Culture and Contradiction: The Case of Americans Reasoning about Marriage

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In a view that is popular in and out of anthropology nowadays, cultural variation can be expected to proliferate unchecked, resulting in as many different variants as there are subject-positions. Moreover, in this view, individuals themselves are sites of multiple cultural constructions having different historical roots and often conflicting with one another. Dorinne Kondo, in a clear and unequivocal example of this position, declares in the introduction to Crafting Selves that she will “attempt to avoid positing in advance the unproblematic existence of a unified, rational, coherent, bounded subject, looking instead to see ‘selves’ as potential sites for the play of multiple discourses and shifting, multiple subject-positions” (1990:44). She goes on to caution, “It is important to realize that conflicts, ambiguities, and multiplicities in interpretation, are not simply associated with different positionings in society—though of course this is a critically important factor—but exist within a ‘single’ self,” and to speak of “paradoxes and multiplicities of self” (1990:45). Cultural sharing is unattended to, in this view, and, indeed, inexplicable.

I wish to examine a case of cultural sharing. Such sharing is not at all unexpected in my view of culture as an integral part of human adaptation to the world. Viewed this way, one reason cultural

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knowledge is shared is because it offers a solution to some task commonly confronted by the members of a given society. Culture in this view is adaptive to human activity in the world, rather than a mere by-product of this activity. Interestingly enough, we are much more disinclined to question the assumption that a shared system for performance of some recurring task has evolved when this system seems exotic and/or esoteric to us—for instance, the development on the island of Pulawat in Micronesia of an ingenious, complex system of navigation that is taught by each generation of master navigators to the next and has been described by several anthropologists (Gladwin 1970; Hutchins 1983; Lewis 1972). Nor would most of us question the assertion that another widely shared system, language, has evolved for the expression and communication of thought in all human societies—perhaps because language is so manifest and so manifestly shared.1

The empirical case I examine is that of a quite ordinary task: reasoning about marriage in the United States. The task solution happens to be resolution of a widely shared contradiction in belief, a contradiction that, unresolved, could be expected to engender inner conflict in many, if not a majority of, married Americans. I take my findings about the way in which a cultural model structures reasoning to be broadly applicable to domains other than marriage. Reasoning is a common part of everyday activity of all kinds, often focusing on perceived dilemmas or contradictions. It is in cases like the one I will describe, in which given contradictions are confronted by many people, occurring over and over again, over long enough periods of time, that we would expect cultural resolutions to these contradictions to evolve.

Even so, there will always be plenty of felt contradiction and unresolved conflict left in our lives, and therefore plenty of business for therapists. This is because, simply put, events move faster than ideas, the world changing faster than cultural adaptation to it. Thus I would not want to be understood as denying the possibilities of subcultural variation that might lead to cultural contradiction and unresolved conflict within the individual—of Kondo’s “paradoxes and multiplicities of self.” But I do not think we can presume such inter-individual difference or such intra-individual conflict to be the rule. Shared cultural models that resolve everyday contradictions, of the sort I describe in this article, are at least as commonplace, suggesting that people are as much active resolvers
of conflict as they are passive "sites for the play of" contradiction (Kondo 1990), and that felicitous solutions to such inner conflicts become cultural ones. Nor, I might add, does the emergence of such cultural solutions entail "a unified, rational, coherent, bounded subject."

These lead paragraphs contain, and this article pursues, a multilayered agenda. In the interests of preserving the entire agenda without confusing readers about what it is, let me first say what the agenda items are, who the audience for each might be, and how these items are ultimately related. I have framed the article as a critique of contemporary anthropological theorizing that depicts individuals as passive victims of their own inner conflicts and the cultural contradictions that engender these, rather than as the active problem solvers and users of the cultural resources at hand for solving the problems they encounter, which they more often than not prove to be.² This argument is aimed at my colleagues in cultural anthropology in the hopes of convincing them of the necessity of studying how individuals think and use culture in order to fully address the relation between culture and the individual. Because of the particular topic of my research, I have found it useful to counterpose my view of individuals as active resolvers of the cultural contradictions that confront them to the contrary view in a well-known social commentary on the same topic: the analysis of American marriage in the 1985 best-seller, Habits of the Heart. Those social scientists and others who have a stake in the debate that has grown up around this book and related social commentary may also be interested in this article. In order to make my argument against the view of individuals as nonthinkers, I must show, in some detail, how people actually do resolve a real-life contradiction—in this case reasoning about a contradiction in our cultural understanding of marriage. In the course of this demonstration I raise a methodological point, on which I have elsewhere expanded (Quinn 1991; Strauss and Quinn n.d.), about the complexity of reconstructing cognition from natural discourse and the perils of assuming that culture can ever be read unproblematically from language. This point may be of special interest to linguists and linguistic anthropologists, as well as any colleagues who undertake discourse analysis as a method for reconstructing the cultural understandings that underlie it.
Also, in the course of this demonstration of how people reason about marriage, I think I have solved a problem that has vexed cognitive psychology: I show how people are able to perform complex natural reasoning. Their ability to do so, furthermore, depends crucially upon their use of a cultural structure designed to facilitate this task. This last implication of my analysis, the more general suggestion that human cognition depends upon human culture, is aimed mainly at cognitive scientists—including, but not primarily, cognitive anthropologists, who are likely to be the only ones already convinced of the need to study cognition in its cultural context. The identification of the shared structure with which people reason about marriage, in turn, leads me to speculate about the preconditions under which such task solutions might be expected to be invented and culturally shared. It also occasions the observation, with which I close the article, that such shared solutions and cultural sharing more generally arise out of specific shared experiences. This last set of points should again be of interest to all anthropologists.

MARRIAGE IN HABITS OF THE HEART

The same presumption of cultural variation and contradiction that dominates current thinking about culture more generally finds its way into a description of American marriage in the influential book Habits of the Heart (1985), by Robert Bellah and his colleagues. It would be careless to imply that the roots of this presumption are the same in both cases: the analysis in Habits of the Heart would seem to be part of a long-standing American tradition of conservative social commentary, where Francesca Cancian (1987:57–60) and Arlene Skolnick (1991:203–204) put it, rather than being prompted by the newer postmodernist impulse that has washed over anthropologists such as Kondo. Still, the presumption is the same, lending itself to much the same image of individuals as passive “sites” for the play of larger cultural forces—and providing me with the grist I need for my mill.

Bellah et al. present a picture of Americans’ ideas about marriage that is only partly shared and decidedly inconsistent. There are two different, and contradictory, models of marriage in America, they say, one “a traditional view of love and marriage . . . found most strongly among certain evangelical Christians,” the other “the
therapeutic attitude” identified with the middle-class mainstream (1985:93–102). Having laid out each of these two contradictory views in its “pure form” (1985:101), the authors go on to acknowledge that extreme versions of either view are unusual among their interviewees (1985:108–109); most people, including many evangelical Christians, hold some blended version of the two. They conclude:

Although we have drawn a sharp contrast between the therapeutic attitude, grounded in a conception of authentic self-knowledge, and an ethic that rests on absolute and objective moral obligations, found in one form among some evangelical Christians, most Americans are, in fact, caught between ideals of obligation and freedom. [1985:102]

The presumption is of historical change in which a newer ideal is overtaking the older one: “Even as the therapeutic attitude spreads,” they say, “it meets, and sometimes blends with, the countervailing aspiration of many Americans to justify enduring relationships and the obligations that would sustain such relationships” (1985:102). Individuals are portrayed as being “caught” in the contradiction between the two “countervailing aspirations,” as reflected in the authors’ descriptions of interviewees who are led to “paradox” (1985:107) or who are “oscillating” (1985:109) between ideas; and of a situation in which a therapeutic language “undermines” (1985:106) one of commitment, and being “without a widely shared language of obligation and commitment” (1985:106) causes “confusions” (1985:109) and “difficulty” (1985:106, 109). While people share the paradox in which they are caught, it is left up to them to resolve it, and their individual attempts to do so are never very satisfactory. Thus Bellah et al. posit two kinds of cultural variability: a small number of individuals escape the historically engendered contradiction between obligation and freedom by hewing single-mindedly to one model of marriage or the other, while most people are divided within themselves as to which of these models they espouse.

