

Introduction to “The Meaning of Marriage Matters” Essays

The meaning of marriage is hardly fixed in granite; over time and space, marriage has changed.¹ In some ways this has been good news. There have been some pretty ugly warts on this crucial social institution, distortions that weakened marriage’s positive effects on individuals and society.

For much of time and space (and still in some darker corners of our society and across the world), marriage meant the subordination of women to their husbands and strict limitations on non-domestic roles. Today, legally and culturally, we define marriage as the union of two equal partners and appreciate much greater flexibility and fluidity in marital behavior. Also, the more impersonal, structural bonds of husband–wife roles have become less central to marriage, displaced by the potential of deep psychological bonds of intimate equals, even if that psychological intimacy is a less sticky glue to hold marital unions together.² Also, in the past there was more acceptance of husbands’ violence and abuse against wives. Today, we are much more aware of such ugliness, condemn it culturally, and try to prosecute it legally, even while acknowledging that we still have some distance to go to remove this stain from marriage.

These changes to the institution of marriage likely afford a richer form of love for more couples than in the past,³ and probably increase the benefits that marriage provides to women, men, children, and society. So it seems that marriage today should be a stronger institution and a healthier place for all. But it’s not, and that’s frustrating. It should be stronger, but other recent changes to the meaning of marriage have pushed in the other direction, weakening the institution, making it harder to do the essential tasks society needs marriage to do for children and adults.

The meaning of marriage matters for how it accomplishes its work. But as we listen to many people today or read what they think, we increasingly hear the word “whatever,” or something similar. The meaning of marriage is whatever two people make it to be. Marriage is more and more a privatized commodity and less and less a public institution that guides our behavior. But what marriage means matters to the capacity of the institution to bless the lives of children, women, and men.⁴ “Whatever” doesn’t work well when it comes to the meaning of marriage because meaning quietly but powerfully shapes our attitudes and behaviors.

So, in a series of essays for this website, we explore recent changes to the meaning of marriage and their impact on individuals, families, and society. Essay #1, “[Capstones vs. Cornerstones: Diverging Blueprints for Modern Marriage](#),” takes on the complex change that is shifting marriage from the cornerstone of young adult life to its capstone—signaling accomplishment of a set of tasks and personal achievements and pushing back the timing of marriage. While this emerging model of marriage may work well for some, for many others it can lead to ineffective, even paradoxical preparation for marriage; elevated risk of re-sequencing family formation; putting parenting before marriage; and placing marriage beyond the perceived reach of too many young people today.

In essay #2, “[Permanence vs. Divorce: Finding a Safe Place to Keep Our Hearts](#),” we explore what how high rates of divorce and relaxed attitudes about divorce make it easier for unhealthy

marriages to end, but at the same time made it harder for all of us to aspire to forever. It's tougher now to trust that marriage is a safe place to keep our hearts. As a result, the decision to marry is bigger and harder to make, and the fear that marriage may not be permanent may restrain our ability to fully commit.

In essay #3, "Same-sex Marriage: Gender Complementarity vs. Gender Irrelevance," we take on the challenging question of how legalization of same-sex marriage changes the meaning of marriage and what effects that may have on the institution of marriage. The law now has removed gender complementarity from the meaning of marriage. In the essay, we explore specifically whether the legalization of same-sex marriage over time may diminish men's connection to marriage and fatherhood by legally eliminating gender from its meaning. If this occurs, it will mean that even more children grow up without a present and engaged father.

In future essays, we plan to explore how the meaning of marriage has changed from a more child-centric focus to a more adult-centric focus and what that may mean for children. Also, we will look into the problem of increasing sexual infidelity and investigate how modern sexual mores and practices change marriage. We also explore in more depth an important positive change to marriage: how gender roles have evolved and the emergence of the norm of equal partnership between wives and husbands.

Some Things to Know about the Essays

Authors: Most essays have multiple authors listed in an accompanying footnote. Dr. Alan J. Hawkins has coordinated the collaborative project and has been deeply involved in the writing of many of the essays. All authors are recognized scholars, most of them professors in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University. However, the essays do not necessarily represent the thinking and views of every faculty member in the BYU School of Family Life, or BYU's sponsoring institution, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Order: Each essay stands on its own, so the order of the essays is not crucial. But as a result, this means there is some minor overlap between the essays.

Short and Long: For each of the essays, we include a shorter version abstracted from a longer version that treats the subject in more depth and with more academic citations. Some will want the greater depth and detail of the longer essays while others will appreciate the brevity of the shorter versions.

Lecture Doodles: Some of the essays are accompanied by an animated lecture or "lecture doodle" that summarizes the basic message of the essay with an animated learning tool. We hope these brief, animated summaries will help to communicate the basic message of the essay in a more engaging way and perhaps stimulate further interest in reading the essay.

Videos: Also, some of the essays are accompanied by a brief, “on-the-street interview” video of people talking about their personal thoughts about the essay’s topic. We hope these brief videos can prime viewers’ thinking about the topic and increase their interest to invest some intellectual time and effort in the essays.

Endnotes:

¹ Coontz, S. (2005). *Marriage, a history: How love conquered marriage*. New York: Penguin Books.

² Cherlin, A. J. (2004). The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 848–861.

³ Cherlin, A. J. (2004). The deinstitutionalization of American marriage. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 848–861; Coontz, S. (2005). *Marriage, a history: How love conquered marriage*. New York: Penguin Books.

⁴ Girgis, S., Anderson, R. T., & George, R. P. (2012). *What is marriage? Man and woman: A defense*. New York: Encounter Books.