

## Making Marriage Promotion into Public Policy: The Epistemic Culture of a Statewide Initiative

Melanie Heath

Published online: 14 August 2012  
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**Abstract** Though political sociologists have sought to understand how self-interest influences politics and policymaking, little research has examined the mechanisms involved in the relationship between constructing knowledge and forming policy. This article extends the concept of epistemic culture to the field of policymaking to uncover the mechanisms of knowledge production in policy formation. It offers an extended case study of government marriage promotion policies that seek to fund and disseminate marriage education among poor couples with the goal of lifting them out of poverty. Based on an ethnography of a statewide marriage initiative in Oklahoma, this article maps out the parameters of an epistemic culture of marriage promotion shaped by three mechanisms: 1) The articulation of connections between policy, commonsense ideas, and extant epistemologies; 2) The formation of policy that consolidates research findings to quell controversy; and 3) The creation of networks to convince relevant actors of the importance of marriage promotion policy.

**Keywords** Marriage promotion · Public policy · Epistemic culture · Knowledge

How does the formation and authorization of expert knowledge shape public policy? Political sociologists have sought to understand how self-interest influences politics and policymaking, but further research is needed to examine the mechanisms involved in the relationship between constructing knowledge and forming policy (Campbell 2002). We often think of contemporary politics as exceptionally contentious, but we live in an age in which expert knowledge is often used not to create but to downplay controversy in the policy domain. In 1996, for example, experts from high-profile conservative think tanks influenced the successful passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) by focusing on social science research to make largely uncontested but spurious claims about a correlation between the growth of welfare, the rise in unwed childbearing, and the poverty of these families (Reese 2005). This legislation

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M. Heath (✉)  
Department of Sociology, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON L8S4M4, Canada  
e-mail: mheath@mcmaster.ca

offered a new policy direction to promote marriage as a route off welfare. As a result, conservative Christian groups have increasingly built alliances with socially conservative and centrist think tanks to urge a focus on promoting heterosexual, two-parent households as a goal to lift poor families out of poverty. The proponents of this new marriage promotion agenda often misrepresent social science findings about the relationship between illegitimacy and poverty. In the process, these networks of experts and activists attempt to close off rather than open up debate about important changes in our economy and intimate lives. This development suggests the need for a new research agenda on knowledge production in the family policy domain.

Sociologists of knowledge have sought to push the study of knowledge claims forward by examining not only the ideas developed by experts but also by elucidating structures of knowledge themselves (Swidler and Ardit 1994). Working in the field of the sociology of science, Karin Knorr Cetina (1999) offered fresh perspective on knowledge structures in her comparative analysis of “epistemic cultures”—the arrangement and mechanisms by which we come to know what we know. Her research on high-energy physics and molecular biology found that there is diversity among epistemic cultures, highlighting the “disunity” within the sciences.

In this article, I extend the concept of “epistemic cultures” to the field of policymaking to uncover the interiorized processes by which policymakers and experts arrive at knowledge. I examine the diverse ways that actors come to formulate controversial policy and how such processes consolidate around particular knowledge claims. Similar to the types of disunity that Knorr Cetina discovered in her laboratory studies, these interiorized processes are not always based on rational logic but on the need to create an epistemic culture to deflect controversy and convince social actors of the benefits of new and untested social policy.

This article draws on a 10-month ethnography of a statewide marriage initiative in Oklahoma in 2004. In my book, *One Marriage under God: The Campaign to Promote Marriage in America* (2012), I set out the unexpected social consequences of marriage promotion policies in Oklahoma as they play out on the ground, examining the boundary work involved in promoting marriage in workshops for the general public, for welfare recipients, for high school students, and in other arenas. Drawing on this research, the current article takes a step back from the specific policy debate to focus on the more general question of delineating the mechanisms of knowledge construction in policy formation. In particular, it examines the important role that social scientists have played in shaping the ideas of actors involved in marriage promotion. Oklahoma offers an excellent example of an extensive statewide marriage initiative, the longest running in the nation. I argue here that configurations of knowledge that form an epistemic culture of marriage promotion are shaped by three mechanisms: 1) The articulation of connections between policy, common-sense ideas, and extant epistemologies; 2) The formation of policy that consolidates research findings to quell controversy; and 3) The creation of networks to convince relevant actors of the importance of marriage promotion policy.

### **Epistemic Cultures and Public Policy**

Theorists have conceptualized the new focus on expert knowledge in modern society as the rise of a “knowledge society” (Bell 1973), an “information society” (Lyotard 1984), and a “risk society” (Beck 1992). These scholars have considered how knowledge in postindustrial societies is productive in a manner similar to that of capital and labor in the industrial period, an emphasis that dovetails with the development of the “new” sociology of knowledge and its

entrance into the sphere of natural scientific knowledge (Zammito 2007). Emerging from the field of the sociology of scientific knowledge is the claim that scientific truths are fundamentally social (Swidler and Arditi 1994) and produced as “knowledge practices” (Knorr Cetina 2005). In this tradition, Knorr Cetina (1999) offers an innovative reading of the activities and the meanings that organize knowing in a given domain. She posits the idea of “epistemic cultures” as a feature of the practices and mechanisms of experts that make up how we know what we know. According to Knorr Cetina, “Epistemic cultures are cultures of creating and warranting knowledge” (2005, 67). Knorr Cetina’s theorization offers an important corrective to deterministic explanations of the processes and development of science and research.

With a similar emphasis, scholars of politics and policymaking have moved away from deterministic and rational choice accounts of policy development to examine the role of culture, ideas, and discourse in this process. Studying the interactions of ideational and material processes in policy formation has offered perspective on why social policy takes a particular form and how it changes over time and varies across context. Policy scholars have studied the ways that ideational processes inform normative and cognitive procedures that shape perceptions of legitimacy. Ideas and discourses on social policy formation involve processes that allow these to become “actively articulated, consciously understood, and often strategically deployed” (Padamsee 2009, 419). Ideas about social problems and specific proposals are important arenas for shaping policy. Political sociologists have further pushed this line of research forward by applying the concept of framing from the study of social movement theory and media studies to address the packaging of social policy ideas (Noy 2009).

While a renewed focus on ideational processes has invigorated the study of policy formation, there is a need for research that theorizes the contemporary reliance on social science research for creating social policy. In 1973, Rist pointed to the social consequences of policy formation that relies on social science research to generate ideational resources, where actors reinterpret findings to legitimate a policy (Rist 1973). While researchers have focused on frames, norms, and cognitive paradigms to explain the success or failure of various social policies, research is still needed to theorize the role that social science plays in creating “strong causal arguments” that favor one policy over another, even when it can generally only offer “weak” causal theories (Rein and Winship 1999; an exception is Somers and Block 2005). Regarding the relationship between social science and politics, political scientists have studied knowledge elites who influence policy decisions as “epistemic communities” or networks of experts who establish competence in a particular domain and claim policy-relevant knowledge (Haas 1992). More recent research has considered organizational strategies for adjudicating contested epistemic standards (Whooley 2010). While research to date has focused primarily on the interactions between policymakers and experts, the broader epistemic cultures that are produced through such interactions have largely been ignored. Studies of epistemic communities, for example, give insight into the social networks involved in the formation and maintenance of epistemic cultures. This research program, however, has not examined the comprehensive *mechanisms* in the construction of knowledge that are specifically engaged in policy configuration.