As Cancian has pointed out in grouping them with other more conservative social commentators, Bellah et al. “view the search for self development as undermining committed relationships,” the persistence of which “is a survival of traditional family and gender roles” (1987:107). My own interviews with Americans on the subject support her contrary contention that the ideal of a lasting marriage is hardly disappearing. More, my analysis of these interviews argues
that, far from posing a conflict in people’s minds, the two themes Bellah et al. refer to as the traditional obligation to sustain enduring relationships versus the therapeutic attitude privileging individual self-actualization—or what I have elsewhere called the expectations of lastingness and fulfillment—are joined in a common cultural model. Bellah et al.’s tendency to counterpose the two themes as psychologically conflicting just may have more to do with their own anxiety about what is happening to our society, including marital and other family relations in it (see Skolnick [1991] for a more general and developed critique of conservative social commentary, including Bellah et al., along this same line), than it has to do with their interviewees’ understandings of marriage. While Bellah et al. quote and cite their interviewees philosophizing in contradictory veins, sometimes within the same interview, they give no evidence that these speakers actually experience the kind of psychological conflict between their different views that is implied by being “caught between” them, “oscillating” between them, or faced with “paradox.”

Let me make clear what I am and am not claiming. I am not denying that a concern with self-fulfillment has grown among Americans or that this preoccupation has had an effect on marital stability in our society or that the ensuing contradiction is realized in marital conflicts and played out in the divorce courts (see Weitzman 1985:374–377). As marriage counselor Karen Seeley has pointed out to me (personal communication, December 1994), some couples in middivorce are prone to conceptualize their situations in decidedly Bellah-esque terms. I am only saying that Americans, in the daily course of their married lives, have recourse to a common way of coping with the conflict between their commitment to lasting marriage and their belief in self-fulfillment, rather than being immobilized by the contradiction between the two or allowing one deeply held belief to be undermined by another. This shared way of coping accommodates the powerful belief that marriage should last, a belief more resilient than Bellah et al. credit it with being. This common solution to a recurrent problem exemplifies one of the most ordinary, and most ubiquitous, uses of culturally shared knowledge. To say that a cultural solution like this is available is not to say that it never breaks down (as it seems to have for Seeley’s divorcing couples), nor is it to say that there are not other kinds of marital conflict that fall outside
its scope, and for which, perhaps, no cultural solution has evolved. There will always be plenty of business for marital therapists, too.

Significantly, Bellah et al. describe what Roy D’Andrade (1995:150–181) has called people’s cultural theories, which he distinguishes from their cultural models. “A model,” says D’Andrade, “consists of an interrelated set of elements which fit together to represent something. Typically one uses a model to reason with or calculate from by mentally manipulating the parts of the model in order to solve some problem” (1995:151). To the degree that the problem that it is used to solve does not involve or require language, a cultural model will remain unstated; for this reason, asked to describe the cultural model they use, people will ordinarily be relatively inarticulate about it and will be able to produce only fragments of it—a difficulty recognizable to every interviewer. A cultural theory, on the other hand, “consists of an interrelated set of propositions which describe the nature of some general phenomena” (1995:172), propositions that can be stated by those who hold this theory. Being stated but not necessarily applied, the propositions in cultural theories can often be quite general and abstract, as well as only loosely related to one another (1995:173). Whether or not model and theory are the discontinuous types of knowledge structure that D’Andrade’s discussion and examples imply, his distinction has been analytically useful to me in pointing to the fact that I have singled out discourse in which my interviewees are using a cultural model, while Bellah et al. appear to have singled out discourse in which their interviewees are theorizing. Here, for example, are Bellah and his coauthors summarizing the cultural theory they call “the therapeutic attitude,” which they find dominates the thinking of the mainstream Americans they interviewed:

The therapeutic attitude reinforces the traditional individualism of American culture, including the concept of utilitarian individuals maximizing their own interests, but stresses the concept of expressive individuals maximizing their experience of inner psychic goods. [1985:104]

For the classic utilitarian individualist, the only valid contract is one based on negotiation between individuals acting in their own self-interest. For the expressive individualist, a relationship is created by full sharing of authentic feelings. But both in hard bargaining over a contract and in the spontaneous sharing of therapeutically sophisticated lovers, the principle is in basic ways the same. No binding obligations and no wider social understanding justify a relationship. It
exists only as an expression of the choices of the free selves who make it up. And should it no longer meet their needs, it must end. [1985:107]

Therapeutic understandings fit many aspects of traditional American individualism, particularly the assumption that social bonds can be firm only if they rest on the free, self-interested choices of individuals. Thus even Americans who do not share the quest for self-actualization find the idea of loving in spite of, not because of, social constraints very appealing. [1985:109]

One might well ask how anything other than the stated propositions that comprise such theories are to be gleaned from interviews. My interviewees (and I presume Bellah et al.'s) do more than propound on the subject of marriage, however. They recount marital histories, anecdotes, and key incidents, for example, and they also perform another task that is an ordinary part of everyday discourse as well as interview talk, and is as important with regard to marital experience as it is with regard to other aspects of life: they reason about marriage. Indeed, although they do both, they appear to reason much more than they theorize. I was able to reconstruct, from their reasoning about it, the cultural model of marriage my interviewees had to have in mind in order to do this reasoning—even though they could not produce a fluent, comprehensive account of this model. Thus while Bellah et al. place great importance on people's having or not having a language for something, I find that people share a concern with marital lastingness, reasoning repeatedly about situations in which the lastingness of marriages was in question, without necessarily having "a widely shared language of obligation and commitment" in which to "justify enduring relationships." In other words, because their interviewees cannot enunciate a theory of marital lastingness equivalent to that Bellah et al. summarize for the therapeutic attitude, they mistakenly conclude that these Americans have no model for thinking about lastingness.5

Coincidentally, my own interviews were conducted in the same time period as those done by Bellah et al., though on the other side of the country. These researchers conducted interviews with over 200 people between 1979 and 1984 (1985:viii–ix), some subset of those being focused on love and marriage and gathered by one of the coauthors, Ann Swidler, in and around San Jose, California. The interviews for my study were conducted by myself, a research assistant, and a student between 1979 and 1980 in and around Durham, North Carolina. Like most Californians, Swidler's inter-
viewees had come to live in the San Jose area from all over the country, few being native. In respect to their region of origin, my 22 interviewees were also roughly representative of the population in the region where they lived, the economy of which was based on hospitals and health industries, numerous pharmaceutical and other corporate research industries, several universities—all of which attracted professionals from elsewhere—and an agricultural hinterland. Under a quarter of these interviewees were native to North Carolina, the rest coming from around the country, predominantly the Northeast (with a few Midwesterners and only one Californian among them).

All of my interviewees were residents of the same middle-sized southeastern city or its immediate environs; all were native-born Americans who spoke English as a first language; and all were married during the period of their interviews, all in first marriages. Beyond these constancies of cultural and marital experience, they were selected to maximize diversity with regard to such obvious differences as their occupations and educational backgrounds, religious affiliations and ethnic and racial identities, their neighborhoods and social networks, and the durations of their marriages. The range of their religious affiliations, for example, reflected their predominantly non-Southern roots: only one couple and the wife in another marriage said they were Baptist, with others identifying themselves as Quaker, Episcopalian, non-denominational Christian, or Jewish, and eight individuals saying they practiced no formal religion. Three couples identified their “race/ethnicity” as black, and another eight couples identified theirs as white or Caucasian. Efforts to attain educational and occupational diversity were not fully successful, with college graduates predominating and professionals and managers overrepresented. Even so, this group was probably more diverse with respect to class than Swidler’s interviewees, who were “either middle-class or from relatively prosperous blue-collar families” (1985:ix) living in suburban neighborhoods in and around San Jose, in the heart of a rapidly growing Silicon Valley.

The diversity of my group of interviewees, and both groups with regard to region of origin, should dispel any easy assumptions—for example, on the basis of stereotypes we hold about Californian fondness for the good life or Southern religiosity—that regional differences might lead my group to be more prone to a commit-
ment to lasting marriages, or less prone to see a contradiction between this commitment and self-realization, or less prone to abstract philosophizing about marriage, than Swidler's. Instead, it appears to me that Bellah et al. arrive at an analysis different from mine because they presume what they will find, and they overlook counterevidence in the discourses they analyze.

