

The Meaning of Marriage Matters, Part 3: Same-sex Marriage: Gender Complementarity vs. Gender Irrelevance¹

The tremors you felt on June 26, 2015, were aftershocks from the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that the constitutional right to marry included same-sex couples. As a result, same-sex marriage is now legal in all U.S. states (and 20 other countries).² And gender, or biological sex, is no longer legally relevant to the definition of marriage. This essay raises the question of what it means when biological sex is removed from the legal meaning of marriage and how that might impact the institution of marriage. What does it mean when marriage no longer solely means the union of a man and a woman?

Exploring this question involves a good deal of guessing, of course, for several reasons. First, the pace at which this change has occurred means that we haven't had much time to catch our collective breath and think about what the change means beyond allowing same-sex couples to choose to marry. Perhaps a bigger reason for the speculative nature of this topic is that the change is a shift from something so fundamental and universal that until about 20 years ago, it had a taken-for-granted, imponderable status to it. We haven't had a lot of cognitive warm-up for this challenging intellectual task. But it is an important question that we raise, even if we are handicapped by time and tradition as we start this journey of understanding. The quest for insight will be a long, slow journey, we think, and we will only be able to view a few vistas in this essay.

As we begin, we choose not to get stuck on whether the five Supreme Court justices who voted to legalize same-sex marriage

have the moral authority—or the wisdom—to change the meaning of marriage for society. Four justices who wrote dissenting opinions in the case said the Court did not have such authority or wisdom and should not have ruled as it did. But same-sex marriage is now the law of the land.

As the Court admits, marriage may be society's most enduring and essential institution. As with any institution, changing the basic definition and social understanding of marriage will change the behavior of its members. We believe that redefining marriage away from its historically gendered purposes will have significant consequences.

Removing gender from the legal meaning of marriage does not mean that men and women will no longer marry; the vast majority of marriages will continue to be heterosexual unions. What it means is that the gender composition of marriage is now a private matter, a personal choice, not a legal requirement or even a public expectation. "Whatever" is now the answer to the question, "What is the gender composition of marriage?" What does *whatever* mean? And what are the implications of "whatever"? If there are benefits to this change for same-sex individuals and their families, are there also risks for heterosexual society that accompany this redefinition of the meaning of marriage?

A Supreme Court Vision of Marriage

Before launching on this intellectual journey, however, it may help to clarify what the five Supreme Court justices said about the institution of marriage in the opinion that legalized same-sex marriage.

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

“No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family.”³

“From their beginning to their most recent page, the annals of human history reveal the transcendent importance of marriage. The lifelong union of a man and a woman always has promised nobility and dignity to all persons, without regard to their station in life. Marriage is sacred to those who live by their religions and offers unique fulfillment to those who find meaning in the secular realm. Its dynamic allows two people to find a life that could not be found alone, for a marriage becomes greater than just the two persons. Rising from the most basic human needs, marriage is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations.”⁴

“This Court’s cases and the Nation’s traditions make clear that marriage is a keystone of our social order.”⁵

And, “the State itself makes marriage all the more precious by the significance it attaches to it.”⁶

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

“Far from seeking to devalue marriage, the petitioners seek it for themselves because of their respect—and need—for its privileges and responsibilities. And

their immutable nature dictates that same-sex marriage is their only real path to this profound commitment.”⁷

The majority of the Court ruled to legalize same-sex marriage largely because of its high esteem for the institution and the benefits it provides its members and society. Of course, many contemporary scholars of marriage are not nearly so enamored with the institution of marriage and point out its warts and flaws both yesterday and today, even questioning its relevance to our future.⁸ And oddly, as one scholar observed, the liberationist cause against marriage—“freedom *from* marriage”—appears to be picking up cultural steam just as the conservative case for same-sex marriage—“freedom *to* marry”—has won the day politically.⁹ But the Court does not go there. The apparent esteem it holds for marriage was a basic reason for deciding that same-sex couples should have the right to marry; it was not interested in debate about the modern value of the institution.

