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What is This?
“Marriage Is More Than Being Together”: The Meaning of Marriage for Young Adults

Maria J. Kefalas, Frank F. Furstenberg, Patrick J. Carr, and Laura Napolitano

Abstract
Based on 424 qualitative interviews with a racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse population of young people ranging in age from 21 to 38, the authors ponder the paradox of the evolving role for contemporary marriage within the developmental perspective of the transition to adulthood. The authors identify two groups: marriage naturalists and marriage planners. Naturalists comprise one fifth of the sample, are largely from rural America, and follow the fast-track into marriage that defined the mid-twentieth century. Planners comprise the remainder of the sample, are based in metropolitan areas, and follow an elongated transition to adulthood. The authors examine the views of each group on commitment and the nature of relationships, and apply their findings to the debates about whether marriage is resilient, in decline, or becoming deinstitutionalized.

Keywords
transition to adulthood, relationships, marriage, youth

Corresponding Author:
Maria Kefalas, Department of Sociology, Saint Joseph’s University, 5600 City Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19131, USA
Email: mkefalas@sju.edu

1Saint Joseph’s University, Philadelphia, PA, USA
2University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA
3Rutgers University, Piscataway, NJ, USA
Introduction

A defining paradox within family research is that even though there are myriad alternatives to marriage and people today will spend less of their adult years in a marriage union than previous generations, Americans remain strongly committed to the ideal of marriage (Bianchi & Casper, 2002; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Coontz, 2005; Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; Smock, 2000; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). Though scholars have meticulously tabulated the national demographic trends in marriage (e.g., Graefe & Lichter, 2002), only recently have researchers tried to examine the meanings young people attach to marriage and how they go about establishing conjugal commitments. To that end, this article’s central contribution will be to shed light on the contemporary debates over the future of marriage by exploring marriage’s subjective meaning within the context of the developmental perspective of the extended transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2004; Shanahan, 2000). We believe that the extended transition to adulthood offers a way to explain marriage’s continued relevance in a world where marriage is no longer the only socially acceptable alternative available to couples. We examine this by analyzing the narratives of an economically, racially, and geographically diverse group of 424 young adults, in the prime family building years of 21 to 38, as they work to achieve the traditional markers of adulthood. Specifically, we explore how young people construct their hopes and expectations for relationships, why they have wed or whether marriage is a likely prospect in their future, and, if so, the conditions under which they foresee entering into matrimony. In doing so, we identify two main tropes in our data, that of the marriage naturalist and the marriage planner, and we illustrate what each group says about commitment, the nature of relationships, and what we call the marriage mentality.

As the process of becoming an adult in a post-industrial economy has changed, the meaning and timing of marriage has been altered in response, and our findings suggest that the marriage planners delay their entry into marriage as a response to the elongated and more haphazard transition to adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Shanahan, 2000). The structural realities of this distinctive phase of life known as “emerging adulthood” have transformed how young people reach conventional adult milestones such as establishing an independent household, marriage, and family formation. Among elite youth, extensive schooling post–high school occupies the postadolescent years, whereas for working- and lower-class youth, this stage in the life course means competing in a post-industrial economy where they face substantial obstacles in establishing their own households and settling into full-time, self-sustaining employment. We find that geography plays a significant role in family formation as other studies have shown (McLaughlin, Lichter, & Johnston, 1993;
Mitchell, 2006a; Snyder, Brown, & Condo, 2004) since the marriage naturalists overwhelmingly reside in the rural Iowa site, whereas the marriage planners are based mainly in metropolitan areas.

Geography is significant because rural regions’ lower cost of living, blue-collar economy, and strong social supports for marriage allow and encourage marriage naturalists to follow an accelerated transition into adulthood, and marriage. Residing in a rural milieu means marriage naturalists operate in a context where the social and economic conditions of the mid-20th century endure, and they view marriage as the natural, expected outcome of a relationship that has endured for a period of time. Note here that we use the term naturalist not as a counterpoint to something that is socially constructed—as in coming from nature or instinct. Rather, we use the term to convey the sense that for the naturalist, marriage is something that happens in the life course, as one might note physical changes associated with maturation. It does not mean that marriage itself is not a social construction, but that for the naturalists it is one that is a logical next step one defaults into, rather than something that must be scrupulously prepared for. Interestingly, marriage naturalists did not ground their view of marriage within religious belief, they described it as an externalized social expectation that created a path for them to follow. It does not mean that marriage itself is not a social construction, but that for the naturalists it is one that is a logical next step one defaults into, rather than something that must be scrupulously prepared for. In contrast, within the metropolitan settings, the planners’ orientations to marriage reflect distinctive metropolitan realities, including the higher cost of living (especially for housing) and the predominance of a high-tech, service-based economy. Because it takes longer for workers to move into full-time employment and establish independent households, young people coming of age in metropolitan areas find it difficult to meet two of the most important preconditions for a formal conjugal union: a separate household and a well-paying job. Because of the elongated transition, marriage planners use cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and premarital sexual/romantic relationships as placeholders—and not marriage substitutes—during the emerging adulthood phase of life so that they can pursue other “adult” goals (such as completing a degree, establishing themselves in work, and creating a sense of emotional and psychological maturity), which they see as prerequisites for a marriage. Though respondents from both groups experience uncertainty about commitment, naturalists are willing to enter a conjugal union, whereas planners want to be more settled before they commit.

**Literature**

Marriage in the United States has undergone a fundamental transformation over the latter part of the 20th century (e.g., Amato, 2004; Cherlin, 2004;
Seltzer, 2004). In simple descriptive terms, the age at which people marry has risen, whereas the proportion of Americans that ever marry has fallen (Cherlin, 2004). The shifts in marriage patterns have been accompanied by other societal changes in configurations of family formation (see Bianchi & Casper, 2002), for instance, the rise in cohabitation (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), the increase in the divorce rate (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), and the growth in the proportion of children born to unmarried mothers (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). Societal transformations such as the significant increase in the proportion of women in the workforce, the increases in participation in higher education, and access to contraception and abortion have profoundly altered the sociocultural landscape of marriage and family formation. It is little wonder then that marriage has changed, and indeed, the fact of this change is about the only thing on which scholars and commentators agree.