In this article, I draw on the field of the sociology of knowledge to elucidate the relationship between social science research, normative epistemologies, and social policy formation as an epistemic culture. I argue that mapping out the parameters of an epistemic culture can help to illuminate how behavior driven by ideas results in policymaking outcomes. Actors rely on academics and think tank researchers to claim expertise and give their ideas priority over others. Research on epistemic cultures reveals a system of relatively closed knowledge networks where distinct cultures form an epistemic market of self-governing “monopolies” (Knorr Cetina 1999). This concept has the potential to illuminate

the ways that policymakers and public officials corral expert knowledge in a particular context to successfully implement social policy in the face of public controversy. Marriage promotion policies in the United States offer an important example of forming epistemic cultures in that public officials have selectively used research on the benefits of marriage, sidelining conflicting findings in order to justify funding marriage promotion programs.

### Poverty, Marriage, and Policy

The framing of the causes and consequences of poverty has been divisive in welfare policy debates. Fueling these debates is the changing nature of the heterosexual family in the United States: In the 21st century, one out of three births occurs outside marriage, the divorce rate hovers at nearly 50 %, and cohabitation often precedes marriage (Cherlin 2004; Smock 2000). The current controversy over poverty, welfare, and single-mother families can be traced at least as far back as the 1960s when academics and politicians focused their attention on the rise of the out-of-wedlock birth rate, and on what many assessed to be the “unraveling” of the black family. In 1965, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan brought this issue to the attention of the American public with his report warning that “the ghetto family was in disarray” (Moynihan 1965). The 1970s also witnessed the emergence of a pro-family movement (also called the religious right), bringing together evangelical Christians who desired to reinvigorate “family values” through political activism (Fetner 2008). The pro-family movement joined other conservative public intellectuals to intensify the policy debate over welfare, placing attention on the importance of the married two-parent family to guard against the increasing “dependency” of single mothers on the resources of the state. Social historian and journalist Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, who was co-director of the National Marriage Project when it was housed at Rutgers University from 1997 to 2009, spearheaded much of the concern over single-mother families with her 1993 *Atlantic Monthly* article on why Dan Quayle was right about the purported negative effects of single-mother families: “Single-mother families are vulnerable not just to poverty but to a particularly debilitating form of poverty: welfare dependency” (Whitehead 1993, 62).

As debate over welfare grew, former president Bill Clinton signed PRWORA into law in 1996, signaling a new chapter in the story of American poverty policy. The law made paid work and work-related activities mandatory to receive aid, set time limits on welfare receipt, and advocated the promotion of marriage as a way out of poverty. Somers and Block (2005) argue that “the perversity thesis”—a public discourse that focuses on the allegedly perverse affects of anti-poverty programs rather than poverty itself—led to the enactment of the welfare reform law. Comparing the 1834 English and 1996 American laws, they find the discourse moved from a focus on structural conditions of poverty to the destructive effects of welfare on poor people themselves. Welfare, it was argued, leads to sexual promiscuity, dependency, and a lack of personal responsibility; thus, welfare was defined not as the solution to poverty but as part of the problem. The 1996 law highlighted marriage as a way to resolve the social problems associated with poverty and single parenthood.

According to Judith Stacey (1996, 54), this new frame of an old ideology that promoted the married two-parent family can be characterized as a “neo-family-values campaign” that took on “an explicitly centrist politics, rhetoric, and ideology,” and grounded its claims “in secular social science instead of religious authority.” By the turn of the century, the self-identified “marriage movement” organized a coalition of family scholars, clergy and religious leaders, family therapists and practitioners, welfare officials and employees, politicians, think tank personnel, and other community activists to promote a “renaissance” for

heterosexual marriage (Institute for American Values 2004). These marriage advocates entered the poverty and policy fray by rallying to support federal and local marriage-promotion policies. With the election of President George W. Bush in 2000, federal funding to support marriage promotion programs grew and gained prominence as a public policy strategy (Lichter et al. 2003). The first four years of the federal government's Healthy Marriage Initiative offered a patchwork of spending totaling about \$200 million dollars, and the 2006 welfare legislation included \$500 million for marriage promotion programs over five years. These programs offer "marriage education," an approach to preventing marital problems based on the idea that couples can learn how to build and maintain successful marriages, as well as the utilization of public media campaigns to signal the importance of marriage to healthy families, and the provision of marriage incentives for poor couples.

In addition to federally funded marriage promotion programs, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF), which replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children, allows states to spend funds from their discretionary TANF block grant; these funds can then be used to help reduce non-marital child bearing and to promote marriage. Arizona and Oklahoma were the first states to use TANF money to fund marriage initiatives, followed by Utah and West Virginia. Oklahoma's marriage initiative has been the most extensive and enduring of all state initiatives. As a pioneer for this new direction in public policy, former governor Frank Keating declared his state's divorce and unwed childbearing rates to be social policy problems. Four of the seven goals of his political agenda for a second term were intended to strengthen and promote marriage and Keating committed an initial \$10 million of the government's TANF monies to fund the initiative. From 2001 to the present, the state has spent roughly two million dollars a year on the initiative.

Such government policies to promote marriage have stirred controversy regarding their philosophy and potential effectiveness. Those in favor argue that marriage is a social good, evidenced by lower rates of poverty for married women (Wilcox et al. 2005). They point to research findings of better physical and mental health for the married (Waite and Gallagher 2000), and to studies that show that children who grow up with their biological married parents have better developmental outcomes than children who come from unwed or divorced families (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Those who are skeptical contend that a policy to promote marriage redirects attention away from the causes of poverty (e.g. lack of education and jobs that pay a living wage), and diverts funds from programs that benefit poor women (e.g., cash assistance or work supports; see Coltrane 2001; Coontz and Folbre 2002). Some scholars have assessed marriage promotion policies as representing the triumph of the religious right's goals in the public policy arena (Coltrane 2001).

In the midst of this controversy, policymakers and political actors in the social conservative camp have turned to social science research to offer "strong causal arguments" about the poor "as a homogenous group facing a common set of issues and thus exhibiting common sets of behavior" (Rein and Winship 1999, 44). For example, Kay Hymowitz (2006, 3) in her book *Marriage and Caste in America* draws on social science research to point to how America has become a "nation of separate and unequal families." She argues for a strong causal link between the breakdown of marriage and growing inequality, and uses this to explain the "marriage gap" between differently educated segments of the population. Americans who are college educated—about 25 % of the population—tend to have higher rates of marriage and lower rates of non-marital births and divorce than their less educated counterparts.