Moreover, in its ruling, the Court attempted to be respectful of those who do not believe same-sex marriage is right or wise:

“Marriage, in their view [those who oppose same-sex marriage], is by its nature a gender-differentiated union of man and woman. This view long has been held—and continues to be held—in good faith by reasonable and sincere people here and throughout the world.”¹⁰

“Many who deem same-sex marriage to be wrong reach that conclusion based on decent and honorable religious or philosophical premises, and neither they nor their beliefs are disparaged here.”¹¹

(Elsewhere in the Court’s opinion, however, the justices also equated opposition to same-sex marriage with racial bigotry, gender discrimination, and demeaning the dignity of homosexual persons and their children. How the Court is respectful of “reasonable and sincere” persons with such “decent and honorable” motives and sentiments is not clarified.)

Nevertheless, the Court reasoned that the gender composition of marriage is not an essential element of marriage’s meaning and purpose. In effect, the Court removed gender or biological sex as a defining pillar, replacing it with sexual orientation or preference—sexual attraction and love—as a more fundamental structural post. The Court admitted that historically the universal understanding of marriage has been the union of a man and a woman. But they also highlighted that marriage has not been a fixed institution over time:

“The ancient origins of marriage confirm its centrality, but it has not stood in isolation from developments in law and society. The history of marriage is one of both continuity and change. That institution—even as confined to opposite-sex relations—has evolved over time.”¹²

The Court reasoned that, “changed understandings of marriage are characteristic of a Nation where new dimensions of freedom become apparent to new generations.”¹³ Also, “The nature of injustice is that we may not always see it in our times. ... When new insight reveals discord between the Constitution’s central protections and a received legal stricture [i.e., excluding same-sex couples from marriage], a claim to liberty must be addressed.”¹⁴

There have been many changes over time and space to the practice of marriage. The Court pointed to some positive changes. Specifically, the justices cite the change from family-arranged marriages (for familial, social, economic, or political purposes) to individual choice of a spouse (based on personal love) as a progressive development in the cultural understanding of human relations. The Court also cited the rejection of coverture—subordinating or subsuming a woman’s legal rights within marriage to those of her husband in order to enact oneness in marriage—as an important legal and cultural development to the institution of marriage that provided women greater civil rights. These changes, the Court argued, “have strengthened, not weakened, the institution of marriage.”¹⁵ The Court majority asserted that times have changed and most people now accept homosexual relationships as morally equal to heterosexual relationships. So, implicitly, opening the portals of marriage to same-sex couples now is enlightened progress.

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

For instance, the Court did not discuss how legally eliminating the concept of

permanence from marriage in the 1960s and 1970s changed the meaning of marriage and, as a result, shaped how individuals behave and interact in marriage. As we wrote in more depth in part 2 of these *Meaning of Marriage Matters* essays, “Permanence vs. Divorce: Finding a Safe Place to Keep Our Hearts,” while there were some specific benefits to no-fault divorce laws, which established an individual right to divorce for any reason at any time, the legal understanding of marriage as a permanent union was deleted. Now the law is indifferent to the notion that marriage is defined as a life-long union. The overall effect of no-fault divorce was to make marriage a less safe place to invest our hearts. The freedom and ease of divorce helped some, but it changed the nature of marriage in ways that made marriage a more fragile institution for all and changed how people thought about and behaved in marriage. That is, it didn’t just affect those in unhealthy and dangerous relationships who needed to end their marriages; it changed the meaning of the institution for everyone in ways that have made it harder for all to enter into and sustain a marriage, thus weakening its ability to provide important benefits to children, adults, and society.¹⁶

The Court also failed to explore another historically recent change in the social and legal understanding of marriage: the traditional notion that marriage is the appropriate guardian of and proper place for human sexuality. Also, the Court did not discuss evolving societal acceptance of nonmarital childbearing and rearing. Both of these modern trends have thinned the meaning of marriage. And they have changed how people behave in intimate relationships. Along with any good these changes may have facilitated, these trends also are linked to negative consequences.¹⁷

These are crucial omissions in the Court’s analysis and their absence makes it much easier for the five justices to assert that marriage understood as the union of a man and a woman can go the way of coverture and other former elements of marriage. This allows them to conclude:

“There is no difference between same- and opposite-sex couples with respect to this principle [that marriage is an important social institution deserving of societal support]. Yet by virtue of their exclusion from that institution, same-sex couples are denied the constellation of benefits that the States have linked to marriage.”¹⁸

