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Leslie A. Baxter

University of Iowa, leslie-baxter@uiowa.edu

Dawn O. Braithwaite

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, dbraithwaite1@unl.edu

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Performing Marriage: Marriage Renewal Rituals as Cultural Performance

Leslie A. Baxter and Dawn O. Braithwaite

Corresponding author – Leslie A. Baxter, Department of Communication Studies, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242, email leslie-baxler@uiowa.edu

Abstract

This interpretive study examined how the marriage renewal ritual reflects the social construction of marriage in the United States. Two culturally prominent ideologies of marriage were interwoven in our interviews of 25 married persons who had renewed their marriage vows: (a) a dominant ideology of community and (b) a more muted ideology of individualism. The ideology of community was evidenced by a construction of marriage featuring themes of public accountability, social embeddedness, and permanence. By contrast, the ideology of individualism constructed marriage around themes of love, choice, and individual growth.

Most interpersonal communication scholars approach the study of marriage in one of two ways: (a) marriage as context, or (b) marriage as outcome. In contrast, in the present study we adopt an alternative way to envision marriage: marriage as cultural performance. We frame this study using two complementary theoretical perspectives: social constructionism and ritual performance theory. In particular, we examine how the cultural performance of marriage renewal rituals reflects the social construction of marriage in the United States. In an interpretive analysis of interviews with marital partners who had recently renewed their marriage vows, we examine the extent to which the two most prominent ideological perspectives on marriage—individualism and community—organize the meaning of marriage for our participants.

The Socially Contested Construction of Marriage

Communication scholars interested in face-to-face interaction tend to adopt one of two general approaches to the study of marriage, what Whitchurch and Dickson (1999) have called the interpersonal communication approach and the family communication approach. The family communication approach, with which the present study is aligned, views communication as constitutive of the family. That is, through their communicative practices, parties construct their social reality of who their family is and the meanings that organize it. From this constitutive, or social constructionist perspective, social reality is an ongoing process of producing and reproducing meanings and social patterns through the interchanges among people (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994). From a family communication perspective, marriage is thus an ongoing discursive accomplishment. It is achieved through a myriad of interaction practices, including but not limited to, private exchanges between husbands and wives, exchanges between the couple and their extended kinship and friendship networks, public and private rituals such as weddings and anniversaries, and public discourse by politicians and others surrounding family values. Whitchurch and Dickson (1999) argued that, by contrast, the interpersonal communication approach views marriage as an independent or a dependent variable whose functioning in the cause-and-effect world of human behavior can be determined. For example, interpersonal communication scholars often frame marriage as an antecedent contextual variable in examining how various communicative phenomena are enacted in married couples compared with nonmarried couples, or in the premarital compared with postmarital stages of relationship development. Interpersonal communication scholars often also consider marriage as a dependent variable in examining which causal variables lead courtship pairs to marry or keep married couples from breaking up, such as the extent to which such communication phenomena as conflict or disclosive openness during courtship predict whether a couple will wed.

Advocates of a constitutive or social constructionist perspective argue that the discursive production and reproduction of the social order is far from the univocal, consensually based model that scholars once envisioned (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Instead, the social world is a cross-current of multiple, often competing, conflictual perspectives. The social order is wrought from multivocal negotiations in which different interests, ideologies, and beliefs interact on an ongoing basis. The process of "social ordering" is not a monologic conversation of seamless coherence and consensus; rather, it is a pluralistic cacophony of discursive renderings, a multiplicity of negotiations in which different lived experiences and different systems of meaning are at stake (Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton, & Radley, 1988; Shotter, 1993). As Bakhtin (1981) expressed: "Every concrete utterance . . . serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance" (p. 272). Thus, interaction events are enacted dialogically, with multiple "voices," or perspectives, competing for discursive dominance or privilege as the hegemonic, centripetal center of a given cultural conversation in the moment. Social life is a collection of dialogues between centripetal and centrifugal groups, beliefs, ideologies, and perspectives.

In modern American society, the institution of marriage is subject to endless negotiation by those who enact and discuss it. Existing research suggests that marriage is a contested terrain whose boundary is disputed by scholars and laypersons alike. One belief is that marriage is essentially the isolated domain of the two married spouses, a private haven separate from the obligations and constraints of the broader social order. The other belief is that marriage is a social institution that is embedded practically and morally in the broader society.

Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) have argued that this "boundary dispute" surrounding marriage reflects an omnipresent ideological tension in the American society that can be traced to precolonial times—a tension between the cultural strands of utilitarian/expressive individualism and moral/social community. The marriage of utilitarian/expressive individualism emphasizes freedom from societal traditions and obligations, privileging instead its private existence in fulfilling the emotional and psychological needs of the two spouses. Marriage, according to this ideology, is not conceived as a binding obligation; rather, it is viewed as existing only as the expression of the choices of the free selves who constitute the union. Marriage is built on love for partner, expressive openness between partners, self-development, and self-gratification. It is a psychological contract negotiated between self-fulfilled individuals acting in their own self-interests. Should marriage cease to be gratifying to the selves in it, it should naturally end. Bellah et al. (1985) argue that this conception of marriage dominates the discursive landscape of modern American society, occupying, in Bakhtin's (1981) terms, the centripetal center.

