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## We're Partners – Not Husband and Wife


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## CASE STUDY 7-2

### WE'RE "PARTNERS"— NOT HUSBAND AND WIFE

By Mary Jo Deegan  
and Michael Hill

Mary Jo Deegan is a professor of sociology at the University of Nebraska, where she met her “life-partner,” Michael Hill. Hill holds a Ph.D. in geography and is pursuing another in sociology.

On May 1, 1982—International Workers’ Day—we celebrated and consecrated our relationship with friends and family. Our partnership ceremony included blessings by a Presbyterian minister, piano music played by a close friend, and readings by Frederick Engels on marriage as slavery for women and by Jane Addams on the right of all people to live in societies they created. We did not obtain a marriage license, we did not exchange “marriage vows,” and we specifically chose to *not be married*. Our celebration cake was covered with white frosting and in red letters the slogan “Workers Should Unite—Not Marry” merrily conveyed our happy tidings.

The choice to be partners, or, as we sometimes say, “life-partners,” has dramatically structured our relationship to others. Since we both had been married to other people, we had experienced traditional relationships being imposed on our nontraditional selves. Our present experiences are very different from these prior ones. People inevitably pause after we introduce ourselves as partners. Often they ask us what that means, and we explain our commitment to each other and our opposition to state control over it. One dramatic difference for a woman is the immediate use of her full name. Although “Mary Jo Deegan” is a name I have used throughout my life, when I was married a large number of people told me they “couldn’t remember it!” They would inevitably address me and introduce me using my husband’s last name. My name causes no lapse of memory in a partnership.



As nontraditional individuals in a traditional marital status, we both experienced a large number of interactions where others assumed we shared their traditional ideas on home, children, and marriage. We had few options in these situations. We could endure them in silence, argue, or present our views and be greeted by silence. Now, no one assumes that we think traditionally and we are accepted from the start as different from the traditional “husband and wife.”

We also share the marvelous experience of supportive nontraditional people. Many individuals are searching for new ways to express their commitments, but they find traditional marriage ceremonies, promises, and relationships are empty and restrictive. Living without ceremonies to celebrate their joint lives is a common, but often unsatisfactory, solution. They often want to share their religious feelings and promises, however, and they are surprised to learn that it is possible to have a religious ceremony without a formal marriage. Thus we find ourselves explaining our commitment, ceremony, relatives' responses, and experiences to a number of people.

Surprisingly, many traditional people find our choices to be quite logical and acceptable. Nontraditional people are often delighted. We hope you will share in our joy and explore the ways you can commit yourself to others without losing an essential part of your own humanity.

- How might some individuals find traditional marriage ceremonies, promises, and relationships empty and restrictive? How is Deegan and Hill's partnership different from marriage? How is it similar?