Note that the Court assumes that its ruling merely opens and expands the institution of marriage to include same-sex couples without altering its fundamental meaning or function. The true nature of the institution remains unchanged; the only difference is who may join. The new members only enlarge the institution and add to its membership rolls. In fact, the Court asserts that excluding same-sex couples from marriage is harmful to society and marriage:

“[E]xclusion from that status [of marriage] has the effect of teaching that gays and lesbians are unequal in important respects. It demeans gays and lesbians for the State to lock them out of a central institution of the Nation’s society. Same-sex couples, too, may aspire to the transcendent purposes of marriage and seek fulfillment in its highest meaning.”¹⁹

But the Court fully fails to acknowledge how changing a fundamental aspect of marriage—the union of a man and a woman—profoundly impacts its meaning, or

how that meaning may be central to producing some of the most important benefits of marriage.²⁰ Gays and lesbians now have a constitutionally protected right to marry. But before they could enjoy this right, the Court had to change the traditional definition of marriage. The Court therefore determined that a gendered understanding of the meaning of marriage was an unenlightened relic of history and not part of its core or true essence, an essence that they believe they know and are comfortable asserting for all of society.

So what is the enlightened essence of marriage, according to Justice Kennedy and the consenting justices? Well, they don't spell that out concretely in any one place in the written opinion. Scattered about the opinion is soaring but abstract rhetoric that provides some clues to their perception of the remaining essence of marriage: it bestows adults with dignity and hope; it creates human synergy and togetherness; it molds identity; it embodies high ideals; it is the first bond of society and a fundamental societal institution. What is notably absent is any reflection on the traditional notion that marriage links a man and a woman together, whose sexual union creates life that is best nurtured by the investment of both the mother and the father.²¹

Marriage, the Court majority says, endows "nobility and dignity to all persons, without regard to their station in life."²² It is "sacred" to many and "offers unique fulfillment."²³ Marriage "is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations."²⁴ Notice, however, the focus here is not on what marriage is but what it does, primarily for adults.

At one point, Justice Kennedy muses on the mystical meanings of marriage, saying that it creates a human synergy: "[Marriage]

allows two people to find a life that could not be found alone, for a marriage becomes greater than just the two persons," and, "In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were."²⁵ Marriage "fulfills yearnings for security, safe haven, and connection that express our common humanity."²⁶ "Marriage responds to the universal fear that a lonely person might call out only to find no one there. It offers the hope of companionship and understanding and assurance that while both still live there will be someone to care for the other."²⁷ And, "Marriage is a coming together for better or worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred ... a harmony in living ... a bilateral loyalty."²⁸ Adult togetherness and profound connection appears to be at the heart of the Court's conception of the essence of marriage. Gender is irrelevant within this view.

The justices find that individualistic values are readily wedded to marriage. Marriage is a "momentous act of self-definition"²⁹ and a profound expression of identity. Through marriage, "two persons together can find other freedoms, such as expression, intimacy, and spirituality."³⁰ And throughout the opinion, Justice Kennedy implies the centrality of sexual intimacy to the meaning of marriage (although he accords it no special status over sex between unmarried persons and does not address the traditional norm of marital monogamy).

Also, here and there in the opinion, the virtues that undergird marriage are highlighted. Commitment and public vows are given as important elements in the meaning of marriage. Also, marriage "embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice."³¹

On a broader scale, the justices explain that marriage is a fundamental unit of society important to its health and order: “Since the dawn of history, marriage has transformed strangers into relatives, binding families and societies together.” And quoting Cicero, marriage is the “first bond of society.”³² The Court also mentions that marriage is a public good worthy of state support. Society pledges to support a couple’s vows, “offering symbolic recognition and material benefits to protect and nourish the union.”³³ The justices note that, “throughout our history [States have] made marriage the basis for an expanding list of governmental rights, benefits, and responsibilities.”³⁴ Also scattered about the opinion is a recognition that marriage is connected to the social function of rearing children, stating that “Marriage also affords the permanency and stability important to children’s best interests.”³⁵

So the Court still sees the essence of marriage in grand and noble terms. Yet clearly they are also abstract terms. The language summons a picture of a grand open-air vista rather than a stately building with walls and a roof; a vision rather than an institution.