Family scholars outside these marriage promotion networks find a far more complex relationship between inequality and marriage. Andrew Cherlin (2003), for example, maintains that the relationship between growing up in a single parent or stepfamily and undesirable outcomes for children is *not* simply causal; instead, both might be attributed to other

factors, such as poverty. Yet, marriage advocates tend to use language that suggests causation. One report, for example, argues that marital decline is “the problem that *drives* so many other problems” (Center for Marriage and Families 2006). The idea that marriage promotion policies might help to alleviate conditions of poverty for poor families deflects controversy away from critiques of using welfare money to promote marriage. Prominent leaders sometimes frame the issue as one of justice, such as Wade Horn (2003, 37), former assistant secretary for the Administration for Children and Families, who declared: “The poor want and deserve good, healthy marriages as much as the wealthy. A truly just society cannot let the powerful social and economic advantages of a good marriage become just another middle-class entitlement.”

To date, there has been limited empirical research on the impact of marriage promotion and education policies on the relationships of low-income couples, and findings from the few studies that have been performed offer a cautionary note. In examining its ideological components, Cherlin (2003, 22) warns, “In the end, the evidence suggests that the benefits of marriage promotion would be marginal.” Perhaps it is not surprising then that a recent report found little evidence of the benefits of marriage education among low-income populations. In 2010, Mathematica Policy Research issued a report on Building Strong Families (BSF), a government-sponsored project to provide marriage education and support services to unmarried, low-income, heterosexual couples with newborn babies. Measuring the overall impact on couples 15 months after they applied for one of eight programs (in terms of the stability and quality of the relationship), the evaluation did not find any significant difference in BSF programs to help couples stay together or get married, nor did these programs improve relationship quality, with the sole exception of the BSF program in Oklahoma (Wood et al. 2011).

Given the lack of evidence to support marriage promotion as a way to combat poverty, how has this controversial idea become accepted government policy? In 2011, for example, Congress approved \$75 million of the Obama administration’s proposed Fatherhood, Marriage, and Family Innovation Fund that will continue to offer grants to marriage promotion activities. While this legislation does seek to promote greater social *and* economic opportunities for low-income parents, the continuation of this funding by the Obama administration highlights the entrenchment of the controversial family promotion policy.

With the goal of enumerating the mechanisms of an epistemic culture of marriage promotion, this article examines the relation between ideational processes and policymaking. First, it challenges assessments of marriage promotion policy as an uncomplicated victory of the pro-family movement in the public policy arena. Second, it disputes the narrow characterization of marriage promotion policy as fueling a “culture war” that James Davison Hunter (1991) saw as a rigid divide between the “orthodox,” who view truth as absolute, and “progressives,” who locate knowledge claims in secular society. In contrast, the epistemic culture of marriage promotion united politicians, researchers, and religious leaders to frame policy according to social scientific findings as evidence of legitimacy. Critics of marriage promotion initiatives are right to emphasize the complexity of social science research findings on the relationship between marriage and poverty, but it is a mistake to underestimate the new forms of hybrid social science—culturally conservative policy initiatives based on the kinds of epistemic cultures discussed in this case study.

## Methodology

The findings reported here are drawn from a larger ethnographic study of 10 months on the marriage initiative in Oklahoma in 2004 (Heath 2012). This article draws on this

ethnographic research to examine the social mechanisms of an epistemic culture that informs public policies to promote marriage among poor women. In this context, it focuses on a sample of open-ended in-depth interviews with leaders and employees of the marriage initiative and participant observation of initiative training sessions and marriage education workshops.

Utilizing an ethnographic approach allowed me to study the marriage initiative from the ground up. In 2003, I first met two employees at the annual conference of the marriage movement held in Las Vegas. The Smart Marriages Conference features presentations by over a hundred marriage experts and is attended by therapists, counselors, clergy, policy-makers, educators and the public.<sup>1</sup> When I arrived in Oklahoma, I contacted one of the employees to gain permission to attend workshops. I conducted participant observation in specialized classes and 30 marriage workshops, as well as a state-sponsored marriage-education training weekend—open to the general population—to discover the method for training volunteers (see Heath 2012). Towards the end of my participant observation, I conducted in-depth interviews with 25 leaders, public officials, and employees of the initiative. I was able to interview all of the current leaders involved in the marriage initiative, including the two top officials: Mary Myrick, the President of Public Strategies, and Howard Hendrick, director of Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS), both of whom as public figures gave permission to use their real names. I was not able to interview the former governor, Frank Keating, who had launched the initiative, nor the Health and Human Services Secretary, Jerry Regier. In these two cases, I rely on accounts from in-depth interviews with initiative leaders and officials who worked with Keating and Regier, and on testimonies and statements written by these two men outlining their objectives and policy specifications. I conducted interviews either at the office of Public Strategies or other public business settings. Questions ranged from inquiring about the emergence and growth of the initiative, to strategies and coalition building, to justifications about government efforts to promote marriage. Interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours, and were taped and transcribed.

In the initial stages of coding interviews and field notes, I used the category- and hypothesis-generating methods of Glaser and Strauss (1967) to identify specific patterns in policy implementation. Later, I coded the transcribed interviews and field notes using a qualitative software program, Atlas.ti. At this stage, I relied on Burawoy's (1998) explication of the extended case method to theorize the relationship between government policy and on the ground practices that I observed (rather than seeking to generate "grounded theory").

Oklahoma is a good choice as a case study to examine the parameters of an epistemic culture of a controversial policy. Home to the most extensive statewide marriage initiative in the nation, its policy "extends out" and is influenced by national marriage promotion politics (Burawoy 1998). In particular, Oklahoma officials employed similar tactics to that of the federal government to justify funding an initiative. In subsequent years, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Texas and Utah have taken Oklahoma's example and designated portions of their TANF block grant to promote a marriage initiative. As a leader of the novel policy of marriage promotion, leaders of the initiative worked hard to consolidate an epistemic culture that would disseminate their message on the importance of marriage. Through reliance on a broader epistemology that unites commonsense ideas of marriage with selective social science evidence, they built policy networks that were able to keep debate at bay.

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<sup>1</sup> The final Smart Marriages Conference took place in 2010. The new annual NARME Conference, which brings together many of the same speakers and interested groups as the Smart Marriages Conference, is organized by the National Association for Relationship and Marriage Education.

## Constructing an Epistemology of Marriage in Oklahoma

The political efforts at establishing an epistemic culture of marriage promotion in Oklahoma built on a general “knowledge culture” concerned with the significance of heterosexual marriage for sustaining the social fabric of American society. For Knorr Cetina (2005, 66), knowledge is a productive force, and knowledge cultures are the “scaffolding for epistemic cultures.” In other words, knowledge takes specific forms in the process of defining an environment as “different cultures have different sciences and technologies” (Knorr Cetina 2005, 73).