By contrast, the moral/social community view of marriage emphasizes its existence as a social institution with obligations to uphold traditional values of life-long commitment and duty, and to cohere with other social institutions in maintaining the existing moral and social order. According to this second ideology, marriage is anchored by social obligation—expectations, duties, and accountabilities to others. In this way, marriage is grounded in its ties to the larger society and is not simply a private haven for emotional gratification and intimacy for the two spouses. Bellah et al. (1985) argue that this view of marriage, although clearly distinguishable in the discursive landscape of modern American society, occupies the centrifugal margin rather than the hegemonic center in modern social constructions of marriage in the United States.

These two cultural ideologies of marriage also are readily identifiable in existing social scientific research on marital communication (Allan, 1993). The "private haven" ideology is the one that dominates existing research on communication in marriage (Milardo & Wellman, 1992). In this sort of research on marital communication, scholars draw a clear boundary demarcation around the spousal unit and proceed to understand how marriage works by directing their empirical gaze inward to the psychological characteristics of the two married persons and the interactions that take place within this dyad (Duck, 1993). By contrast, other more sociologically oriented scholars who study communication in marriage emphasize that the marital relationship is different from its nonmarital counterparts of romantic and cohabiting couples precisely because of its status as an institutionalized social unit (e.g., McCall, McCall, Denzin, Suttles, & Kurth, 1970). Scholars who adopt the latter view direct their empirical gaze outside marital dyads to examine how marriage is

enacted in the presence of societal influences, such as legitimization and acceptance of a pair by their kinship and friendship networks, and societal barriers to marital dissolution (e.g., Milardo, 1988).

A third approach to the study of marriage is identifiable in the growing number of dialogically oriented scholars interested in communication in personal relationships who are pointing to the status of marriage as simultaneously a private culture of two as well as an institutionalized element of the broader social order (e.g., Brown, Airman, Werner, 1992; Montgomery, 1992). According to Shotter (1993) and Bellah et al. (1985), couples face this dilemma of double accountability on an ongoing basis. Although the ideology of utilitarian/expressive individualism is given dominance, "most Americans are, in fact, caught between ideals of freedom and obligation" (Bellah et al., p. 102).

For example, Shotter (1993) has argued that relationship partners are accountable or answerable for their relational actions both to themselves and to others outside the marriage, and that such double accountability presents the pair of spouses with a dilemma between public and private ideologies of relating. That is, public traditions, expectations, and constraints are embodied in a society's historical and ongoing reinterpretation and debate about different ways of living. Private relational realities emerge in the joint actions of partners when they interact in a responsive way solely to each other, creating spontaneous dialogues that are out of the control of prevailing social ideologies but are dependent on the uniqueness of the pair's acting together in the privacy of the relational culture created between the two of them. Further, Shotter argued that the more partners reference public accountabilities in their private relational life, the more socially moral, competent, and intelligible they appear to outside others, but also the more intimacy fades in the privacy of their relationship. In contrast, solely referencing their jointly-created reality, while characteristic of intimacy, is to be publicly unaccountable and alienated from society.

Given this apparent double accountability of marriage, scholarly attention needs to focus on how marital couples negotiate their way through the sometimes disparate ideologies of marriage as a "private haven" of self-expression, choice, and gratification, on the one hand, and marriage as a social institution with obligations and duties, on the other hand. One way to study this is by examining artifacts or rituals that publicly reflect the negotiated outcome of the construction of marriage upon which they agreed. Such public displays or performances function as meta-communicative statements by couples that clearly embody an already established stance on what marriage is and should be.

Ritual Performances as Multivocal

How do spouses respond to the dilemma between their private ideology of marriage and the cultural, institutional, public ideology of marriage? Several scholars have argued that ritual performances function as particularly powerful rhetorical mechanisms in negotiating the multivocal dilemmas of the social world (Altman, Brown, Staples, & Werner, 1992; Roberts, 1988; Werner, Altman, Brown, & Ginat, 1993).

In general terms, a ritual is a communication event involving a structured sequence of symbolic acts in which homage is paid to some sacred cultural object (Goffman, 1967). Turner (1969) has argued that ritual performances are fundamentally multivocal in nature,

simultaneously incorporating at a symbolic level multiple, competing themes. He argued that rituals are constituted in symbols that exhibit the properties of condensation of larger cultural themes, unification of disparate referents, and polarization of meaning:

A . . . [ritual] symbol . . . represents many things at the same time: it is multivocal, not univocal. Its referents are not all of the same logical order but are drawn from many domains of social experience and ethical evaluation. Finally, its referents tend to cluster around opposite semantic poles. (Turner, 1969, p. 52)

Thus, to Turner, a ritual is a condensed cultural conversation in which the multiple, competing voices that play in everyday social life are brought together in bold relief and given voice simultaneously.

A ritual performance gains its cultural significance in its liminality (Turner, 1969, 1988). That is, ritual performance separates cultural members from everyday life for the period of the performance, placing them in a suspended cultural state or "limbo." Ritual performances are enacted within a definite time span, or at least with distinct beginning and end points; they involve an organized program of activity; they have a place and occasion of enactment; and they involve a set of performers and an audience (Turner, 1988). The liminal nature of ritual performances positions them as occasions to observe cultural reflexivity at work, or what Turner calls performative reflexivity. In performative reflexivity, cultural members are afforded an opportunity to step back from everyday living, to "bend or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components" (Turner, 1988, p. 24). In other words, ritual performances can be viewed as cultural occasions of metacommunication in which cultural members step back from everyday life in order to reflect symbolically on that very life.