Justice Alito, in his dissenting opinion, summarizes the five justices’ grand and abstract portrait of marriage this way:

“Although the Court expresses the point in loftier terms, its argument is that the fundamental purpose of marriage is to promote the well-being of those who choose to marry. Marriage provides emotional fulfillment and the promise of support in times of need. And by benefiting persons who choose to wed, marriage indirectly benefits society because persons who live in stable, ful-

filling, and supportive relationships make better citizens.”³⁶

Justice Alito continues:

“This understanding of marriage, which focuses almost entirely on the happiness of persons who choose to marry, is shared by many people today, but it is not the traditional one. For millennia, marriage was inextricably linked to the one thing that only an opposite-sex couple can do: procreate.”³⁷

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

Justice Alito defends those that cling to the traditional meaning of marriage:

“While, for many, the attributes of marriage in 21st century America have changed, those States that do not want to recognize same-sex marriage have not yet given up on the traditional understanding. They worry that by officially abandoning the older understanding, they may contribute to marriage’s further decay.”³⁸

Five Supreme Court justices (and many lower court justices) believe that gender has been drained of its meaning to marriage in modern society. Thus eliminating it from the legal definition will not change the essence of marriage in any substantive way. Respectfully, we disagree.

Marriage as a Social Institution

A fundamental social institution has been redefined. Social institutions shape human behavior. They provide human relationships with meaning, norms, and patterns; they encourage and guide conduct. And when the definitions and norms of a social institution are altered, the human behaviors and interactions that the institution shapes also change.

As the Court admits, marriage may be society's most enduring and essential institution. As with any institution, changing the basic definition and social understanding of marriage—such as by nullifying its gendered understanding—will change the behavior of men and women in marriage and may even affect whether they enter marriage in the first place. Whether deemed good or bad, legally necessary or unnecessary, we believe that redefining marriage away from its historically gendered purposes will have significant consequences.

We don't claim prophetic-like insight into the future. Like all, we can only make reasonable guesses at what changes will occur as a result of de-gendering marriage. Although one change is already occurring: the terms *husband* and *wife* and *mother* and *father* are being removed from statutes in some states and replaced with gender-neutral terms like *spouse* and *parent*.³⁹ Most who marry and become parents endow such actions with a deep connection to their biological sex. But now, for them, many states officially disavow any gendered meaning to those actions.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to discern how such changes will affect marriage. We agree with Justice Alito's point in his dissenting opinion: "The long-term consequences of this change are not now known and are unlikely to be ascertainable for some time to come."⁴⁰ This is because "the process by which such consequences come about is

complex, involving the interaction of numerous factors, and tends to occur over an extended period of time."⁴¹ Coming to understand how the de-gendering of marital unions will impact marriage will be a long and difficult journey.

Sometimes ideas are so fundamental that they aren't even conscious. The conscious consideration of de-gendered marriage is really only about a decade old. And even there, we have spent the last decade mostly debating the civil rights issue of whether same-sex couples should be allowed to choose marriage. Many people think removing gender from the legal meaning of marriage will have no effect. But like trying to imagine what it would be like day to day to live in a world without taken-for-granted things like gravity and friction, it will be hard to understand something that we have hardly ever given a second thought to.

So even though it is too early to know exactly how redefining marriage to include same-sex couples will change marriage over time, we think there are some reasonable guesses. In trying to see the future, our focus will not be on homosexuals but on heterosexuals, who will continue to make up all but a few percentage points of the married population. We will say little here about the possible benefits to same-sex couples and their children of formalizing their unions with the public symbol of marriage. Just as the legislative innovation of no-fault divorce benefited some men and women in dead or dangerous marriages and may have raised the bar for some on how they should behave in marriage,⁴² same-sex couples also may benefit from being able to marry. And it is reasonable to think that children living in same-sex-couple households would also benefit from marriage if it brings greater stability and more social support to their families. Still, as the history of no-fault divorce suggests,

there are also reasons to expect that there will be unanticipated negative consequences to marriage from changing its gendered meaning. And importantly, one has to look beyond the effects on same-sex families to accurately gauge the full impact of a de-gendered understanding of marriage.

