

# *STATE OF OUR UNIONS*

## *Marriage Promotion and the Contested Power of Heterosexuality*

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*Marriage promotion is a government strategy aimed at ensuring that children are raised in married, heterosexual families, preferably by their biological parents. This article places critical heterosexuality studies in dialogue with feminist state theory to examine marriage promotion as a reaction of the gendered and sexualized state to crisis tendencies of institutionalized heterosexuality. Drawing on the first in-depth study of marriage promotion politics, the author examines polycentric state practices that seek to stabilize the norm of the white, middle-class, heterosexual family. While explicit policy concerns focus on race and class, state-sponsored marriage workshops teach about gender hierarchy to rehearse an implicit ideology of marital heterosexuality. In contrast to feminist state theories that present a monolithic, top-down model of state control, the author offers a more nuanced examination of the relationship between macro and micro levels of power and their uneven consequences for social change.*

**Keywords:** *marriage promotion; state; heterosexuality; gender, race, and class*

**I**n the 2002 *Frontline* documentary “Let’s Get Married,” Alex Kotlowitz declared that today “everyone from the government to church leaders to intellectuals—on both the right and the left—are pushing marriage.” Kotlowitz is referring to the marriage movement launched in the late 1990s by a coalition of religious and civic leaders, public officials, family therapists, educators, researchers, and others. Advocates support an array of government

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policies collectively known as “marriage promotion,” which seek to reduce the rate of divorce and single parenting. Many of these policies were codified into federal law in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Ending more than 60 years of federal welfare benefits to poor families, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act created discretionary state block grants under the rubric of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and specifically designated marriage promotion as a sanctioned use of federal funds. Since the election of President George W. Bush, federal funding for marriage promotion has grown substantially. The Healthy Marriage Initiative has directed federal money to promote marriage and fatherhood programs, and in 2005, Congress passed a federal appropriations act that includes more than \$500 million annually for marriage promotion.

This article explores the power dynamics of marriage promotion, particularly in terms of the enforcement of heterosexuality and hierarchies of gender, race, and class. I place the emerging field of critical heterosexuality studies in dialogue with feminist state theory to bring to light the crisis tendencies of institutionalized heterosexuality in relation to the diminishing dominance of the white, nuclear family (Connell 1995; Ingraham 1999). As marriage promotion programs have sprouted across the country, feminist and gay/lesbian scholars have offered criticisms of such policies as a form of discipline and control, particularly for poor women (Cahill 2005; Coltrane 2001; Coontz and Folbre 2002; Hardisty 2007; Mink 2003; Moon and Whitehead 2006; Polikoff 2008). Others embrace the benefits of marriage but caution against it as a panacea for poverty (Lichter, Graefe, and Brown 2003). To date, no study has examined the implementation of marriage promotion policies on the ground. This article draws on data from the first in-depth study of marriage promotion in both state and local contexts. Examining the state’s structure as forming a gendered and sexualized national identity, this study reveals the state’s polycentric practices that seek to stabilize the norm of the white, middle-class, heterosexual family. At the policy level, state practices seek to secure boundaries of exclusion in the form of rhetoric on “fractured families” and inclusion through the norm of the white, middle-class family. On the ground, marriage workshops teach about gender hierarchy to rehearse an implicit ideology of marital heterosexuality. In contrast to feminist state theories that present a monolithic, top-down model of state control, this article offers a more nuanced examination of the relationship between macro and micro levels of power and their uneven consequences for social change (see Haney 1996).

## STATE INTEREST IN HETEROSEXUAL MARRIAGE

Nation-building strategies tied to the white, nuclear family have a long history in the United States. Federal and state law has shaped marriage as a form of inclusion and exclusion by determining who can marry, the rights and obligations involved in marriage, and the conditions under which a marriage can end. Historian Nancy Cott (2000, 3) identifies how in the United States the government has promoted a particular model of marriage: “lifelong, faithful monogamy, formed by the mutual consent of a man and a woman, bearing the impress of the Christian religion and the English common law in its expectations for the husband to be the family head and economic provider.” The ideal of the nuclear family in the United States evolved by separating “productive labor” from the home, creating a new social category: the “housewife” (Pascale 2001). Domesticity attributed to wealthy white women became the standard for all women, and the “Cult of True Womanhood” elevated the submissive housewife as morally superior (Brown 1990; Pascale 2001). In contrast, racial ethnic women have systematically been relegated to do the “dirty work” in domestic service and industry (Duffy 2007). Protecting the family and nation has meant maintaining boundaries of racial and sexual purity. In building the nation, the federal and state government sought to “civilize” American Indians by instituting monogamous households, instilling a work ethic among men and domesticity among women (Cott 2000). Slaves were denied the right to marry, signifying their lack of civil rights that would entail the freedom to consent to marriage’s obligations. Before and after slaves’ emancipation, many states passed laws to ban marriage across the color line, as the specter of sexual relations between white women and African American men created moral panic. Concerns about race and morality also motivated the evolution of immigration law, which largely restricted the entry of Chinese and Japanese women.