So far as I can glean from the examples provided in Habits of the Heart, two of which will be considered below, my interviews do indeed bear striking resemblances to Swidler's, expressing quite similar ideas about marital lastingness and marital fulfillment. However, my interviewees hardly give the impression of oscillating between these two ideas or being caught between them. Elsewhere (Quinn 1992a) I describe a graphic case of such oscillation, between a different set of poles, to be found in my interviews: women interviewees caught between conflicting ideas about their obligations as wives and their rights as people. The most powerful evidence for these women's internal conflicts between these two expectations comes from their reports of their own subjective experience: one of them described finding herself doing what she does not believe in; another described herself holding conversations between different parts of herself; and the third described oscillating back and forth between views from one day to the next—the "flip-flop syndrome" that Arlie Hochschild (1989:104–105) named after an interviewee of hers who reported "I flip-flop all the time" between thinking that her husband's career was more important and thinking that he and she should share housework equally. As Hochschild might agree, a cultural solution to this particular widespread dilemma has not yet evolved. By clear contrast, neither the three women from my own study whom I have just cited, nor any of my other interviewees, report these subjective experiences of inner conflict between their idea that marriage should be lasting and their idea that marriage should be fulfilling.

A different possibility, explored by Claudia Strauss (1990), is that individuals avoid contradiction by compartmentalizing potentially contradictory ideas. Strauss describes working-class men she interviewed who see no contradiction in their ideas about the way the system oppresses little people and their ideas about getting ahead in it, because these two sets of beliefs have been maintained in separate cognitive contexts. Apparently in their daily life these men have not had to face the kind of reasoning task that would bring
the conflicting ideas into juxtaposition. By contrast, in their talk about marital lastingness and marital fulfillment, my interviewees evidence none of the discursive patterns Strauss identifies with cases of compartmentalization. Rather, a close analysis of their discourse about marriage reveals my interviewees to be employing a cultural model that reconciles the contradictory expectations of a lasting marriage and a fulfilling one, allowing them to reason about the frequent cases in which lack of fulfillment might seem to threaten lastingness. Americans can use this model to decide what to do when this threat arises in their own marriages, for instance, or to figure out what might have happened or know what to expect when other marriages of their acquaintance appear to be in trouble, or to assess the significance of the rising rate of American marriages that do not last.

Empirical investigation should bring together those of us who study cultural models and those of us who study multiplicities of self in a common anthropological enterprise, instead of segregating us into different and competing academic industries. For a start, it would seem important to examine the conditions under which one or another of the outcomes I have mentioned—in inner conflict, compartmentalization of the conflicting beliefs and expectations, or adoption of a cultural model to resolve conflict—emerges as a response to cultural contradiction.

**ACTUAL REASONING ABOUT MARRIAGE**

What is this shared model Americans use to reason about marital fulfillment and lastingness, and how does it work? In elucidating this model I rely on Edwin Hutchins’s (1995, n.d.) exploration of culturally shared mediating structures that, coordinated with the task world, allow actors to perform given tasks. A simple, clear example is a written procedure such as a checklist (Hutchins 1995:290–312), which controls the order in which components of a task are to be executed. Others before me (D’Andrade 1989a:822; Rumelhart et al. 1986:46–47) have speculated that the task of reasoning, in particular, must be mediated by culturally provided representational systems invented for this purpose. Of course, a difference between the lists, scales, dials, charts, and landmarks that mediate performance of the navigation tasks Hutchins analyzes, and the mediating structure I will describe for reasoning
about marriage, is that the latter has no external realization—unless the words in which reasoning is conducted be regarded as a partial external representation of this structure. Being internal and not readily observable, structures of this sort must be reconstructed from such verbal reasoning. Here, I do such reconstruction, from reasoning embedded in the actual discourse of my interviewees, in order to show what one such internal mediating structure might look like and how it might work. If, as Hutchins comments, “the phenomena of mediated performance are absolutely ubiquitous” (n.d.:2), then the kind of internal mediating device for reasoning that I describe here is one of the most ubiquitous.

This internalized mediating device takes the form of a prototypical or idealized sequence of marital events. In this structure, one event is linked to another by a relation of causality, the concatenation of such relations forming a causal chain. This structure is used to reason about a common marital quandary. It is idealized in two ways important for the performance of reasoning. First, the events that can occur are highly circumscribed, being of a limited number and occurring in an invariant order. These events are lastingness, sharedness, mutual benefit, fulfillment, compatibility, difficulty, effortfulness, success, and risk of failure. The sequence goes like this: Marriages are ideally lasting, shared, and mutually beneficial. Marriages that are not shared will not be mutually beneficial, and those not mutually beneficial will not last. Benefit is a matter of fulfillment. Spouses must be compatible in order for their marriages to be fulfilling and hence beneficial. Fulfillment and, especially, the compatibility it requires are difficult to realize, but this difficulty can be overcome and compatibility and fulfillment achieved with effort. Lasting marriages in which difficulty has been overcome by effort are regarded as successful ones. Achievement of a lasting, successful marriage is, of course, the point of the story.

Incorporated into this simplified story about marriage, it is worth noting, are the cultural themes that Bellah et al. identify: marriage as a contractual relation between parties, either one of which is free to leave the relationship if not benefited; and this benefit as a matter of fulfillment in terms of sex, intimacy, companionship, support, and other interpersonal needs to be met. In fact, benefit requires compatibility because two people must be compatible in order to fill each other’s needs, and it is the difficulty of achieving this compatibility, in large part, that makes marriage difficult.
Another salient cultural theme, one not noted by Bellah et al., is reflected in the way in which a lasting marriage is cast as a matter of success in overcoming this difficulty through effort. The shared model they use to reason with allows my interviewees to resolve the contradiction set out by Bellah et al. and to resolve it in a quintessentially American way—by hard work—rather than being caught in it.

A second idealization is that the causal relations between pairs of events in the sequence are themselves highly simplified (see Quinn 1987). A successful marriage is a lasting one and a lasting marriage successful, always. If a marriage is beneficial it will last, and if it has lasted it is beneficial, categorically. The benefit of marriage is fulfillment, pure and simple. If two people are compatible, their marriage will be beneficial, and if they are incompatible, it will not be, period. Incompatibility causes difficulty, without qualification, just as a compatible couple will have no difficulty. Effort overcomes difficulty, absolutely. And so on.

Now, the logical relations involved here are not that simple, as shown by some examples taken from an impromptu analysis of my material by Roy D’Andrade (personal communication, October 1994). Lastingness is a property of a successful marriage; all successful marriages are lasting ones but not all lasting marriages are successful ones; in fact, there are plenty of unsuccessful old marriages around. Mutual benefit is a sufficient cause of a lasting marriage. That is, mutual benefit by itself makes a marriage last. But a lasting marriage need not always be a mutually beneficial one, and we know cases. We call them “unhappy” marriages. Mutual benefit is actually a property of fulfillment; as such, it can also be a property of marital benefits other than fulfillment and sometimes people marry for them. Effort is a requirement, but only one requirement for overcoming difficulty—a necessary but not a sufficient cause; we all know that the best efforts cannot always save a marriage. What I am asserting is that in the course of ordinary reasoning these complexities drop away. People do not follow strict inference. They appear, rather, to substitute something like plausible inference (see Hutchins 1980:56), that is, treating likely events as if they were always true. We will consider why this should be so momentarily.

At the same time, I hasten to note, my interviewees demonstrate that they recognize, and can incorporate into their reasoning when
called upon to do so, marital events and complex causality not contained in the prototypical event sequence they use to reason with. A concise example is that of a woman who, talking about the observable conflict and evident dissatisfaction in her sister-in-law's marriage, concludes, "I'm sure they must have something good in their marriage or they wouldn't still be together" (1W-3). The event pair on which this little piece of reasoning depends is one that allows of no alternatives, no shades of gray: having something good in their marriage causes people to stay together; their being together is evidence of this something good. However, the speaker immediately amends this statement in the following way: "Who knows? They might be staying together for their little boy's sake but they—she doesn't seem to be as happy as she could be." The alternative event sequence, of staying together for the sake of the children even when the marriage is not fulfilling to the spouses themselves, is a subplot in the American marriage narrative; we recognize that it happens while denying that it should, since marriages are supposed to be fulfilling. That her sister-in-law's may be one of these latter kinds of marriages kept together for the children's sake is suggested by an added piece of evidence: the sister-in-law does not seem as happy as she would if her marriage were fulfilling.