In the present study, we focus on a ritual performance that is gaining popularity in modern American society—the renewal of marriage vows (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995). Increasingly, married couples are choosing to renew their marriage vows in public ceremonies witnessed by others, usually to commemorate an important milestone in their marriage such as a 25th or 50th anniversary of their wedding (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995). Our purpose in this study is to examine how the marriage renewal ritual reflects the social construction of marriage in the United States. Guided by Turner's (1988) ritual performance theory, examining this ritual allows us to assess the extent to which the two most prominent ideological perspectives have been incorporated into these constructions by long-term marital pairs.

Methods

Participants

We pursued the purpose of our exploratory study by interviewing people who had recently participated in a marriage renewal ritual in their respective marriage, or who were planning to participate in this ritual in the near future. Although our analysis of the interview transcripts is limited to the particular sample of persons we interviewed, an effort

was made to seek a diversity of perspectives on the renewal ritual experience. Therefore, we sought informants through three primary means: local newspaper announcements of vow renewals; announcements of the study in university classes and among work colleagues; and the snowballing of referrals from early informants. When informants agreed to participate in the study, we gave them the choice of being interviewed alone or with their spouse. The choice usually depended on whether it was possible for the interviewer to be present when both partners were together. Overall, ten interviews were conducted separately with the husbands and wives who comprised five couples; four interviews were conducted jointly with husband-wife pairs; two interviews were conducted with husbands only; and five interviews were conducted with wives only. A total of 25 informants were interviewed through 21 interviews that captured the vow renewal experiences of 16 married couples.

All 11 of the male informants were Caucasian, with a mean age of 50 years and a mean of 16 years of education. Fourteen of the 16 female informants were Caucasian, and two were Hispanic in ethnicity. The mean age of female informants was 48 years, and the mean education level was 13 years. The marriages that were honored through vow renewal ceremonies had a mean length of 29 years. Two of the couples represented in the interviews were in the planning stage for their respective renewal events, and the 14 couples represented were reporting on vow renewal events that had already taken place.

Data Collection and Analysis

We relied on intensive, open-ended interviewing in order to probe the depth of informants' perceptions and experiences (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988). Interviewers asked a series of questions designed to elicit open-ended narrative responses from informants, such as "Where/when was the vow renewal enacted?"; "Who was present for the event and why were these particular people there?"; "Why did you do the vow renewal?"; "What went on at the vow renewal ceremony?"; "What were the outcomes or effects of the vow renewal?" Informants often used the interview as an occasion to share with the interviewer a variety of artifacts from the vow renewal event, such as copies of invitations to the ceremony, pictures and photo albums, videotapes of the ceremony, and objects involved in the renewal event like special clothing worn during the ceremony, or music played at the event. Interviewers probed informants about the meanings and functions of these artifacts, such as "Why was this particular music selected?"

All interviews were audio tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed for purposes of interpretive analysis. Analysis revolved around two tasks. Our first analytical task was to identify the characteristics of the marriage vow renewal ceremony that would qualify it as a ritual performance. Using Turner's (1988) description of a ritual performance, we looked for evidence of a place and occasion for performing an organized program of activity, with an audience, that took place within a finite time period. Basically, this analytic task was organized around Spradley's (1979) semantic relationships of Location for Action ("X is a place for doing Y"), Sequence ("X is a step in Y"), and Means-End ("X is a way to do Y"). Our second analytic task was that of examining the transcripts to determine the meanings of "marriage" reflected in our informants' descriptions of their vow renewal ceremonies.

This analytic task was organized around Spradley's (1979) semantic relationships of Rationale ("X is a reason for doing Y"), Cause-Effect ("X is a result of Y"), and Attribution ("X is an attribute [characteristic] of Y"). A unit of data was a discourse segment that described a location, a sequence, a means-end, a rationale, a cause-effect, or an attribute.

Our next task was the coding process. Central to the coding process is what Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to as theoretical sensitivity. In short, this sensitivity involves an open mind but not a theoretically empty mind in approaching the data. The coding process involved performing open, axial, and selective coding, where we functioned inductively, open to what the data contained. However, we were also mindful of the two ideologies of marriage identified in extant research and theory, taking note when we saw points of overlap. As a check to ensure that we were not forcing these ideologies onto our data, we engaged in an interpretive exercise known as negative case analysis in which we interrogated our data analytically in search of alternative explanations that would render our analysis invalid (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). For example, we asked of a given datum whether a third ideology was present rather than the two identified in existing research and theory.

To perform open coding, we initially functioned independently of one another, using the constant-comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In general, this method is an iterative one in which a researcher derives categories of X based on a judgment of sameness or difference from one datum to the next. The first datum for a given semantic relationship provides the first category of X; if the second datum is judged somehow different from the first, a second category is added, and so on until all of the data have been interpreted. This process is both iterative and emergent in that categories are added, combined, and revised on an ongoing basis. Categorization is completed when no further changes are required in a given category set.