Policy knowledge is often shaped by the national context. For marriage promotion, I call this scaffolding an “epistemology of marriage,” where knowledge is organized around the ideal of a public meaning of marriage in American society. As one marriage advocate asserts, the importance of marriage means that society “formalizes its definition, and surrounds it with norms and reinforcements, so we can raise boys and girls who aspire to become the kind of men and women who can make successful marriages” (Gallagher 2003). Aspirations to renew a marriage culture demonstrate the depth of radical transformations in intimacy and family in the United States. Social theorist Neil Gross (2005, 288) argues that there is a decline of “regulative traditions” that concern “the threatened or actual exclusion of an individual from some moral community if certain practices regarded as central to that community’s historical identity fail to be engaged in.” He names this regulative tradition “lifelong, internally stratified marriage” (LISM) that has controlled the heterosexual dyad through state control and a religiously sanctified commitment. Marriage advocates seek to revive this regulative tradition.

The epistemology of marriage relies on discourses and unmarked assumptions about LISM as a universal, heterosexual institution and as encompassing a nostalgic ideal of the “traditional” American family. As a general knowledge culture, this idea of marriage has particular resonance in American society. One might say that “social, political, and economic life” participates in a specific knowledge culture of marriage particular to the United States (Knorr Cetina 2005, 74). Implicit to this epistemology are nostalgic representations—such as those looking back to television sitcoms—of white, middle-class, American families: Ozzie and Harriet (*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*), Ward and June Cleaver (*Leave It to Beaver*), Jim and Margaret Anderson (*Father Knows Best*), etc. (Coontz 1992/2000). Popular nostalgic images of the married, nuclear family are fundamental to conceptions of American identity. As a form of commonsense knowledge, the epistemology of marriage maps out a space of “us” and “them” that makes the monogamous, heterosexual, nuclear family appear to be the only “natural” family form. This knowledge culture has been influential in establishing national law and policy that promotes the significance of marriage. For example, the welfare reform law of 1996 stated in its first section two “findings” of Congress that 1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society and 2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society that promotes the interests of children (U.S. Congress 1996).

The epistemic culture of marriage promotion in Oklahoma built upon and warranted this general knowledge culture. Thus, these knowledge practices were more about *warranting* than *creating* knowledge about marriage promotion (Knorr Cetina 2005). Leaders drew on research to promote a one-dimensional, universal understanding of marriage, making a case for marriage as the source of many other societal goods. Examples include fact sheets from the initiative’s website detailing the benefits of marriage and the negative impacts of divorce. One sheet lists the following as unexpected harms incurred by children of divorce: “Acting out; Teen pregnancy; Health problems; Low self-esteem; Mental health problems as an



adult; Getting in trouble with the law; Dropping out of school; [and] Low income” (Harrison et al. 2012). Another fact sheet titled, “Isn’t Marriage Just a Piece of Paper?” points to scientific evidence on the ways that “marriage changes people. Once they get married, spouses usually make more money and are both happier and healthier” (Nock et al. 2012). Such statements reflect the dissemination of knowledge that is presented without contextualization of scholarly debates and/or the complexities of research findings. Dissemination of these facts taps into commonsense ideas about the importance of marriage to social order in American society.

Howard Hendrick, director of OKDHS, drew on this logic in discussing how he became aware of the research on marriage and the need for promoting it:

I think marriage has been overlooked in terms of its criticality. My first awareness of this being a problem actually came before I came to [OK]DHS. I went to a banquet honoring the top one hundred graduates of a very large hospital district in Oklahoma City, and I began to go down the list of these kids and their parents, and you know, almost all of them came from two-parent households. The persons at my table said it’s probably understandable and they put me on to the “Dan Quayle was Right” article that appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine in the early 1990s.... It was very well documented.

Similar to the language of other marriage initiative leaders, Hendrick does not take into account the effects of class privilege in his observation but rather focuses on family structure. He references Whitehead who published the “Dan Quayle was Right” article in the April 1993 edition of the *Atlantic Monthly* (not the *New Yorker* as Hendrick wrongly attributed it to). Whitehead employs social scientific evidence to argue that unwed childbearing and divorce bring about disastrous consequences for children.

This article changed the public conversation in two ways. First, Whitehead offered justification for Dan Quayle’s thesis that “marriage is the best antipoverty strategy of all” by marshaling social-scientific research to make a case that unwed childbearing *causes* intergenerational poverty. Second, Whitehead’s article shifted the discourse on poverty away from black families, its historical focus, onto the crisis of marriage decline among white families. Retaining similar language to that of the “tangle of pathology” that was attributed to female-headed black families (Moynihan 1965), Whitehead argued that single parent and divorced families in general fail to sustain environments to teach children self-discipline and responsibility. Upholding the perversity thesis and the tendency to blame the poor for their own poverty (Somers and Block 2005, 278), she assessed poor families as sustaining a “culture of dependency.”

The epistemology of marriage is also grounded in the language of Christian morality, and efforts to build an epistemic culture relied on such moral knowledge. At the launch of the initiative, leaders invited Christian pastors and religious officials to voluntarily pledge their support of a marriage covenant by signing a contract that encouraged mentorship of the newly married. The contract asked pastors to make a commitment to set aside a “preparation period” of four to six months before performing a wedding, requiring couples to take four to six marital preparation classes. The covenant reads:

I believe that marriage is a covenant intended by God to be a lifelong relationship between a man and a woman. I promise to God, to my family, and my community to encourage couples to remain steadfast in unconditional love, reconciliation, and sexual purity, while purposefully growing in their covenant marriage relationship.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The Oklahoma Marriage Covenant. n.d. Retrieved July 25, 2011. ([http://www.okmarriage.org/downloads/images/oklahoma\\_marriage\\_covenant2.doc](http://www.okmarriage.org/downloads/images/oklahoma_marriage_covenant2.doc)).

Roughly 1500 pastors are listed as signatories on the marriage initiative website. The wording of the covenant was taken from the national Covenant Marriage Movement that bills itself as “a movement of God to provide an avenue through which His people can boldly stand alongside thousands of other couples and congregations to affirm God’s design for marriage as a covenant relationship.”<sup>3</sup> As part of the endeavor to define marriage as exclusively heterosexual, this Christian framework unquestionably demarcates marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman (Heath 2009).

When faced with the question of same-sex marriage, initiative representatives cited research to justify the importance of focusing solely on the normative, heterosexual family. In 2004, when Oklahoma had a constitutional amendment on its ballot to define marriage as between one man and one woman, I asked Mary Myrick—the president of Public Strategies—about the initiative’s policy with regard to same-sex couples and the issue of marriage. She referred to social science research and state policy to justify the decision to focus the activities of the initiative on heterosexual marriage:

We are very clear about our mission. Our mission is to provide public information about what the research says about what works in relationships, and frankly, there’s not a lot of long-term research for sure about what happens with gay and lesbian couples. We don’t really have much to speak to in that area. Our position is that we’re a marriage initiative designed to encourage activities that lead to marriage, and our state has defined marriage as an act between a man and a woman and until the state defines it differently, it’s really all defined for us. We don’t get into the debate about it.

The justification of a lack of long-term research on same-sex relationships is not consistent with the initiative’s marriage-strengthening activities among other populations. Research on the effectiveness of marriage education workshops for poor, single mothers or the prison population is only beginning to emerge. Yet the initiative has provided workshops to these groups, and the programs are justified in social scientific language. Again, the selective use of research solidified an epistemic culture that set boundaries of acceptable practices to strengthen marriage, this time based on commonsense knowledge regarding the “natural” family.