How do scholars and observers make sense of the changes in the nature of marriage in the United States and its meaning? One mode of interpretation has been characterized by Amato (2004) as a debate between those who argue from a marriage decline perspective (e.g., Popenoe, 1996; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wilson, 2002) and those who advocate a marriage resilience perspective (Coontz, 2005; Stacey, 1997). The marriage decline proponents see the rising divorce rate and the increase in children born outside of marriage as negative developments that lead to a variety of social problems. Moreover, marriage decline advocates believe such transformations are emblematic of a wider culture that privileges individual happiness and devalues commitment to institutions. For those holding this view, the solution to this problem is, notes Amato (2004), “to create a culture that values commitment and encourages people to accept responsibility to others” (p. 960). The advocates of marriage resilience interpret trends such as rising divorce rates in different ways. Far from undermining marriage and intimate relationships, marriage resilience adherents argue that easy access to divorce has meant that people can escape dysfunctional and often abusive relationships. Though this debate is vigorous and often polarized, what is often absent in these discussions is what these changes actually mean to people. Americans make choices whether or not to marry, divorce, or have children, and in this article we reveal the subjective dimension of those choices as a way to provide a context for the decline–resilience debate.

A second mode of explanation focuses not so much on the ideological ramifications of the changes but on tracing the conceptual shape and meaning of the transformation in marriage over time. Here scholars of the life course (Stanger-Ross, Collins, & Stern, 2005) and of the family (Cherlin, 2004) describe period-specific modes of marriage. Stanger-Ross et al. (2005) identify
three eras of patterned choices for young adults; reciprocity (1900-1950), dependence (1950-1970), and autonomy (1970-2000), where people made decisions about marriage that were shaped by their relationship to their parents’ household. Therefore, in the middle part of the 20th century, young people entered adulthood early and made decisions about marriage while they were still dependent on their families. In the latter part of the 20th century, as the transition to adulthood has elongated (Shanahan, 2000), young people make decisions about marriage and family formation from a position of relative autonomy from their parents.

In his depiction of transitions in the meaning of marriage, Cherlin (2004) also delineates three eras. In the early 20th century, the institutionalized marriage was the preeminent model, where bonds of love were secondary to the institution itself, and roles within the marriage were sharply delineated. By the middle of the century, the institutionalized marriage was displaced by the companionate marriage, which is characterized by bonds of sentiment and friendship that were mostly absent in the institutionalized marriage. In the companionate marriage, partners derived satisfaction from building a family and through fulfilling spousal roles. The third major transition in the meaning of marriage began in the 1960s, and Cherlin (2004) labels it the “individualized marriage” (p. 852) where people garner satisfaction from their personal development more than through building a family, and roles are less sharply demarcated than in companionate and institutionalized forms. Cherlin argues that marriage has undergone a process of deinstitutionalization, which he describes as a “weakening of the social norms that define people’s behavior in a social institution such as marriage” (p. 848). However, he notes that despite a decline in practical significance, marriage retains a vibrant symbolic significance in that people still want to marry and revere the institution (see also Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

There are two major things missing from this discussion about marriage. First, there is a dearth of research on the subjective meaning of marriage for young adults. Cherlin (2004) speculates about the symbolic significance of marriage, and, although Edin and Kefalas (2005) do explore the meaning of marriage, they do so for a sample of poor women, and, consequently, we know very little about what marriage means for other populations. The decline–resilience debate draws mainly on large data sets, and as a result, we lack the depth and context that narrative data bring to these issues. In this latter regard, the present work has the advantage of narrative data from a diverse sample of young adults from several regions of the United States. The second omission in the current discussions of marriage is the underutilization of the life course perspective. For instance, Mitchell (2006b) argues for the “importance of
situating family-related transitions and social change within their relative time and space” (p. 334). The transition to adulthood is the staging ground for decisions to marry, cohabit, or bear children; as such statuses are often seen as certifying one’s passage to maturity. The meaning of marriage can then be better assessed in terms of how it unfolds among the life circumstances and choices that young adults make in this crucial phase of their lives.

Below we try to answer several questions arising from the review of the scholarship. First, what does marriage mean for young adults at the turn of the 21st century, and what influences their decisions to marry or not? Is there evidence of the deinstitutionalization of marriage? Second, does our sample of young Americans see marriage in decline or is there more evidence for resilience? And how can a life course perspective help us answer these questions?

Method

The data used for this article come from a national qualitative interview study sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation’s Network on Transitions to Adulthood (for more information, see Waters, Carr, & Kefalas). From March 2002 through February 2003, researchers at four sites—New York City, San Diego, Minneapolis/St. Paul, and rural Iowa—conducted in-depth interviews with a socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically diverse group of young adults ranging in age from 21 to 38 years old. The goal of the in-depth qualitative study was to gain a better sense of how young people today perceive and manage the transitions to adulthood. Therefore, our aim in obtaining the sample was to maximize diversity in age, social class, ethnicity, and region. Although we can make no claim to have a nationally representative sample, we did make every effort to ensure that our participants represented a wide range of America’s young adults.

In Minnesota, New York, and San Diego, respondents were selected from participants in ongoing research projects, whereas the Iowa sample was recruited solely for the present study. For all four sites, respondents were recruited non-randomly from larger samples. In Minnesota, respondents were recruited from the larger Youth Development Study (YDS), an ongoing longitudinal study of young people from St. Paul, Minnesota initiated when respondents were in ninth grade in the spring of 1988. The initial sample was representative of the St. Paul public school population . . . [and] interviews were conducted in the summer and fall of 2002 when respondents were between the ages of 28 and 32. Interviewees were selected from three previous YDS [waves]. (Swartz, Hartmann, & Mortimer, in press)
The New York sample was drawn from the Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York (ISGMNY) study. The study began as a telephone survey conducted with 3,415 young adults age 18 to 32 from immigrant and native-born households, which was followed by open-ended interviews with 343 respondents. For the current data collection, participants were chosen to complete a second round of 130 in-person interviews conducted between January 2002 and June 2003 when the respondents were 22 to 36 years old (see Holdaway, 2010). In San Diego, the in-depth interview sample was drawn from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), a panel study that followed for more than a decade a large, representative sample of young people growing up in immigrant families in San Diego. The original CILS baseline sample was drawn from eighth and ninth graders enrolled in San Diego City Schools in Fall 1991, and they were surveyed during three time periods: in 1992 (at the end of junior high), 1995 (toward the end of senior high), and 2001-2003 (when they were in their mid 20s). The participants whose narratives we use here were drawn from a representative 1-in-10 subsample of 134 respondents from the third wave of surveys (see Borgen & Rumbaut, 2010). Finally, the Iowa sample was not drawn from an ongoing longitudinal study. Instead, researchers completed a survey of two cohort sets of young adults, who attended a high school in a small town in the late 1980s through mid 1990s. Researchers non-randomly recruited more than 100 participants from this larger survey of 280 for in-depth interviews (Carr & Kefalas, 2009).

