

5-1995

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Braithwaite, Dawn O. and Baxter, Leslie A., "“I Do” Again: The Relational Dialectics of Renewing Marriage Vows" (1995). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 118.

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Published in *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 12:2 (May 1995), pp. 177–198; doi:  
10.1177/0265407595122002  
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## “I Do” Again: The Relational Dialectics of Renewing Marriage Vows

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### **Abstract**

This study provides descriptive insight into the dialectical themes of one public relationship ritual in modern US society, the renewal of marital vows between spouses. Interpretive analyses of in-depth interview data revealed that this ritual allows spouses to manage three underlying dialectical contradictions: private-public, stability-change, and conventionality-uniqueness.

**Keywords:** marriage vow renewal, relational dialectics, ritual

Although the wedding event, in its many possible forms, is a longstanding cultural practice that holds deep meaning for its participants (Holmberg et al., 1993), the marriage vow renewal event is a more recent phenomenon in American society. However, the phenomenon apparently holds considerable appeal if recent media coverage is any indication. For example, the *New York Times* reported on a 94-year-old husband and his 87-year-old wife who marked their 70th wedding anniversary in a vow-renewal ceremony attended by their family (Malcolm, 1992). The *Chicago Tribune* described a ceremony in a local Catholic church in which 720 couples renewed the vows of their respective 50-year marriages (Schreuder, 1992). The *Atlanta Journal* devoted column space to a Baptist minister who was organizing for the second time in five years a special service to be held in his church on Valentine’s Day during which 75 couples were to repeat their marriage vows in a mass ceremony (Sibley, 1993). Television celebrities have received media attention when they

have elected to renew their vows in their real-life marriages (*People Magazine*, 1991; *TV Guide*, 1991). In the syndicated newspaper advice column "Dear Abby," a letter on "Renewing Our Vows" prompted an elaborate reply on the protocol of formal vow renewal ceremonies ("Dear Abby," 2 May 1992). However, to date, the vow-renewal phenomenon has received no academic attention despite its relevance to at least three issues that are addressed by scholars interested in communication in personal relationships: the functions of ritualized enactments in the conduct of relational life, the ways in which dyadic relationships are embedded in larger social contexts, and how relationships are maintained. The current study was undertaken in order to explore qualitatively what significance the vow renewal event holds for participant couples. Framed theoretically in a dialectical perspective, the overarching question that guided the study was how the vow renewal ritual is used by couples to manage the interplay of oppositional exigencies in their respective marriages.

Scholars committed to a dialectical view argue that personal relationships are organized around contradiction, that is, the dynamic interplay of opposing forces (Montgomery, 1993). Although the specific contradictions that have been identified in research to date vary somewhat from study to study, they appear to cohere around the three general dialectics of integration—separation, stability-change, and openness-closedness, each of which can be situated within the boundaries of the dyad and/or at the nexus of the dyad with the larger social collective (for an extensive review of the research, see Werner & Baxter, 1994). The integration-separation dialectic captures the necessity for relationship parties to be interdependent with one another while sustaining autonomy and the need for them as a pair to seek isolated privacy from others at the same time that they need to achieve pair integration with others. The stability-change dialectic captures the necessity for partners to achieve both stability and novelty in their interactions with one another and the necessity for them to re-produce the societal social order at the same time that they need to see their relationship as unique from all others. The expression-nonexpression dialectic refers to the simultaneous needs for both candor and discretion as the partners interact with each other and as they interact with third parties outside the boundaries of their relationship.

A dialectical perspective has been brought to bear in each of the three research domains noted above for which the marriage renewal events holds particular scholarly relevance. We now turn to a discussion of relational rituals, the social embeddedness of relationships and relationship maintenance in order to frame more precisely the potential contributions of the present study.

Relationship parties can manage the interplay of opposing tendencies or needs in any of several ways (Baxter, 1988). However, a number of dialectically oriented scholars have recently pointed to rituals as a particularly powerful way in which relationship parties can simultaneously address both poles of a given contradiction (e.g., Imber-Black et al., 1988; Werner et al., 1993). In general terms, a ritual is a communication event involving structured sequence of symbolic acts in which homage is paid to some sacred object (Goffman, 1967). In paying homage to one another and/or to their relationship through ritualized enactments, partners also fulfill competing tendencies inherent in relationships. As Roberts has cogently stated:

Ritual can hold both sides of a contradiction at the same time. We all live with the ultimate paradoxes of life/death, connection/distance, ideal/real, good/evil. Ritual can incorporate both sides of contradictions so that they can be managed simultaneously. For instance, a wedding ceremony has within it both loss and mourning and joy and celebration. (1988: 16)

Roberts continues her analysis by suggesting that the ritual form is inherently multivocal or multilayered in meaning, and it is this symbolic density that allows responsiveness to opposing needs or demands.

A number of scholars have suggested over the years that rituals of all kinds are important to the well-being of personal relationships, and over the past decade, a number of specific ritual forms have been examined by researchers (for a review, see Werner & Baxter, 1994). However, very little of this work is explicitly framed within a dialectical perspective. A notable exception is the research program undertaken by Altman and his colleagues from a transactional/dialectical perspective (Altman et al., 1992; Werner et al., 1993). In a series of case studies that involve birthdays and other family celebrations among fundamentalist Mormon polygynists, and Christmas and Halloween celebrations in families and in suburban neighborhoods, this group of researchers has documented persuasively the multiple ways in which rituals pay homage to several competing identities at once. The particular rituals considered by Altman and his colleagues allow relationship parties to manage the interplay between competing demands for individuation and connection as they are manifested within relationships and at the nexus of relationships with larger social collectives.

The current study adds to the relatively small corpus of dialectically centered research on relational rituals. The marriage vow renewal event clearly constitutes a communication ritual; at a minimum, the two spouses are paying homage to the unique marital bond between them, and perhaps to the broader institution of marriage as well. The ways in which contradictory demands are managed simultaneously in the ritual's enactment is the primary focus of our analysis.

A second contribution of the current study rests with the public nature of the marriage vow renewal event. Like wedding ceremonies, vow renewals are largely social events in which very personal feelings and commitments between partners are witnessed by friends and family members regardless of whether the location for the event is a church, a public secular space or a residential home. However, as a number of scholars have recently observed, researchers interested in personal relationships have tended to focus on the private, dyadic events that take place between two relationship parties, to the relative neglect of issues that revolve around how the couple interacts with the broader social order composed of their family and friends (e.g., Duck, 1993). Yet the web of others in which a relationship is embedded is a significant factor in pair stability (e.g., Surra & Milardo, 1991).