Governmental intervention has changed over time in how it envisions protecting “the family,” but the thread in this history can be traced to the need to safeguard the boundaries of the nation along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality (McClintock 1997). In recent years, federal and state concern has focused on “family breakdown.” Sharp rises in female labor force participation, divorce, cohabitation, and single parenting have triggered a “deinstitutionalization” of marriage (Cherlin 2004). These changes, together with the growing movement to legalize same-sex marriage, call into question what constitutes “normal” family life in the United States (Stacey 1996). In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson

drew on a report from a little-known senator, Patrick Daniel Moynihan, to address the problem of the “breakdown of the Negro family structure” (quoted in Blankenhorn 2007, 5). Controversy about the report ultimately led to a new consensus between conservative and liberal policy makers about what they viewed as the bad behavior of impoverished single mothers inherent in “welfare dependency” (Reese 2005). More recently, marriage advocate David Blankenhorn (2007, 5) has identified a united policy stance to address “the breakdown of *white* family structure” that he believes has followed the trends purportedly undermining Black families. These concerns now motivate federal and state policy to promote marriage. While race and class are visible in these policies, below the surface are anxieties about changing gender relations and the challenge to heterosexuality presented by the increased visibility of lesbian and gay families. Thus, marriage promotion offers a novel case to contribute to the development of feminist state theory as federal and state actors enact policies to reinstate the heterosexual, nuclear family in American culture.

### **STATE THEORY AND CRITICAL HETEROSEXUALITY STUDIES**

Feminist theories of the state are relatively new (Haney 2000). Theories that emerged out of second-wave feminism often envisioned the state as the perpetuator of patriarchy, offering a monolithic conceptualization of state power over women as a homogeneous group. In recent years, feminist state theory has expanded to analyze the gendered state and its social practices that regulate the gender of its citizens along the lines of race and class (Brown 1992; Mosse 1985; Yuval-Davis 1997). Scholars doing comparative and U.S.-focused research on welfare states have demonstrated the ways that government policy and law concerning welfare, pension, child care/education, and the labor market shapes and is shaped by ideologies of gender, race, and class while at the same time interacting with norms around family and marriage (Glauber 2008; Gordon 1994; Hays 2003; Misra 1998; Misra, Moller, and Budig 2007; O’Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999; Reese 2005). Feminist scholarship on the state, however, has tended to take for granted normative ideas about heterosexuality, including the presumption that heterosexual pairings define social institutions like marriage and the family. As a corrective to this presumption, I put state theory and critical heterosexuality studies in dialogue to examine the relationship of the gendered and sexualized state to normative heterosexuality (Cooper 1995, 2002).

In the 1990s, scholars began to focus a critical lens on the ways that heterosexuality serves as the standard for all “sexual-socio behavior,” charting a new theoretical path called critical heterosexuality studies (Ingraham 2005, 4). Contemporary theorists of sexuality have elucidated the emergence of “the homosexual” as a category of person distinct from “the heterosexual” in the later part of the nineteenth century and the subsequent amassing of medical, legal, psychological, and literary discourses based on the heterosexual/homosexual binary (Foucault 1981; Katz 1996; Sedgwick 1990). Originating in radical lesbian feminist critiques of heterosexuality as a patriarchal institution, critical heterosexuality scholarship has established heterosexuality and its exclusionary practices vis-à-vis homosexuality as an important topic of inquiry and shed light on its organizational and ritualistic practices as a set of rules and norms for behavior (Ingraham 1999). Marital heterosexuality occupies the largely invisible core of natural and desirable sexuality, and homosexuality the periphery as perverse and unnatural (Roseneil 2002). Legal marriage has consequently been a central mechanism the state has used to regulate institutionalized heterosexuality and the construct of the “natural” (white, middle-class) family.

Critical heterosexuality studies stress the coconstitution of gender and sexuality, contributing to scholarship on the performative aspects within marital heterosexuality (Butler [1990] 1999; Ingraham 1999). Valorizing the “natural” family, U.S. federal and state law attaches a considerable number of benefits to heterosexual marriage: retirement and death benefits, family leave policies, health care decision making and access, taxation, immigration, and numerous others. The power of state practice rests not only in specific law and policy but in its ability to conceal the work involved in maintaining the unitary “nature” of institutionalized heterosexuality. But beyond this, more recent, and more active, efforts to promote marriage have further institutionalized inequalities in the face of growing challenges posed by structural changes in global economies, transformation in family life, and movements for lesbian and gay rights and gender equality (Ingraham 1999). In this article, I examine the uneven outcomes of state policy efforts to implement marriage promotion on the ground.