The recruitment strategy was to provide a group of respondents with the broadest diversity in terms of educational experience, socioeconomic background, family structure, and geography. However, there are some limitations to the present sample. The first limitation is the relatively small proportion of African American respondents in the overall sample. This was partly because of the nature of the original studies that were used in that there are no African Americans in the original CILS study, and very few in the YDS and ISGMNY. Researchers in Minnesota and New York made every effort to contact and recruit African Americans but the group is still underrepresented. In the small Iowa town where we conducted our interviews, there were no African Americans. A growing body of research (see, e.g., Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; England & Edin, 2007; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005) has provided racial comparisons between low-income and working-class African Americans and Whites and Hispanics suggesting that the aspiration for marriage endures among African Americans, despite the far lower rates of marriage, and that there are relatively minor racial differences in marital intention. A second
limitation is that this is a sample that is limited regionally in that there are no participants from southern states. It is an empirical question as to whether the inclusion of such a site would have affected our results, and perhaps future work should include respondents from southern states. Although all the young people in the sample were born in the United States, 51% of the 424 interviews were conducted with the children of immigrants, mainly because the immigrant experience so colors the local context of New York and San Diego. Though this is an over-representation, recent research (Rumbaut & Komaie, 2007) has indicated that of the more than 67 million people in the United States in 2006 aged 18 to 34 years, more than 30% were either immigrants or second generation, and this segment of the population is increasing rapidly, especially in large metropolitan areas. Therefore, we think that it is important to gauge the experiences of this segment of the population as it is unclear what effect the mixture of parent and host culture has on their orientations toward marriage.

The diversity of the sample is apparent from the summary demographics displayed in Table 1. The San Diego research team completed the largest number of interviews \((n = 134)\) with an ethnically diverse group of young adults, including Chinese Americans, Mexican Americans, and several other ethnic groups. New York City is the second largest site \((n = 130)\), and here researchers conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse group of second-generation Americans from a number of different racial and ethnic groups as well as native-born Whites and African Americans. The Iowa research team completed interviews with 104 participants, and this sample was the most racially and ethnically homogeneous. Finally, the Minnesota sample \((n = 54)\) targeted native-born Whites, African Americans, and a small sample of Hmong. The Hmong were not included in our analysis because they have a “cultural marriage,” which is distinctive from state-recognized unions (see Moua, 2003). Because of the varying levels of recognition for gay marriage, we have also excluded discussions of marriage among young people who identified themselves as homosexuals.

In terms of marital status, approximately two thirds of the New York and San Diego samples reported being single at the time of the interview, whereas Iowa respondents were the most likely to report being married (48%) followed by Minneapolis/St. Paul (42.6%). In all, 29% of the entire sample was married at the time of the interview. Minneapolis/St. Paul respondents were the most likely to report that they were cohabiting and also the group most likely to have been divorced or separated. The rate of cohabitation was lowest for the Iowa sample, and the rates of divorce/separation were lowest for New York and San Diego. Rates of parenting varied also from a high of 70%
in the Minneapolis/St. Paul sample to around 30% for New York and San Diego. The Iowa sample was the only one where rates of parenting did not exceed rates of marriage for the sample, which illustrates that fewer of the Iowa children are born outside of marriage. Few respondents said that they were engaged at the time of the interview, and Iowa and San Diego have similar proportions reporting being engaged and cohabiting, whereas the ratio of

### Table 1. Select Characteristics of the Qualitative Sample: Sex, Age, Race/Ethnicity, Marital Status and Educational Attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Iowa (N = 104)</th>
<th>Minnesota (N = 54)</th>
<th>New York (N = 130)</th>
<th>San Diego (N = 134)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% age 22 and younger</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 23–25</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 26–28</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 29–31</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% age 32 and older</td>
<td></td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Male</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Female</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% African American</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% West Indian</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Puerto Rican</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>% CEP</td>
<td></td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Dominican</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>% Mexican</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Other Latin</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Filipino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>26.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Vietnamese</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>% Lao</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Cambodian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hmong</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Other Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>% Russian Jewish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>98.0%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Mixed</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Native American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% HS Grad or less</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 1 - 2 year college</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 3 - 4 year college</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% BA or more</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. CEP = Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru.
cohabiting to engagement is 4:1 in Minneapolis/St. Paul and 6:1 in New York. In all, there is a diversity of experience in the overall study; many of the respondents are or have been married, some have divorced, many cohabit, and 38% of the overall respondents have children.

The interviews were conducted using a common instrument that was developed collaboratively by several members of the research network. The common core instrument included open-ended questions on several themes, such as living arrangements, family, education, work, religion, leisure, and subjective aging, and interviewers in all sites asked respondents the same questions. The data collection strategy differed in each site. In the New York and San Diego sites, teams of trained interviewers conducted the interviews, whereas in Iowa and Minnesota the principal investigators were the primary interviewers. All interviewers were trained and instructed to adhere to the question order and format, but they were asked to pursue topics as they emerged. Though it is difficult to ensure absolute consistency across sites and among so many disparate interviewers, every attempt was made to ensure that each site was producing data that could be used in comparative analyses. This was accomplished in two main ways. First, the principal investigators for each site reviewed the early transcripts of interviews to ensure that the interviewers were using the guide correctly and to assess how well the questions were working. Second, each site had regular meetings for its interviewers to give feedback and discuss emerging issues. Though we did not complete any member checks, the consistency of the narrative responses indicate that the data are valid and reliable.