Accordingly, we focus here on how changes to marriage that allow same-sex couples to marry impact how heterosexuals think about and act in marriage. Justice Kennedy, and many justices in lower-court opinions, have asserted that, “it is unrealistic to conclude that an opposite-sex couple would choose not to marry *simply* because same-sex couples may do so.”⁴³ They assert this even though we know that some heterosexual couples over the past 15 years chose *not* to solemnize their union with marriage vows because marriage was an “unjust” institution that excluded same-sex couples.⁴⁴ Similarly, it seems likely to us that some traditionalists, offended at the secular redefinition of marriage, will eschew entering its state-sanctioned doors and will seek only a religious solemnization of their union. Still, as long as Justice Kennedy includes the word “simply” in that sentence, he may be right. The actions of a homosexual individual down the block or three cubicles over at work probably will not simply and directly affect heterosexuals’ actions toward marriage. But it isn’t that simple. And here Justice Kennedy’s arguments are simply simplistic. He and the assenting justices are thinking about marriage here only in private terms, not institutional terms.

Going back to a previous point, human institutions shape human thinking and behavior. That is what they are designed to do. When an institution changes—and in this case, changes in such a prominent way—it is reasonable and logical to expect that people will think and behave differently. To assert otherwise is to believe

that meaning doesn’t matter or that gender already was an empty element of marriage. Neither of those beliefs is reasonable.

Although marriage serves many private ends, its institutional nature means that it is not merely a private arrangement.⁴⁵ As an institution, it exists also to shape and guide human behavior to serve important social and public purposes. Traditionally, those public purposes have centered on uniting a man and a woman to order their sexual attraction and behavior and maximize the welfare of their children.⁴⁶

Far from being a relic of history or a quaint custom that has outgrown its usefulness in modern society, we argue that gender is a crucial component of not only the meaning of marriage for most people but of how marriage produces its benefits for children and society.⁴⁷ In fact, it may be more crucial now than it has ever been because of changes that already have occurred in the meaning of marriage over the past five decades that have dramatically diminished many men’s bonds to their children and their children’s mother.⁴⁸

Marriage and Masculinity

So here is one educated guess⁴⁹ about how the de-gendering of marriage will impact the institution: It will further weaken heterosexual men’s connection to marriage. How? Marriage has been an important way that adult men establish their masculinity in a way that benefits women, children, communities, and society. A de-gendered blueprint of marriage—a public demolition of biological sex as a defining pillar of marriage—may weaken the institution’s power to channel men’s generative masculinity in child- and family-centered ways. When maleness is an unnecessary and legally excluded feature of the institution—a luxury—then we are likely to see less of it in

marriage. As a result, more children of heterosexual parents will be raised without the manifest benefits of marriage and its ability to get fathers involved day to day in their children's lives. This may not be the only way that a de-gendered understanding of marriage may impact how people think about and act toward marriage; there are other possibilities. But we think it is a prominent possibility that deserves careful monitoring.

According to the eminent, late family sociologist Steven L. Nock, marriage is the primary means society has had for shaping men's identities and behaviors (e.g., sexual, economic, etc.) from immature and self-centered in nature to generative and child-centered in orientation:

“Historically, masculinity has implied three things about a man: he should be the father of his wife's children, he should be the provider for his wife and children, and he should protect his family. Accordingly, the male who refused to provide for or protect his family was not only a bad husband, he was somehow less of a man. In marriage, men do those things that are culturally accepted as basic elements of adult masculinity. ... [M]arriage changes men because it is the venue in which adult masculinity is developed and sustained.”⁵⁰

Moreover, Nock argues that,

“by calling for behaviors of a certain type [socially valuable behaviors], the expectations of normative marriage also reinforce and maintain

masculine identities. In this sense, normative marriage is a masculinity template.⁵¹ ... In their marriages, and by their marriages, men define and display themselves as masculine.”⁵²

“When we ask why marriage appears to be beneficial to men [and women and children], one possible answer is that the institution of marriage, at least in its traditional form, is a socially approved mechanism for the expression of [mature] masculinity.”⁵³

Even in our progressive twenty-first century (and perhaps even more observable now because of our modern attitudes about diverse ways of forming families), marriage is the most important social mechanism we have to channel young men's adult identity into other-oriented behaviors of sacrifice, generosity, and protection for their own children and even for all children in society. *Marriage is a transformative act, but especially so for men*, because of how it funnels men's adult identity into service to their families and to society.