## STUDYING MARRIAGE PROMOTION

To study marriage promotion, I conducted ethnographic research for 10 months in 2004 in Oklahoma. Oklahoma is home to the most extensive statewide marriage initiative in the nation, and consequently its policy

“extends out” and is influenced by national marriage promotion politics (Burawoy 1998). In 1999, the governor employed the marriage promotion provisions of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act to pioneer the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative at a time when few states opted to exercise this option. The Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS) committed \$10 million from its federal TANF block grant and contracted with Public Strategies, Inc. (a private, for-profit firm) to develop and manage the initiative. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative trains state employees, community leaders, and other volunteers to offer marriage education workshops throughout the state. The workshops use the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), a research-based curriculum created by Howard Markman and Scott Stanley that teaches communication skills, conflict management, and problem solving. The initiative also trains volunteers to offer a Christian version of the PREP curriculum in settings that are not state funded. In exchange for receiving free workshop training, volunteers pledge to provide at least four free workshops in their communities.

In addition to its groundbreaking marriage initiative, Oklahoma is also well known for being a Bible Belt state. Nearly 60 percent of registered voters say they attend church regularly, compared to the national average of 40 percent (Campbell 2002). Oklahoma’s high religiosity would appear to render it exceptional with respect to wide-ranging marriage promotion activities across the nation. Indeed, Oklahoma’s social and cultural environment is likely one reason that the marriage initiative was able to take root in the early years of welfare reform, as a Republican governor initiated it with little political resistance. While there are many unique aspects to the formation of the marriage initiative, Oklahoma has nevertheless served as a model for state and community marriage promotion programs across the nation. In recent years, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Utah have also designated portions of their TANF block grants for marriage promotion. Texas legislated \$7.5 million a year.<sup>1</sup>

The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative blends two models of marriage promotion. On one hand, it seeks to blanket the state with messages about marriage by providing free marriage workshops to as many Oklahomans as possible. On the other, it targets specific populations, including welfare recipients, low-income parents, high school students, the prison population, the military, and Native Americans. I conducted fieldwork on the workshops for both the general and target populations and found that the more sustained efforts were the workshops for the general population.

These included large Sweetheart Weekends that occurred every few months and offered the curriculum on a Friday evening and all day Saturday.<sup>2</sup> Advertised on local radio stations and in the newspaper, they drew 50 or more couples on average. Weekly smaller workshops were advertised on the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative's Web site and through local churches. By 2006, the initiative had trained 1,500 volunteers to conduct the workshops and had provided services to 37,500 people. Data for this article include fieldwork on public workshops and in-depth interviews with marriage initiative leaders and participants.

To gain access, I first met with two Oklahoma Marriage Initiative employees at the annual conference of the marriage movement held in Las Vegas in 2003. The SmartMarriages conference features presentations by more than 100 marriage experts and is attended by therapists, counselors, clergy, policy makers, educators, and the public. My two initial contacts expressed enthusiasm about my idea of doing ethnographic research on the initiative's cultural impact. When I arrived in Oklahoma in February of 2004, I contacted them about attending workshops as a single woman. Altogether, I participated in 30 workshops for the general public that were advertised on the marriage initiative's Web site, including three Sweetheart Weekends (six classes), three six-week workshops (15 classes), and 24 weekend workshops (24 classes).<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of each workshop, I introduced myself and my research and took detailed field notes. I also conducted participant observation of a state-sponsored PREP training weekend to discover the method for training volunteers. Finally, I conducted 20 in-depth, semistructured interviews with volunteer participants and leaders from workshops and 15 with the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative leadership and OKDHS staff that lasted between one and two hours.<sup>4</sup> All interviewees were given pseudonyms. The transcribed interviews and field notes were coded using a qualitative software program, Atlas.ti. In this process, I discovered a gap between the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative's stated goals and its on-the-ground practices. This article examines marriage promotion activities targeted to a general population that included predominantly white, middle-class couples.

### **REIN[STATE]ING WHITE, MIDDLE-CLASS MARRIAGE**

In 1999, the former Republican governor of the state of Oklahoma, responding to an economic report that linked Oklahoma's declining economy to its purportedly weakening family structure, announced a goal of reducing the state's divorce rate by one-third by the year 2010. This goal

was later restated more nebulously as an initiative to strengthen healthy marriages, an objective that might, at first glance, appear benign. However, when I asked the president and the acting project manager of Public Strategies about the objective, she confirmed that it is specifically aimed to promote marriage—in and of itself—as a special and beneficial type of relationship. She stated, “The goal of the initiative is to strengthen marriage, and we are really unwavering about that goal. We believe that marriage is a different kind of relationship with different kinds of outcomes, and so we are not in any way, shape, or form going to do anything that sells that goal short.” By “outcomes,” the project manager evokes the statistical debate about social scientific research on childhood outcomes. This research has shown that, on average, children growing up in a one-parent family experience some disadvantage compared to those growing up with two parents. Although scholars are divided about the causes of these disadvantages (e.g., Blankenhorn 2007; Cherlin 2003), marriage promotion advocates recite this body of research to justify the need to promote marriage so that every child can grow up with her or his biological, married parents.