Some of the questions we asked those who were married were “How did you decide to get married/move in together? In what ways is your relationship like previous relationships?” For those not partnered we asked “What kinds of things do you look for in a relationship? What kind of person would you like to commit to or marry? When do you think this will happen?” Most interviews took place in participants’ homes or other locations chosen by the respondents so that the participants could feel at ease and relaxed. Interview length ranged from 2 to 4 hours and, in all, generated more than 12,000 pages of transcript. Each participant was paid an honorarium for the interview ranging from $25 to $75. All participants completed a rigorous informed consent process and were promised strict confidentiality. In the latter regard, all respondent names and specific places referred to herein, other than large metropolitan areas, are pseudonyms. All interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the interviewee and were later transcribed and coded using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software.
Coding and Analysis

The formal coding procedures for the study involved coders and principal investigators working together to establish a common set of codes, much in line with LaRossa’s (2005) discussion of the use of grounded theory methods. The principal investigators and coders developed a broad set of codes based on early readings of the interview transcripts as well as hypotheses of what themes might develop. These themes included broad categories such as community, education, employment, relationships, sexuality, family, and politics. Intercoder reliability was assessed at several points in the coding process, and concordance ranged from 88% to 93%. Once the initial open coding (LaRossa, 2005) was complete, investigators and coders went back and coded the transcripts in more detail. This list of codes is quite extensive, and a brief example can be seen by looking at the open code “relationships” and the more detailed codes of “relationships-love,” “relationships-expectations,” or “relationships-divorce.” This second layer of coding uses a more inductive approach as detailed themes developed from a more in-depth reading of the transcripts, what LaRossa (2005) refers to as axial coding. Finally, the authors used selective coding to produce the results for this article, relying on the broad codes of “relationships,” “children,” “expectations,” and the more detailed codes within those to tell the story of the meaning of marriage among this group of respondents. The ATLAS.ti software allows users to analyze these codes according to “family.” Families are broad categories of informants and are identified by demographic characteristics such as gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status. This allows the authors to analyze quotes not only by gender of the respondent but also in combination with other criteria such as age or socioeconomic status. Therefore, interview transcripts were not scrutinized separately for each site, but themes across sites were analyzed so that broader categories could be examined. This article relies primarily on data about relationships, which included several questions about marriage. However, in addition to the data from the relationships section of the questionnaire, participants also mentioned marriage in other parts of the interview, and those data were also included in the analysis. For the class-based analysis, we used respondents’ educational attainment as a proxy for class level mainly because the large number of immigrants in the San Diego and New York samples made parents’ level of education a misleading tool given the high number of upwardly mobile children of immigrants.

Two of the authors analyzed all the coded output on relationships for emergent themes in how respondents talked about marriage, and, at each
stage of analysis, they collaboratively derived hypotheses, which were then subsequently tested on the data. At various stages, all the authors read complete transcripts in conjunction with coded extracts to more fully investigate the iterations of the respondents and to ensure that coded passages were not being viewed out of context in terms of each participant’s complete narrative. The analytical procedure we used enabled us to identify two main categories of respondents—marriage naturalists and marriage planners—who represent distinctive viewpoints on marriage and its place in their lives. It is important to note that these categories are tropes around which there is some variation, but where the majority of the data coalesces.

The two categories that we describe below emerged from the data as the distinctive poles around which the narratives about marriage were arranged. We did not collapse several categories into two main groups for the sake of our analysis. Rather, through the several stages of data analysis that the authors undertook it became clear that there were two main ways that respondents spoke about marriage and to represent the data in any other way would be to impose categories where none existed. Our sample is nonrandom, and there is the possibility that other tropes exist but that is an empirical question for future research in this area. We are confident that in our data there are only two types of narrative, and in what follows, we discuss each of these categories, using representative quotations to highlight points in the argument, and we examine the views of each group on commitment, relationships, and the future of marriage.

**Results**

**The Marriage Naturalists**

Marriage naturalists account for 18% of our sample and, at first glance, they seem like they are the young Americans of the 1950s and 1960s in terms of their general pathways to adulthood and their specific views on marriage and family formation. For marriage naturalists, the transition to adulthood happens earlier in the life course, and, for the most part, they achieve the markers of adulthood in sequence. In the parlance of Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, and Barber (2004), they are “fast starters,” and for them, marriage happens quickly and without the existential crises, that is, they move seamlessly into marriage. The marriage naturalists also happen to be overwhelmingly from the Iowa site, and further to be those Iowans who have stayed in or returned to the small town where they grew up. Even though there were young people in
other sites from lower economic backgrounds who married at early ages, sometimes after becoming pregnant, by the time we interviewed them, these unions had either broken up or were fraught with tension. Indeed, most of these respondents now saw their fast track into marriage as a mistake. What is significant for understanding the marriage naturalists is not simply the age at which they wed, but rather the language they use to make sense of their choices, in other words, what marriage means to them. Marriage naturalists are not distinct solely because they wed early in the life course and were more likely to have had “shotgun weddings,” but they are also unique because, unlike their marriage planner counterparts, they view marriage as an inevitable outcome of a romantic relationship. In contrast, marriage planners, regardless of their economic, ethnic, or racial backgrounds, believe that a marriage can only occur after a relationship is thoroughly tested, the partners have completed economic and educational goals, and each partner has acquired the marriage mentality.

At least part of the reason for naturalists’ early marriage is how opportunities are structured in this rural context, specifically the mixture of an agrarian–industrial economy and a lower cost of living—particularly for housing. These structural conditions allow rural couples to acquire economic independence far sooner than their urban peers, and, as a result, reinforce prevailing norms that encourage early marriage and childrearing. In the words of a 26-year-old married Iowa woman with a community college degree who wed at age 22, she felt ready for marriage because “the time was right.” The couple had moved into a rent-to-own house, and she and her husband were working full time and no longer dependent on their families financially.

You know. He had a job, I had a job. We both felt, you know, stable with stuff so (laugh). [Interviewer: Well what was going on in your life about that time? Like what made you make the decision to get married then instead of waiting?] Um, I guess ’cause we felt there’s really, I mean there’s no reason really to wait.

Precisely because it is difficult to imagine 22-year-olds in New York, San Diego, or Minnesota being finished with their schooling, settled into the full-time labor force, and economically self-sufficient, the social context of the marriage naturalists lives must be understood as integral for sustaining their distinctive orientation to marriage.

For the marriage naturalists, living in rural Iowa also means they inhabit a social world where, in the words of a 28-year-old Iowa woman
with a bachelor’s degree who “waited” until her mid 20s to wed, “around here, 24 is old to be getting married.” Over and over again, we heard that the marriage naturalists view matrimony as the expected next step in a relationship that endures over a period of time. A 24-year-old four-year college graduate living in rural Iowa, who wed at age 22, says he and his wife were aware that many people delay entry into adulthood and marriage, but they self-consciously chose the more traditional naturalist path because they believe that there is a schedule one ought to follow on the way to adulthood.

We didn’t really discuss [marriage] too much, I just asked her because we’d been dating so long. I had a schedule that I thought was a smart way to do it. I thought I would graduate from high school, graduate from college, have a job and then get married and then have kids, two, three, four years later. I took pride in that... [marriage] was the next thing to do. I guess, you know, I pretty much knew that she was the person that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with so I guess that was the next step, that’s the last step that you can take.