But masculinity and fatherhood are more socially constructed and more contextually sensitive than femininity and motherhood, according to a report to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which was later published in a leading peer-reviewed journal.⁵⁴ Fatherhood is more problematic than motherhood because men's commitment to and investment in parenting is more difficult to achieve. Many of the historical supports that have traditionally preserved men's involvement in their children's lives have been eroding for contemporary families. Historically high rates of nonmarital cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbirth, and divorce have dramatically altered the landscape of fathering,⁵⁵ leaving unprecedented numbers

of children growing up with ambiguous or non-existent relationships with their fathers.

While these demographic trends have changed family life in general, they have been particularly grim for father–child relationships, which are more sensitive than mother–child relationships to contextual forces and supports.⁵⁶ *Accordingly, we believe any societal signal that men’s contributions are not central to children’s daily well-being threatens to further decrease the likelihood that men will channel their masculine identities into responsible fathering. And we believe that the official de-gendering of marriage sends just such a signal.* The state, in essence, now says the terms *husband* and *father* (and *wife* and *mother*) are relics. A gender-free definition of marriage makes marriage less masculine; it risks diminishing the norm that marriage is the primary way for heterosexual men to achieve mature masculinity. It also signals that men are not necessary for marriage.

The legal recognition of same-sex marriage is not just an extension or expansion of marriage’s borders to accommodate a new group of people and family form; it changes the social and psychological environment within those borders for all the inhabitants. In our opinion, to legally proclaim that gender is not an essential component of marriage officially undermines the very mechanism that creates many of the benefits that marriage produces. If marriage is redefined as two committed sexual partners regardless of their gender, then the institution’s connection to fatherhood becomes more ambiguous because masculinity is irrelevant to the meaning of marriage. It invites, even demands, new ways of understanding families that make men’s special contributions to family life and their children optional. It deepens the destructive, decades-long cultural trend of

questioning the necessity and importance of fathers as day-to-day nurturers, providers, and protectors within families, a trend that has weakened father–child bonds and familial ties.

In sum, if men are legally defined as optional to marriage, childrearing, and parenting, then marriage will likely struggle to maintain its primacy as a means for men to establish their masculine identity in ways that serve women and children best. *A gender-free definition of marriage—where gender is legally irrelevant to its structure and meaning—will likely have less social power to draw heterosexual men into marriage and thus less power to serve marriage’s vital child-welfare purposes.*⁵⁷ And no doubt these potential effects, like many others, would be felt most keenly and quickly by the children and families of the most socially and economically disadvantaged men in our society—men who already are struggling under a sense that they are optional and of secondary importance to their children and families and whose masculinity is already challenged by their tenuous participation in our economic system.⁵⁸

The courts have made the mistake of believing that redefining marriage to include same-sex couples is only a matter of opening doors or extending to such couples the legal benefits and obligations of marriage. Redefinition changes meaning for all. It is naïve to believe that marriage can be redefined in non-gendered terms without significant consequences to how people think about and behave towards marriage. To assert—as many courts and advocates of same-sex marriage have done—that removing gender from the meaning of marriage will have no impact on how people behave is to assert that meaning is meaningless.

The risks associated with legalizing same-sex marriage may prove difficult to disentangle from the negative effects of other social changes. After all, we think a de-gendered understanding of marriage is an additional force in a larger trend that is uncoupling sexuality, marriage, and parenthood and making men's connections to children weaker. That is, same-sex marriage is not a new, unique, or independent force; it comes from the same source as other trends impacting the quality and stability of family life. It will be difficult to separate the potential effects of de-gendering marriage from its cousin effects: the sexual revolution, the divorce revolution, and the single-parenting revolution.

The potential effects of redefining marriage to include same-sex couples are intertwined with the effects of other powerful forces. Still, this does not diminish their importance or the potential harms they can impose on marriage. Removing gender from the legal meaning of marriage will add to the grand social experiment of the past 50 years of deinstitutionalizing marriage and the marginalization of fatherhood.⁵⁹ Yes, gay men (and lesbian women) who so choose will now have clearer legal pathways to marriage and parenthood. But for the vast majority, marriage is sheared of its connection to the idea that gender is a defining pillar of the institution and that men are essential parts. We fear this will only add to the deinstitutionalization of marriage and the many problems that have flow from that. Foremost among those problems is decreasing likelihood that children will be reared together by a father as well as a mother.

