly as lesbian mothers. What I found was a story far more embedded in what might be considered the hegemonic ideology of motherhood than I ever anticipated, a story that allowed lesbian mothers to claim motherhood as a source of personal goodness and as an identity to which they had an entitlement grounded in nature. I also found, seemingly paradoxically, that both lesbian and heterosexual mothers whose stories I gathered framed motherhood as an accomplishment or achievement that demonstrated their competence and individual agency.

In a more recent book project, *Recognizing Ourselves* (Lewin, 1998), I looked at the ritual content of same-sex weddings, all performed prior to the current same-sex marriage debate and therefore completely outside the legal domain. In this project, I was concerned to understand what couples who staged ceremonies—and these were enormously various in their form and content—wanted to achieve. Viewing the ceremonies as both performances and as rituals, I focused on couples' expressed objectives but also on the ways in which different ceremonial elements sometimes conveyed messages that were less intentional. In particular, I was fascinated by the interplay of accommodation and resistance, regardless of whether these were explicitly articulated, and by how messages of conformity and subversion both collided with and reinforced one another in virtually all of the ceremonies. Another question I explored was what made these rituals worth having, considering that they were often expensive and always consumed a lot of emotional and organizational energy, but provided no concrete or legal benefits. Concurring with some other anthropologists and cultural studies scholars who have studied weddings, I found that these ceremonial occasions offer excellent opportunities for elaborating various kinds of messages about identities and communities not explicitly related to marriage or the relationship. Participants used their weddings to claim a place in ethnic or other communities, to make statements about their relationship to God, to situate their bonds in a discourse of nature, and to affirm their connections with either the mainstream culture or with subversions of that culture, among other agendas. Many of the attributes of weddings were revealed in my analysis to be markers of legitimacy and belonging, and in all of the ceremonies, considerable effort was directed toward demonstrating the authenticity of claims being made by brides or grooms. Most fundamentally, they were concerned that these rituals would be read as "weddings." Such elements as conventional wedding gifts, religious settings, clergy as officiants, texts that focused on love as the foundation for marriage and as a transcendent and ultimately unquestionable emotion, and the presence of persons from outside the gay/lesbian community—especially kin—among the guests were all markers of the claim that the event in question was *really* a wedding. This was true even in the absence of legal recognition.

All of this means that my approach to marriage is filtered through a particular set of theoretical, methodological, and topical concerns. I view marriage less as a concrete demographic condition (though it is, of course, that) than as a discursive arena within which many different kinds of statements can be made. Marriage offers people ways to comment on themselves to a variety of audiences, as well as to reflect on their own experience and identity.

On to the articles. First, we have the matter of cohabitation, the focus of two of the articles: Seltzer's (2004) account of demographic patterns in the United States and Great Britain, and Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk's (2004) study of similar issues in Canada. Although the authors were invited to describe changing patterns of marriage and cohabitation, I still am puzzled by the authors' preoccupation with definitions that may be theirs alone, and by their reluctance to frame their discussion within the more normative discourse that surely drives it. My first impulse is to ask the authors why we should care whether people get legally married or cohabitate unless we partake of a prescriptive vision of "the family" and seek to impose it as broadly as possible. Le Bourdais and Lapierre-Adamcyk regale us with statistics about cohabitation versus marriage in Canada, including the intriguing difference between Québec and the rest of the nation, only to speculate that "maybe" the difference has something to do with rebellion against the longtime dominance of the Catholic Church in Québec. Or maybe not, they then suggest, recalling that Sweden has a comparable pattern, but lacks a similar history of Catholicism. I find this perplexing, because it seems to me that a number of basic concerns are not addressed. After all, Canadians still join in unions on some basis and still have children. And because Canada has enacted progressive legal measures that protect the rights of couples and children in common-law families, marriage seems to have moved from being an assumed stage of adulthood to constituting a way for people to situate themselves culturally. Do people in Québec eschew legal marriage because they want to make clear their independence from the Catholic Church? Do changing roles of women and men motivate their decisions? And is there evidence that they benefit from more gender equality than people in Canada's other provinces? There should be data that could answer this question, even if one is loath to talk to any actual people. And more to the point, if "cohabitation and marriage constitute two different forms of conjugal engagement" with cohabitation offering "a greater equality and professional autonomy of partners, whereas marriage rests on greater specialization and complementarity between spouses," as they argue, what then does it mean to conclude that "cohabitation remains an alternative to rather than a *true substitute* to marriage" (p. 940; emphasis added)?

