Chapter 2
Honor Thy Father(s) and Thy Mother(s)

No biological function has been more deeply scrutinized than sex. The reason is surely that, unlike respiration or elimination, sex is a matter of relationships among different people. Sex expresses ties between the sexual partners ranging from love and tenderness to domination and violence. And sex is the avenue to the creation of new life in the children that result from it, and the relationships that the parents establish with them. Thus it is entirely understandable why anthropologist David Schneider wrote that sexual intercourse is the central symbol of kinship in American culture. Not, however, sexual intercourse all by itself, but as legitimated by culture when it occurs between married opposite sex partners (Schneider 1968:37–38). Schneider’s claim is that marriage, parenthood, the nuclear, and extended families all revolve around the central symbol of sexual relations. He stresses the significance of this for interpersonal relations in the conclusion to his book:

What better model than sexual intercourse and its attendant psychological elements? These biological facts are transformed by the attribution of meaning into cultural constructs and they then constitute a model for commitment, for the passionate attachment which is one side of trust, and for the unreasoning and unreasonable set of conditions which alone make “solidarity” really solidary, and make it both enduring and diffuse. (1968:117, italics in the original)

The “diffuse” or open-ended and unconditional kind of commitment to which Schneider refers is conveyed by the marriage vows “for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.”

And yet, the special significance of sex has been steadily whittled down, and the reason is technology. It is debatable whether the
cultural significance of sexual relations as a sign of enduring commitment and reproduction was as critical as Schneider avers even in 1968, when more effective means of contraception had already rendered sexual relations more casual and separated them from reproduction. Since then the ties between marriage, sex, and reproduction have loosened much further. In the United States married couples with children now form a minority of households and 32 percent of births in 1995–1996 occurred outside of marriage (Difonzo and Stern 2011:376, Hirczy de Mino 2000:232). The Uniform Parentage Act of 1973 eliminated the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children on the basis of the marital status of the parents, conveying legitimacy on children of unmarried couples. Changing social values are opening the way for lesbian or male gay couples to marry and have children. Assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) have now made sex, as the means of having children, optional.

**What God Hath Joined Together, Let No Man Put Asunder**

Man’s technology has put asunder virtually everything that God (and/or nature) joined together in the realm of reproduction. Sex is separated from reproduction for many people who for one reason or another do not succeed in reproducing in the ordinary way and who utilize an array of ARTs to have children without sexual intercourse. Louise Brown, the world’s first test tube baby, was born from IVF in 1978. Surrogacy, and using eggs or sperm from donors (who are often anonymous) are common procedures. It is estimated that 4 percent of births worldwide now result from one or another of these ARTs (Difonzo and Stern 2011:353), and that percentage can only be growing.

ARTs do not only remove the necessity of sex from reproduction. Some of them may even curtail it or otherwise dampen the sex drive. Surrogates are required to refrain from sexual relations during certain periods of their pregnancies. During the period of ovary stimulation in preparation for egg extraction and IVF sexual relations are discouraged, and a woman is so tired and sore from her daily injections that she has little interest in sex anyway (Haelyon 2006:184–185). She is preoccupied with becoming pregnant and, almost paradoxically, that very effort turns her not toward but away from sex. Despite dire warnings from pundits and pulpits about the ills of sex without marriage, ARTs conspire with Schneider’s claim concerning the centrality of sexual intercourse in the American kinship system to suggest that the symbolic foundation of the family may face a greater