Another unique characteristic of the marriage naturalists, which separates them from the marriage planners, is that they view marriage and family as pursuits that rise to the top of a short list of goals that can occupy this phase of life. Many young Iowans said that life in a small town means there is less to do and they have fewer choices. Although marriage planners have other competing goals, marriage naturalists are generally more likely to say they wed because “there is nothing else to do.”

According to a 24-year-old divorced and remarried Iowa homemaker with a community college degree, life in the “big city” teaches you that there is more to life than “starting a family.” But “in the smaller towns, people don’t see that, so they think, ‘I want marriage.’” She continues,

There’s nothing else to do here... I just thought I needed to be mar- ried. I wanted, I guess, I wanted to play house and that was the only way to do it, to get married. I had dated [my husband] for so long, dated him since I was 16, and I said to myself, “Oh well, let’s get married... [It’s like you] think you know who you are [early on in life].

Indeed, it is this strong belief in a schedule that is such a central element of the marriage naturalist orientation. As stated earlier, there is no question that living
in Iowa provides a social context where it is easier to follow this schedule. Moreover, in other social settings, rather than a schedule, it seems marriage planners have a shopping list of things they need before they wed, and, as we will see later, there is no particular order they have to follow in acquiring them.

We also find support for the fact that attending a 4-year college builds natural delays for marriage (e.g., Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Sweeney, 2002) though going to college is not the only reason for postponing marriage. Higher education and high-status careers, goals that are linked with the 21st-century experience of emerging adulthood, erode young people’s desire for early marriage. Both the marriage planners and marriage naturalists believe that getting married while still in college is generally undesirable. According to this 23-year old Iowa wife and mother, who is employed at a convenience store and wed at age 17, she does not think she would have followed the “fast track” to marriage if she had attended a “real” (or 4-year) college instead of a nearby vocational school.

I would’ve met other people. I would’ve wanted to be free and just have fun and do the whole free spirit college thing . . . [marrying young] is a small town thing . . . you might as well [get married] because you guys have been together so long and it’s not gonna make a difference.

Growing up in his rural Iowa hometown, a single 24-year-old law student attending the University of Iowa, says he started out as a marriage naturalist for he too believed “22 or 23 years old [was] the right age to get married.” After spending seven years in higher education, surrounded by elite and upwardly mobile young people more likely to delay the transition to adulthood, he has become a marriage planner, since, as he explains, “there’s so much more that I want to do.”

I think there’s something about [my hometown], the people that stick around there tend to get married a lot quicker and we were just talking about this last night. We have a friend who came down to see us. She’s got it in her mind that she needs to be married now, or engaged because all her friends are. I’m just like “it’s not 20-year-olds getting married anymore.”

We find that the experience of attending a 4-year college surrounded by young people who view marriage as something they will get to “in the future” has the potential to transform marriage naturalists into marriage planners.
Marriage Naturalists and Commitment

In a world where getting married just seems to happen, there is no self-doubt or anxiety about being ready to make the ultimate commitment. Relationships that endure “for a certain amount of time” lead to marriage, effortlessly and inevitably. Even though the marriage naturalists’ relationships might span 5 or 6 years, the decision to wed does not require the extensive testing and assessment of a relationship in the way marriage planners do. Naturalists and planners are united in the convictions that you cannot wed while you are in school or living at home, but whereas the planners will bear children and cohabit as they move toward “being ready,” the naturalists believe that if a relationship survives over a period of time, and you have entered the labor force and can afford your own separate household, marriage is the logical next step. Here, a 29-year-old high school graduate who works as a machinist in rural Iowa, who wed at age 23, describes how moving to the “marriage” level of commitment comes so easily to the naturalists.

[Getting married] just seemed like the thing to do I guess. We got engaged in high school. [Everything] just clicked, [we] basically hit it off, got along great, and we were engaged for two years. I was not going to do anything until she graduated from [community] college . . . But after she graduated, things were still going great, and we got married in September when she got out of school.

Commitment then is an important step on the road to being an adult, and marriage itself is a visible badge of adulthood. But commitment is not something that is endlessly analyzed, strategized, or fretted over. A 26-year-old married Iowan, who is employed as a secretary, explains that young people who follow the traditional path to marriage “feel like [marriage is] how they [show people] they are growing up and . . . they’re not kids anymore.” In the words of a 29-year-old Iowa woman with an associate’s degree who wed at age 21, marriage was a way to get her “real” life to begin

I look back at it and I know when I was 21 I was thinking, ‘When are we going to get married?’” In [my hometown], a lot of people marry people who they’ve been with here and so I guess it’s a natural progression of things.

Marriage naturalists have a far more modest set of requirements for marriage, and once they are attained, building a life together seems more preferable
to the marriage planners’ preference for pursuing life goals individually. Here a 29-year-old professional, college-educated Iowan sums up why he and his wife rejected the marriage planner path that structured the lives of their friends from college and chose the more traditional naturalist path. It is interesting to note here that the context of staying in rural Iowa seems more influential than class given that this respondent has high levels of education.

[It was] the summer after I graduated from college and she was just going into her final year of college. And we sort of knew that that was going to be a, transitional time I guess for both of us and we, we sort of determined that wanted to make that transition together and kind of go it together rather than each kind of go follow our own dreams [on our own].

For the marriage planners, a wedding only occurs after one has become an adult, and each partner has built lives as individuals separately, but for marriage naturalists, building a life together as a couple endures as the best way to create a genuinely mature and grown-up life. For the young man quoted above, the fact that he and his wife chose to share a life together—in a formalized conjugal union—relatively early on in the life course demonstrates the single most distinctive element of this marriage naturalist perspective. For the naturalist, the best way to embark on a life is bound together in a conjugal union.

To summarize, marriage naturalists transition to marriage early and, in this regard, the paths they take resemble those that many young Americans took three and four decades earlier. We speculate that the ample opportunities for economic independence early in the life course, combined with prevailing social norms that support the fast transitions to adulthood that defined the mid-20th century, keep the traditional timing and orientations to marriage strong. Marriage naturalists move into marriage and view commitment as a natural, largely underexamined and almost unconscious act. In contrast, as we will demonstrate, marriage planners are in no hurry to enter into formalized conjugal unions and they evince a qualitatively different orientation to commitment.