This snippet of reasoning is somewhat unusual because the speaker went back—having finished her brief piece of reasoning and arrived at the conclusion she had wanted to draw—and filled in some of the complexity of the situation. She entertained another interpretation of events. Most reasoners do not do this. Consider the following example:

And there isn't any signs [sic] right now that it's not going to be a very s—that our marriage isn't going to be a successful marriage in terms of lasting. Not only just lasting but our wanting it to last and enjoying each other. I think Rich is very happy. I think Rich is getting affection, and having affection expressed, probably the first time in his life, really. Really feeling accepted just for being Rich, you know. And he acts it. I mean he says things—he'll say, you know, how happy he is, and I really believe so. And, I know that—I think I might have said this—and some people have said to me that it's really obvious that he feels for me, in the way he acts, sort of thing. And certainly back on my part, I mean it's very nice knowing that I'm loved that much. That is just a tremendous feeling. I—and he spoils me rotten, at times, like when I was sick and on the couch, you know, he always changed the channel on the TV, or turned it up or down, and he still does. I mean—like he—after the seven o'clock news—at seven o'clock the news are
over—he'll get up, wrap my—the afghans around me, turn down the game shows, turn off the light and kiss me goodnight for an hour. I mean, he really does spoil me, and I really like it. So I don’t see any reason at this point that anything is going to happen. And I can’t imagine it happening. So, maybe we’ll be a success.

[9W-10]

There is the qualifying “a successful marriage in terms of lasting,” and the cautious “there isn’t any sign right now,” and the telltale “maybe we’ll be a success” at the close, suggesting the speaker’s knowledge that lastiness is only one measure of success and success itself is only a likelihood. (In the event, she was right to reserve judgment; her marriage ended in divorce.) Yet the structure of the argument is clear: a fulfilling marriage is a lasting marriage is a successful marriage. Considered as a discourse type (Linde 1993:90–92), this is a well-formed explanation: the proposition to be proven—that the marriage is a successful one—is set out in the beginning, the evidence for this proposition is adduced, in the form of examples showing that the marriage is mutually fulfilling, and, finally, the proposition is restated as a conclusion: “So,”—that is, because the marriage is fulfilling—“maybe we’ll be a success.” As in the last example and others to follow, another’s fulfillment can be inferred from the evidence that they act happy and say they are happy, happiness being the emotion that one ordinarily feels when one is fulfilled. Rich is very happy, we understand, because he is getting affection for the first time.

In these and other chains of actual reasoning about marriage the event sequence I have described is used as a template. As D’Andrade (1989a:822–823) explains, such a model must be brought into coordination with the world, the reasoner deciding that some state of the latter aligns with a given point in the former—in this case, an event in the prototypical event sequence. Once such an alignment is achieved, the reasoner can reach conclusions about the world by reading them off of the model. Thus if a person determines that a real-world marriage is lacking in benefit, he or she can use the model to predict outcomes of that state of affairs—for instance, that it will be difficult or that it will not last. If a person learns that a real-world marriage has ended, he or she can infer that it was not beneficial. If a person observes that a marriage is fulfilling and hence beneficial, he or she can infer, as did the wife just quoted, that it will last and succeed. And so forth. As the first example of “I’m sure they must have something good in their
marriage or they wouldn’t still be together” illustrates, speakers can reason in either direction, from effect to cause as well as from cause to effect. Speakers reason in this way between any link to any other link in this causal chain, concluding, for instance, that marriages must be compatible to last, that marriages that are not mutually beneficial will be difficult, and so forth. As some of these examples indicate, they reason just as readily to negative conclusions that marriages that are not shared, not mutually beneficial, or incompatible, or in which effort is not made to resolve difficulty, and so forth, are unsuccessful ones that do not last. In sum, speakers can reason across causal links from any event or its negation to any other event or its negation, and they can reason either forward or backward across these events. They do so readily and rapidly.

Now we are in a position to see why the mediating device I have described—an idealized event sequence chained together by a simplified causality—serves natural reasoning. In the first place, a limited sequence of events in a fixed order makes it possible to reason to conclusions about marriage without confronting an unmanageable number of potential outcomes. In the second place, a simplified causality makes it possible to reach these conclusions without getting tangled up in limitless shades of probability. Imagine, for example, what would happen if a reasoner wanting to infer whether a marriage was ending because it had been unbeneﬁcial had ﬁrst to examine the causal relation between lastingness and beneﬁt to decide whether it was transitive and could bear the inference, and further had to subject the linking relations between beneﬁt and compatibility, compatibility and difﬁculty, difﬁculty and effort, and effort and lastingness to the same scrutiny. That is precisely the kind of cognitive morass that the mediating device I have described is designed to circumvent. The device works by treating the event sequence, in its entirety, as perfectly transitive and perfectly reversible—that is, as if plausible inferences were being made at every juncture. Otherwise, it would not be possible to use the event sequence for reasoning in the way I have described, lining up an event in the template with a state of the world and using the template to read off another event.

A connectionist-inspired approach such as that proposed by Claudia Strauss and me (n.d.) suggests another important way in which the structure, once well learned, facilitates reasoning about marital events. I have characterized the model for marriage as a
sequence of causally linked events, and so it is; this model allows us to understand, and narrate, the way in which a marriage can be expected to unfold. In connectionist terms, however, once this model has been well learned, it is a set of strong links connecting each event and relation between events with every other event and relation in the sequence, in a densely connected network. In connectionist models, elements of such a network are activated simultaneously. When a reasoner has occasion to consider any one event in the network, say, the effort of marriage, the relations of that event to events several links removed in the causal chain—as, say, lastingness is to effort—are no less strongly linked and hence are no harder, and take no more time, for the reasoner to process than the relations between events that are directly causally linked—as effort is to difficulty. Since the network preserves relations between events as well as events, the causal sequence that leads the reasoner through these events to the ultimate success or failure of marriage can be reconstructed from it.

EVIDENCE FOR THE MODEL

It behooves me to bring further evidence for the existence, widely shared nature, and real-life application of the model I have described. Given limitations of space in which to treat the entire model, I will support my claims about it with some evidence for the key subset of assumptions about the relations between the effort required of marriage, the benefits expected of it, which are understood in terms of fulfillment, and marital lastingness, which can also be understood as marital success. My examples are intended to demonstrate the common assumptions underlying the varied language of different speakers discussing different marital experiences. I begin with a set of seven passages in which, like the two women already quoted, speakers invoke the causal link between benefit and lastingness. I then turn to four passages in which speakers make the link between effort and benefit, and finally, to eight other excerpts that rest on the assumed link between effort and lastingness. Two of these latter eight passages—those identified by the names Bellah et al. gave these interviewees in contrast to the codes I assigned to mine—are taken not from my own corpus but from Habits of the Heart. I will end with a single instance of a
somewhat rarer type, in which a speaker spells out almost the entire causal sequence between effort and lastingness.

The context in which speakers most often invoke the assumption that mutual benefit causes a marriage to last is one in which, like Rich’s wife and the following interviewees from my study, they have occasion to assess the status of their own marriages:¹⁵

You know, it’s like I know everything that she needs. That—you know, and the things that I don’t know are things that will come up in the future, I feel like she will tell me, you know, maybe perhaps our relationship will allow her to get it, you know, and vice versa. So I feel like, you know, we’re here to stay, you know. I think we got it—you know, I feel like—well I really feel it’s, you know, concrete, you know. [2H-8]

But I feel pretty mutual about, we both have as much at stake in the relationship as the other person does. We both express to each other the same desire to keep things going. [4W-7]

Rich’s wife and these last two speakers are offering assessments of their marriages’ chances of lastingness and success. Such running assessments can certainly be an important guide to the status of marriage as to other realms of life, telling us when we need to take corrective action or reassuring us that we do not. (Of course, these assessments can be mistaken.) The next woman, however, describes a somewhat more critical situation in which she has been trying to convince her husband that she is not going to leave him—a case in which the relation between mutual benefit and marital lastingness is far from academic:

Like what I tried to explain to Dan was that one person can’t be expected to fulfill everything because they’re not exactly the same. You know, fulfill everything that one person needs. And that Ron fulfilled something for me that Dan couldn’t, you know. And, it wasn’t as much—like Dan fulfills so much for me that I would never want to leave him for Ron, you know. Because Ron just fulfills this one added little block that Dan doesn’t. I’m not going to leave thirty for one, you know, that’s just—I mean, you know—I mean, I can’t put a number on what he fulfills for me, but you know, that kind of ratio. [3W-4]

Speakers equally readily make the opposite assumption, that lack of mutual benefit or fulfillment will cause a marriage to end, and, again, the reasoning in which this assumption figures ranges from the purely hypothetical to the all-too-real:

When a marriage gets to the point where you’re really holding down the other person, you’re really restricting them, it’s not worth sticking together because
life’s too precious to waste your time, with another person. Unless they’re really fulfilling you on an emotional level. [3H-1]

I’m a firm believer in divorce if things are not going well. Life is too short to spend it with someone you’re not happy with. [7W-6]

If I wasn’t happy. If there came a day-to-day thing and neither one of us were progressing in any way or getting anywhere in the marriage I wouldn’t see any reason for going on with it. But I don’t have any particular cause of what would bring on divorce immediately. [1H-13]

I think it costs me a lot and I don’t think he’s measuring that cost. And I’m scared it’s going to cost too much and leave me without being able to stay in the relationship. [4W-12]

While the speaker before her seems complacent about the current status of his marriage, the last woman presents herself as being in the throes of internal debate about whether or not to leave hers.