Fears about the declining significance of the nuclear family have spurred the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative to offer marriage education to the public as a mechanism to reinstitutionalize marriage. As one report puts it, the strategy of the marriage initiative is to provide marriage education services to all Oklahomans to effect “specific behavior change at the individual level” and to “restore support for the institution of marriage as a valued social good” (Dion 2006). When I interviewed the OKDHS director, he described being enlightened by reading Barbara Dafoe Whitehead’s (1993,) *Atlantic Monthly* article “Dan Quayle Was Right,” which explains “family breakup” as breeding behaviors that “damage the social ecology, threaten the public order, and impose new burdens on core institutions.” Whitehead goes on to express concern that the once isolated breakup of Black families is now spreading to white ones. This implicit (and sometimes explicit) racial comparison is a common theme in the discourse of the marriage movement. Kay Hymowitz (2006, 78), the author of *Marriage and Caste in America*, argues that educating the young to be “self-reliant” members of a democratic society is “The Mission” of white, middle-class families and that poor Black parents are not “simply middle-class parents *manqué*; they have their own culture of child-rearing, and—not to mince words—that culture is a recipe for more poverty.” This philosophy harks back to nation-building principles that analogize marriage and the state as a necessary form of governance to produce worthy (white, middle-class) citizens (Cott 2000).

In the national discussion, the poor Black family remains an invisible standard of deviancy. As the focus of policy has turned to family breakdown, the mostly unspoken concern of marriage promotion leaders is the norm of the white, middle-class family and the harm caused to this norm. During our interview, the OKDHS director outlined the cost of “fractured families”: “Another piece of this, when you sit back and think about it, we spend \$40 million in this state to run our child support enforcement division. Every one of those faces is a fractured relationship. So, we are spending \$40 million in the state to do nothing but administer the transfer of cash from non-custodial parents to custodial parents who have experienced fractured relationships. You can see the high cost of having fractured relationships. It’s worth the investment.” The director’s words suggest that the “deviancy” of fractured families hurts middle-class families that consist of good citizens who pay taxes and embrace Hymowitz’s (2006) “Mission.”

The focus on fractured families reinforces a boundary around the normalcy of the white, middle-class, nuclear family. One of the top managers of the marriage initiative, a social worker who maintains a more critical stance, offered this evaluation: “The way Governor Keating attached lowering the divorce rate through a poverty-funded program, who are we blaming for the divorce rate? I mean that kind of message is real strong in my mind. I’ve got an education so I was concerned about people living in poverty being blamed for the divorce rate and the state of families and that kind of thing.” Attaching marriage promotion to TANF shifts attention away from transformations taking place among white, middle-class families and places it on poor ones. Moreover, the welfare-to-work provisions in TANF, which enforce stringent work requirements and set time limits for receiving aid, help to ensure that poor “dependent” women (most often U.S.-born and immigrant women of color) are bound to low-wage jobs in service and industry.

Marriage promotion follows a long history in the United States of defending the ideal gendered family to preserve a bounded space of normalcy against “deviant” others, with attendant social consequences of race and class inequalities. While positioning fractured families as a social problem, the marriage initiative’s practices on the ground predominantly focus on white, middle-class couples to promote a bounded heterosexual space to define the ideal family. In the marriage workshops, issues of race and class disappear, and the focus turns on the problematic of gender relations for heterosexual couples. Heterosexuality is the unexamined backdrop to teach about the “opposite sexes” within the ideal family.

## TEACHING THE IMPORTANCE OF GENDER (AND HETEROSEXUALITY)

A dominant ideology of marriage promotion, and its historical presumption in the gendered behavior of the opposite sexes, deems that it form the foundation of a cohesive and stable society. Crisis tendencies, in the form of growing marriage activism by gays and lesbians, are beneath the surface of this ideology, informing the need to strengthen heterosexual relationships. When I asked the OKDHS director, for example, about the goal of the marriage initiative, he confirmed the ideal of marital heterosexuality: "In terms of the marriage initiative, it's relationships between men and women which are committed preferably for life." His use of the words "relationships between men and women" announces the kind of relationships applicable—a declaration that would have been unnecessary 20 years ago—and suggests the prohibition of nonheterosexual love.

With heterosexuality as the unquestioned footing, the marriage workshops for the general population represent a forum to teach the mostly white, middle-class couples who attend about gender as *the* visible problem. The instruction encourages self-discipline and motivation to do gender in the manner compelled by the ideology of the "natural" family (Hay 2003). PREP, the secular version of the curriculum, engages communication and problem-solving skills. One of its main features is the speaker/listener technique, which instructs the speaker, who holds the "floor"—a tile that lists the rules of communication—to make brief "I" statements and the listener to paraphrase what he or she has heard. Despite the mostly gender-neutral curriculum, the 30 workshops I attended stressed gender relations in marriage.