**The Marriage Planners**

The traditional fast-tracking into marriage and family that defines marriage naturalists’ lives does not fit into an increasingly complex wider world where so many possibilities compete for emerging adults’ time and energy. As a group, the marriage planners are the typical young adults that scholars...
(Arnett, 2000; Mitchell, 2006a; Shanahan, 2000) have depicted as experiencing a more elongated and haphazard transition to adulthood. Marriage planners do not wed early in life, and they achieve the statuses associated with adulthood later in their lives than the marriage naturalists. Marriage planners also, on average, have much higher rates of participation in higher education, though socioeconomic and normative context may matter more in shaping planners. As we discussed previously, college offers a reason to delay adulthood’s burdens and responsibilities, and it also gives young people a place to experiment with different options.

According to a 25-year-old female New Yorker currently enrolled in a 4-year college and working full time, you can only be ready for marriage after you achieve personal goals for education and economic security. She goes on to list the order of achieving these accomplishments.

I’m hoping that in five years, I will have completed my Bachelor’s degree and my Master’s. I’m hoping to be employed as a teacher . . . happy and satisfied in [my profession]. I’m hoping that I will have my house, if not one of my own, one with my mother. I’m hoping that if I’m not married, that I will at least be with somebody that I care about and with plans of marriage, but I don’t necessarily have to be married. But, number one, the education goals and then two, I hope to be financially stable and content.

Planners also insist that personal growth and maturity should come before marriage. For instance, even though this 24-year-old New York woman with a bachelor’s degree believes her boyfriend “is the one for her,” she insists both of them need to mature on their own before they can move to a higher level of commitment. She states, “I feel like I have growing up to do individually and together before we’re able to get married or have children.” For a 25-year-old San Diego woman with a bachelor’s degree who lives with her boyfriend, this is the most marriage-worthy relationship she has ever had. Though she can find nothing wrong with her boyfriend, or the relationship, marriage is something that will happen in the future.

We were best friends for a year before we became a couple. I still really value that side of my relationship. We have really great communication and we share many interests . . . I’m not sure if there is a single quality I dislike about him. . . . [Interviewer: So why aren’t you planning marriage?] Well, it’s not because I don’t want to marry him, but because I don’t want to be married at this point.
Over and over again, we heard how young people felt they did not have time for relationships and marriage. Indeed, it seems that sharing your life with someone in marriage is seen as incompatible with pursuing personal and professional goals successfully. As a 25-year-old San Diego man enrolled in a 4-year college and working full time says,

I’m so busy with school and work that now I’m like I don’t really have time for a relationship. I’d love to have one but I really feel I wouldn’t dedicate myself enough to having one. I think that if it came along and it happened I would make time for it but when I think about it now, in perspective, I would say that I probably wouldn’t have time.

None of the marriage planners speak specifically of courtships, but, in fact, there is a distinct notion that relationships must develop over time, be tested, and ultimately move to the “absolute commitment” a wedding represents. The hurdles that slow young people’s progress on the way toward marriage offer revealing insights into marriage’s meanings. Marriage planners talk a great deal about being ready, or not, for marriage. Being ready means feeling settled, mature, and having achieved personal, educational, and career goals. The planners’ focus on work, school, and even on raising children is fundamentally incompatible with the emotional labor required for the committed relationships that survive into marriage. The fast pace of life, the high cost of housing, the demands on completing one’s education, the challenges of the labor market, and a social context that makes it relatively easy for young people to enjoy the benefits of marriage without its obligations, make the transition to marriage for young people in metropolitan areas more cautious. This 30-year-old New York woman with a bachelor’s degree recounts the travails of her long-distance relationship and why marriage represents a far-off, distant goal. For her and her boyfriend, being together in a more permanent relationship feels like trying to choreograph a ballet where the two principal dancers seem unwilling or unable to move closer together.

We’ve talked about marriage and living together but it’s hard when we don’t have a chance to see each other. It’s not like, “Hey, what are you doing? I want to come over.” It’s very strategic, like it’s very planned. I’ve just closed on a condo [in New York] and he’s closed on one in Boston. Don’t ask me what we’re doing, because my grandmother says to me, “You guys aren’t even working . . . to get closer together.” It’s like we’re being entrenched in our current situations . . . We haven’t
really said that in a year from now [let’s reevaluate our plans] because we don’t want to put any pressure on ourselves.

For a San Diego man in medical school who has been dating his girlfriend for 6 years and now lives with her, their relationship is inching toward marriage ever so slowly. Though he expresses no concerns about his girlfriend or the quality of their relationship, there is no sense that marriage is a high priority.

I mean, we’re definitely talking about marriage. Especially now that, you know, there’s a possibility that we’re going to be [apart] . . . it’s kind of raised the issue. Is this long distance going to be worth it? Where is it going? So it’s forced us to think about that. We’ve kind of had the idea of well, if things go well and we’re still happy and healthy even with the distance, you know, maybe we could get engaged some time in med school and get married after we graduate. And try to get, you know, do a couples residency match. So I mean we definitely talk about the future. But so much change is going to happen in the next couple of months . . . it’s hard to say for sure we’re getting married.

Ultimately, for this couple, what is more important than the relationship and a future together are their individual career goals. Not only does the idea of making a more permanent commitment feel vague and uncertain, in his comments one also detects that marriage has only come up as a point of discussion as a by-product of career goals and medical school. Indeed, the fact that educational and career goals overshadow the significance of building a life together is a central feature of the planner orientation.

Marriage Planners and Commitment

If marriage naturalists view commitment as something that happens automatically, marriage planners understand commitment as an ongoing effort in which romantic partners come to think of one another as us, rather than simply you and me. The data indicate that for planners commitment must be achieved by gaining intimate knowledge of one’s partner, experiencing decisions and setbacks together, learning to communicate, developing a sense of mutual trust, and believing that their relationship has a kind of inevitability; that is, that they are the “right person” for one another. Given that relationships evolve over an extended period of time, respondents describe cohabitation, not as a marriage substitute, but rather an intermediate phase—a dress rehearsal of sorts—for couples working toward a marriage’s absolute commitment.
(see also Brown, 2000). Marriage naturalists also cohabit, but they do so in lesser numbers and in a context where marriage is clearly the planned outcome for their living situation. This 30-year-old college-educated New York woman, who previously described her relationship as “strategic” and “planned,” feels ready to live with, but not marry, her current boyfriend. Though she describes marriage as a label, it is a label, she says, she wants for herself at some point in the future. She explains:

I wouldn’t know how to be married or not, it’s like a label to me. It’s something I want to do, but I don’t necessarily know if it would make our relationship stronger or better. At this point, I would just like to live together, then we could spend more time together and that would be the best thing. I think I’d be terrified about getting married at this point. [But] I want to be married and this is the closest I would say I’ve ever been to wanting to be married.