Next I turn to a set of examples that illustrate the shared assumption that effort makes a marriage mutually beneficial:

I think it’s a whole lot easier to ride along, each person taking their position and not moving very much but being—you know, “It’s good enough to stay in it.” You’ve got your kids, you’ve got your house and that kind of thing. And I think that the emotional—an emotional relationship that is really meaningful and a relationship that is sustaining that affirms both people as individuals and allows those people to be individuals and yet, you actually like being together, I think that’s terribly hard to achieve that kind of relationship. And I feel like, Dave and I have consciously worked toward doing that, achieving that kind of relationship and maintaining—I think there are periods in our life and in our marriage when it was very questionable, when I don’t think either of us was certain that we wanted to do that, that we wanted to put the energy and emotional effort into making that happen. And yet I think it has, so somewhere, some part of each of us must have felt it was worthwhile enough to struggle through those periods and move on. [5W-1]

This is an interesting passage because it begins with an argument about how much and what kind of benefits cause a marriage to last. Some people stay in a marriage that is just good enough, but the real benefits of marriage go beyond kids and a house, to a meaningful emotional relationship. That kind of benefit takes effort, as do the benefits described by the next speakers:16

We really are, in many ways, opposites. I mean I enjoy being by myself. I enjoy quiet. And I’m very happy with it whereas my husband is not. And so it’s sort of balancing the needs of both of us. That—you know, that we had to work at it. [8W-3]
Because you have the man, I don’t think you can stop there and say, “Well, this is it,” you know, “I can just let everything go.” Because you can—you’d be surprised at the little things that really bug men. I mean that you wouldn’t think about it. He say, “Well you’re a lousy housekeeper,” you know, and this type of thing. So you keep working on the things that you think would, you know, enhance—well not enhance him, but, that would make him happier, you know, as much as possible without making yourself miserable. [11W-16]

It’s not something that comes natural either. It’s something that we both work at. [I: Oh, really?] Yeah, that—you know, it’s just that our relationship is extremely important to each of us and, you know, we want to work hard at making it so and making it better. And so, you know, the sharing and giving to each other is part of—you know, a major part of that. So, you know, we go out of our way to do things for each other. [9H-3]

If mutual benefit makes a marriage last, and it takes effort to achieve mutual benefit, it follows that effort is required to make a marriage last. All of the next eight quotes show speakers making this last connection. Not surprisingly, given the more general understanding we carry into our model of marriage—of human enterprise as requiring effort in overcoming difficulty to be successful—lasting marriage is rephrased in terms of marital success more often in the context of the effort required of it, we will notice, than in the context of the benefits expected of it.

The assumption that a lasting marriage takes effort informs the global expectations people bring with them into marriage, as in the following quotes:

I felt like it [marriage] should be about the same as any other relationship. Any other good relationship but that you were—you know, this is more permanent, this is something that you should make work, you know. And not anything that you should give up on. You know you should always keep trying no matter what. [2W-1]

If you have arguments and if there are problems, you have to say to yourself, “I came into this with my eyes wide open. It’s my responsibility to try to help make it work.” [7W-5]

You can’t have something as good as a love relationship without putting a lot of effort into it. It’s a wonderful thing, but it’s not going to keep going by itself just because it’s wonderful. That person is not forever just because you found that special person. [Ted Oster, quoted in Bellah et al. 1985:104]

In a rather unusual instance, even as he quarrels with the idea that a successful marriage requires more than casual effort, a young husband demonstrates that he knows this piece of the model:
I guess you can say I really don’t think about it, as far as it breaking up or whatever, you know it just—I think it’s a waste of time to think about it. I mean why look for problems? But I think she’s always kind of got it like she’s got to work harder to make it work. And I don’t really look at it that way. I figure if it’s going to work it’s going to work, you know, there’s no need going out of your way to do it. I mean if there’s no problems there there’s no need to try to make it any better or knock yourself out trying to do a little more when there’s no problem to start with. I just kind of do it day to day. If a problem or whatever comes up that’s when I worry about it. [1H-5]

Like the expectations that benefit makes a marriage last and benefit takes effort, the expectation that effort makes marriages last and succeed has clear implications for action. Not surprisingly, then, this understanding plays a part in the conscious decisions people report making, as well as the less consciously planned actions they report taking, in the course of married life:

We talked about. . . . Do we want to make this thing stay? You know, living together for a long time. Because it took some work to do it. [3H-6]

What in the world chance would I have of finding anybody else who would be any easier to be married to and I wouldn’t know that person any better when I got—married him than I knew Tom. . . . And never having learned or worked through what actually you need to learn and work through to make the first marriage stick. [4W-1]

When I married him, I said that he was the person, not that I have to spend forever and ever with, but at least I’m going to try to work things out with this person, have a family with him, and be a family with him. If we hadn’t been married, I don’t know that I would have gone through counseling, marriage counseling, or couple counseling. [Melinda Da Silva, quoted in Bellah et al. 1985:102]

I think all the work and effort we went through in the first, I’d say three years or so of that marriage making it work was completely subconscious, you know. I don’t think I had any idea—that’s why I say I had no idea what I was getting into. I don’t think I had any idea at the time we got into it that it was necessary to work at it. [6H-1]

I should mention that it is necessary, in interpreting passages like these, to decode the metaphors speakers use to talk about benefit, effort, lastingness, success, and so forth, as well as the causal constructions they use to link these terms. Notice, for instance, the varied metaphors for lastingness in sentences such as “Do we want to make this thing stay?” and “It’s not going to keep going by itself,” and “Never having learned or worked through what . . . you need to . . . to make the first marriage stick,” and the common metaphor for marital success, repeated by several speakers, “making it work.”
Notice also the differing causal constructions in the last eight passages, ranging from the mere juxtaposition of clauses to indicate an X therefore Y relation in "this is more permanent, this is something that you should make work," to a simple because in the comment "Do we want to make this thing stay? Because it took some work to do it," through such constructions as if X, not Y and the more amplified must do X to make Y happen and need X to make Y happen in other ones.\(^{19}\) The reader should be able to identify and decipher other metaphors and causal constructions in the passages that have been presented.

Illustrating this particular assumption about the causal link between effort and marital lastingness has given me an opportunity to draw upon some of the few actual quotes from their interviewees that Bellah et al. provide, and by doing so to at least suggest the generalizability, beyond my own material, of the model of marriage I have reconstructed from it. As I have already commented, the effort marriage requires to be successful is not a theme that the authors of Habits of the Heart recover from their own interview material, although it is there.

Let me now add one final passage in which the speaker fills in the causal links in the sequence connecting effort to marital lastingness:

I guess what I was saying is that since that's the way we started out [referring to their age difference and her weak self-image and lack of confidence at the time she and her husband married], what has happened since then in some ways seems to me quite miraculous. That there—that I have changed so much and that we have changed so much and that we have been able to work through so many basic struggles in our marriage and be at a place now where we trust each other, we love each other, we like each other. We appreciate each other. And feel pretty confident about being able to continue that way and continue working any other stuff that comes up. Just seems pretty amazing to me. It could have gone in so many different directions and that it didn't is incredible. But I think both of us take a whole lot of credit for the direction it went in, that we worked at this really hard. [5W-1]

This passage incorporates further steps in the causal chain linking effort to a lasting marriage, steps specifying that effort overcomes the difficulty required to achieve the compatibility necessary for a marriage to last. How much this woman and her husband have changed can be interpreted as a reference to their becoming more compatible, as reflected in their now trusting, loving, liking, and appreciating each other; this change came about only with substan-
tial difficulty, put metaphorically as "so many basic struggles" that were surmounted because, in another metaphor, they "worked at this really hard." Overcoming this difficulty with this effort enabled them to "feel confident about being able to continue that way," an ongoing journey metaphor for having a lasting marriage. 19 While these links between difficulty, effort, compatibility, and lastingness are made explicit in this passage, mutual benefit and its relation to compatibility are left implicit; we are expected to understand, although the speaker does not say so outright, that people who have worked hard to overcome their difficulties so that they trust, love, like, and appreciate each other are in a position to fulfill each other's needs. This critical link in the argument is made explicit in other passages from these interviews. We have seen that the further relation between benefit and effort is also made explicit elsewhere, as in the excerpt quoted earlier, in which this same speaker rejects a good-enough relationship, one "it's a whole lot easier to ride along" in, in favor of one that is emotionally meaningful because of the work and struggle put into it.