Although much dialectically oriented work emphasizes the contradictions that reside within the private boundaries of a dyad, a number of dialectically based scholars have posited contradictions that are situated at the nexus of the dyad and the larger social collective (Werner & Baxter, 1994). In addition to the case studies by Altman and his colleagues discussed above, existing dialectically based research addresses the tension

between information openness and closedness which relationship parties face in their interactions with social network members, the dialectical tension which a given pair faces as it seeks to integrate with others at the same time that it seeks pair separation, and the dialectical interplay between the demands for pair uniqueness and the demands for conformity with society's conventions of relating. In addition to the relatively small corpus of dialectically oriented research that is situated at the nexus of the dyad and the broader social order, we seek to explore how possible oppositional tensions between the dyad and larger social collectives are managed simultaneously by spouses through their enactment of the vow renewal event.

The present study also seeks to contribute to research and theory on relationship maintenance. Over the last decade, scholars have devoted considerable attention to the study of relationship maintenance and repair, that is, the communicative practices by which partners sustain and restore the satisfaction and commitment levels of their relationship (for a recent review see Canary & Stafford, 1994). The bulk of this research has taken a strategies approach, asking relationship parties to indicate what they say or do to restore their relationship to its former state or to sustain their relationship at its current satisfactory level. Most of the strategies research focuses on everyday communicative strategies of maintenance and repair, for example, verbalizing assurances to the partner of one's love and commitment, interacting with a positive tone, refraining from a variety of antisocial actions such as sulking and initiating fights, assisting the partner with tasks and so forth. Although everyday efforts at maintenance and repair are important to a relationship's well-being, relationships are also likely to benefit from efforts that are out of the ordinary and which depart from daily routines and activities in the relationship (e.g., Baxter & Dindia, 1990). In addition, existing maintenance researchers have largely focused on strategic actions enacted by individual parties, to the relative neglect of communication events that are enacted jointly by relationship partners. Further, the maintenance research tends to emphasize maintenance activity that is situated primarily within the boundaries of the dyad, to the relative neglect of maintenance activities that are enacted at the border of the dyad and larger social collectives. The vow renewal event is a special, public, joint enactment by a couple and is a kind of maintenance activity that has heretofore received little attention.

Although much of the research and theory in relationship maintenance is nondialectical in nature, a growing number of scholars are adopting a dialectical approach to relationship maintenance (for a recent review see Montgomery, 1993). These scholars argue that relationships are maintained to the extent that the parties successfully manage over time the dynamic interplay of opposing tendencies. Important to this dialectical conceptualization of maintenance is the idea that a couple never resolves contradictions into some idealized state of homeostasis or transcendence. A given dialectic is likely to change in character and salience over time, but a couple never escapes the dialectical exigencies inherent in relationships. At a given moment, a couple might fulfill both competing needs simultaneously and thereby feel as if they have transcended the contradiction; however, from a dialectical perspective, such equilibrium is only a fleeting moment within the temporal ebb and flow of a pair's ongoing adaptation to dialectical flux (Montgomery, 1993). Thus, the vow renewal event is not conceived as a permanent resolution of various dialectical tensions; at

its best, it is one of those moments when a couple is able to experience the simultaneous fulfillment of both poles of a given contradiction.

In summary, the present study explores a fairly recent relational ritual in the cultural landscape of modern US society, the renewal of marriage vows. Framed in a dialectical perspective, we seek to examine the ways in which enactment of the vow renewal event functions as a ritual to allow married couples to manage simultaneously the opposing tendencies of relating. To the extent that the event's enactment is responsive to dialectical exigencies, it can be regarded as an effective strategy of relationship maintenance for married couples.

## **Method**

The overall design of the study was in the qualitative/interpretive tradition (Bodgan & Taylor, 1975). We relied on intensive interviewing (McCracken, 1988) that targeted the perceptions and experiences of informants in a semistructured manner. The goal of interpretive work is the identification of recurring patterns of behaviors and meanings. From a qualitative/interpretive perspective, the researcher does not stop collecting data when a certain sample size is achieved but, rather, stops collecting data when recurring patterns are identified (Katz, 1983). Although the findings presented below are limited to the particular sample of persons we interviewed, care was taken, within the constraints of an availability sample, to seek a diversity of perspectives with respect to the vow renewal experience.

We sought informants through several means, including follow-ups from local newspaper announcements of vow renewals, responses to announcements of the study in classes and among work colleagues, and referrals from early informants. Once informants agreed to participate in the study, we gave them the choice of being interviewed alone or with their partner. A total of 25 informants were interviewed through 21 interviews that captured the vow renewal experiences of 16 married couples. Overall, 10 interviews were conducted separately with the husbands and wives who composed 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. All 11 of the male informants were Caucasians, with an average age of 50.3 years (range 37–74 years) and an average of 16 years of education (ranging from the completion of high school through PhD level). Fourteen of the 16 female informants were Caucasian, and the others were Hispanic. The average age of female informants was 47.8 years (range 36–72 years), and the average education level was 13 years (ranging from completion of the 8th grade through PhD level). The marriages that were rededicated averaged 29 years in length, with a range of 7 to 52 years. Four couples had repeated their vows more than once beyond their original exchange of wedding vows: one couple enacted a very private renewal ritual between them which was repeated often and potentially daily; a second couple had reaffirmed their vows several months after their original Justice of the Peace ceremony so that family members could be involved, and this couple had a more private renewal for their seventh anniversary with only their young son present; a third couple had renewed their vows in formal ceremonies surrounding both their 25th and 50th anniversaries; and a

fourth couple had repeated their vows several times in various group-based renewals held at their church but additionally held a special ceremony for their 25th anniversary. Informants were diverse in their experiences with single renewal events. Two couples were in the planning stage for their respective renewal events. One couple had renewed within the first year of marriage, whereas the majority of others had renewed in commemoration of 25th, 40th, or even 50th wedding anniversaries. Some couples had renewed their vows at times unrelated to anniversary dates.