Seltzer's (2004) approach is a bit more measured, though she still seems preoccupied with the durability of cohabitation as compared with marriage. Perhaps paradoxically, she acknowledges that marriage is "still a highly valued state" (p. 926) even as it decreases in frequency. But she argues that this is merely a time-out from business as usual, concluding that "cohabitation is … not an alternative to marriage in the sense that cohabitation is not on an equal footing with marriage in the kinship system," and that "cohabitation lacks the formal and informal supports that marriage has" (p. 926). One might argue in response that the demographic facts speak for themselves; if people are not getting married, then whatever they are doing instead simply *is* an alternative. The authors of both of these demographic articles seem to be strangely reluctant to stand by the demographic data as conveying something real and authentic.

Other articles in this issue concern themselves with the matter of sustaining, supporting, and strengthening marriage. But how marriage is defined for the purposes of research turns out to be more elusive than one might expect, considering that the rest of the articles are all drawn from studies conducted in the United States. Bradbury and Karney

(2004), for example, seem to understand marriage as a bundle of personality traits and interpersonal skills that can be enacted as readily in a laboratory as in real life. From the perspective of my admittedly ethnographic bias, these personality traits are strangely disembodied, impervious to the context and constraint that must surely be provided by cultural, economic, and structural variation. Individuals offer each other "positive affect" or not; spouses *report* (my emphasis) high or low degrees of marital quality, all under the contrived circumstances of the laboratory, and never do Bradbury and Karney consider how these results may themselves be artifacts of the experimental situation they have created. They do try to cover the notion of context with mention of things they call "variables"—clinical or even pathological factors with labels such as "acute stress"—suggesting that these attributes are part of the "rich context" within which marriages actually take place. But again, the preoccupation here is with reducing activities and behaviors laden with meaning to something that can be measured and subjected to statistical analysis. Even so, Bradbury and Karney cannot account for the patterns that they observe without considering the impact of structural factors. In the end, they conclude that,

[W]e should not overlook the value of bypassing couples and lobbying for change in environments and conditions that impinge on marriages and families. Although it may be difficult to discern their effects in experimental designs, we can expect that the availability of reliable child care, safer neighborhoods, affordable housing, higher wages, and improved access to high-quality medical care would have far-reaching consequences for enhancing couple and family well being. (p. 876)

I would think that these "variables" need to be the starting point of any meaningful inquiry into marital behavior, rather than something raised only when observed patterns do not fall into place.

Unfortunately, not all researchers who are concerned with patterns of marital behavior at the individual level seem ready to consider factors beyond the couple as a laboratory sample. Kurdek's (2004) article brings lesbian and gay couples directly into the discussion, an important advance over the usual erasure of these couples and their families from the sociological literature. Understandably, his approach draws on a heternormative discourse that reminds us of the rare circumstances under which such subject matter "dared to speak its name" in mainstream journals until very recently. Although accepting these ground rules was probably the only way that lesbian and gay relationships could make even a fleeting appearance, it leads to what I consider a deeply flawed reading of the current debate over same-sex marriage, one that we need to carefully evaluate.