The three-day, state-sponsored workshop leader training of PREP and its Christian version, taught by its creators—Howard Markman and Scott Stanley—and Vice President Natalie Jenkins, established the importance of gender to an implicit heterosexuality. Volunteers attending the training were predominantly white, many of them counselors and educators receiving continuing education units. Throughout, the three presenters focused on what men versus women do in relationships. Scott Stanley told the audience that he wanted to talk about gender differences and explained how researchers have found a pattern that involves women's pursuing an issue and men's withdrawing. He attributed this to men's tendency to be more physiologically reactive and women to be more emotionally aroused. Stanley acknowledged that these patterns of behavior are complex and that researchers have difficulty deciding what is physiological

and what is not. Yet he suggested that the pattern seems to reflect a greater need for men not to argue with their mates. He conveyed that a central goal for teaching PREP is helping couples manage gender differences.

Stanley explained the impact of the decline of marriage on men and women. He argued that today, young people think that cohabiting is a good first step to test marriage but that in reality, practicing serial non-monogamy hurts women because marriage is the only means to ensure a man's commitment. Citing research, Stanley told us that a young man who lives with his girlfriend tends to think she is not the "one," while a young woman thinks just the opposite. He explained, "We have talked young people out of thinking that marriage matters, particularly young women. Women get the worse deal if men don't marry them." Although it is not clear what he meant by the "worse deal," Stanley implied that women are naturally more committed to men, whereas men need the institution of marriage to become self-disciplined practitioners of lifelong monogamy. A dominant script of marital heterosexuality is that men know to settle down—that is, no longer act on their sexual urges—after they marry.

The curriculum includes a number of videos of real couples fighting. One shows a young African American couple who argue over the amount of time the man spends watching sports. During the young man's explanation for why his sport watching is not excessive, Howard Markman stopped the video to point out the way he lifts his hands up and "gazes towards heaven." Markman called this the "beam me up Scotty response." He explained, "This really is an appeal to God. We have a special message to the women in the room. If your partner, husband, son has this response, you might mistakenly think that he is withdrawing, but he is having a spiritual moment." I laughed along with the audience, but what makes this statement funny is the cultural assumption of an embattled masculinity. Markman implied that women cannot really understand the nature of men, which leads to the kind of exasperation shown in the video. Later, Scott Stanley told us that the young man is asking for his wife to accept this important part of him—the part that lives on sports. Statements like this place the onus on the wife to understand the "nature" of men.

Throughout the training, the presenters performed gender and made jokes that drew on the innate differences between men and women, providing a message about handling gender within heterosexual relationships (Butler [1990] 1999; West and Zimmerman 1987). These performances and dialogue subtly suggested a gender hierarchy compelling women to put up with men's idiosyncrasies since ultimately men are the stronger sex. At one point, Howard Markman told a joke about how many men it takes

to change the toilet paper. The punch line: There is no scientific answer because it has not happened. Underneath the humor is the suggestion that men have more important things to do than change toilet paper. Several moments later, he flipped the remote as if he were surfing television channels, distracting from Natalie Jenkin's presentation. She told him to "sit" and informed us that she forgot to take the batteries out of the men's toy. She quickly qualified that she "needed" these guys because she is not the most technologically advanced. As we watched a video of a couple fighting over the way the husband put the laundry soap in the washer, Jenkins asserted that the wife is "missing the miracle. He's doing the laundry!" Later, Jenkins discussed expectations and how, when she was first married, she wanted flowers because all her friends were getting them. She and her husband were having financial difficulties, so she found a 99-cent coupon for a dozen carnations. She put four quarters and the coupon on the fridge with a note saying, "Honey, if this coupon expires so will you."

All of this gender work solidifies the importance of the differences between men and women. Men play with toys (and are technologically advanced); women want flowers (and do laundry). The state's promotion of marriage makes visible the importance of these gendered practices, teaching men and women to monitor and accept the differences between men and women. At heart is a lesson about gender difference as the glue that keeps two people of the opposite sex together. The ideal for white, middle-class families is a configuration of gender hierarchy premised on institutionalized heterosexuality. Tying gender difference to understandings of bodies solidifies marital heterosexuality.