But Do Fathers Really Matter?

Do men really matter to family life or has twenty-first century enlightenment taught us

that fathers are fungible even if marriage still matters? We haven't really taken on that question yet in this essay. We assume that most people still believe that men (and women) bring something important and special to family life and that children's lives are diminished when their fathers are absent or uninvolved in their lives.

Still, a broad-brush-strokes review of men's complementary contributions to parenting may be helpful for some. Two bodies of research give insight into this question of men's special contribution to parenting, looking at (1) what happens to children when fathers are largely absent from their children's day-to-day lives and (2) how present and involved paternal parenting supports children's healthy development and well-being.

First, an enormous body of scholarship has tried to document what happens when fathers are not involved in meaningful ways in the day-to-day lives of their children. This research has shown consistently that children, generally, are at 2–3 times the risk of a wide range of problems growing up without regular involvement with their fathers, even when controlling for the many demographic differences between single-parent and two-parent families.⁶⁰ A second large body of scholarship looks directly at fathers' involvement in their children's lives and how that impacts their development and well-being. This body of research also finds consistent positive effects of men's day-to-day engagement in the lives of their children.⁶¹

Thus, these two bodies of research reinforce each other. Fathers are not a luxury; they make vital contributions to children's lives. Children are, on average, at greater risk for a wide range of problems when their fathers are uninvolved in their lives; when fathers are involved, they make a positive

difference, maybe even adding elements to their children's lives that mothers generally do not provide as much or as well.⁶²

In the late 1970s, Azim Surani tried to create new life using two sets of genes from only a mother or a father.⁶³ Everything then known about genetics suggested that with the right number of chromosomes, life would develop normally, even if all of its genetic material came only from a female or a male. But the eggs with only the mother's genes could not survive. A similar fate met the eggs implanted with two sets of father's genes.

As science reporter Paul Raeburn describes,⁶⁴ Surani discovered that mothers and fathers each contributed something in their genes that was critical to sustaining life. These paternal and maternal genes appeared completely indistinguishable in every way, yet expressed themselves differently depending on whether they came from the mother or the father. And both were essential to the survival of the egg.

The need for both a mother and a father to provide genetic material for survival parallels what social science tells us about the importance of mothers and fathers in children's development. Fathers and mothers bring similar, even indistinguishable, capacities that enable healthy child development. But like the complementarity of the left and right halves of the brain, they also seem to bring distinct capacities that provide crucial, complementary contributions to children's healthy development. Women and men have substantially different hormonal, neurological, cognitive, and emotional systems that influence identity and behavior throughout the life course. Children are best raised by two someones who have endowed them with their biological gender. When we separate the biology from the environment

in parenting, we will have extra challenges, as is seen by the sometimes perplexing, negative outcomes for adopted children raised by loving parents with all the good family resources we could hope for.⁶⁵

Perhaps just a few examples can illustrate this point of gender complementarity in parenting. Mothers appear to be biologically oriented toward creating the strong attachment relationship that is foundational to children's identity development. Dramatic increases in oxytocin and oxytocin receptors during the process of giving birth and caring for infants act like a switch turning on maternal behaviors—expressing positive feelings, affectionately touching and gazing—all of which prime them for bonding. In a complementary way, fathers also experience physiological changes that prime them for bonding. But the same hormones elicit different types of responses. Instead of inviting security-inducing behaviors, fathers' levels of oxytocin are associated with stimulating behaviors, like tickling and bouncing. Mothers are more likely to “coo and cuddle,” while fathers are more likely to “tickle and toss.”⁶⁶

These complementary differences foreshadow patterns that continue across development. Mothers tend to exhibit strong capacities for emotional attentiveness and responsiveness, which facilitate the development of a secure identity in children.⁶⁷ In a complementary way, fathers tend to exhibit capacities that influence how children approach the world around them, including whether they develop prosocial behaviors.⁶⁸