We then met to discuss our open coding and to perform axial coding and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These two forms of analysis differ largely in terms of their level of abstraction and share the common goal of integrating findings from different semantic relationships in search of more general themes that bring coherence to one's analysis. In the present study, we first conducted axial coding by searching for commonalities across semantic relationships. For example, *love/intimacy* surfaced as a category in several semantic relationships: *love for partner* emerged as a reason our informants reported engaging in a vow renewal, *the renewal of love* and *joy/satisfaction in the expression of love* emerged as perceived outcomes of the vow renewal, and *articulation of continuing love for partner* emerged as a component of the actual renewal ceremony. At the axial level of coding, a theme of *social embeddedness* surfaced under the Rationale semantic relationship (saying thanks to others for the success of the marriage was a reason for engaging in the renewal ritual), the Cause-Effect semantic relationship (solidifying bonds with family and friends was an perceived outcome of the ceremony), and the Means-End semantic relationship (informants describing to us how they incorporated significant others into the actual ceremony).

At the level of selective coding, we noticed that themes cohered into broader ideological perspectives on marriage and that these ideologies were not expressed with equal force by our informants. These ideologies are discussed in the next section.

Results

The Ritual Performance of Marriage Renewal

The marriage renewal event clearly meets Turner's (1988) criteria of a ritual. Central to the vow renewal event was its public nature. The vow renewal involved an audience who functioned in a variety of capacities. The event was a public enactment that typically involved a ceremony in which the spouses exchanged vows. After the ceremony had ended, it was usually followed by some sort of celebratory reception or party. Three types of settings were used for vow renewals: private residences, churches, and reception halls rented specially for the occasion. Even when the vow renewal ceremony was held in the same room as the reception, the two events were demarcated by time or space. Couples would end the ceremony and start the party, and they would move to another part of the room or rearrange the space for food, drink, dancing, etc.

Two types of vow renewal ceremonies were described by our informants. The first type, experienced by four of the couples represented in our sample, was what we termed a *mass ceremony* in which a presiding member of the clergy administered vows to many couples en masse. These mass renewal rituals were typically initiated by the church, rather than by individual couples. These mass ceremonies were enacted in the presence of other congregation members and invited guests, and tended to be fairly large in size. Half of the mass renewal events were part of a regularly scheduled church service and the others were a special church service held at a different time. For both forms, the reception typically occurred afterward in the church's reception hall.

The second type of vow renewal ceremony was initiated and planned by the pairs of spouses themselves; self-initiated ceremonies were experienced by twelve of the couples represented in our sample. Ceremonies of this type often took place on milestone anniversaries, such as the 25th or 50th. A smaller number of these ceremonies took place as a marker that the couple had successfully come through a difficult period, such as a separation, and was celebrating the start of a new chapter in their marital life. The couple-initiated ritual involved members of the couple's network, including children, family, friends, and, in many cases, church members. The smallest number of participants assembled for a renewal event was four, and the largest numbered several hundred; however, most had a large number of people present.

All of the public renewal events involved an officiating person who administered the vows of renewal to the couple. In all but one instance, this person was the couple's pastor, minister, or priest. The members of the clergy often performed preparatory work as well, consulting with one or both members of the couple in advance of the ceremony with respect to the type of ceremony to be performed and the content of the vows that would be administered during the ceremony.

Participants other than the presiding official enacted a variety of roles in the vow renewal event, three of which will be discussed here because of their frequency in our data. First, there were preparatory or planning roles in which family members, particularly daughters, assisted the couple in coordinating the plans for the event. Second, participants enacted assigned roles during the ritual, such as forming a traditional wedding party consisting of ushers or bridesmaids for the ceremony. Finally, participants performed the role

of witness when they were invited guests. In the case of mass ceremony renewals, participants had the role of co-enactor of vows.

The renewal ceremony itself usually took the form of a traditional Western wedding. Many of these vow renewal ceremonies were virtually indistinguishable from initial wedding vows. Many wives wore wedding gowns and husbands wore suits or tuxedos. The couple often involved participants as members of the wedding party. Most often, couples asked their children, relatives, or close friends to enact traditional wedding party roles as witnesses, attendants, or ushers. A few couples asked members of their original wedding party to reenact their previous roles for the renewal event.

The public renewal events involved many artifacts of an initial wedding event, including a decorated wedding cake, flower bouquets and arrangements, wedding decorations like bells and bows, guest books, and a photographer or videographer. Most of the couples designed and mailed out formal invitations. Many of the couples had artifacts made to commemorate the vow renewal ritual, most often a ring for the wife and, in some cases, rings for both wife and husband. Some couples had new rings made and some altered existing rings.

Centripetal-Centrifugal Voices in the Marriage Renewal Ritual

The interviews suggested that the marriage renewal ritual gives voice both to the ideology of utilitarian/expressive individualism and to the ideology of moral/social community. That is, our informants described their marriage renewal vows in ways that constructed marriage as both a private emotional site of self-expression, intimacy, and gratification, and a public institution embedded in the broader social order. Typical of this ideological blend is the following statement by a 74-year-old husband in one of our couple interviews. This couple, married for 49 years, participated in a mass renewal ceremony.