The union of gender differences and bodies together with institutionalized heterosexuality was even more pronounced in the breakout training session of the Christian version of PREP. Scott Stanley discussed how gender differences originate in the Genesis passage of the Bible. He explained, "I think it is interesting that it says man [will leave his mother and father] and not man and woman. I have come to believe from science—and this is going to sound sexist—why males are called to a higher level of commitment and sacrifice, biologically and scripturally. Women are inherently made more vulnerable than men because they have babies. Males need to protect. Unfortunately, in our culture, we have gutted that, and women bear the most burden by the lack of a sacrificial ethic." His statement makes explicit the often implicit instruction on gender difference throughout the training—men are naturally less emotional and better equipped for certain responsibilities in marriage, namely, the need to protect their families. The interaction of gender and heterosexuality is important to position men and women hierarchically as part

of a social order that rewards married, heterosexual (and mostly white, middle-class) men as husbands and often as the primary breadwinner.

Linking ideas of gender and heterosexuality directly to bodies, the instructor presented the definition of marriage as a union of male and female. According to Stanley, “God meant something when he specified that there should be male and female and what to do with bodies. I don’t just mean sex and physical union, but I mean oneness. They covered up where they are most obviously different. We don’t cover up where we are similar. We fear rejection in relationships because of the possibility of difference. Difference symbolizes physical union, which is now apparent to them.” The heterosexual footing implied by the idea of the opposite sexes is also the ground for the performance of gender hierarchy. Through the state-sponsored instruction, potential instructors of PREP and the Christian version of PREP are taught to present ideas about gender and sexuality to encourage self-monitoring in relation to the ideal of the “natural,” married family.

### **REHEARSING THE POWER OF HETEROSEXUALITY**

Teaching about gender within the confines of marital heterosexuality enables the state to govern indirectly by encouraging self-regulation. However, success is never guaranteed. While the hierarchical heterosexual/homosexual binary is a systematic presence in modern society, shifts within its organization can render an unproblematic heterosexuality less trouble free. Crisis tendencies motivate efforts like marriage promotion to shore up marriage’s boundary while simultaneously undermining these labors. For the marriage initiative, the increasing visibility of same-sex couples troubles efforts to strengthen a clear boundary of marital heterosexuality.

In the 30 marriage promotion workshops I attended, most included heterosexual married or engaged couples and sometimes a single woman or man. In two of the six-week workshops, however, there was one lesbian couple.<sup>5</sup> The first of these included 14 white heterosexual couples, one interracial heterosexual couple, and three female coaches, two white and one Black. Tammy and Chris, white lesbians in their fifties, had introduced themselves as “life partners” on the first day. They had a number of issues with communication. After hearing about the workshop on the radio, Tammy enrolled herself and “a friend.” They told me they were relieved they were not asked to leave. The next workshop included Amanda and Jennifer, a white lesbian couple in their late twenties, among the 18 white couples, two white single men, and two female coaches, one

white and one Black. Amanda and Jennifer were less talkative, but with their severe communication problems, by their own admission, they monopolized much of the coaches' energy during the practice exercises.

Some of the workshops, especially those targeted to low-income populations, are taught by social workers or other state employees aware of and often committed to the National Association of Social Workers's code of ethics that takes a strong stand against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. In the first workshop, the instructors were volunteers from the community and not social workers: David, a white married professional, and Randy, a white married associate Baptist pastor at a church in town. Randy, joined by Susan, who attended his church, taught the second workshop.

Similar to the training seminar I attended, a central focus of the workshops was on gender differences within marriage. David and Randy often referenced sports to command men's attention. For example, Randy talked about the tendency for one person to withdraw in an argument and said, "This is just what men do, withdraw." He provided the analogy of playing baseball. When you get hit a few times, you tend to give up. He said this is the same with arguing; sometimes it just feels easier to give up or withdraw. Instead of giving up, he encouraged men to practice. David piped in, "Can you do the same analogy with knitting?" and Randy shot back, "I can't, but I'm sure there are those in the audience who can!" In the next six-week workshop, Randy told the participants that having "crappy experiences in marriage is a man thing, not a God thing." This is a "big boy thing," he declared. "God gives me a good picture of how I am supposed to be in a relationship. He calls you to love one person."

The focus on gender within the confines of marital heterosexuality ensured that the same-sex couples' presence remained invisible. This was true even in the case of Tammy and Chris, who were very vocal. The last class of the first six-week session on sensuality/sexuality offered one of the more poignant examples. David asked people to share how their families of origin had discussed sexuality with them when they were young. I was sitting at an end table with Tammy and Chris. David began at the table opposite us and stopped at the table next to ours to talk about his own upbringing, skipping Tammy, Chris, and myself. This omission did not deter the two from participating. When David asked about sensuality and touch, Tammy spoke up: "We assume that what we like, the other person likes." Her words drew attention to the fact that her partner is a woman and not a man. While it is probably true that heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals make this kind of assumption, her statement stood in bold

relief to the dominant message of managing difference in heterosexual relationships. Comments such as this one challenge taken-for-granted assumptions of gender and sexuality.