Ultimately, tapping into a broader epistemology of marriage helped to justify the creation of a statewide initiative funded by welfare monies to offer workshops for the general population: predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual couples. The marriage initiative advertises its free marriage education workshops on its website and through local churches. Workshops involve anywhere from two to twenty-five couples and meet at two hour intervals for either six weeks or two all-day Saturdays. The higher-volume marriage workshops, also free, are called “Sweethearts Weekend” (later renamed “All About Us”), and are offered on a Friday evening and all day on Saturday. The practice of providing marriage education workshops to as many Oklahomans as possible begs the question of why the state government chooses to use TANF monies to fund the initiative when the program is not directed specifically to this population (see Heath 2012). Again, the epistemic culture of marriage promotion relies on research concerning divorce and family decline to justify providing services to the general population. This objective points to the original language of the welfare reform law. One initiative leader explained:

Well, the initial directive from the standpoint we made in Oklahoma was we wanted all Oklahomans to be able to access this information period, regardless.... Part of it too

<sup>3</sup> Covenant Marriage. n.d. Retrieved July 1, 2011 ([www.covenantmarriage.com](http://www.covenantmarriage.com)).

has something to do with probably the wording, and I couldn't spit it out from the original 1996 Act was that the funding would be from TANF. But there are some funding pieces in TANF, and I've even seen it in budget lines, that say to be applied in a community sense, for the good of the community without meeting certain income guideline standards.

This leader is referring to the goals in the 1996 welfare reform law that specify the need to “encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families,” a provision that applies not only to low-income families but to the general population also. With this wording, the welfare reform law implicitly sanctions the redistribution of TANF funds from poor families to more wealthy ones. While the epistemic culture of marriage promotion drew on general knowledge about the significance of heterosexual marriage, the interiorized processes of creating an epistemic culture relied on iterating research on marriage to sidestep controversy and build networks to support the initiative. I now turn to these mechanisms.

### Marriage Policy Formation

The factors that facilitated the embrace of the new and untested policy of marriage promotion in Oklahoma were multiple. One was the local social and political climate. As a “Bible Belt” state—part of the region in the United States in which socially conservative evangelical Protestantism dominates—Oklahoma fostered a receptive environment for the controversial policy experiment of marriage promotion that fit well with other “family values” campaigns mobilized by conservative Christians (e.g., anti-gay initiatives and legislation, anti-abortion activism, and so on). In this sense, the social “site” of Oklahoma established the conditions for an epistemic culture that consolidated and warranted knowledge about the need for marriage promotion, including statistics on the state's high divorce and unwed childbearing rates, and the economic impact of these factors (see Knorr Cetina 2005, 65 on the warranting of knowledge).

National media put the state into the limelight as a pioneer of marriage promotion, making it necessary to deflect controversy. In response, Oklahoman leaders turned away from arguments based on moral value and religious relevance of marriage for its population. Instead, these leaders garnered social science research to justify the need to promote marriage. A federal government report on “Putting Marriage on the Agenda” pointed to the need to “gain credibility” by relying on research: “Oklahoma marriage supporters drew on research, and brought experts and advocates together to stimulate interest, address skeptics, and build awareness” (Strong 2008). Another assessment of the marriage initiative in Oklahoma—“What if a Governor Decided to Address the M-Word”—again addresses the importance of research (over values) to then-governor Frank Keating's motivation for instituting the marriage initiative:

Marriage and divorce have traditionally been considered personal, private matters, the province of the religious community, not government. It was a bold step for a Governor to decide that strengthening marriage is government business. What were his reasons? Governor Keating's personal values and religious beliefs undoubtedly played a part, but it was research that provided the rationale. (Myrick and Ooms 2002)

Thus, from the beginning, emphasis was placed on building an epistemic culture of marriage promotion that drew on research for justification.

Social science researchers have a history of attempts at shaping government policy, and there are many reasons to value this type of scholarly work. For example, Lauder et al.

(2004) advocate for the potential of sociology to become a “new policy science,” and Michael Burawoy (2005) has written extensively on what he calls “policy sociology.” The relationship between social science and policy, however, can be fraught, as witnessed by the obstacles sociologists have faced when traveling into the policy arena, including loss of control over ideas (Becker et al. 2004; Stacey 2004). In the case of marriage promotion, leaders drew on social science research to argue for a strong causal link between family structure and poverty, in contrast to the more cautious and nuanced approach of many researchers. The repetition of this research amounted to what Stacey (2004, 140–42) has called “sound-bite sociology,” where research findings are turned into sound bites that fall into the vernacular. Over and over, in interviews and written documents leaders referred to the superiority of the married two-parent family over other configurations in interviews and written documents to justify the need for marriage promotion. This was an essential component of building an epistemic culture of marriage promotion.

In establishing the initiative in support of the traditional family, religious and moral concerns about marriage and divorce were joined with economic anxieties over poverty and single parenthood. For Keating, a Republican, the marriage initiative offered an opportunity to garner the support of economic and religious conservatives, and it was research on family formation and the state’s economy that brought diverse interest groups together. In his 2004 testimony to Congress, he explained, “I came at this, Mr. Chairman, strictly as an economic development matter. When I became Governor, I was troubled by the fact that my State, which is 28th in population, was 45th in per capita income” (Keating 2004).

Concerned with how “to make our state rich,” Keating (2000) commissioned a joint study by economists from the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University on ways for the state to strengthen its economy. The researchers identified three social indicators—high divorce rate, high rate of child death due to abuse, and high rate of out-of-wedlock births—that made headline news as causes for Oklahoma’s slow economic growth. In the early 1990s, the state had the second highest divorce rate in the nation, and out-of-wedlock birth rates were slightly higher than the national average. These figures led Keating to focus the budding marriage initiative on lowering the divorce rate, an objective both religious and economic conservatives could stand behind.

In his 1999 State of the State Address, the governor established a goal of reducing the state’s divorce rate by one-third by 2010. To begin, Keating sponsored a summit on marriage—the Governor’s and First Lady’s Conference on Marriage—drawing together prominent evangelical leaders, marriage experts and antipoverty advocates. Keynote speakers included Gary Smalley who has written two dozen books on marriage from an evangelical Christian perspective; Patrick Fagan, a senior researcher with the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation; Wade Horn, then president of the National Fatherhood Initiative; and David Blankenhorn, president of the centrist think tank Institute for American Values. The conference also featured Theodora Ooms, a self-identified liberal from the Center for Law and Social Policy, who became a leading spokesperson for marriage promotion policies. These speakers focused on evidence of the negative effects of father-absence and single parenthood on children and on the benefits of marriage for children and for adults. At the conference, Keating also advocated for a covenant marriage bill to facilitate premarital counseling and impose waiting periods on divorce.<sup>4</sup>

In the first stages of the initiative, one of the key strategies involved getting churches and religious leaders on board to renew what they viewed was a marriage culture. In formulating

<sup>4</sup> Although introduced on a number of occasions, the covenant marriage bill has never passed.

a strategic plan, Jerry Regier, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Human Services in Oklahoma at the time, stated:

Churches will play a key role in this initiative, not just because of their moral mission, but because of their direct contact with those who seek to be married. Whether or not people regularly participate in a local church, most seek the guidance of a religious leader or express a desire to use a church facility when they make the decision to marry. (Regier 1999)

As the policy was implemented, however, leaders began to target other areas of society. The initiative broadened its mission to deliver marriage education services to the general population. Leaders decided on a “multi-sector approach” with both a secular and a faith-based track. Public Strategies, Inc., a for-profit public relations/public affairs firm, was awarded the contract to manage the initiative. It originally received funding from the Burbage Foundation, a non-profit “pro-family” organization, to organize the governor’s conference. The initiative was also funded with \$10 million by the Oklahoma Department of Human Services and managed by Public Strategies.