What was my motivation [for renewing the marital vows]? I just thought it was a good exercise in spiritual renewal and family renewal, and it would be worthwhile. Marriage is not really a totally private thing; it has social implications that I think are important. I felt that, uh, we could, well, make a contribution for that reason but also personally, I think it enriches our personal self. (#9, 11, 39–44)¹

This statement evidences a celebration of personal selves, and this ideological strand is complemented with an even stronger belief that marriage is a social institution with ties to both religion and family.

A similar ideological blend surfaced in interviews with pairs who had participated in a couple-initiated renewal ceremony. Illustrative is this excerpt from a couple interview with a wife (aged 45) and a husband (aged 48) who had been married for 26 years at the time of the interview:

- I: What has going through this [renewal ceremony] meant to you?
- W: Probably first and foremost being able to express our love to each other in front of a group. . . . Being able to say with everybody there that marriage can be wonderful if you let it be.
- I: What did it mean to you?
- H: I think two or three things. One being that it gave us an opportunity for people to visually see and hear our love for each other. And what we tried to stress in that was that "nothing in this world that is worth anything comes easy." Our relationship over the years was nothing magical, it was because we were dedicated to one another. And committed to one another. . . . And, so, that was probably one of the most meaningful things to me. Probably, just being able to be with our friends, our family. . . . And not just in the wedding ceremony, but in seeing Gloria's [his wife's] dedication to all of it, and uh, it means a lot to me. (#20, 12, 495-522)²

Both members of this couple noted that they felt love for their partner, but this theme was embedded in statements that indicated that the significance of the renewal ceremony rested with its public nature and the opportunity to be with others and have them hear the pair's expression of their love.

Unlike the cultural conversation discussed by Bellah et al. (1985), in which the private, self-focused marriage occupies the centripetal center against the more marginalized, centrifugal voice of communality, our married informants described a reversal of these two ideological voices. That is, although marriage comprises both individualistic and communal dimensions, it is the public, communally embedded marriage that our informants sought to emphasize in the enactment of their respective renewal performances. The condensed cultural conversation of these ritual performances captured a centripetal voice of communally centered marriage alongside a more muted, centrifugal voice of individually-centered marriage. Thus, in stepping outside the everyday doing of marriage to reflect upon it, our informants used their marriage renewal performances to make a cultural statement about marriage as constituted fundamentally through a communal process and only secondarily through negotiation by their individual selves. Given that our interviews evidenced both ideological strands, we will turn to a detailed discussion of how each ideology contributed to the significance and meaning of the marriage renewal ritual among our informants.

The marriage of moral/social community

This ideology of marriage was evident in three themes that surfaced in the interviews: accountability to others, embeddedness in communal webs, and the expectation of permanence. We will discuss each separately.

First, our informants discussed their marriage renewal vows as occasions in which the public accountability of marriage was emphasized. Two kinds of public accountability were evident. In one kind of public accountability, informants emphasized that the public nature of their renewal vows was important to them because it underscored their belief

that the commitment of marriage was a public act of moral declaration. An audience functioned as witnesses of this declaration, making the parties accountable for their vows of renewal. As one 37-year-old male informant expressed to us about the mass ceremony in which his 12-year marriage was honored:

An important aspect of wedding ceremonies is the witnesses. That's why you have a, a ceremony is to have witnesses. . . . You can be romantic, recite your vows to each other on Valentine's Day or something like that, but that idea of having witnesses is an important one, I think. . . . It just gives you greater accountability. I mean, uh, vows are not easy to keep [laughs] without people keeping you accountable, and you being impressed yourselves of the significance of it. It's not like promising to be at dinner at six o'clock, you know! (#7, 11, 115-134)

To this informant, the private, romantic meaning of a marriage could be enacted in private, between the partners. The public ceremony functioned as an accountability mechanism. The same point was made by this 52-year-old woman about the couple-initiated ceremony to celebrate their 25th anniversary: "[The original wedding] was standing up in front of God and everybody and declaring it that gave it a little extra solemnity and a little extra commitment. And so we insisted on that for this [renewal ceremony]" (#22, 6, 224-230). The significance of having a marriage renewal ceremony was that it recognized the important public accountability of commitment.

The second way in which a theme of public accountability emerged in our transcripts was in the expressed obligation our informants felt to provide a public model and living proof of successful marriage for younger generations and for those in their social network who were currently struggling with marriage. Couples often felt obligated to model a successful marriage for the sake of their children, as this 58-year-old female informant noted about her couple-initiated ceremony to celebrate their 25th anniversary:

I think that it brought to the minds of the children that Mom and Dad have struggled and they are here, we can do it too. I noticed that my oldest son has had problems with his marriage, this is his third one. . . . My oldest daughter also had problems with hers. . . . I think that maybe seeing that it [marriage] can be good with struggles made them a little more committed to trying harder. (#19, 10, 22-38)

A second theme through which the ideology of moral/social community was given voice was a construction of marriage as part of a larger, communal web. To our informants, the success of their marriages was in large measure because of the support that others provided to their marriage. A 45-year-old female informant expressed an example of this theme during a couple interview about their couple-initiated ceremony in honor of their 25th anniversary:

We didn't focus just on us . . . we focused more on others. . . . We wanted to honor our families, so our pastor had Frank's [her spouse] mom stand and give tribute to her. She and Frank's dad had been married 54 years. They gave tribute

to my mom and dad who were there; they had been married 54 years. We gave flowers to our families. And then we had a special song to all of our friends and family. . . . We gave special tribute to them, to the group, while they played a special song for them. And shook hands with them and gave our love to them, saying "thank you for being there to support us during the ups and downs." And so it was kind of a tribute to everybody. (#20, 11, 92–104)

Thus, to this informant, and to many others, the renewal ceremony was an occasion to pay homage to friends and family because the success of her and her husband's marriage was in large measure attributable to connections with family and friends and the support they provided to the couple.