All the participants I interviewed acknowledged awareness of the lesbian couples without my asking, and most admitted feeling a little uncomfortable due to either their disapproval of or their inexperience dealing with same-sex relationships. Tom, a white man in his mid-twenties who attended with Suzanne, said he was caught off guard by “the two girls who were there together. They were like lesbians. I was surprised, I guess.” Becky, a white woman in her thirties who was married and had four children with Martin, an African American man in his early forties, answered my question about whether anything in the workshop made her uncomfortable: “Mmm. I did feel uncomfortable with the fact that there were couples in there of the same sex, just because I feel strongly about family values and what the traditional family is. But I know it is something that is happening in the United States, and there is really nothing I can do about it. And, I mean, they *are* human. They have needs too. It doesn’t mean that I agree with them.” Norm, a white man in his sixties who attended with his third wife, moved from talking about men’s responsiveness to his disapproval of homosexuality. He said, “At first, the unknown [was uncomfortable]. When you go around and there is more and more interaction, I felt like there was a quality of responses and information given by the men in that class that usually doesn’t happen. [Pause] I do consider homosexuality a sin, but I’m not here to judge that. I have a lot of patients that are gay, and they have a lifestyle I *do not* approve of. But I thought even the gay couple had a lot of good information to toss out.” Some of the other participants expressed a subtle resentment about dealing with same-sex couples in the marriage workshop but admitted that these couples “have needs too.” It is unclear what the reaction would have been if the couples had taken a more in-your-face position, were gay men instead of lesbians, or were not middle class and white. Martin articulated his desire that lesbians and gay men remain in the closet: “Be gay. Don’t force it on me.”

The invisibility of the same-sex couples confirms the power of heterosexuality to exclude. Nevertheless, same-sex couples in marriage workshops have the effect of troubling dominant gender prescriptions within marital heterosexuality. Bettina, a white woman in her thirties and the only self-identified feminist I interviewed among the heterosexual participants, remarked on the tension that the presence of a lesbian couple brings to gender assumptions: “I was surprised at the lesbian couple who

attended. I was shocked every time we came and they were still there! I was very happy to see that, especially because I thought stereotypically everybody is going to be pigeonholed into male-female. I can't imagine what that put on them." Bettina's words reflect the tension that the presence of a same-sex couple created for normative heterosexual gender performance. The environment of these marriage workshops discouraged dealing with gender outside the confines of marital heterosexuality, as doing so might have called into question the institution itself.

One of the lesbians, Jennifer, expressed her exasperation with and resistance to the focus on gender and marital heterosexuality: "So, that was the thing I really found offensive because they kind of gender stereotyped relationships, and I don't think that is completely appropriate if you're teaching gender diverse people." Her words stress the tension of being placed outside the rigid gender binary fundamental to the training. Amanda told me that taking a class with a lesbian was important to change people's perceptions. She said, "I don't know the personal story of all these people in our class, but if they never met a lesbian before, and now they do, now they see, and hear what I say in class, and don't think we are the devil now, you know, that's a goal in itself. I mean, people are ignorant, and they don't know. So just being open and honest about stuff and talking to people or just being a good person around them and knowing you are gay, it has a positive influence." Her words rang true. Even though most of the participants I interviewed expressed negative feelings about homosexuality, when faced with a same-sex couple, they tended to soften their stereotypic perceptions. Ultimately, the presence of lesbians in the workshops both strengthened and disrupted the power of heterosexuality; the question of same-sex relationships consistently remained in the background and sometimes came to the foreground when the couples discussed their relationships.

The (in)visibility of the lesbian couples suggests the unevenness of state efforts to reinstate the dominance of the heterosexual, white, middle-class family. On one hand, the teachings on gender and marital heterosexuality inscribe a powerful vision of the "natural" family. On the other, this prevailing image can be interrupted by the increasing diversity of families and prominence of lesbian and gay couples in American society. Even in the face of what appears a monolithic achievement to promote gender and marital heterosexuality, instances of defused power can create small opportunities for social change.

## CONCLUSION

In their annual report, “State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America,” Barbara Whitehead and David Popenoe (2004, 4) remark that “the pathway into marriage is changing. The meaning of marriage is changing. The institutional role of marriage is changing.” Fears about the declining significance of the nuclear family have spurred national marriage promotion policies to fund programs to reinstitutionalize heterosexual marriage. For many marriage promotion advocates, concerns about the state of “our unions” center on fears for the white, middle-class (heterosexual) family. In Oklahoma, anxiety about “fractured families” and the use of TANF money to fund marriage promotion focuses attention on single-mother families—coded as women of color and their children. Yet its practices on the ground offer services predominantly to white, middle-class couples.