Keating’s initial goal of divorce reduction shifted as leaders dealt with the difficulty of evaluating the initiative’s success. For example, a research brief stated: “An important issue to consider in any assessment of state-level outcomes is that broad societal change in the culture of marriage is likely to take time to emerge” (Pardue 2008). The president of Public Strategies, Mary Myrick, referred to a change in the initiative’s goal:

The initiative really started out of a response to our high divorce rate. That was the impetus that sort of got the idea in play. But as we began to think and plan what we wanted to do about that, it actually shifted some in its mission from sort of a divorce intervention strategy to a marriage strengthening activity. We began to see divorce as one of the outcomes that we might want to measure, but decided that there were some limitations to divorce as the only measure of our success.

An essential component of the epistemic culture of marriage promotion, therefore, was finding a mechanism to measure and determine success. Although the divorce rate had already been falling in Oklahoma even before the launch of the initiative, it seemed unlikely that it would decrease by the substantial one-third Keating had made as his goal. Evaluating success based on “marriage strengthening,” however, offered a nebulous indicator. Thus, leaders turned to general research on the benefits of marriage to justify policy, taking the focus away from specific objectives.

While the initiative offered marriage education to the general population, it also began to prioritize low-income families but especially poor single mothers. Director Howard Hendrick explained to me that the goal of strengthening marriage links to a “focus on improving the prevalence of children being reared in two-parent households.” He noted that Oklahoma had received a significant earned bonus from the TANF program for raising the number of children being raised in a two-parent household by two percentage points in 2003. I asked whether this increase was in married households, and after a long pause, he admitted to not knowing the answer. I then asked whether the goal was to encourage people to marry or create healthier relationships. He answered that the goal was for them to marry, and he turned to social scientific data to specify why: “Even in the Fragile Families Study [a longitudinal study of 5,000 children, three-quarters of whom are born to unmarried parents] the results show that couples who marry and get divorced have better outcomes for their kids than couples who never marry.” Differences in income, age, and years of education are correlated with more negative outcomes for children of never-married parents over divorced

parents; yet, Hendrick's rationale specifies marriage. In this way, leaders relied on claims of a strong causal relationship between marriage and poverty to justify policy implementation.

Offering marriage education to welfare recipients placed Oklahoma at the center of controversy. Articles appeared in major news outlets where coverage focused on marriage promotion in Oklahoma for single mothers (e.g., Boo 2003; Goldstein 2002). Much of this coverage offered a negative analysis, suggesting that marriage promotion may be proselytizing poor women to marry when it is not in their best interest. Katherine Boo (2003), in her award-winning *New Yorker* article in which she reported on the impact of marriage classes on the lives of two African American women from an Oklahoma housing project, points to the limits of marriage promotion. She recounts how structural and economic barriers were reminders that "there are many things besides being single that make it blisteringly difficult to bootstrap oneself up from places like Sooner Haven [the housing project]."

In the face of such criticism, leaders relied on social science research to stress the importance of the married two-parent family to a healthy economy and society. Social science ideas both helped make their case and allowed them to manage a controversial public image of promoting policies that were ideologically driven and/or religiously motivated. One of the initiative employees explained:

I just think that the positive effects of marriage, the research has shown and stuff, and it all goes back to the kids. I've seen a lot of negative effects from people breaking up, and divorces, and I don't think anyone will ever say that divorce is a happy thing or is a good thing. I don't think you'll ever find anyone who says it's a fun thing to do. That's why I always think...try to enhance people's marriages.

Thus, leaders consolidated an epistemic culture built on the idea that research unquestionably leads to the conclusion of the positive effect of marriage promotion policies.

The initiative also conducted its own baseline survey to collect comprehensive information about attitudes and behavior related to marriage, divorce, and marital quality in Oklahoma. Between September 2001 and January 2002, the Bureau for Social Research at Oklahoma State University conducted telephone interviews of two samples totaling 2,323 adults age 18 years or older. The researchers found, for example, that Oklahomans marry and divorce more than the nation as a whole, and Oklahomans average age of marriage is 2.5 years younger than the national median age at first marriage. Perhaps most importantly, the survey found strong public support for a marriage initiative: 85 % of Oklahomans thought that an initiative to "promote marriage and reduce divorce" would be a good/very good idea, providing legitimacy to the marriage promotion policy.

Building an epistemic culture based on strong causal reasoning gave justification to offer marriage-related services to the general population, and to target other segments through the existing state systems as well as the private sector. Initiative officials named this the "Service Delivery System," targeting three key public agencies: the State Department of Health, the Cooperative Extension Service at the Oklahoma State University, and the OKDHS. The goal has been to train state employees and volunteer community members to offer free marriage workshops throughout the state. By 2007, the initiative reported training 2,277 individuals to deliver marriage education workshops and these workshop leaders delivered an estimated 7,078 workshops, ranging from 1-day events to a series of weekly meetings (Dion et al. 2008). As discussed above, the number of no-cost workshops offered to the general population represents a significant diversion of TANF funds away from needy families to provide free services to middle-class couples.

## Public Policy Networks

Building an epistemic culture to inform marriage promotion policies brought together a coalition of social scientists, think tank researchers, religious and civic leaders, public officials, family therapists, educators, and others to form an epistemic community (Haas 1992). Religious leaders were the more prominent players in the beginning stages, shaping the focus of the initiative to reach out to religious communities. Jerry Regier, for example, was particularly influential in launching the initiative and alerting Keating to the research on family formation. Regier had long been involved in conservative Christian politics, founding and serving as the first President of the Family Research Council in 1983, a conservative Christian think tank in Washington, D.C. that has organized against lesbian and gay rights, feminism and abortion.<sup>5</sup> Religious leaders dominated the initial steering committee where three of the initial six representatives were from conservative Christian churches or organizations. A prominent example was the executive director of the Oklahoma Family Policy Council, a non-profit organization that has been a central clearinghouse for anti-gay and lesbian campaigns in Oklahoma.