All informants were interviewed using a protocol that consisted of two parts: (1) a series of questions related to demographic background; and (2) a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit informant perceptions of their vow renewal experiences. The open-ended questions were general in nature and were designed to elicit informant perceptions of the renewal event with respect to the setting for the exchange of vows (e.g., "Where/when was the vow renewal done?"), the people who participated in the event (e.g., "Who was present at the vow renewal and why were these particular people there?"), why the vow renewal was enacted and its perceived functions (e.g., "Why did you do the vow renewal?"; "What were the outcomes of the vow renewal?") and details of the enactment of their vow renewal (e.g., "What went on at the vow renewal ceremony?"). In many of the interviews, informants shared various artifacts with the interviewer, for example, invitations to the vow renewal ceremony, copies of the text of renewal vows, pictures and photo albums, videotapes of the ceremony, and objects involved in the vow renewal (including special clothing worn during the ceremony, rings exchanged between spouses, and so forth). Interviewers probed informants about the meaning and function of such artifacts, and in some cases, made photocopies of such artifacts as invitations, the text of vows, and so forth. Informants were assured of confidentiality, and all interviews were taped for subsequent transcription purposes.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 230 pages of text-based data for analysis. The researchers initially read each transcript holistically in order to get a sense of each informant's perspective before beginning with the analysis. Next, a qualitative content analysis was performed, using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Instead of using predetermined classification categories, each category was induced from the informants' comments in a manner similar to that described in Rawlins & Holl (1988). In several instances, informants' use of similar words and phrases provided the basis for categorization—for example, references which explicitly mentioned the importance of attendance by family and friends. However, other informant comments were categorized according to the generic or abstract features which they exemplified. An example would be an utterance in which an informant described the delay in the scheduling of their renewal event in order to allow all of the children to attend; the act of delaying the event evidenced the importance of family to the event, although the informant did not state this feature as explicitly or concisely as other informants did. As informant statements were examined, new categories were developed or the utterances were classified into categories that had previously been developed. Thus, the development of categories was an emergent process that continued as data analysis proceeded. Once the data had been classified, the transcripts were read again in order to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the categories.

The data analysis next involved the identification of different patterns or meaning clusters in an attempt to uncover implicit dialectical themes that could organize seemingly opposed categories. Three overarching dialectical themes, discussed below, were identified. Following the rival-explanation procedure described by Miles & Huberman (1994), we reread the transcripts again, looking in a focused way for negative evidence that would disconfirm our analysis. Confident in our analysis, we reread the transcripts one final time for purposes of identifying informant utterances that best illustrated the dialectical themes.

## Results

Three dialectical themes surfaced in informant talk about their renewal vows, which, for ease of reference, we have labeled *public-private*, *stability-change*, and *conventionality-uniqueness*. Each theme will be discussed in turn. All excerpts from transcripts are accompanied by parenthetical notations which refer to the interview number and the line number(s) in which the quoted text appeared.

### *Public-private*

The contradictory interplay between pair integration and pair separation was a salient feature of the vow renewal event. In particular, integration and separation were nurtured simultaneously in the ritual's construction of marriage as both a public, social relationship and a private, dyadic relationship. On the one hand, marriages are embedded in webs of interaction with third-party others, thereby achieving necessary social support and legitimation; on the other hand, the boundary of privacy and separation that partners establish to keep others at bay facilitates the development and maintenance of the pair's intimate bond. Through public vow renewals, marital partners reasserted that their marriage was part of the larger social fabric at the same time that they paid homage to the sanctity of their private bond. For ease of presentation, we organize our discussion of this dialectic by artificially separating public and private dimensions, but it is important to recognize the interdependence of these dialectical strands as they were experienced and enacted by our informants.

The *public* nature of the marriage relationship was evidenced in a variety of ways in our informants' accounts of their vow renewal experiences. Perhaps the most obvious way in which couples recognized the integration of their marriage with a larger social collective was the pervasive decision by spouses to renew vows in the presence of others, as opposed to a renewal event held in the privacy of the couple alone. With only one exception, all vow renewals took place in the presence of third parties who varied in number. The smallest number of participants assembled for a renewal event was five, and the largest numbered several hundred. The smallest gathering involved a private church service with the couple, their pastor and two witnesses who were close friends of the couple. The largest assembly involved a gathering of several hundred family and friends at the farm of the wife's parents; the renewal event had the trappings of a large wedding and was held a few months after a Justice of the Peace had legally wedded the couple in a private ceremony. This event coincided with a reunion of extended family and the family's Fourth of July picnic celebration. Some couples also renewed their vows as part of a "mass ceremony" in

which a member of the clergy administered vows en masse to multiple couples in the presence of fellow congregation members and invited guests, and these ceremonies also tended to be fairly large. Other renewal events were of intermediate size and varied according to the number of family members and friends invited by the couple.

The presence of others functioned as a source of legitimation for the vow renewal. All of the public renewal events involved an officiating person who administered the vows of renewal to the couple, thereby lending a formalized legitimation to the pair's vow renewal. In all but one instance, this person was the couple's pastor, minister or priest; the single exception was a friend-lawyer who was asked to administer the renewal vows because of the friendship with the pair and the person's demeanor as "a very presiding type of person" (#3, 102). In addition, informants also noted explicitly the importance of a "witnessing" function that was performed by the presence of family and friends; others' presence added elements of accountability and seriousness to the spouses' declarations to one another of continued commitment. One female informant discussed the accountability that came from renewing vows in front of gathered family and friends:

[Having others present] adds verification that in a sense, we're willing to be held accountable for this commitment to each other because we promised [it] in front of the witnesses. We can't say to the witnesses now "Well, we've broken that promise" without real due cause. It's nothing casual. (#22, 241-45)

A male informant confirmed this sentiment: "The [wedding] tradition just isn't arbitrary, there's a reason, and the witnesses are an important part of it, and it's to make the vow serious and to be held accountable" (#7, 132-35). In short, informants felt that the public nature of the renewal, whether the presence of officiating persons or attendance by family and friends, made it important and binding for them.