This research contributes to feminist theories of the state by problematizing the assumption of a male state with unidimensional control of its citizens or subjects. Instead, it reveals polycentric state practices that are structured as gendered and sexualized, and that uphold the dominance of the white, middle-class family and its importance to a cohesive national identity. In the case of marriage promotion, diverse state practices focus policy concerns on “deviant” (coded Black) single-mother families while resources are allocated to teach about gender hierarchy to predominantly white, middle-class couples. Putting feminist state theory and critical heterosexuality studies in dialogue demonstrates the importance of an unspoken heterosexuality to state control. State actors who seek to promote marriage rely on a particular, and conservative, interpretation of social scientific research on families as a noncontroversial way to focus policy concerns on the need to promote “healthy” (heterosexual) families. These policies demonstrate a perceived need on the part of the state to safeguard the health of the nation by strengthening the “mission” of white, middle-class (heterosexual) marriage. The race and class assumptions of this reasoning are largely made invisible as marriage promotion leaders use the rhetoric of health and social capital.

On the ground, marriage education becomes a tool to teach self-monitoring gendered practices within the confines of heterosexual marriage. In the workshops I attended, instruction on the “opposite” sexes signaled heterosexuality to reaffirm the sexual outsider status of same-sex couples as well as that of single-mother families. The on-the-ground practices of promoting heterosexual marriage mirror antigay countermovements, such as

the ex-gay movement, which encourages individuals to police their behavior according to scripted gender and heterosexual norms (Robinson and Spivey 2007). This strategy provides states and social movements the ability to govern the behavior of citizens and members from a distance.

Marriage workshops rehearse dominant scripts on gender polarity to reinforce expectations of men's and women's "nature" to make marital heterosexuality appear instinctive and effortless. The decline of marriage and women's increased workforce participation during the past 40 years has challenged traditional norms that created social cohesion through gender hierarchy and implicit heterosexuality. Marriage workshops offer a forum to revisit ideas on hierarchical relationships between men and women. State training for workshop leaders teaches that managing gender differences is essential to a harmonious marriage. The trainers provide examples and offer gendered performances to focus on indisputable differences between men and women that cater to cultural ideas of men as rational (strong) and women as emotional (weak). These performances provide simple answers to complex negotiations that many families face as they juggle tight work schedules along with raising children and try to manage households that often bring children from previous marriages or relationships. The gendered performances teach that wives need to allow "men to be men" and that husbands need to cater to their wives' emotional needs.

State activities to implement self-monitoring practices carry an assumption that "good" citizens will act according to dominant norms; however, this assumption does not necessarily entail success. In two six-week workshops, for example, the presence of a lesbian couple challenged the ideology of marital heterosexuality. The performance of gendered binaries intrinsic to institutionalized heterosexuality, a generally seamless aspect of the marriage workshops I attended, was rendered more palpable and transparent. Even while the relationships of the lesbians were disregarded, their presence created a disruption. The assumptions underlying the workshops marked these two couples as different from other heterosexual women in the context of a marriage class, and the gendered prescriptions made them gender and sexual outsiders. Alternatively, their presence provided a rare opportunity to bring together heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals in an equalizing environment to learn communication and problem-solving skills. This was probably one of the few environments in the state, and anywhere else for that matter, that mixed together heterosexual and nonheterosexual couples in an intimate and prolonged setting, specifically in the context of enriching relationships. For heterosexuals, such exposure has the ability to challenge stereotypes about nonheterosexuals and perhaps about gender itself. Thus, while state practices

seek to reestablish the hegemony of the white, middle-class, heterosexual family through rhetoric and cultural practice, marriage promotion offers insight into the way these can be destabilized on the ground by the very outsiders whom state policy seeks to outlaw.

## NOTES

1. Many of these states, including Texas, have incorporated the “one percent solution,” putting 1 percent of their Temporary Assistance to Needy Families money toward marriage promotion. From my calculations, Oklahoma designates roughly 5 percent of its Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grant per year.

2. Recently, the marriage initiative changed the name from “Sweetheart Weekends” to “All about Us.”

3. I was not able to attend every class in the series during the six-week and weekend workshops. Since I acted as a participant in these workshops and determined not to provide any information that would identify other participants, I did not seek individual consent except in the case of volunteers for in-depth interviews.

4. In addition to the participant observation and interviews described above, I did fieldwork in 20 marriage workshops for welfare recipients and led three focus groups; attended eight weeks of daily marriage classes for high school students and conducted in-depth interviews with the high school teachers; conducted in-depth interviews with a prisoner and the prison’s chaplain; and did participant observation of a marriage workshop for the Chickasaw Nation and interviewed a Chickasaw government official. Finally, I conducted extensive fieldwork on the campaign against the initiative to ban same-sex marriage that was placed on the November ballot in 2004. For analysis of all ethnographic research in this project, see Heath (forthcoming).

5. One of the initiative leaders told me that she knew of other same-sex couples attending marriage workshops. There was no way to find out how many actually did attend since the “All about You” forms that participants fill out at the beginning of the workshops do not ask about sexual orientation or same-sex relationships.

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