Various artifacts were also used by our informants in their renewal ceremonies as ways to symbolically establish links with others, thereby emphasizing that marriage was enmeshed in a web of significant others. Artifacts represented a way to reflect the past contributions of members of the couple's network, most often family members, to the success of the marriage. For example, in one ceremony, the wife rewrote and recited a poem her father had taught her. At another renewal event, for the couple's 40th anniversary, the pair used and prominently displayed a silver coffee serving set that their son had brought them from Vietnam on their 25th anniversary. Another couple talked about the special dress the wife wore for the renewal event. She had gone shopping for the dress with her daughter and found a dress that cost over \$100, but she would not buy it because it was much more expensive than any dress she had ever owned. The daughter talked to her father, who went down and bought it for his wife. This dress was dubbed in the family "the anniversary dress," and subsequently other women in the family also had worn the dress on special occasions. This dress became an artifact of the renewal event that has been shared, literally as well as symbolically, by members of the family, thereby retaining a special meaning for the entire family.

The third theme in which the marriage of moral/social community was evident was an expectation of permanence. Our informants viewed commitment as a lifelong promise to stay in the marriage, not a fair-weather declaration to be abandoned when maintaining the relationship became effortful. To our informants, the renewal ceremony was an occasion to declare to themselves and to others their conception of marriage as a permanent undertaking. As one 58-year-old male informant expressed about their couple-initiated ceremony to honor their 30th anniversary:

It is not something that you go into as a trial-and-error thing. It's something that is a lifetime commitment. . . . I think our children saw us in a different light. [The ceremony] showed a commitment, we are not just Mom and Dad. (#15, 11, 29–51)

This theme is also apparent in several of the excerpts we have quoted above.

In sum, our informants drew upon the ideology of moral/social community in making sense of their marriage renewal vows. The ceremony was meaningful because it constructed marriage as a publicly accountable institution, embedded in a communal web of friends and family, with the expectation and obligation of lifelong commitment. In fact,

this ideology emerged as the more dominant one, and the ideology of utilitarian/expressive individualism was more muted.

The marriage of utilitarian/expressive individualism

Although our informants viewed marriage first and foremost as a social institution, they also drew upon themes of intimacy and love, freedom of choice, and self-growth in making sense of the meaningfulness of their marriage renewal vows. These themes are prominent semantic strands in the cultural ideology of utilitarian/expressive individualism.

In part, the marriage renewal vow ceremonies were important to our informants because they were occasions in which the spouses could express and realize their love for one another. As one 50-year-old female informant told us about the mass ceremony in which she and her husband of 20 years participated:

At one moment, when they actually went through the ceremony, and, and it, it flashed, it was like flashback. When I looked at him, I knew that love was still there [crying]. It's so neat. I mean, there's times in your marriage before you could just kill 'em, and I'm sure they do you . . . but there's still that, it's still there. That was the most remarkable. (#12, 5, 78–84)

To our informants, the renewal vows were important as private expressions and realizations of love and intimacy between the spouses. In fact, our informants often viewed the renewal ceremony as more about the expression of love than was the original wedding, which had a legal function of creating a marriage unit in the eyes of the law. Put simply, our informant married couples were still in love and wanted to express that to each other in a special way afforded by the renewal of vows ceremony.

The renewal ceremony not only allowed an expression of love but an opportunity to rejuvenate love. As one 42-year-old wife reported about the couple-initiated ceremony in honor of her marriage of 9 years:

It's [love for partner] not the same as it was in '83, but that doesn't mean that we can't recognize it and nurture it. I think it's real easy for me to take, uh, take it for granted and, it's not something I want to take for granted. . . . [The ceremony] makes it special, keeps it alive, makes it flourish. (#4, 11, 488–494)

In the everyday life of conducting a marriage, love can be taken for granted and thereby lose its spark. To our informants, the liminal act of suspending business as usual for purposes of expressing love for partner functioned to revitalize that love.

Before we began the interviews, we wondered if the vows themselves would be a very important part of the ceremony. We anticipated hearing stories of how couples negotiated the words of vows and that copies of the text of the vows would be the most treasured memory coming from the ritual for the couples. However, with few exceptions, couples did not recall much of the text of their renewal vows. Most of the couples had made suggestions to the presiding official when they met before the ceremony, but then left it to the

official to prepare the vows. Except for videotapes of the ceremony, only a few of the couples could produce the actual vows they had made. Most informants had a vague recollection that they had recited traditional wedding vows, slightly altered for the renewal ceremony. Thus, for our informants, the expression of love for partner was not housed in the *wording* of the vows per se, but more in the *speech* act of renewing the vows. Thus, love for partner was expressed in the very act of participation in the ceremony.