Many informants felt strongly that their marriages were embedded in communal webs composed of family and friends and that these significant others should be honored somehow through the celebration of the vow renewal event. One female informant indicated that she and her husband had gone through marital problems that had taken their toll on the children and that their planned renewal event was a way to make amends to the children:

The kids have been real concerned about divorce for a long time now and uh, maybe it [the vow renewal] might give them more of a sense of security. Security's a big issue in this family for everyone. . . . [The kids] have a real need for security and I guess having the new ceremony and making the new commitment will hopefully provide some sense of security that we don't have right now. (#17, 145-56)

Similarly, when asked what he thought the renewal of vows would accomplish, this wife's husband reflected, "Well, I don't know if the kids recognize it. I think by going through this process we're strengthening our marriage a great deal and by strengthening my rela-

tionship with [wife's name], then it strengthens the family unit" (#16, 509–12). Other informants perceived that support from friends and family had been a factor in the success of their marriages, and they wanted others to share in the celebration of that success. One wife described how she and her husband conceived their vow renewal event as a tribute to others:

Our friends and our family have been so significant in our lives and we had spent 24 anniversaries celebrating just the two of us. So, it seemed on our 25th kind of selfish just to keep it all to ourselves. . . . And what we did—there was very little communication in terms of renewing our vows—that was (snaps fingers) just like that. But we wanted to honor our families. . . . And so it was a kind of tribute to everybody. . . . We felt that so many of them had such an impact on our lives that we wanted to give back, we literally wanted to give back and say we want to share this time . . . we want you to share this, you know, and be part of all this. (#20, 245–344)

Another female informant indicated that their renewal event was “more like celebrating the whole family, the whole experience. Families are coming together in love, and [the renewal] acknowledges that in the affirmation [of vows]” (#3, 191–93). In fact, members of this woman's family confuse this woman's original wedding date, an event in which no family members were in attendance, with the renewal event a few months later, and the informant really doesn't bother to correct the error: “It's interesting because my family still celebrates the July one [the date of renewal]. They don't remember [the original wedding date]. Even in our family newsletter, I mean, here's where I know . . . they have [the] reaffirmation . . . under the anniversaries” (#3, 54–59).

In short, our informants conceived of their marriages as social relationships in which the dyadic bond was part of a much larger social fabric composed of family and friends. The marriage affected the larger social whole just as the larger social whole affected the marriage.

At the same time that the vow renewal event was a public occasion which recognized marriage as a social relationship, spouses also held *private* meanings for this event and thereby recognized marriage as a private bond of commitment between two persons. In essence, the vow renewal event was a way for spouses to pay homage to their partner and to their marital relationship.

Informants reported using the occasion of vow renewals to declare their love for their partner and their commitment to the marriage. To several informants, the renewal of love and commitment was regarded as a more meaningful expression of these sentiments than the original wedding vows. These informants believed that spouses couldn't fully understand what the words of a wedding vow meant until they had experienced the interdependence of married life. As one male informant expressed it:

The first time through you say those vows, they are just words; you don't know what all those things are. When you say them after 25 years' experience, you have flashbacks, and you say, “Yeah, that's right—these are the same kind of

things you go through, happy and sad, you know, trying." You make it through and at that point you know the next 25 years you are going to have similar type challenges, joys, great things, so I think it is more meaningful then. (#15, 46–53)

Another male informant confirmed this point of view, indicating to the interviewer:

We both decided that we wanted to make this our commitment. When we got married, neither one of us really knew what we were doing, you know, because [my wife] was pregnant and my head was so in the clouds. I was so in love that I really didn't see the relationship clearly. And also because of our sexual involvement, I don't think I saw it really clearly. But after 16 years of marriage, I do, and I know who [my wife] is. (#16, 81–87)

To other informants, the spouses had meaningfully declared their love and commitment at the time of the original wedding, but the renewal event allowed for a reaffirmation of those sentiments. As one wife indicated, "After all these years, it's kind of like . . . letting the person know I'd do it all over again" (#18, 82–83).

Many informants honored their relationship by using the vow renewal event to mark a special "landmark" anniversary such as the 25th or 50th. They simply perceived the vow renewal event as a socially accepted way to mark certain anniversaries as "special." One female informant indicated that she and her husband had always celebrated their anniversaries but that they elected to renew their vows in commemoration of their 25th anniversary because "to be honest with you, that seemed to be when everybody was doing theirs—at 25 years" (#19, 54–55).

Some couples also paid homage to their marriage by giving themselves the "full wedding" that they had never had but very much wanted. These informants indicated that the vow renewal event functioned in a compensatory manner, providing the spouses with their first "complete" wedding ceremony. A female informant indicated that she and her husband had eloped the first time, thus "we wanted to do it on our 25th anniversary because of the number, it just seemed like a nice round number, and we eloped, so we thought it would be really nice to have a church wedding this time around" (#18, 13–16). Another female informant told the interviewer that she and her husband had renewed their vows on both their 25th and their 50th anniversaries in part because of the material inadequacies of their original wedding:

The first time we got married, I don't know, maybe I was too young and I didn't, uh, how can I explain it? Uh, I didn't remember, you know, of course, not that they forced me. No, not that I had to get married or anything, but I mean, it's like I tell them now, I remember . . . more on the 25th and I remember more on the 50th, see. . . . I don't know, maybe because I was too young when I got married. Uh, we didn't have a party. We didn't have a reception. We just had the cake and things and, you know. . . . We didn't have any dinner or anything, or reception, or anything, just the cake there for somebody that would drop by and have cake, see? That's what I mean, you know, uh, I, we didn't have much. (#5, 281–99)

In sum, the vow renewal event was simultaneously public and private. The ritual instantiated the couple's marriage as a public and social phenomenon at the same time that it was steeped in private meanings between the spouses.

### *Stability/change*

A second dialectic that organized the significance of the vow renewal event for its participants was the interplay of *stability* and *change*. On the one hand, relationship parties require predictability and continuity in order to establish and sustain a healthy relationship. Yet, adaptive relationships also must change in order to be responsive to changing exigencies. Our data suggest that the vow renewal ritual speaks to both stability and change simultaneously. Many informants went to great lengths to establish a temporal continuity with the past and with the future, thereby affording a sense of stability. At the same time, however, many informants appreciated the fact that their relationship had changed through the years, and the vow renewal was a way to mark that change. For ease of presentation, we discuss separately the two dialectical strands of this contradiction; again, it is important to appreciate the dynamic interdependence of these in the enactment of the vow renewal event.