Father closeness to children across development is a key predictor of children's socially appropriate behaviors, academic achievement, and quality of relationships in adulthood. Lack of father involvement consistently predicts delinquent and criminal

behaviors, particularly for boys. And for both boys and girls, father closeness predicts less depression. In addition, children with involved fathers are more likely to earn A grades, less likely to repeat grades, and are significantly more likely to graduate from college.⁶⁹

Compared to mothers, fathers spend much more time engaged with their children in physical play characterized by arousal, excitement, and unpredictability. This play seems to be particularly helpful for children in learning appropriate ways of dealing with their bodies and emotions when engaging with others. In repeated studies, fathers who spent time “rough housing” while eliciting positive emotions had children with the highest social ratings from their peers. As children age, fathers are more likely to engage in peer-like verbal play, strengthening children’s social confidence and appropriateness within the safety of the father–child relationship.⁷⁰

The arousal, excitement, and unpredictability orientation fathers emphasize plays an important role in stimulating children’s openness to the world. Fathers are also more likely than mothers to encourage children’s risk-taking behavior, while also ensuring safety and security. This helps children to learn to be braver in unfamiliar situations.⁷¹ Mothers tend to intervene and actively solve problems when children express concerns, while fathers tend to hold back from intervening but continue to offer verbal and nonverbal support to children.

Fathers also play a key role in their children’s safety. Children reared by their married mother and father are the least likely by far to experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.⁷² Girls who are not reared by their biological fathers also are much more likely to engage in sexual

relations at an early age and become pregnant as teenagers. The effect is so consistent that some scholars have concluded that an absent father may be the single greatest risk factor in teen pregnancy.⁷³

Certainly, there is much overlap in the capacities, skills, and behaviors of mothers and fathers that enable children to develop and even thrive. But mothers and fathers also appear to retain distinctive capacities, styles, and orientations that emerge as important, if not crucial, contributors in children’s social-emotional, cognitive, and sexual development, as well as their safety and protection. Both mothers and fathers are needed to create life, and both are needed to best facilitate the nurturing of that life.

To be clear, we are not asserting that fathers and mothers are non-overlapping contributors to child development. When it comes to parenting, we don’t subscribe to the pop psychology notion that “men are from Mars, women are from Venus.”⁷⁴ Clearly, mothers and fathers often do many of the same things, parent in similar ways, and often have similar impacts on their child’s development. And research suggests that the amount of time that married mothers and fathers spend with their children is converging somewhat.⁷⁵ Our argument is not that fathers and mothers parent in ways fully distinct from the opposite-sex parent, or even, strictly speaking, that they make essential contributions to child development that the opposite-sex parent cannot make. Research generally points to a good deal of similarity between the parenting that women and men do, along with some differences.⁷⁶ Moreover, children generally are resilient and there is great plasticity in human development.

Still, the importance of complementary gendered parenting—the parenting of both a biological father and a mother—doesn't need to rest on a strong empirical base that shows fathers and mothers make unique, essential, non-overlapping contributions to their children's positive development. Our primary point is that fathering matters to children's healthy development and the legalization of same-sex marriage may change the meaning of marriage in ways that diminish men's motivations for fathering.

The law now has removed gender complementarity from the meaning of

marriage. This ruling goes against the grain of our understanding of the ideal parenting environment for children's social, emotional, intellectual, and moral development. The optimal circumstance for children's healthy development is to be reared and nurtured by two parents who are biologically related to the child. If the legalization of same-sex marriage over time diminishes men's connection to marriage and fatherhood by eliminating gender from its meaning, it will mean more children growing up without a present and engaged father. As a society, this is not something we should naïvely embrace.

Endnotes:

¹ Contributing authors to this essay were: Alan J. Hawkins, Jason S. Carroll, Jenet J. Erickson, Dean M. Busby, & Mark H. Butler.

² For updated information on countries where same-sex marriage is legalized, see:

<http://www.freedomtomarry.org/landscape/entry/c/international>

³ *Obergefell v. Hodges* (slip opinion, June 26, 2015) p. 28; 576 U.S. ____ (2015). Available at

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[eliminate-bride-groom-on-marriage-certificates.html](#). A bill was recently introduced in the U.S. Congress to eliminate the terms *husband* and *wife* from federal law; see: <http://www.examiner.com/article/bill-pushed-to-remove-husband-and-wife-from-federal-code>

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