The renewal ceremony was also significant because it was a choice-point for couples. In freely electing to renew their vows, our informants felt that they were emphasizing the voluntary nature of commitment. As one 36-year old woman told us about her planned couple-initiated ceremony for her 16-year old marriage:

We want it to be clear to us and to other people that we choose to stay married. Because we didn't feel like the first wedding we chose freely. We said we did . . . but inside I think that we both felt we had to. And this time we want to be what we really freely choose. (#17, 9, 220–227)

On its face, the obligations of permanence attached to the social institution of marriage appear to fly in the face of freedom of choice. However, our informants were able to blend these two ideological strands easily. The details of what was meant by commitment and the details of conducting married life on an everyday basis were up to the partners. The everyday doing of commitment was the site of freedom of choice for a couple; that is, in *choosing* to conduct a renewal ceremony, couples underscored that marriage was an exercise in freedom. In choosing to say their initial vows, couples further emphasized marriage as a choice-making enterprise. In choosing the details of the ceremony and the reception (e.g., what to wear, whom to invite, what kind of flowers to display, what food to eat, what music to play), couples constructed a sense that marriage was a series of choice-points at the detailed level of its enactment. The marriage renewal ceremony was also meaningful to our informants because it was an occasion to celebrate individual growth and change in the spouses' selves and in their marriage. One 42-year-old female informant expressed this theme about her couple-initiated ceremony to honor her 9-year marriage:

I know we're not the same married couple as when we first got married. You know, if we were, I'd have some serious doubts about us . . . I've seen remarkable growth in both of us as individuals and as a couple. And we want to recognize that growth and change. (#4, 11, 481–486)

To this informant, marriage is a process of ongoing change for the partners. The renewal ceremony was a way in which parties could pay homage to their individual and joint growth.

In addition to celebrating growth in the spouses, and in their marriage, the process of planning and executing the renewal of vows ceremony also afforded an opportunity for self-reflection between the spouses, and thus growth in the relationship. One 58-year-old male informant captured this theme in the following way in describing the couple-initiated ceremony in honor of his and his wife's 30th anniversary:

It's not only the ceremony but it's the process that we've been going through before and now since we decided to actually do this [renew marital vows]. Now, it's the whole process of learning who we are in relationship to each other. I mean you know that you're married and you kind of go on day-to-day—it's like you don't really think about it or talk about it. Sometimes those things are taboo; you know it's there but you don't talk about it. [In renewing vows], we're forcing ourselves to say "what is my commitment to you?" (#11, 11, 604–612)

The renewal ceremony was important to this informant because it provided a liminal moment in the marriage—an occasion where the parties could reflect on what their marriage meant to each partner, thereby affording an occasion for individual self-reflection and possible growth.

In sum, laced within the discourse of marriage as a social institution was another image of marriage, a view of marriage as a private haven for the partners in which they should nurture love for one another, make their own unique choices in how to conduct the details of life together, and nurture growth and change. These themes are the watchwords of the utilitarian/expressive individualism ideology articulated by Bellah and his colleagues (1985).

Discussion

The marriage renewal vow ceremony is a richly textured ritual that allows married couples to weave together two different idealizations of marriage. Our informants found meaning in the ceremony because it celebrated both the public marriage of institutional obligation and accountability and the private marriage of two expressive selves. The ritual's ability to blend these two ideological strands may account for why it appears to be enacted with increasing frequency in U.S. society (Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995).

Although both Shotter (1993) and Bellah et al. (1985) frame the public and private ideologies of marriage as a dilemma between competing choices, most of our informants appeared to experience a complementary interweaving of these two perspectives in their construction of marriage. Complementarity, rather than competition between these two ideologies, was particularly evident for the theme of love and intimacy from the ideology of utilitarian/expressive individualism, and the theme of communal webs from the ideology of moral/social community. That is, love between partners was nourished by the security and support afforded by the communal web of friends and family that surrounded the pair.

The central role of other persons to the marital relationship has been captured in a "convoy model" of personal relationships. In this model "individuals move through their lifetimes surrounded by people who are close and important to them and who have a critical influence on their life and well-being" (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1996, p. 356). Although this model includes the spouse as a central part of one's convoy, the convoy also includes family members and friends because these relationships can greatly enhance the marital relationship. For example, Wright (1989) describes a complementary relationship between marital, family, and friendship roles. This is especially true for women because research

indicates that women are able to communicate more effectively with their husbands because of the social support derived from their friendship relationships (Rubin, 1986). For married couples, their social relationships outside of the marriage become a "supporting chorus" for the marriage (Berger & Kellner, 1964), endorsing their view of the world as a married couple (Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000).

Complementarity, rather than competition between ideologies, is also apparent for the themes of choice and public modeling via the vow renewal ritual. Modeling a successful marriage was viewed by our informants as important because it served as a teaching mechanism, instructing others, particularly their children, on making the "right choices" in their marriage. Our informants stated that the renewal ceremony displayed for the benefit of others what the successful choices were that led to a long-lived marriage. This included recognizing the role played by others, as well as the significance of making a commitment to a permanent union, and so forth.