By including participants who attended their first wedding or who had been a part of their lives over the years, spouses clearly established *continuity* with their past and positioned the marriage to benefit in the future from the support which those others could provide. The renewal event typically involved either a traditional wedding or a nontraditional ceremony in which persons from the couple's past or present were assigned particular role responsibilities; family and friends thus were active participants in the ceremony in which the vow renewal was accomplished. Many couples enacted a traditional wedding ceremony, and these pairs often involved family and friends as members of a traditionally conceived wedding party. Some informants told us that they tried to reconstitute their original wedding party from many years before. One female informant told us that she and her husband managed to get "the flower girl, the one that took part in the first [wedding]" (#5, 84) to enact the same role during the renewal ceremony to commemorate their 50th wedding anniversary. In the vow renewals associated with their 25th anniversary, another informant indicated that "We invited all of our bridesmaids and ushers we had at our first wedding. So they stood up with us and we renewed our vows again. . . . So I got my picture taken with all my old bridesmaids" (#19, 176–80). Other couples who enacted wedding-like ceremonies asked their children and/or other relatives to enact traditional wedding party roles. One couple reported that their daughter served as the wife's maid of honor and her fiancé served as the husband's best man (#20). Another informant told us that her sons were the "groomsmen" and their wives were the "bridesmaids" (#5, 12–15). Some couples had a formal renewal ceremony in which close family members and friends performed roles other than traditionally conceived members of a wedding party. For example, one nontraditional ceremony involved third-party testimonials:

We had a mass and invited our family and friends. It was really nice because the priest who did it was an old friend of our family. . . . He did it in a very special

way. He had us in a circle and asked people to comment on us, on their experience with us. So we had family and friends commenting. . . . And we had a little reception afterward. (#14, 27–33)

Whether the format was a traditional wedding or a nontraditional ceremony, people important to the couple were included as coparticipants in the renewal event; some from the distant past of the first wedding were brought into the present, and others important to the couple over the years were included in the present celebration.

Temporal continuity with the past was accomplished not only through the inclusion of people but additionally through use of a variety of physical artifacts from the past, particularly from the first wedding ceremony. Some couples decorated the cake for their renewal celebration with the original bride and groom from the top of their first wedding cake (e.g., #1, 330). Although one woman could no longer fit into her original wedding dress to celebrate her 50th anniversary renewal, she selected a new dress which resembled her original dress (#5, 48–49). One couple, whose ceremony was a private service with the minister and two close friends as witnesses, had an organist play the same music that was played for their original wedding service (#22, 40–41).

The renewal event also was perceived to establish continuity between the present and the future. By the very act of declaring their commitment anew, spouses signified their desire to continue their attachment into the future. In addition, for many couples, the process of enacting a vow renewal was perceived to function in a causal manner in contributing to the future stability of the marriage. For some couples, the renewal served as a sort of emotional booster. As one husband expressed about his renewal vows that took place within a year of the original wedding event:

[The renewal] strengthened it [our marriage]; it jelled it. I mean, the official wedding was very small and really didn't mean much except "Oh, we're, now we're legally married." But this one tied us emotionally. . . . It tied me to her [his wife] more than just in a legal sense. I mean, it was, it was for me, a very romantic, joyful experience. (#4, 249–66)

In planning for the renewal event, some couples perceived that they worked through issues that were problematic in the marriage; in these instances, it was the preparation for the event, rather than the event's enactment per se, that was perceived to contribute to the future stability of the marriage. One pair, in the planning stages for their renewal event, devoted substantial joint time in making decisions as a couple surrounding their renewal event because they had been experiencing some uncertainty about their commitment to their marriage. The wife described their joint decision-making process surrounding the content of their vows:

We've just come to a different place in our relationship and so we thought our vows need to reflect that. Just what is it [that] we want to commit to and do we feel, you know, when we do it, what do we want our commitments to be? . . . And so, uh, we wanted to have new vows that reflected where we are now . . .

And so with that end in mind we got this Bible study we're doing that talked about the wedding vows through examples of different married couples in the Bible and negative examples as well as positive examples, and it explores the different parts of the wedding vows for what they mean, and different interpretations and that. We thought that would be good for us to do because we need to be thinking about what our vows are going to be. And so we've been doing this Bible study amazingly consistently since November. We've met every week since November. We leave the house, because, you know, you can't do it at home, and go to a restaurant and have something, you know, sodas or dessert or something, and do it, and have a time, appointment time, every week and we've been real consistent. . . . And we've almost finished the book; it has 12 or 13 lessons and we only have a couple left, so real consistent. (#17, 89–112)

This couple is apparently cementing their marriage through the preparation of their renewal vows, taking time away from children and other commitments to discuss the status of their relationship.

In addition, a variety of physical artifacts were also used in an effort to establish continuity with the future. Several couples took steps to create artifacts from their renewal events that would enable them to remember the event in the future. Some couples had their guests sign "guest books" so that they could be reminded in the future about the family and friends who attended their celebration (#1, 137; #19, 246–47). Photographs were taken at most of the ceremonies and receptions to provide couples with visual memory aids of the event. One couple had a videotape made at their reception in which "everybody had a little thing to say in the video" (#5, 349–50). Other couples had developed scrapbooks exclusively devoted to their renewal event, which they eagerly shared with the interviewer. Physical artifacts other than scrapbooks and photo albums also provided mnemonic devices that would facilitate the recollection of the renewal event. For a number of couples, for example, the renewal event involved an exchange of newly purchased rings, and these rings served as reminders to spouses whenever they were worn.

The vow renewal event marked *change* for marital couples in addition to continuity. Couples who perceived that their relationship had undergone some crisis or transformation reported using the renewal event as a way to begin their relationship anew. One female informant shared this story of their decision to renew their vows as a way to mark passage through a difficult period in their marriage:

We renewed in 1983. And it was not on any particular anniversary; it was in, I think, February, and our anniversary is in September. We had a difficult year and uh, and I was finishing my doctorate and I think that was very hard on my husband. And, so we suddenly kind of looked at each other and we, we talked about whether we needed to separate or not for a while. . . . We were at church. We had separated for about a week and we went to church. . . . The minister's sermon was something on the value of commitment, not to marriage, but to anything. And that it doesn't have any value unless it's able to weather very difficult storms, otherwise it is not a true commitment, it's just an easy association. . . .