Kurdek (2004) begins with the premise that debate over same-sex marriage is grounded in the perception that gay and lesbian couples are "different" from heterosexual married couples at the level of "relationship quality," and that reassurance that such difference does not really exist will clear up lingering resistance. Besides the fact that he presents no evidence that concerns with these sorts of differences are the source of the passionate controversy filling our daily newspapers, I think that Kurdek commits a serious tactical

error in eliding possible areas of common experience between gay and straight couples in his sampling strategy. The couples who make up his research population are childless homosexual couples, with two groups of heterosexual couples, parents and nonparents, constituting the comparison group.

What kind of comparison is this? Does the presence of children not have something to do with "relationship quality," at the very least? Kurdek (2004) is frank in reporting that his sample was predominantly White and college educated—though he does not say why he settled for this—but he is less self-conscious in selecting psychological traits that he thinks are worth testing in an examination of lesbian and gay couples. Lesbian partners, we learn, are more likely than heterosexual parents to see themselves as extraverted "because lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to describe themselves in terms of the masculine attributes indicative of agency and self-efficacy" (p. 889). Is this statement based on anything beyond the crudest gender stereotypes? Would it hold up if lesbian mothers were being compared with heterosexual mothers? And to what extent do results that point to such generalizations emerge from experimental situations where investigator bias skews subject responses? Kurdek does not question the validity of findings that depend on "reported" behaviors that emerge from responses to contrived (and value-laden) questions such as, "I spend as much time with my partner as possible." He takes positive responses to this item to be markers of intimacy when they could easily be read in other ways—say, as indicators of insecurity or conformity. And although he cites Christopher Carrington's important study of lesbian and gay domesticity, *No Place Like Home* (Carrington, 1999), he fails to consider one of that book's primary contributions: its interrogation of self-report through direct observations of what people *really* do in their homes and daily lives, a perspective that can only be achieved through arduous ethnographic fieldwork.

Perhaps even more troubling, Kurdek (2004) normalizes a particular construction of heterosexual marriage, and then simply compares lesbian and gay couples with that model. But even so, he suggests that the lack of marriage rights for same-sex couples is actually an advantage because they can conveniently separate without the burden of legal, religious, and in-law ties. This is an alarming conclusion on several grounds. Many same-sex couples become entangled at these very levels, but lack the protections that legal divorce can provide to help them through the process of breaking up. Some have solemnized their relationships in religious ceremonies and consider those bonds to be serious, and many have complicated property and financial arrangements that link them legally. Nor is it unusual for same-sex couples to forge elaborate family and in-law relationships, particularly if they have children. It is breakups of couples with children that have produced some very troubling disputes, such as when birth mothers argue that their former spouses' roles as coparents do not constitute "real" relationships worthy of shared custody or visitation rights. With this in mind, I cannot help but feel that the notion that gay and lesbian couples can walk away from their relationships without institutional disruption—however well intentioned its origins—colludes with the some of the most pernicious stereotypes in current circulation.

Not all of the authors seem to assume that the mission of family research is to preserve marriage as an institution without regard to the contexts in which it occurs. Huston and Melz (2004), for example, take up the matter of real obstacles to marriage and consider the ways in which such constraints reflect the agency of actors. For low-income families, particularly for those in which men are unlikely to be successful providers or trustworthy partners, marriage may be neither a realistic nor a logical goal. These women, who accurately assess the abilities of the pool of available men, may judge themselves more able to care for children and carry out the other responsibilities associated with family life without "help" from men. In these instances, avoidance of marriage is evidence not of individual pathology or poor interpersonal skills, but of strategic decision making that needs to be supported rather than questioned and devalued.

In their article on marriage in Hispanic populations, Oropesa and Landale (2004) also seek to consider the effects of context on the constitution of marriage. What I found most compelling in their article, though it was not developed in detail, was their discussion of how marital patterns may reflect notions of *Hispanicity*, thereby questioning models of individual choice and autonomy that they argue are normative for understanding mainstream marriage in the United States. This insight resonates with findings in my own research on lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies that showed how celebrations of unions may elaborate messages beyond the relationship itself, including statements about ethnicity, specific community affiliations, or other particular identities. Marriage in this configuration is about much more than the emotional lives of couples, but rather emerges as a force in the process of maintaining ethnic identity, and indeed, constructing continuing definitions of that identity.