The most striking examples of how marriage planners see commitment as an evolving process may be among the unmarried parents who tend to be from a lower class position. When childbearing occurs outside of marriage, young people recognize that parents should want to stay together for the sake of a child. But, changing norms—specifically the fear of divorce and the declining stigmatization of nonmarital childbearing—have made the shotgun wedding a thing of the past. A 23 year old San Diego man attending a four year college, working full-time and raising two children with his girlfriend epitomizes the marriage planners’ viewpoint. He insists:

*Marriage is something you earn* [italics added] . . . If [she] graduates and [I] graduate, you can start working and we can afford [a wedding] and that’s when you get married. It’s not just ’cause we have a child and all of a sudden we need to go out and do it.

For a cohabitating 25-year-old New York woman with an associate’s degree, who has been with the father of her child for 5 years, marriage will only come once the couple has some economic security. She and her child’s father actively resist the social pressure to wed because they still cannot afford their own place, and, therefore, have not met the economic bar for marriage:

Actually, from my family, I was getting pressure [to get married], but I just didn’t like feed into it ’cause we weren’t ready, even though we had a child, but, we weren’t ready to get married. Financially we couldn’t
deal with it ’cause we were still living at my mother’s house when we had our son. We are planning on doing it, so whenever we’re ready, we’ll do it.

Even in cases of a shared child, today’s marriage planners delay their entry into marriage to optimize their chances that they have selected the best partner and, to be sure, their marriage will last. Fifty years ago, the social prohibitions against nonmarital childbearing would have led a young woman with a baby (or expecting one) to accept a man’s marriage proposal. The ambivalence that many young adults exhibit now toward marriage comes, in part, from the myriad alternatives to marrying, an abiding apprehension that many marriages do not work out, a very high set of standards for what a successful marriage is, and the perceived need for attaining personal maturity and having the resources to settle down before forming a family.

The Marriage Mentality and the Future of Marriage

Marriage naturalists and marriage planners have what we have termed a different marriage mentality, defined as the orientation that moves marriage from an ideal to a reality. The marriage mentality includes accepting the norm of exclusivity for marital relationships and embracing the life-altering responsibilities that the status of wife or husband demands. For marriage naturalists, the marriage mentality is the imprimatur of adulthood; you become an adult when you get married, whereas, for the planners, one has to be an adult before the marriage mentality is possible. Naturalists have an orientation to marriage that echoes the companionate and even institutionalized forms of marriage, whereas planners’ mentality is more characteristic of the individualized marriage. The marriage mentality occurs earlier for naturalists and as part of their relationships, whereas this attitude comes slowly to planners and can be independent of relationships.

Within a social context where marriage is a natural part of early adulthood, as is the case for the marriage naturalists, marriage flows inevitably from a relationship of a certain duration. The naturalists marry because they have been together for a while, and this is what is expected. When a 24-year-old Iowan with a bachelor’s degree recounts how he decided to get married, he illustrates the “natural” occurrence of the marriage mentality. He says,

I guess [marriage] just seemed like the next step. We had been dating 7 or 8 years, all throughout high school and college, so it pretty much just felt natural [italics added]. It was the next thing to do I guess you
know I pretty much knew that she was the person that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with so I guess that was the next step that’s the last step you can take.

In contrast, marriage planners develop a marriage mentality, and it is usually seen as part of the changes associated with maturity and not as a naturally occurring part of a relationship. You become an adult and then the marriage mentality is possible independent of whether you are currently in a relationship. For instance, a 27-year-old New Yorker with a vocational certificate who has only recently acquired the marriage mentality notes an internal change in herself that has nothing to do with a current relationship. She explains,

I want to be married. Lately, I’ve been thinking, “Oh, I want to get married.” I never used to think about that. You know what it is, I’ve changed my mentality [italics added]. It’s family, you know, before it used to be, “I don’t care if I leave my boyfriend, that’s fine.” Now it’s changed. I want to have a family. I want to have kids. I want that. I want to get married, like in a church.

For another 27-year-old New Yorker with a college degree and professional career, he struggles to acquire the mentality. At this point in his life, he would rather be free of restrictions.

You can’t rush into marriage . . . I’m a little older and things are different, but financially, I’m not ready. And mentally [italics added], there’s days when I feel like I could and days when I feel like I’d rather be single. . . . Not in the sense that I want to go out and play around and stuff. I feel like I don’t want to come home to a wife.

The marriage mentality is linked to how the transition to adulthood plays out for each of these groups, and, as such, it has implications for the future of marriage. The naturalists transition to adulthood as quickly as their counterparts of two generations ago, whereas the planners take the scenic route to adulthood. As the scenic route increasingly becomes the modal experience of attaining adulthood, then increasingly the marriage mentality will depend on being an adult first rather than marriage signifying entry to the status. The future of marriage then seems bound up with and inseparable from the changes in emerging adulthood and should be understood in tandem with these wider changes. We discuss what our findings portend for discussions about the decline, resilience, or deinstitutionalization of marriage below.
Discussion

What light do our data shed on the questions we posed earlier? In terms of the ongoing debates regarding marriage decline or resilience, even if only 29% of the sample was married when we interviewed them, we find little evidence of a decline in the importance of marriage among young people during their prime family formation years. Overwhelmingly, young people insist they value marriage, and the unmarried respondents express a desire to wed at some point in their lives. A 23-year-old unmarried mother in New York who cohabits with her boyfriend and attends community college, whom we quoted previously, summed up the way the majority of young Americans view marriage: “We are planning [italics added] on doing it, so whenever we’re ready, we’ll do it.” These findings are consistent with national survey data showing support for marriage among all groups in the United States (Raley, 2000).

Our study of young adults, which is not based on a representative sample, reveals that 1 in 5 are marriage naturalists, whereas the remainder fit into the marriage planners category. Not only do the marriage naturalists wed early on in life; when compared with the marriage planners, naturalists also see marriage in a distinctive way: specifically, it is a natural and seamless outcome for a relationship that endures over a period of time. Among the planners, however, marriage occurs only after a relationship has been tested, professional and personal goals are attained, and each partner achieves the “marriage mentality:” the cognitive framework that allows them to give up the self-interested ways of an unattached single so they can commit to the obligations and responsibilities of being a husband or wife.