Also, in the beginning stages, the marriage initiative appointed Drs. Les and Leslie Parrott as “Marriage Ambassadors” in Oklahoma. They co-directed the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific University, a Christian liberal arts college, and thus were important links between religious based movements and academic oriented epistemologies. The Parrotts served as Scholars in Residence at Oklahoma State University and traveled the state speaking on college campuses, training married couples as mentors for the newly married, and writing a short book entitled *Building Better Marriages in Oklahoma*. All of these activities focused time and resources on gaining the support of faith-based groups for the initiative.

In the next phase, the marriage initiative began to involve different sectors of the state to initiate activities to support marriage. To gain legitimacy and seek guidance, leaders created an interdisciplinary Research Advisory Group (RAG) in 2000 composed of a panel of academic scholars (including sociologists Norval Glenn, Steven Nock, and Kathryn Edin), practitioners and researchers, and policy experts. Mary Myrick, president of Public Strategies, describes the strategy that RAG decided upon:

We began to think that it was such a big problem with so many stakeholders that if we didn't build a common system like the Service Delivery System that the sectors would never interface with one another, and we felt like the problem was big enough to really require a systemic kind of change that it was going to need to be managed over a long period of time.

The leaders first held a 1-day orientation for high-level senior administrators and key community leaders, with national experts presenting on marriage research. Next, they began offering 2-day staff development meetings “for ‘gatekeepers,’ agency staff and community leaders (such as pastors) who were not in a position to deliver workshops, but were able to refer couples” (Myrick and Ooms 2002). Finally, the initiative sponsored 3-day training workshops for state employees and other volunteers. After reviewing relationship curricula,

<sup>5</sup> Family Research Council (FRC): <http://www.frc.org/about-frc>. In 2010, the Southern Poverty Law Center named FRC as one of 13 organizations considered a hate group based on their “propagation of known falsehoods—claims about [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] people.” In response, FRC published an ad in the print editions of the *Washington Examiner* and *Politico* that was co-signed by 22 members of Congress (<http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/news/splc-adds-family-research-council-to-hate-groups-list>).

the initiative chose the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) as the core service to promote marriage education in the state. The justification given for choosing PREP was “its strong grounding in research” (Myrick and Ooms 2002). Over time, the main thrust of the initiative became offering the PREP curriculum (or its Christian version) to “as many Oklahomans as possible,” in the words of one marriage initiative leader.

Building social networks of individuals who agreed on the research concerning the negative consequences of family “breakdown” solidified the epistemic culture of the marriage initiative. Leaders pointed to social science research concerning family structure, to public policy concerns, and to conservative economic and moral values for legitimation. Many government employees and other actors who started off less convinced were eventually won over. As one social services supervisor with the OKDHS told me:

I was assigned to go [to the information meeting on the marriage initiative] as a worker at the time. At the beginning of the meeting, I got to visit with a gentleman from the Brookings Institute who...he and I discussed the initiative. To tell you the truth, going into it I was a pretty skeptical individual. I didn't believe we had a chance in the world that we could come up with something that could make a major positive impact on people's lives. I followed up with researching this online with Brookings Institute and all of their policy papers, and I came out with a pretty positive outlook because of the people I met, just in those 2 hours at that meeting.

This supervisor ultimately helped to facilitate PREP workshops for welfare recipients.

Another supervisor gave a similar story about being reluctant at first and having some fears (although not all) alleviated through discussing the program with one of the marriage and poverty experts that the initiative brought on:

Okay, so how did I get involved in it? I will say reluctantly. It wasn't like an assignment that I said hell, no, I won't go, but what I did say was let me be a part of it, but as a qualifier, because of my concern ... with why are we doing this; are you sure we're not cramming something down poor people's families, down their throats. What are we doing here? Fortunately, very early on, and to their credit, Public Strategies brought Theodora Ooms on. And Theodora is the expert working with families in poverty in a policy context at a national level. I wasn't immediately won over, but at the same time, because more of it was a wait and see, and a lot of that [concern] is probably still in the background.

Thus, even those who were highly skeptical in the initial stages were increasingly won over as experts were brought in to disseminate the research on marriage, poverty, and family formation. Whereas religious leaders were as convinced by moral justifications as they were by research, leaders in the public sector like Director Howard Hendrick and other public sector employees were more likely to be won over by research alone. Building an epistemic culture meant disseminating selective research findings to a broad population.

A core group of OKDHS employees came on board and offered the PREP workshops in a variety of public sector venues, including the orientation for TANF recipients. One employee described how she was known among her staff as the “Queen of PREP” because she had done more workshops than anyone else in the state. When I interviewed the coordinator for the marriage initiative in 2004, she told me that the Department of Health had met its goal of conducting 200 workshops, but that it was met only because some clinicians conducted twenty or more workshops. Others, she pointed out, either did not conduct any or very few. She stated:

Some of them felt...um...like they were pushed into the training, you know, that that wasn't something that they would have done. Other people just said that in recruiting



to have the workshops, they had lots and lots of issues, especially in the rural areas, trying to get groups together. In the metropolitan areas, we had some of that too.

Thus, a number of government employees resisted being forced to conduct PREP workshops. Still, while not all clinicians were convinced by the philosophy of the marriage initiative, overall its epistemic culture became a legitimate state policy as more and more leaders, public officials, and community volunteers signed on and worked together to offer PREP workshops.

## Conclusion

In instituting a statewide marriage initiative, much work needed to be done to create an epistemic culture that would offer legitimacy to the untested government policy of marriage promotion. At first, the marriage initiative focused efforts on church leaders and religious organizations that were likely to be the most sympathetic to the philosophy of promoting marriage to strengthen the moral and social order and build a more economically prosperous state. Marriage initiative leaders realized early on, however, that broader efforts would need to be made to “sell” the initiative to Oklahomans, and to make it into a viable and sustainable policy. To accomplish this, leaders worked to create an epistemic culture through the mechanisms of connecting the public to the extant epistemology of marriage, articulating social-scientific research “sound bites” as justification and to downplay controversy, and building public policy networks to form an epistemic community of support for marriage promotion.

As the marriage initiative formed, leaders became well versed in social science research on family formation and were able to offer justification for an untested new policy based on strong causal arguments. Leaders consistently referred to research as “proof” of the superiority of the married two-parent, heterosexual family, repeating sound-bite facts as universally agreed upon and overstating the consensus of family demographers. Over time, the dissemination of expert knowledge won over OKDHS employees and other actors who had been skeptical at first. Thus, the initiative was able to branch out farther than would have been possible by simply targeting religious leaders to sign a covenant or by funding a media campaign. Also important to its ability to branch out to the general population was the initiative’s ability to tap into an epistemology that idealizes the two-parent, married, heterosexual family. Some of this knowledge builds on the mythology of a nostalgic past during the “golden years” of intact, married, heterosexual family life. As Coontz (1992/2000) has argued, these myths fail to place contemporary family dilemmas in the context of far-reaching economic, political, and demographic changes. The epistemology of marriage also connects to the commonsense idea of heterosexual marriage as a Judeo-Christian moral construct. Thus, the moral mission of the initiative—to promote heterosexual marriage as the gold standard for all relationships—was made less controversial.