The authors ask, importantly, whether exogamous unions produce children who are "Hispanic." This is not a question that can be resolved by applying external definitions of ethnicity; it depends on how meanings are imposed on particular persons, and how those persons interpret those meanings and use them to identify themselves. But it is a question that provides an approach to marital patterns that problematizes the facticity of Hispanic as an identity by emphasizing the varied cultural and material circumstances of different populations who trace their origins to Latin America. If we read this article alongside the perspective put forward by Huston and Melz (2004), we can begin to confront the complicated questions of meaning and identity that conspire with structural constraints to produce pragmatic approaches to marriage.

I want to end these comments with my responses to Cherlin's (2004) article, "The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage," a thoughtful piece that does much to address the limitations of the other contributions, and that particularly solidifies the insights of the two articles I have just discussed. Cherlin does a number of very important things in this article. First, he interrogates the model of *individualized* marriage for its reliance on "personal choice and self-development." This strategy enables him to discuss the pattern he calls *deinstitutionalization* without calling for measures such as the Healthy Marriage Initiative or other mandates to "save" marriage. Rather, he understands that changes in marital patterns need to be observed, documented, and interpreted, not lamented and attacked. If a particular kind of legal marriage is less prevalent or organized

differently—occurring later in life, often after periods of cohabitation, and more readily dissolved—the job of social scientists is to understand these pathways rather than to pathologize those who take them.

Further, Cherlin (2004) argues that the emergence of same-sex marriage offers compelling key evidence of the ongoing story of deinstitutionalization. He points to the ways in which same-sex marriage enshrines the changes he speaks of elsewhere in the article, particularly the transition from a companionate model to an ideology of individualized marriage that he traces to the mid-20th century, and the emergent notion of personal intimacy as the crux of marital bonds. If individuals seek uniquely emotional rewards through marriage, same-sex marriage is as logically viable as any other sort of union. Given the flexibility that this ideology offers those who might or might not marry, and the many institutional obstacles to marriage, he then asks the really crucial question: Why do so many people marry or want to marry? Asking a question that turns the conventional discourse of most marriage research on its head, Cherlin can comment on marriage as a *cultural* good—as a practice steeped in symbolic significance, not "the foundation of adult personal life … [but] the capstone" (p. 855). He continues, "It is something to be achieved through one's own efforts rather than something to which one routinely accedes." This insight leads him to the observation that marriage is often particularly valued and desired among those who are least likely to be able to achieve it—the poor, and, I would now add, same-sex couples. Its evolution from an ordinary and wholly predictable life passage to a marker of prestige is played out in the growing elaboration of weddings and the trend for couples themselves to finance their wedding ceremonies.

Cherlin's (2004) approach is noteworthy in that it situates same-sex marriage within cultural patterns that are ongoing rather than as a demand to overturn family life as we know it—or think we know it. He offers a model that allows scholars to incorporate seemingly disparate trends—demographic data that seem to suggest a waning interest in marriage and the parallel longings of the disenfranchised (the poor, same-sex couples) for entrance into its embrace. Uniformity of expression need not be a requirement for marriage or any other social institution to be central to our lives; like consumption, marriage can be culturally enacted in its absence and when it is present.

I would suggest here that whether marriage has a future is not for us to decide. The rigid definitions that scholars bring to this question are more likely to impede than facilitate understanding, because, as Cherlin (2004) shows, meaning is a more stable indicator of importance than specific behaviors and practices. At their best, articles in this issue speak to the concrete conditions that shape marriage as an institution and to the structures of meaning and interpretation that people use to understand their relationships, whether they succeed in achieving them or only use them to think about themselves. What these articles abundantly demonstrate is that researchers have a stake in these developments as much as anyone. The articles stand not only as research reports and analysis but also as evocative statements of how culture defines what *should be* as much as what *is*, for both researchers and ordinary people.