And that made us rethink it and we got together that afternoon and we, um, talked about it and decided we wanted to, to really make a definite, make it not just a casual . . . but really a ritual about coming back and reaffirming this, this commitment. . . . And so, um, he had a new wedding ring made for me, he had the whole, he just wanted to make it a whole, full reacclamation. And so we had the minister, we arranged it with just a very private ceremony. We had another couple who were our best friends be witnesses for us. (#22, 5–38)

Some informants believed that their marital commitment was the same as it had been originally but that the society had undergone change such that enduring marital commitment had become transformed into something of a cultural anomaly. Thus, the social currency of their marriage had changed over the decades, and the vow renewal event was used by couples to signify their understanding of this change. In response to a question from the interviewer concerning why they elected to renew their vows instead of just having a big party to commemorate their 40th anniversary, one couple revealed that they wanted a vow renewal ceremony to mark the fact that their marriage had survived:

*Husband:* I think it was partially to . . . reinforce our commitment to marriage and the permanence of the marriage. . . . One of my feelings was that there is no real assurance that we'll live to celebrate the 50th so let's celebrate the 40th (laughing).

*Wife:* The 40th anniversary . . . especially in these times where marriages aren't lasting very long and [there are] many changes, we [will spend] the rest of our lives together. (#1, 39–65)

In sum, the vow renewal ritual appeared to be responsive to both stability and change. The ritual linked past, present, and future, thereby facilitating temporal continuity for the marital pair. However, for many couples, the renewal event also marked change, either internal changes in the marriage and/or perceived external changes in the society's view of the longevity of marriage.

### *Conventionality-uniqueness*

The third contradiction that was managed in the enactment of the vow renewal event was the interplay of conventionality and uniqueness. On the one hand, society's conventions of relating afford a couple the efficiency and convenience of "prepackaged" expectations and behavioral scripts for the conduct of their own relationship, obviating the need for the partners to negotiate everything anew. In addition, a conventional relationship is easy for others to understand and thus support. On the other hand, our society expects intimate relationships to be different from all others, and relationship parties often define their intimacy in part through the perception that no other relationship is quite like theirs. Although this contradiction is related to the public-private contradiction, it is distinct from it. Both contradictions deal with the social embeddedness of marriage but in different ways. The public-private contradiction centers around a couple's information-sharing and interaction

with their social network, whereas the conventionality-uniqueness contradiction revolves around the reproduction of societal conventions and institutions. With the exception of the “mass ceremony” vow renewals, informants described how their renewal events were simultaneously both conventional and unique. Again, for ease of presentation, we artificially separate the two dialectical strands of this contradiction.

At a basic level, couples were affirming the most *conventional* of society’s forms of intimacy—the institution of marriage. Informants who articulated this function felt that the public renewal of their marriage gave testimony to the endurance, strength, and beauty of the institution of marriage. In honoring their own successful marriage, couples felt that they were serving as role models to others, particularly to members of the younger generation. As one male informant indicated:

Well, my thoughts were that we would in a formal way rethink the commitment we have to each other and to marriage as an institution. We also felt . . . it was an example that would be given particularly to our children that were approaching the marriage age. I looked upon it as a teaching experience in a way or a personal testament to the institution of marriage. (#15, 124–29)

A female informant affirmed the honor paid to the institution of marriage in her renewal experience:

It was important for our children to see that. They were at an age . . . it was an important statement for them to hear. I think they saw concretely what commitment can lead to. They heard our own witness to marriage. . . . They heard that from our own mouth and some other people, too. I think it was really important for all of them to hear that. . . . I think situations like that serve as a help to other people, the more you see that kind of thing tends to help you, too; strength in numbers. It just strengthens the institution of marriage. I think it is an important thing to do. What you believe in you should be willing to speak publicly about. (#14, 236–51)

Informants who paid homage to the institution of marriage did not perceive their own marriages as good exemplars of the institution because they had been trouble-free. Rather, their marriages had survived both the good and the bad inherent in the institution of marriage. As one wife revealed:

We didn’t want it [their renewal event] so much to be a wedding as to be able to express to people as a witness that . . . in a marriage relationship there are ups and downs, good times and bad times . . . and we are committed to our commitment and that it doesn’t mean that we’ve never had bad times, that we’ve never had to work through things. (#20, 76–83)

Couples also displayed conventionality through the form of their renewal event. Most pairs elected to affirm their marriage and the institution of marriage by enacting some variant of the most conventional of society's bonding ceremonies—the wedding. The majority of renewal ceremonies were framed as traditional wedding ceremonies in which a presiding member of the clergy administered traditional wedding vows to the couple (or to a group of couples in the “mass ceremony” renewal). A few couples altered the traditional wedding vows to reflect that they were renewing their vows; for example, some couples uttered vows that were worded something like “I reaffirm thee as my wedded wife/husband” (#22, 81). In addition, a few couples decided to construct an alternative ceremony, just as some couples do in their original wedding. However, these variations were generally exceptions, with the modal pattern one in which couples simply enacted a traditional wedding ceremony. Like weddings, the renewal ceremonies varied in size, formality, and expense.

Spouses further established the conventionality of their marriage by linking it to another of society's most traditional of institutions—the church. For a number of informants, the success of their marriage was in part attributed to “God's love” in their marriage, and the public renewal of marital vows was regarded as a way to give public witness to their God's glory and strength. One female informant revealed that “We felt and believed that our marriage had remained as it has because of Christ being in the center of our life, and He's helped us through it, and we wanted to emphasize that” (#20, 180–82). A husband affirmed this homage in his account of his renewal of vows: “I think it's important that the world see that Christ can build the home and build commitment to human hearts that lasts, and this is the message our church gives and this is a message we want to participate in, too, by our lives and our testimonies” (#9, 24–28).

For other informants, the link to the church appeared to be motivated more out of respect for the church as an organization and the pastor as a representative of the church. Interestingly, this respect was most evident among informants who participated in “mass ceremony” renewal events. Many participated in “mass ceremony” renewals because “Well, the church was putting it on . . .” (#13, 36–37). One female informant told us that she wasn't very keen initially on participating in her church's mass renewal ceremony but changed her mind when the time came: “Oh, I fussed about it all week; I almost wasn't going to go . . . But [the pastor] likened it a bit unto the church, the bride of Christ thing. . . . [Our pastor] expresses a lot through drama” (#6, 13–32). These couples cooperated largely out of respect for their pastor and/or church; for these informants, noncooperation or noncompliance would have displayed lack of respect for the wishes of the pastor or the church.