There is another lens through which we might interpret these findings. The works of Giddens (1993) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) both posit that modernity itself has transformed intimate relationships. For Giddens (1993), this gives rise to a new kind of intimacy, which manifests as a negotiated agreement between partners of equal standing, and where sexuality is emancipated from reproductive needs. Here “pure relationships” can develop without having to lead to marriage. Similarly, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that as marriage has waned as a basis for the organization of intimate relationships, there is more freedom and democracy in personal life and more chaos. Both these works argue that love and passion are evident, and indeed the intensity of feeling can lead to problems (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 100), but marriage is no longer needed or desired by many. Our data would lead us to conclude that the opposite is true for our respondents—few talk about love or passion at all, and even for those planners for whom marriage is a distant aspiration, they still desire it.
In terms of how respondents talk about the meaning of marriage, race/ethnicity, gender, and class matter less than the socioeconomic and normative contexts in which the respondents reside. One way to interpret this finding is to say that the orientations toward marriage are shaped by a cultural context, specifically that there is an element of young people’s attitudes and beliefs about marriage mirroring the behavior they see around them. The symbolic interactionist perspective (e.g., Blumer, 1969) enables us to see how within a given structural context attitudes are shaped by interaction and by an individual’s expectations of how others perceive him. Certainly, the fact that in different structural contexts the naturalist and planner trope predominate is due in part to the interactive process. We found that the socially, racially, and ethnically heterogeneous category of marriage planners share a broadly similar script to make sense of relationships and marriage. There were also no real differences between the respondents who were children of immigrants and native-born respondents. What does vary across various socioeconomic groups is how the structural location of a person’s life makes it more or less difficult for them to achieve the economic, personal, emotional, and relationship goals that all marriage planners demand. It is also likely that class and race influences access to the number of marriage-worthy partners (Wilson, 1987). However, despite their starkly different backgrounds, marriage planners are united in the fact that getting married requires acquiring the marriage mentality, achieving economic stability and emotional maturity, and having a thoroughly tested relationship.

Geography and regional location are strongly correlated to the naturalist and planner orientations. Naturalists are bolstered in their early marriage and their accelerated transitions to adulthood because they exist in an economy where workers possess moderate earning potential and levels of education, there is a lower cost of living (particularly for housing) and the labor force works in full-time blue- and pink-collar jobs. In contrast, planners inhabit a post-industrial economy with high housing costs and a labor force where workers often need several years of training, education, and work experience before they can become economically self-sufficient. Within these economic conditions, which are overwhelmingly found in urban/metropolitan areas, young people operate in a social context where the structural realities create obstacles and delays as they work toward the goal of marriage. Because Iowa’s rural economy mirrors the mid-20th century, we can speculate that conditions in this setting keep the older family patterns alive although the realities of a post-industrial economy in metropolitan areas build in delays for the transition into adulthood.

In terms of the changing meaning of marriage within society, our findings bolster the case for viewing marriage from a life course perspective. As stated
earlier, naturalists’ scripts about relationships evoke the mid-20th century, a time when marriage was seen as a crucial first step toward adult status. In contrast, the planners reflect the “wait-and-see” attitude that defines the extended transition to adulthood of the current era. For the planners, getting married competes for their time and attention with the myriad adult milestones that define this stage of life: earning a degree, settling into a career, establishing a separate household. Marriage is a desirable outcome, but it is one that does not happen simply because a relationship endures.

The typology of the marriage planners and the marriage naturalists gives scholars a way to resolve the paradox of how young people with so many alternatives to marriage still view marriage as a meaningful and important part of their lives. Although others have argued that marriage’s cultural significance has changed for the society at large (Cherlin, 2004), we ground these cultural shifts within a structural argument about the unique developmental character of the transition to adulthood. For many educated and elite young adults, delaying marriage until personal and professional goals are achieved is a rational response given the education, training, and time that is needed to acquire full-time, well-paying, stable employment (Axinn & Thornton, 2000). Low-income couples may bear children, but they also delay marriage until they have met the “economic” and “relationship” bars that all marriage planners see as prerequisites for a marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Based on how marriage planners make sense of relationships and marriage’s role in their lives, they are more discerning about whether marriage will indeed improve their economic and social conditions. Most will cohabit and, to be sure, a minority will never make the transition to a formal marriage at all. Ultimately, the most striking difference between the two groups is that whereas the naturalists see marriage as a prerequisite for being an adult, planners want to establish themselves as adults before they wed.

Conclusion

Our unusually large (for a qualitative study) and diverse sample permits us to take the pulse of the meaning of marriage. Marriage in America has changed, and it is important to take stock of what these changes mean. The overly ideological debate about whether marriage has declined or is resilient (recent examples are Cloud, 2007; Zernike, 2007) misses the point. What has changed fundamentally is the transition to adulthood, and even though a fifth of our respondents become adults as quickly as their parents and grandparents did, four fifths do not. Marriage planners have what is fast becoming the modal
experience for young adults. Though marriage remains an important goal, adulthood comes before the lifelong commitment that marriage engenders. For marriage planners, commitment evolves, and the marriage mentality can emerge independent of the relationship. Finding love and companionship is secondary to getting marriage right, and this would suggest that Cherlin’s (2004) prediction of the deinstitutionalization of marriage may be premature. Certainly, he is correct to say that marriage is now individualized as opposed to companionate, and even the marriage naturalists have unions where the roles are not as traditionally defined.

Our finding that the children of immigrants did not differ significantly from other planners in the sample is worthy of attention. Given the often vexed debate about assimilation and acculturation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), our data on orientations toward marriage suggest that in a structural context marked by an extended transition to adulthood, the children of immigrants adopt attitudes and behaviors that have more in common with their metropolitan peers and owe less to parent culture influences. Some interviewees who were the children of immigrants did talk about how their parents expected them to be married by a certain age, or how for some, their parent-approved marriage partner should be someone from their own ethnic group or from a certain social class. However, even as these young adults noted these expectations, they spoke about marriage in terms that echoed their nonchildren of immigrant peers. Simply put, in terms of an orientation to marriage, there was no vestige of a segmented assimilation (Zhou, 1997) among our second-generation respondents across class groups. This is an area that clearly calls for more research, and future work should try to tease out the process by which children of immigrants form their orientations toward marriage.

As with any study of this nature, we are aware of our limitations and the need for further research. Our sample was chosen nonrandomly to investigate various aspects of the transition to adulthood, and the study is not necessarily generalizable. Our measures for class were also limited, and future studies should address this limitation. Ultimately, we think that future work should examine whether the results of this nonrepresentative sample can be replicated, and also, whether the meaning of marriage is entering a new phase where its norms will be redefined, and, to what extent the changing landscape of young adulthood influences this process.

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