Given unlimited space, I could provide examples of speakers arguing from the assumption that a mutually beneficial marriage must be shared, that what makes a marriage mutually beneficial is compatibility, that incompatibility causes difficulty, and linking the various other pairs of events that enter into the story of how to make a marriage both lasting and fulfilling. It is noteworthy that minimal causal chains of the sort I have illustrated most extensively, in which the reasoner establishes just one causal link between a pair of events, occur much more commonly in discourse I have examined than do longer chains of reasoning like the one I ended with (for another example of an extended chain of reasoning see Quinn 1987). This is probably because speakers ordinarily assume listeners to share knowledge of the idealized event sequence that surrounds the point they want to make, comprehending how compatibility is linked to marital success, effort to marital difficulty, and so forth, without being told. On the other hand, when speakers do take the trouble to fill in intermediate links in the causal chain it may be because they judge the real-world state of affairs to be unusually complex and hard to follow, or, as seems to be the case for the last speaker, because they wish to be especially forceful and persuasive.
WHY A CULTURAL SOLUTION

The reasoning task I have described has three properties that make it a likely candidate for the evolution of a shared solution to it—rather than the cultural contradiction that occasions its being left to individuals to either resolve by cognitive compartmentalization of the contradictory ideas or endure in the form of inner conflict between these ideas. First, the task is recurrent. Reasoning is a common part of everyday activities of all kinds, often focusing on perceived dilemmas or contradictions like that between marital lastingness and marital benefit in the form of fulfillment. This contradiction between lastingness and fulfillment is confronted by many people over and over again, making a cultural resolution of the dilemma highly adaptive.

Second, the dilemma, and hence the need for its solution, is long-standing. The older expectation of marital lastingness, predating the importation of European marriage practices to America, collided with newer expectations of marital satisfaction as, in the course of the 19th century, the authority of husbands and the deference of wives eroded in favor of a companionate ideal for marriage. Robert Griswold concludes an analysis of California divorce cases from 1850 to 1890 by saying:

[T]he trail from the early stirrings of the companionate family in the mid-eighteenth century to "no-fault" divorce today is faint, but it can be traced. As marital expectations and demands steadily rose, so, too, did possibilities for failure; as men and women expected each other to act in more complex ways, more people fell short of such expectations. By the late nineteenth century, wives complained to the courts about cold, aloof husbands, of husbands who did not spend enough time at home, who failed to check their sexual desires, or who ignored women's emotional needs. Men countered with complaints of unloving, peevish, quarrelsome wives, of wives who were poor housekeepers and insensitive mothers. Tensions like these arose as a logical, even necessary consequence of the companionate family: marriages predicated on emotion required a safety valve when affection wanted, hence the emergence of the "divorce crisis" that began in the 1880s. [1982:174]

By the early part of the 20th century, says another historian of divorce, Elaine May (1980:156), the pursuit of happiness had taken on a new urgency and a new definition in terms of personal fulfillment within marriage. Divorce in 1920, she observes, "did not indicate a rejection of marriage; rather it reflected the increased personal desires that matrimony was expected to satisfy, especially
for women” (1980:162). In the course of the late 20th century, the Victorian-derived understanding of marriage as an obligation to perform complementary roles has been largely superseded in legal discourse—even if it has never disappeared entirely from ordinary understanding of marriage—by a new idea of marriage as a voluntary contract between two individuals (Regan 1993:34–67). This latter contractual understanding of the marital relationship better accommodated, and became intertwined with, a recasting of marital happiness as complementary need fulfillment. This particular formulation has been with us since the 1960s. Its distinctive language should not obscure the fact that the idea of marital fulfillment, cast in an older language of marital happiness, with the inherent contradiction it poses to marital lastingness, goes back much farther, to the previous century.

Nor is this a marital dilemma that will go away, however often it is restated in new language. Despite Bellah et al.’s fear that Americans are losing their sense of obligation to committed relationship, I have said, the expectation that marriage will be lasting is itself an enduring one. Equally, despite the proselytizing of the New Right against what is deemed to be our selfish preoccupation with self-realization, the expectation that marriage be fulfilling is no more likely to disappear. I have argued elsewhere (Quinn 1992b; Strauss and Quinn n.d.) that the persistence and urgency of this constellation of expectations about marriage, including the expectation that it be shared as well as lasting and fulfilling, has its psychic roots in the earliest infant experience of contemporary Americans, for whom married love, and hence marriage as we know it, is a refinding in the sense Freud spoke of adult love as being a refinding of the early love relationship. The expectations we have that marriage be lasting, fulfilling, and shared match our understandings that people who love each other stay together always, fill each other’s needs, and be with each other. These ideas about love, in turn, revert to the infant’s earliest anxieties about not being left, being cared for, and being one with the caretaker. Thus the expectations that marriage be lasting, fulfilling, and shared go together in a powerfully motivating package. But this is another chapter of a longer story.

A third condition conducive to the evolution of a shared solution to this reasoning task is the cognitive complexity of the task. I have already indicated how the model facilitates the task by reducing the
number of potential outcomes, eliminating probabilistic tangles, and speeding reasoning across lengthy causal chains. It is instructive to consider how much more troublesome it would be to form the simplest expectations or to decide on the simplest actions regarding marriage, or to convey the simplest point about it, without some such ready-made mediating device of the sort I have described. Nor is it reasonable to imagine that each individual reasoner might reinvent a task solution of this sort for him- or herself. Cognitive scientist David Rumelhart and his colleagues consider why not:

[W]e think that the idea that we reason with mental models is a powerful one precisely because it is about this process of imagining an external representation and operating on that. It is interesting that it is apparently difficult to invent new external representations for problems we might wish to solve. The invention of a new representation would seem to involve some basic insight into the nature of the problem to be solved. It may be that the process of inventing such representations is the highest human intellectual ability... [I]t seems to us that such representational systems are not very easy to develop. Usually they are provided by our culture. Usually they have evolved out of other simpler such systems and over long periods of time. Newer ones, when they are developed, usually involve taking an older system and modifying it to suit new needs. [1986:47]

In other words, such systems are much easier to borrow than to invent in the first place.

The final observation made in this passage is significant for my case as well: given the intellectual difficulty of inventing them, say Rumelhart et al., when task solutions must be invented they generally evolve out of older ones already at hand. While the authors take this foray into cognitive anthropology no further, their observation points to something about the particular form taken by the model I have described for reasoning about marriage. This latter model capitalizes on an existing cultural model for succeeding that is generalized to marriage—taken and modified, as Rumelhart et al. put it, to suit new needs.

I have already noted how American, and how generalizable to many realms of American life, is this tale of inevitable difficulty encountered and overcome through effort, to achieve ultimate success, that resolves the contradiction between a lasting marriage and a fulfilling one. What we have here might usefully be considered a candidate for, in Anna Wierzbicka's (1993:220–224) suggestive term, an American cultural script for human action.23 Such
cultural scripts, or what D'Andrade has characterized as cultural models having "a wide range of application, serving as a part of many other models" (1987:113), gain this generalizability or thematicity, Claudia Strauss and I (n.d.:107–110) have elsewhere argued, because they are first learned very young, because they are taught across varied contexts, because they are presented as natural and desirable, and because they are reinforced by public cultural forms. To the degree that by these means a cultural model like the American success story has already become a valued ideal for behavior generally, it will recommend itself for application to shared task solutions like this one for reasoning about marital fulfillment and marital lastingness, as these evolve. It is not only the sheer availability of a cultural model like that for success that determines its incorporation into new task solutions, as Rumelhart et al. suppose, but also the appeal that it has, and that accounts for its already having become widespread and widely available as a model.

Moreover, such general models for behavior carry the strength of their appeal with them, lending this appeal to each new model in which they become incorporated. Americans have thus come to find it natural to seek success, and want success, in marriage as in so many other endeavors. The borrowed appeal of the success model assures the spread and persistence of this shared solution for reasoning about marriage.