At the same time that informants demonstrated their conventionality by the ties they established symbolically to traditional values and institutions, they also revealed the many ways in which their *unique* individual and relational signatures were present in their vow renewals. Throughout the “Results” section we have pointed to various displays of uniqueness, including unique ways of including family members and friends in traditional wedding roles, the construction of unique ceremonies that departed from a traditional wedding format, and various markers of the unique relational histories of couples. In general, physical artifacts and post-ceremony celebrations were particularly important ways in which uniqueness was interwoven with conventionality. For example, couples who adopted the

conventional wedding format included a ring ceremony in which the ring(s) was often specially crafted to hold unique relational meaning. One male informant, for example, indicated that the ring he selected for his wife had rubies in it to symbolize that he and his wife were forgiving their past mistakes and making a fresh beginning in their marriage:

And the reason I wanted rubies—thinking in symbolic terms—it’s like the blood of Christ. And for me, the most important part of the ceremony is that the blood of Christ covers the past. And so, so that I forget the past, and I forgive the past or whatever that’s gone on and I go into the future. (#16, 133–38)

Another informant told us that rubies also figured centrally in her renewal event, but with an entirely different meaning: “The 40th anniversary is represented by a ruby and my birthdate is July which is also the month of rubies and so . . . [my husband] gave me a band of rubies and I gave him a tie tack of rubies” (#1, 39–65).

Renewal events that took a highly conventionalized and formal form succeeded in achieving a personalized, unique touch through the more informal reception or party that followed the vow exchange proper. The post-ceremony celebration is what made the renewal “so personal” (#1, 71). In fact, for many couples, the post-ceremony celebration was in some respects the highlight of the entire renewal event. One couple rented a large hall in order to permit a large post-ceremony celebration. The exchange of traditionally worded wedding vows took only about 10 minutes and what the wife most recalled was the post-ceremony festivities: “When it was all over, everybody clapped and they all came up and gave us hugs and things like that. One of the musicians had written a special song . . . so we got to dance to that together” (#19, 203–6).

However, perhaps the best evidence for the importance of uniqueness is found in its relative absence for participants in the “mass ceremony” renewals. “Mass ceremony” renewal events were problematic for participants with respect to the interplay of conventionality and uniqueness. “Mass ceremony” renewal events were rich in conventionality—one member of the clergy administered one common vow at once to an audience of couples who repeated in unison the expected lines. Unfortunately, as our informants repeatedly revealed, such renewal events failed to be fully responsive to the demands for uniqueness. As a consequence, many informants perceived their “mass ceremonies” as relatively empty emotional experiences in which they participated in order to avoid a display of disrespect to their church community and to their pastor or minister. In response to the interviewer’s query concerning how the vow renewal came about, one male informant said:

Well, it was my pastor. . . . As I recall, he read some appropriate passages of Scripture . . . just gave a relatively brief sermon on the importance of marriage and marriage vows, and then he said, “This is the time,” and he had everybody stand up, who wanted to. . . . So it seemed like it was kind of a high pressured thing. . . . I think it would have been [hard not to stand up]. . . . It didn’t turn our marriage around or something like that. No, it was not the kind of thing . . . it was, you know, it was . . . a group thing, “Well, okay we’ll go along with the group,” rather than our own decision. It wasn’t as significant an event as it might

have been for other people that make individual decisions. It was a little bit more mechanical in that it was a group thing. (#7, 99–105)

It should be noted that, while the “mass ceremony” renewal event was seen as less significant than individually planned renewals, informants reported that they were nonetheless glad that they had participated in the “mass ceremony” experience.

### **Concluding remarks**

Rituals, as Cheal (1988: 638) has observed, “affirm the reality of abstract meanings for daily living” and “define the continuity of experience between past, present, and future.” The vow renewal events of our informants give vivid testimony to Cheal’s analysis. Based on our sample of informants, married couples appear to use the renewal event to weave together their past, their present, and their future commitment to one another. The vow renewal events of our informants were rituals steeped in actions, participants, and artifacts that affirmed in a concrete way a couple’s abstract love and commitment for one another in a relationship that was simultaneously personal and social.

Consistent with the argument of many dialectical scholars, our informants’ vow renewals enabled them to cope simultaneously with a variety of dialectical oppositions. In particular, three contradictions were managed productively in our informants’ accounts of their respective marital vow renewals: (1) celebration of marriage as both a personal/private relationship and a social/public relationship; (2) celebration of marriage as an arena for both stability and change; and (3) celebration of marriage as both a conventionalized social form and a uniquely constructed culture of two. These three contradictions appear to represent specific manifestations of the general dialectics around which the bulk of extant research coheres, as summarized and discussed in Werner & Baxter (1994). The *public-private* dialectic appears to be a mixture of the integration-separation and expression-nonexpression dialectics in its merging of physical, informational, and psychological accessibility-inaccessibility of the pair to larger social collectives. The *conventionality-uniqueness* dialectic appears to weave together elements from both the integration-separation and stability-change dialectics. Conventionality integrates a pair’s identity with the larger social collective, whereas uniqueness functions to mark a pair’s identity as distinctive. When a couple reproduces the conventions of the social collective, it functions to maintain the stability of those conventions; by contrast, a couple’s uniqueness provides opportunity for departures from societal conventions, thereby facilitating social change. In contrast to the public-private and conventionality-uniqueness dialectics, both of which are situated at the border of the personal with the social, the stability-change dialectic appears to be a fairly straightforward manifestation of the general stability-change dialectic as it is experienced within the boundaries of a dyadic system.

Because the vow renewal ritual appears to be simultaneously responsive to both poles of a given dialectical contradiction, it illustrates what Baxter (1988) has identified as the dialectical coping response of integration. Relationship partners have a variety of ways of responding to dialectical exigencies, including (1) oscillating back and forth through time

between efforts to fulfill first one pole of a contradiction and then the other pole; (2) developing specialized activity domains in an effort to privilege each pole in separate activities; (3) compromising such that each pole is partially fulfilled at a given time; and (4) integrating, by which the parties attempt to fulfill both poles of a contradiction simultaneously. Integration has not emerged as a frequently identified coping mechanism in existing dialectically based research (e.g., Baxter, 1990; Baxter & Simon, 1993), but this finding might be due to the fact that dialectically based researchers in the personal relationships field have only recently turned their attention systematically to the study of relationship rituals. However, based on our findings in this study, we would argue that rituals are not likely to emerge as frequent dialectical coping responses in any study because of their inherent self-limiting nature; part of the significance of such rituals as vow renewal is their infrequent enactment. Although some of our informants had experienced more than one renewal event, the enactments were punctuated by the passage of many years. When asked if they would elect to renew their vows again, several informants responded that the renewal ritual would lose its meaning if it were enacted too frequently. Thus, many rituals by their very nature are not likely to surface with high frequency. Although rituals such as the renewal of marital vows are infrequent in the history of a given couple's marriage, they nonetheless appear to hold substantial symbolic value for the pair.