Although our findings provide clear support for the two ideologies of marriage articulated by Bellah and colleagues (1985), our findings challenge their assertion that the ideology of utilitarian/expressive individualism is given dominance. Among our informants, we heard instead a construction of marriage as first and foremost a social institution, a view more sympathetic to the ideology of moral/social community. What could account for this apparent centripetal repositioning? It is possible that the sample of informants for this study is somehow not representative of the typical American who marries in that the reversal of prominence of the two ideologies might reflect our reliance on persons who hold a particularly traditional view of marriage. However, other possibilities may also account for this centripetal-centrifugal reversal of ideologies.

One possibility is that the vow renewal ritual may function in a compensatory manner. Married couples may privilege the ideology of utilitarian/expressive individualism in their everyday lives, and this ritual may be a rare occasion to recognize the social side of marriage. Couples may have emphasized the social ideology over individualism to compensate for its secondary place in the everyday enactment of marriage. The vow renewal ritual might be an important opportunity to reflect and focus on something very important to them, and their marriage, that is not stressed in public discourse about marriage. Future research needs to examine how ideological blending is enacted in everyday married life.

Another possibility that could account for the salience of the ideology of moral/social community is the density of long-term marriages in our sample. Eleven of the 16 marriages represented in our sample had lasted at least 20 years. Sillars and Wilmot (1989) point out that marriage may service a different set of needs and values in early as opposed to later life: "Early marriage calls for flexibility, empathy, supportiveness and problem solving skill because this is a period when many new roles and responsibilities are acquired, separate identities are reconciled, and family policies are established" (p. 240). Certainly this analysis would lead one to expect an expressive view of marriage in early married life. In contrast, in later marriages many of the difficult adjustments in the relationship have been resolved or otherwise put aside (Zeitlow & Sillars, 1988). At this stage of marital life, although intimacy is still important, "attachment may substitute for attraction" and partners (and others) value the relationship for what it has been and produced, rather than what it will

become (Sillars & Wilmot 1989, p. 240). Compared with earlier marriages, marital satisfaction in later marriages may be more strongly linked to people outside of the marital dyad, particularly children, grandchildren, and siblings. We did not notice any thematic differences between these marriages and those of shorter length, but our sample size was too small to allow for meaningful group comparisons between early and later marriages. This question awaits future research.

We do not know how these two ideologies of marriage will play out in the future, as today's younger cohort groups age. Scholars predict that marriages of the current older cohort groups may be different from those who follow them, as fewer may be married, fewer may have children with whom they are close, and as the stigma surrounding divorce and living outside of marital bonds decreases further (Goldscheider, 1990). Dickson (1995) and others stress the importance of historical context and cohort on the way people experience and enact relationships.

Clearly, vow renewal rituals are structured to recognize the past and present of marital relationships, as the couple honors those who were with them in the past and those who support the relationship in the present. The ritual also speaks to the future as well, because couples renewing their vows produced from the event permanent artifacts that they would leave future generations, such as photo albums, videos, and rings made for the ceremony. In addition, in the more immediate future, family and friends might be important, if the renewal vow enactors need assistance from caregivers or become widowed. Antonucci and Akiyama (1996) emphasize that people should be encouraged at all stages of life to develop and maintain a high quality convoy of family and friendship relationships, and they emphasize the importance of these relationships in later life.

This study, like any exploratory study, is not without weaknesses. First, its small sample size precludes not only group comparisons based on length of marriage but a comparison of the mass ceremony versus the couple-initiated ceremony. We did not notice any ideological differences in these two forms of renewal rituals in our data set, but we had too few instances of the mass ceremony in particular to allow for a meaningful comparison. Second, because of scheduling difficulties, we were able to have couple interviews with only a portion of our informants. We found these interviews particularly insightful because they allowed husbands and wives to provide us with their joint perspective on marriage and on their renewal vow ceremony. Future research should solicit couple-level data because it affords us better insight into a couple's joint construction of the social reality of their marriage than does individual-level data.

Third, our efforts to attain theoretical sensitivity could have benefited from a member-checking procedure (Erlandson et al., 1993), in which we would have gone back to our informants to determine whether the relative dominance of the two ideologies we identified in their discourse rang true with their experiences with the vow renewal ceremony. Fourth, the interview data could usefully be complemented with participant observation data gathered by attending actual renewal ceremonies. Our data set was based on retrospective accounts of ritual performance, not the performance *per se*.

Our study provides the impetus for scholars to continue to explore the ideologies that guide our views of marriage, as well as to research and theorize about marriage. Our anal-

ysis demonstrates the ability of the vow renewal ritual to highlight the importance of marriage, both as a union of two expressive selves and as institutional obligation and accountability. One starting place would be to compare vow renewals with the ideologies of marriage represented in other rituals, such as the ritual of original weddings. A goal would be to examine whether original wedding rituals speak more powerfully to expressive individualism, representing the needs and values of couples at the early stage of married life, where later-life rituals, such as the vow renewal, would speak to marriage as social community, thus highlighting different needs and values of marriage at different stages of life.

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Notes

1. For all quotations, the three numbers in parentheses refer respectively to the interview number, the page number, and the line number(s).
2. Gloria is a pseudonym. We have employed pseudonyms in all excerpts, as needed.

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