This favored American model for success may have another function and hence an added potency, suggested to me by Robert Paul (personal communication, March 1995). It may serve not only as a culturally shared task solution, but also as a culturally available reaction formation. That is, the emotional conflict that Americans feel in not being able to resolve the inevitable contradiction between lastingness and fulfillment is translated into its opposite, the idea that we can indeed resolve the contradiction by our own efforts. Indeed, this interpretation raises the possibility that Americans resort to this culturally provided reaction formation in other, similar situations, substituting a sense of efficacy for feelings of helplessness in the face of the unavoidable. Steven Marcus, remarking on our willingness to accord uncommon social esteem, economic rewards, and authority to medicine and its subdiscipline, psychoanalysis, refers suggestively to "the poignant and apparently incorrigible American sentiment that there is nothing finally that
cannot be ‘fixed up’—including, it sometimes seems, life and death themselves” (1984:257).

CULTURAL MODELS RECONSIDERED

I began by challenging a reigning view of individuals as sites for the play of cultural contradiction. For my part I readily confess that I once held a view of culture as all too monolithic. In the beginning I thought of this cultural model I had reconstructed, in the abstract, as the cultural model of American marriage. Now, as should be apparent, I think of it at a more concrete level, as a cultural model for performing a specific reasoning task—although it is certainly the model most Americans use to do that reasoning. This latter way of thinking about this particular cultural model accords with my present view of culture in general. In this view, shared understandings come, not out of nowhere, but out of common experience. If we want to know how a given cultural model evolves and is reproduced, we have to identify the common experience that produces it. The common experience that gives rise to this model for reasoning about marriage, I have speculated, is a widespread cultural contradiction encountered by most people in the course of their marriages. The common American experience that has given the model much of its distinctive shape is the widespread learning of another set of understandings about success.

This is not to say that this idealized story about marriage I have described has no cultural life beyond its application in ordinary everyday reasoning. Using it to reason with so constantly, we are bound to overlearn it. Moreover, the very cultural scriptedness that gives it its appeal for deciding what to do about our own marriages and making inferences about the marriages of people we know, makes it appealing to those who create more public images of marriage. We should not be surprised, then, if it finds its way into the marriages of TV sitcom couples or those of the princes and princesses in children’s books, or legal decisions bearing on marriage and domestic partnership, for a few examples. This is one way a model “for” becomes a model “of” (Geertz 1973:93). And, of course, as I have already indicated, these public forms then, through our experience of them, play a role in reinforcing this same idealized event sequence in our minds.
NOTES

Acknowledgments. A much shorter version of this article, entitled "Culture in Action: The Case of Americans Reasoning about Marriage," was first delivered at a Society for Psychological Anthropology invited session "Individual Variation and Cultural Models," organized by Morris Freilich, at the 92nd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, DC, in November 1993. Subsequent versions, under the present title, were delivered at a Department of Anthropology colloquium at the University of Michigan in December 1994, and at an extremely lively and useful Mellon Foundation Symposium organized by Bradd Shore and Charles Nuckolls, "Cultural Models and Ambivalence: At the Crossroads of Cognitive and Psychoanalytic Anthropology," at Emory University in March 1995. I am grateful to all these audiences and participants for their comments, but especially, as is evident in my text, for the comments of Karen Seeley, whom I met on the Michigan trip, Robert Paul, who also participated in the Emory symposium, and Roy D'Andrade, Gillian Einstein, and Claudia Strauss, all of whom read the paper independently. All have helped me immensely; none is responsible for the use to which I have put their assistance.

1. Though linguists dispute almost everything about the evolution of language: for example, whether it is the product of natural selection or some nonadaptationist processes; and, if the former, whether it evolved for communication, the expression of thought, or some other function; and whether it evolved as a complex system or piecemeal (see Pinker and Bloom 1990 and the open peer commentary following that article).

2. This was the original point of the earliest version of this article, when it was addressed to psychological anthropologists attending a session on individual variation and culture (see my acknowledgments), and I have not wanted to lose it.

3. Cancian's larger issue is the argument, contra Bellah et al., that self-development and committed relationship are not incompatible.

4. As Skolnick points out, Habits of the Heart has become a national best-seller, its discourse on a supposed conflict between obligation and self-realization in marriage reshaping the understandings of all of us who read it, and who read the work of other social scientists through whom it is refracted:

Speaking to widely shared anxieties about social and cultural change, the book has played a surprisingly large role in the newly pessimistic discourse about the family on the part of social scientists. It is not uncommon to find works presenting hard statistical data on family trends that cite Habits of the Heart as evidence for a corrosive new individualism that can explain the trends. [1991:203]

She goes on to remind readers that the analyses in this book are variations on themes in an ongoing social critique of modernity that "contrasts a romantic version of the past with a jaundiced view of the present" (1991:203; see also Cancian 1987:107). And she notes how the trends toward expressive individualism and the therapeutic attitude that Bellah et al. describe have been used in explaining the decline of a nuclear family characterized by a traditional sex roles. Family decline, of course, is responsible (in a view promulgated by much other conservative critique) for a further array of contemporary social woes.

5. Since the authors' summary of their interviewees' theory about the therapeutic attitude is more extensive than any linguistic utterance by an interviewee that they supply, it is never clear of this attitude these Americans are said to espouse how much has actually been well and fully articulated by the interviewees, and how much is the authors' theory, inferred from fragmentary evidence in the interviews.
6. The latter ranged from 1 to 27 years, older marriages being less heavily represented, but still overrepresented relative to their occurrence. With regard to cohort, seven individuals in these marriages were born in the 1920s and 1930s, seven in the 1940s, and the other eight in the 1950s.

7. One interviewee had ended his formal education at high school, four others had attended one or more years of college without obtaining degrees, another six had finished their education with college degrees, two more had gone on to begin, but not complete, a course of graduate study, while nine of the twenty-two had graduate degrees.

8. Apart from this methodological exigency, an internal mediating structure is also more strictly constrained than an external one by the limits of mental processing. The former does not differ fundamentally from the latter, however. Hutchins (1995) is clear that mental models or imagined representations are one kind of mediating structure among others, and that written checklists and other external mediating structures can be internalized. Indeed, a thrust of his work is the demonstration that the boundary between what is in the external world and what is inside the skin must be softened in order to understand how human beings opportunistically and in combination employ both, in the performance of the cognitive tasks that confront us.

9. Jean Mandler (1984) uses the term *event schema*. However, Mandler (1984:14) views such schemata as encompassing event sequences connected by either causal, conventional, or arbitrary relations, the first two being obligatory and the last optional. The structure I am describing in this article is rather more specialized, being a chain of causally connected events designed especially for reasoning with.

Hutchins describes something quite similar in the context of Trobriand land litigation: chains of propositions conjoined to create what he calls "episodes" (1980:54). Hutchins identifies five of these, which he designates as "descendant schemas," all but one of which are derived from a Trobriand "general or master schema" for reciprocity (1980:54-60)—which might be compared to the general American schema for success that figures in the event sequence for marriage. There are some obvious differences between the schemas Hutchins describes and those described here, but these seem to have to do with the different nature of the two domains and the different purpose to which discourse about these domains is being put. Thus there are five different ways to transfer land in the Trobriands, but only one way to have a successful marriage in America. Further, in the specialized discourse of land litigation, an episode culminating in a land transfer seems always to be pursued to its ultimate outcome, since land litigation is for the purpose of inferring, ultimately, who has rights over given pieces of land. The outcome of the event sequence I have described is a lasting, successful marriage, but everyday discourse based on this event sequence does not always pursue the chain of events all the way to this ultimate end. This discourse as often isolates various internal segments of the event sequence, since its purpose is usually to identify—and perhaps repair—whatever part of the event sequence appears to be problematic. I think Hutchins would readily agree that the schemas for Trobriand land transfers he describes are, in his more recent way of conceptualizing culture, mediating structures for reasoning akin to the event sequence for successful marriage that I have described.