Based on our data, the vow renewal event appears to function more to maintain than to repair marital bonds. For most of our informants, the renewal event was not envisioned as a way to restore the marriage as much as a way to celebrate a marriage that was still viable. The renewal event seems to us less aptly described as a "strategy" of maintenance and more appropriately described as a *dynamic* of maintenance. That is, married couples appear not to renew their vows out of a rational and instrumental intention to sustain their marriage, as the term "strategy" connotes in existing research literature. Rather, married couples appear to partake in a renewal of their marital vows as an emotionally based expression of their love and commitment. The act of celebration, in turn, may function to maintain the relationship's viability, particularly in its responsiveness to the interplay among a variety of dialectical exigencies. The vow renewal event points to the bias toward rationality and instrumentality that characterizes existing maintenance research from a "strategies" perspective. Clearly, one implication of the present study is the need for additional research on maintenance phenomena similar to the vow renewal ritual, that is, phenomena that function to sustain relationships but which lack strategic overtones of rationality and instrumentality.

However, not all forms of vow renewal appear to hold equal potential for relationship maintenance. At a practical level, the findings of this study suggest that proponents of "mass ceremony" vow renewal events might be better served if they could develop ways for couples to lend their unique relational signatures to the event. Although informants who participated in "mass ceremony" vow renewals did not have negative experiences, it was clear to us that their experiences lacked the emotional and symbolic significance that was reported by other informants who had planned renewal events uniquely meaningful to their respective marriages.

Repeatedly throughout the process of executing this study, we were struck by the importance of physical artifacts such as rings, photographs, and wedding cake decorations

to a couple's experience of their commitment to their marriage. These artifacts were woven into the fabric of a couple's renewal ritual, and they gave concrete form to the intangible sentiments that constituted their marriage. Physical artifacts served for many of our informants as vivid memory repositories, linking the past to the present and the future in very material ways. Like the scrapbooks which individuals keep while they are growing up (Katriel & Farrell, 1991), the physical artifacts of a couple's marital bond serve as rhetorical devices through which a couple tells and retells their relationship story to themselves and to others. With the exception of the research by Altman and his colleagues on the physical environments in which relationship parties are embedded, scholars have tended to study relationships as if they were removed from their physical and material moorings. Further, as Radley (1990) has noted, researchers have tended to conceive of memory exclusively as a cognitive state of the individual's mind. The material artifacts of the vow renewal event remind us that memory is socially constructed through people's social practices and props. Clearly, the symbolic value of physical artifacts merits further research attention by researchers interested in personal relationships.

Another contribution of this study is the focus on couples in older adult life. Our data suggest that the vow renewal event is a ritual that is likely to be concentrated among older persons in long-term marriages. Among our informants, for example, the average couple had been married almost 30 years. The vast majority of research on communication in personal relationships tends to emphasize a younger population in its emphasis on dating relationships and early marriages. The average length of marriage is increasing as part of the general aging of the American population (Ade-Ridder & Brubaker, 1983), yet our understanding of communication practices in later-life marriages is very limited (Sillars & Wilmot, 1989). Recently, several scholars (e.g., Pearson, 1992; Sillars et al., 1992) have provided rich descriptive insight into the themes of togetherness and interdependence that are salient in later-life marriages, but we have only limited insight into the communicative practices by which such themes are instantiated in these marriages. In addition, research devoted to long-established marital pairs might be able to shed insights into communication in personal relationships that simply cannot be obtained from the study of dating or newly married pairs. For example, awareness of the social embeddedness of personal relationships might be more salient among long-established marital couples than in parties to less developed relationship types or parties whose repository of relationship experiences is more limited. It would stand to reason that dating couples might be more inwardly focused in conceiving of their relationship than would partners in long-established relationships; newly developing relationships have not yet crystallized a dyadic identity to which others can respond. Further, the marital relationship functions to create the social network, that is, children, grandchildren, and long-term friends of the couple. The relative neglect of the social side of personal relationships in existing theoretical perspectives might be an artifact of the kind of relationships that have dominated researchers' attention to date.

Important limitations about the current study should be noted. The qualitative and interpretive methods used in this study specialize in rich description of a small number of cases. By its very nature, our methodology does not provide the opportunity to locate systematic differences among various types of renewal events. An amazing array of renewal

types emerged in our sample. Although the majority of our informants were renewing their vows as celebrations of successful long-term marriages, a minority of informants used the renewal event as a way to cope with marital problems. Although the majority of our informants' renewal events were planned as "single ceremony" events, a minority of our informants participated in "mass ceremony" events. Although some of our informants viewed their renewal event as a way to replicate their original wedding ceremonies, other informants sought to complete unfulfilled wedding dreams. With the exception of differences between "mass ceremony" and "single ceremony" events with respect to management of the conventionality-uniqueness dialectic, we could identify no patterns that systematically differentiated one renewal type from another. However, larger samples of each renewal type may permit the identification of systematic differences.

Reliance on a small convenience sample and retrospective interviewing may also have produced an overly positive view of the vow renewal phenomenon. In general, our informants had positive renewal experiences, and the question this raises is whether couples with unhappy vow renewal experiences were underrepresented. It is possible, for example, that some pairs who use the renewal event as a way to repair marital problems may be disappointed with the outcome and hence less open to participation in a study such as ours. The retrospective nature of our interviews also creates the possibility that disappointments and frustrations at the time of renewal may be forgotten through selective memory. Clearly, additional follow-up research is needed to sort out the extent to which participation in vow renewals functions positively to maintain marital stability and satisfaction.

We have no baseline information on the prevalence of vow renewals in US society as a whole. The anecdotal evidence with which we opened this article is suggestive of the event's growing popularity, but follow-up research is needed to determine whether such anecdotes might instead support the vow renewal event as an anomaly whose interest value rests in its rarity. Our data suggest that the vow renewal event holds significance in the history of a couple's marriage, and the many questions raised in this exploratory study merit additional research attention.

**Acknowledgments** – The authors would like to thank Charles Braithwaite for his comments on this manuscript, research assistants Jeannette Biddle and Kelly Sherrill for their assistance, and Arizona State University West for a research grant to the first author. A previous version of this paper was presented at the Fourth Conference of the International Network on Personal Relationships, Milwaukee.

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