

INTRODUCTION TO MARRIAGE AND FAMILY*

OpenStax College

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Figure 1: With so many unmarried couples living together and having children, is marriage becoming obsolete? (Photo courtesy of Nina Matthews/flickr)

Christina and James met in college and have been dating for more than five years. For the past two years, they have been living together in a condo they purchased jointly. While Christina and James were confident in their decision to enter into a commitment like a 20-year mortgage, they are unsure if they want to enter into *marriage*. The couple had many discussions about marriage and decided that it just didn't seem necessary. Wasn't it only a piece of paper? And didn't half of all marriages end in divorce?

Neither Christina nor James had seen much success with marriage while growing up. Christina was raised by a single mother. Her parents never married, and her father has had little contact with the family since she was a toddler. Christina and her mother lived with her maternal grandmother, who often served as a surrogate parent. James grew up in a two-parent household until age seven, when his parents divorced. He lived with his mother for a few years, and then later with his mother and her boyfriend until he left for college. James remained close with his father who remarried and had a baby with his new wife.

Recently, Christina and James have been thinking about having children and the subject of marriage has resurfaced. Christina likes the idea of her children growing up in a traditional family, while James is concerned about possible marital problems down the road and negative consequences for the children should that occur. When they shared these concerns with their parents, James's mom was adamant that the couple should get married. Despite having been divorced and having a live-in boyfriend of 15 years, she believes that children are better off when their parents are married. Christina's mom believes that the couple should do whatever they want but adds that it would "be nice" if they wed. Christina and James's friends told them, married or not married, they would still be a family.

Christina and James's scenario may be complicated, but it is representative of the lives of many young couples today, particularly those in urban areas (Useem 2007). The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the number of unmarried couples has grown from fewer than one million in the 1970s to 6.4 million in 2008. Cohabiting, but unwed, couples account for 10 percent of all opposite-sex couples in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Some may never choose to wed (Jayson 2008). With fewer couples marrying, the traditional American family structure is becoming less common.

1 References

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¹http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/2008-07-28-cohabitation-census_N.htm

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