Cherlin's (2004) article in particular offers a useful perspective for thinking about same-sex marriage, and for understanding why it has become such an important arena for activism. Although advocates for marriage have stressed the bundle of rights and entitlements that come with marriage, the attention he gives to the symbolic significance of marriage can help us understand both why many lesbians and gay men are so passionate about securing marriage rights and why the separate-but-equal civil union option is so profoundly unsatisfactory. On one hand, more than 1,000 specific rights are restricted to heterosexually married couples, including tax benefits, pension rights, child custody, and survivor benefits—in other words, most entitlements that have to do with being someone's next of kin. These benefits are not trivial. They can directly affect the ability of lesbian and gay people to survive under particular conditions, particularly if they have low incomes and cannot afford the legal assistance needed to circumvent some of these legal disabilities.

But I would argue that as marks of legitimacy and authenticity, these entitlements are even more vital. They mediate the ability to claim a particular identity in the context of one's community, and they intervene in situations where shame may preclude naming one's most important relationships. In other words, they have to do with the dignity with which lesbians and gay men move through life, and not incidentally, with their access to rights that mark full citizenship. My research on same-sex commitment ceremonies mentioned earlier revealed a pattern within which couples claimed legitimacy through extralegal commitment ceremonies. Couples reported that these ritual occasions were transformative moments that often motivated actions—such as making their relationships public to family and employers—that they might not have otherwise contemplated. In other words, weddings, even in the absence of official recognition, conferred a sense of authenticity and legitimacy on couples, much in the same way that Cherlin's (2004) account details the symbolic benefits of marriage.

Early information coming from same-sex couples who have been legally married in Canada and in some of the U.S. locations where renegade public officials have provided such services (San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; and New Paltz, New York, as of this writing) indicates that state sanctioning can provide a far more powerful feeling of legitimacy than extralegal solemnization. One member of a couple who was married in New Paltz, for example, said that he and his partner "sat down in the front of the bus for the first time and began a new phase of our lives together." By drawing on this image from the Black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, he not only situated the struggle for same-sex marriage in an honorable protest tradition but he also alluded to the psychological damage done by discrimination that was at the heart of moral opposition to racial segregation. This evocation of full citizenship, and the sense of entitlement that couples gain from it, far outstrips the value of the various material benefits often cited in discussions about same-sex marriage. In other words, gay and lesbian couples, like others in our culture, marry not in hope of receiving health insurance and other entitlements (although those benefits are certainly attractive), but because they want to make particular kinds of public statements about themselves and their relationship. The benefits serve as markers of authenticity, as do many other material and textual elements of the occasion, and state approval may be the most potent symbol of such legitimacy. Lesbians

and gay men need to mark their accomplishments just as others in our society do, and as Cherlin (2004) argues so effectively, marriage has come to be a particularly important expression of adult achievement.

That this issue is dedicated to the future of marriage rather than the future of the family as a social institution is an enormously significant choice, perhaps particularly for same-sex couples and the aspirations that they have begun to voice. Most Americans understand "family" to mean children, with or without a spouse, and it is clear that families, although intersecting with marriage much of the time, also operate somewhat independently of that peculiar institution. This is true whether we speak of divorce rates, low rates of marriage among the poor, or classes of people who do not have the right to marry. My research, although seemingly situated at the margins of conventional family formations, has shown me that the particular forms of marriage or family that lesbians and gay men (or others who are disenfranchised in some way) experience do not necessarily define how they identify themselves. But it also convinces me that just as "family" is in the eye of the beholder or the participant, and cannot be limited by arbitrary and prescriptive definitions, so our understanding of "marriage" needs to stretch beyond rigid typologies. Marriage, like family, is both something people *do* and something they *think*—in many different and equally valuable ways—and it is vital that our scholarship reflect that reality.

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