10. Although Ann Swidler has been quoted as saying (in an unpublished 1985 paper),

[The romantic love myth] has been replaced by another powerful heroism—the heroic effort people view as necessary to keep their relationships going. They insist that one must "work at" a relationship. But even more, they insist that a whole range of virtues—from honesty and a willingness to face change to stamina and a willingness to stick by one's commitments—are necessary to preserve a modern marriage. [quoted in Skolnick 1991:194]

11. I am indebted to D'Andrade, not only for the analysis on which I draw in this paragraph, but also for the accompanying crash minireview of formal logic.
12. D’Andrade (1995:151) makes the general point that the seven (plus or minus two) chunk limit of short-term memory is a strong constraint on the number of elements integrated into a schema of any kind. Claudia Strauss (personal communication, February 1995) has pointed out to me that this appears not to be empirically true of schemas. It may be the case, however, that schemas used for reasoning are constrained in this way, by the number of possible outcomes of any given state of the world that reasoners can entertain at once.

13. D’Andrade (1989b) has investigated experimental subjects’ performance on logic problems, observing that reasoners are much better at modus tollens problems and syllogisms when these are constructed out of “culturally coherent” rather than arbitrary content. For example, as is well known, subjects have great difficulty figuring out, from if \( p \) then \( q \) and not \( q \), whether \( p \) is true or false. D’Andrade considers what makes modus tollens so difficult:

\[ \text{Tollens requires the subject to look at the state of affairs set up by the formula if } p \text{ then } q \text{ from the perspective of not } q. \ldots \text{ Given the state of affairs set up by the formula if } p \text{ then } q, \text{ when one encounters } p \text{ one expects to encounter } q. \text{ Changing the topic to } q \text{ means changing the perspective. Looking at the state of affairs from the position of } q \text{ leads one to expect that maybe } p \text{ will be encountered and maybe not. Changing to not } q \text{ changes the perspective again. From the position of not } q \text{ one expects to encounter } p. \] 
[1989b:138]

Yet subjects reason readily from the identically formed problem “If this rock is a garnet then this rock is a semiprecious stone” and “This rock is not a semiprecious stone” to the correct conclusion that “This rock is not a garnet” (1989b:139–140). Similarly, D’Andrade points out, subjects given “Some of the artists are beekeepers” and “None of the beekeepers are chefs” have trouble seeing that “Some of the artists are not chefs” (taken from Johnson-Laird 1983:101). But given a syllogism of the same form with a culturally coherent content—“Some artists are temperamental types” and “No temperamental type always keeps his temper”—it is easy for the same subjects to infer that “Some artists do not always keep their temper” (1989b:141–142). Noting that any instantiations subjects create on the spot are likely to be ill formed and hence too fragile to support complex reasoning about problems like these that require even a moderate amount of mental manipulation, D’Andrade concludes that such reasoning depends on already “having a well-structured cognitive schema which can be used as the template for a specific instantiation of a particular state of affairs” (1989b:141). In such a well-structured schema, all the possible “perspectives” that must be taken to solve the problem are already there to be activated when needed.

The case of reasoning I present here can be thought of as extending D’Andrade’s insight: like these experimental logic tasks, complex reasoning problems that recur in everyday life, and that also exceed the limits of human mental manipulation, require well-formed schemas for their solution.

14. Even could the speaker keep track of her argument and had the time to make it in all its length and complexity, she would risk losing her audience, both literally and figuratively. (I have a colleague who does this.) Thus memory may conspire with sociality to dictate the simplification of natural reasoning.

15. The second of these next two speakers relies on an understanding we all share about the role motivation plays in marriage and other human affairs. Because she and her husband are both benefiting from the marriage, they want it to last. Similarly, enjoying each other and getting affection, Rich and his wife not only expect but want their marriage to last. This wanting is critical to a lasting marriage, we will see. Like assumptions about emotion such as that we encountered about marital fulfillment and happiness, assumptions about human motivation fill in our understanding of marriage as of any realm of human activity. But, being overlearned, they are taken for granted and hardly ever made explicit.

16. The last of these next three examples is complicated by an understanding about the causal relation between motivation and effort that finishes the motivational story alluded to
in two earlier passages. This speaker is arguing, not simply that it takes effort to make a marriage beneficial, but that because his wife and he understand that it takes effort to make a marriage beneficial, and because they value the benefits of their relationship—the sharing and giving to each other—they make a conscious effort to make their marriage better. We all understand that when people make an effort to achieve something, it is because they want it. In the previous passages we saw that what people want from a beneficial marriage is that it last. Now we see that not only do people want a beneficial marriage to last, but wanting it to last causes them to make an effort to make it the kind of marriage—a continuing and increasingly beneficial one—that will last. Once again, this chain of inference is hardly ever articulated in its entirety because it is so taken for granted. Reasoners can rely on their audience to understand these motivational links between mutual benefit, effort, and marital lastingness.

17. Married only a year, this man made clear his feeling that he had not been ready for marriage. His rejection of the expectation that marriage takes effort can best be understood in terms of his overall resistance to marriage, a resistance evidenced in other ways as well. He refused to take on what his wife considered a fair share of the work and responsibilities of their marriage, ignoring her expressed feelings of being very unequally treated (see Quinn 1992a for her story). Most strikingly, again over her objections he insisted on a largely unshared life in which he continued to spend most of his leisure time playing basketball and drinking beer with his friends as he had before he got married. She complained that he never let her know where he was or when he was coming home, and that she could never persuade him to do things with her. Not surprisingly, of those I interviewed who later got divorced, this couple was the first to do so.


19. Compatibility appears to have a feedback effect as well, giving this couple confidence that they can “continue working any other stuff that comes up” in the future.

20. Regan traces this shift from “status” to “contract” through developments in family law regarding such matters as marital contracts and no-fault divorce.

21. Regan (1993:33) characterizes the difference between status and contract as complementary obligations in contrast to the voluntary commitment of individuals, and presents this trend in law as part of a more pervasive American movement from social role to authentic self, or “what Robert Bellah and his colleagues have termed ‘expressive individualism,’ the belief that self-actualization occurs through the expression of each individual’s unique emotional core” (1993:45). This trend is owed, Regan argues, to the decline of the Victorian ethic of self-restraint and the rise of modern consumer culture. By contrast, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1978) attribute the shift to a contractual view of relationships much more specifically to the rise of the human potential movement in the popular psychology of the 1960s and 1970s. These authors summarize how, in the way of thinking introduced with that self-help movement, need fulfillment translates into the contractual terms of the marketplace:

If you are not responsible to anyone but yourself, it follows that relationships with other people are merely there to be exploited when (emotionally) profitable, and terminated when they cease to be profitable. The primary assumption is that each person in a relationship has a set of emotional, sexual, or other “needs” which he or she wants met. If they are no longer being satisfied by a friend or sexual partner, then that bond may be broken just as reasonably as a buyer would take his business away from a seller if he found a better price. The needs have an inherent legitimacy—the people are replaceable.

Thus a bad relationship is one where you “put in” more than you “get out.” Relationships—especially marriages—are in reality financial/emotional “contracts” in which rights and responsibilities should be clearly agreed on, and preferably spelled out in writing, down to the last intimate expectation. . . . Marriage, it is revealed, is a deal like
any other which begins when two people "sell" themselves to each other. [1978:274–275; emphasis in original]

Whether popular psychology was the main cause of this new contractual way of thinking about relationship, or just an extreme expression and crystallization of it, this fashionable "marketplace psychology" (1978:269) certainly provided a language for it—a language linking need fulfillment to benefit and unmet needs to costs that had infiltrated my interviewees' talk about their marital experience at the end of the seventies.

22. This is, of course, an American or at least Euro-American version of a process that unfolds differently elsewhere depending upon the shape of child-caretaker relationships, the way adult relationships are organized, and much that transpires in between the two experiences.

23. In a provocative application of her theory of conceptual universals, Wierzbicka posits cultural scripts, culturally variable sequences of universal concepts that "attempt to capture a society's tacit cultural norms" (1993:221). She contrasts American with other cultural scripts for feeling, thinking, wanting, and saying things, but does not consider scripts for acting.

24. How very early the success script is learned by Americans was brought home to me on a climb up Hanging Rock, NC, with my daughters and my three-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter. Of three trails up the rock, we chose the one intermediate in difficulty, but we would hardly have taken my granddaughter up that way if we had realized, before setting out, how really precipitous it was. Near the top, where the grade became almost vertical, we were assisted by a helpful stranger who stood above and directed my granddaughter where to put her feet while her mother and I climbed behind her in case she should slip. The kind gentleman refrained from lending my granddaughter his hand, however, explaining to us, "I'm not helping her up; I don't want to take away her sense of accomplishment."

25. This model for success is not the only larger cultural theme that has colonized our contemporary understanding of marriage, the most notable other being the themes of utilitarian exchange and need fulfillment (see note 21).

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