The epistemic culture of marriage promotion in Oklahoma is connected to a public policy debate that arose with the publication of social scientist Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report on the “tangle of pathology” of the black family and unites politicians and intellectuals across a diverse range of political views. Moynihan’s statement that “at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family” foreshadowed the words of Vice President Dan Quayle during the 1992 campaign. Whereas Moynihan, a Democrat, focused his report on a liberal agenda to fight against rising rates of black male unemployment, Quayle, a Republican, sought to push a

conservative strategy to dismantle welfare as a system that encourages “dependency and subsidizes broken families.”<sup>6</sup> Quayle’s speech became infamous for his comments on Murphy Brown, a sitcom character played by Candice Bergen who as a *white* single professional decides to have a baby. He castigated the sitcom character of Murphy Brown for “mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another ‘lifestyle choice.’” His words mark an important shift in the discourse on the “pathology” of black families to concerns over the “breakdown” of white families.

In a 1993 newspaper essay political scientist Charles Murray, the W.H. Brady Chair at the American Enterprise Institute, explained that a new “post-racial” narrative had designated the “black story” old news, instead decrying the emergence of a “white underclass” in which whites accounted for the most people living in poverty, the most unwed childbearing, and the most women on welfare. His recent book, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (Murray 2012), makes explicit the argument that a new white lower working class that defies “traditional” American values has grown in size, to the point where “America is coming apart at the seams” (12).<sup>7</sup> Murray argues that an increasing gap in behavior and values is dividing America not along racial but along class lines, where the lower classes have children without marrying, lack industriousness, perpetuate crime, and abandon religion. He criticizes the hypocrisy of members of the white upper class who refuse to proselytize the values they practice of hard work and bearing children after marriage due to their liberal politics. For Murray, remedying the growing divide in America will require liberals “to stop claiming that the traditional family is just one of many equally valid alternatives. They will have to acknowledge that the traditional family plays a special, indispensable role in human flourishing and that social policy must be based on that truth” (300). The extensive media coverage and wide dissemination of this book’s arguments on the importance of the nuclear, married, heterosexual family will likely offer further justification for building epistemic cultures of marriage promotion in the U.S. based on a synthesis of social scientific and culturally conservative thinking.

Politicians and policymakers in Oklahoma were able to take advantage of the growing concern over the “coming apart” of family in America to legitimize marriage promotion policy by transcending partisan and polarized racial political debate. Leaders relied on social science research and strong causal reasoning to build policy based on “proof” that the married two-parent family fosters the best environment to raise children. Building social networks, leaders cast their net wide to partner with conservative Christian leaders, disseminating a moral message about marriage, and with more liberal-minded researchers and policy-analysts, such as Theodora Ooms, who offered a more complex perspective on the relationship between poverty and marriage. Ooms, for example, advocates for a policy direction that she has called “marriage plus,” meaning that efforts to promote marriage should combine economic resources and noneconomic support for unmarried mothers. Rector et al. (2003) of the Heritage Foundation criticized the idea of marriage plus as a way “to cripple the [marriage] initiative by siphoning off limited marriage funds into traditional government activities that have little or nothing to do with marriage.” Forming policy based on social science research and invigorating an epistemic community allowed leaders of the initiative in Oklahoma to form an epistemic culture connected to a broader knowledge culture of marriage promotion policy at the national level.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Quayle’s speech was delivered May 19, 1992 at the Commonwealth Club of California. [http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/speeches\\_StandingFirm\\_CCC\\_1.html](http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/speeches_StandingFirm_CCC_1.html). Accessed 1 November 2012.

<sup>7</sup> In *Coming Apart*, Murray largely abandons the term “underclass.”

Applying the concept of epistemic culture to the study of policymaking illuminates the mechanisms involved in forming and implementing potentially controversial policies. James Davison Hunter (1991) argued that controversy in policymaking and politics has to do with competing conceptions of morality based on a culture war that pits traditionalists, who define truth in connection to an absolute, external, often religiously-based authority, against progressives, who view truth as contingent and constantly in flux. While theorists who prioritize the clash of cultural values have uncovered important features of policy formation, I have introduced the concept of epistemic culture to shine light on the mechanisms that facilitate the mixing of cultural values and research knowledge to bridge controversy and unite social actors in creating and implementing controversial policies. Even as significant actors may continue to disagree, the consolidation of an epistemic culture diminishes the power of such dissent.

Studying the mechanisms of epistemic cultures in other arenas offers opportunities to illuminate the ways that knowledge is practiced across different empirical contexts and the importance of different approaches to knowledge formation (Benzecry and Krause 2010). Science and Technology Studies has invigorated the field of the sociology of knowledge, bringing scholars together who are interested in how scientists come to “know” the natural world and in studying the role of technology in everyday life from a constructivist perspective (Zammito 2007). Karin Knorr-Cetina has branched out from her earlier pioneering work on science to do research on other areas of social life, including the study of epistemic cultures in the financial world (Knorr-Cetina and Preda 2004). My analysis of the specific mechanisms for an epistemic culture of marriage promotion extends this theory to the policy arena.

This theoretical focus can shed light on the knowledge practices in other areas of policy. Epistemic cultures, as is the case of the marriage initiative in Oklahoma, offer specific discursive sites through which we can study internal processes of legitimation that rely on social-scientific knowledge and practice. That said, the particular mechanisms, and the relationship between a specific epistemic culture and broader knowledge cultures, will likely differ across issues and institutional arrangements. One example of a good application of this concept would be to study think tank-affiliated experts, and how they understand and talk about their own role, as well as formulating the elements of knowledge construction central to their mission (Medvetz 2010). Other potential policy arenas for considering the ways that epistemic cultures offer legitimacy and evade and downplay controversy include policies of abstinence and sex education, policies and legislation for and against lesbian and gay rights (such as the right to marry), local and state policies for and against abortion, policies on AIDS, among others.

Theorizing local epistemic cultures, specifically those focused on one site, has the advantage of offering a meso-level analysis of policy formation that can be theorized within the macro-contexts of social meaning and policy debate (Benzecry and Krause 2010). Comparative analyses may also be useful to understand how epistemic cultures form in varying national contexts, such as comparative empirical research on social and welfare policy formation in the United States and Europe, and differences in epistemic cultures of policy formation in developed and developing worlds (Knorr Cetina 2005). Rather than analyze these processes within a limited framework of national culture, theorizing epistemic cultures at the local and meso-level offers the advantage of empirically uncovering different mechanisms in the construction of knowledge and in claims-making processes. Such meso-level research will allow us to be more sensitive to the interiorized processes of varying epistemic settings. If social authority structures knowledge, we need to theorize how particular practices are instituted in different knowledge settings (Swidler and Arditi

1994). I show that applying the concept of epistemic cultures to the policy arena is a fruitful direction to theorize the connection between ideational processes and policy formation.

**Acknowledgments** I want to thank to Neil McLaughlin for his helpful comments on this article. Thanks also to editor David Smilde and to three anonymous reviewers for their time and input. The research this article draws on was funded by a dissertation grant from the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California.

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**Melanie Heath** is an assistant professor of sociology at McMaster University, Ontario. She is the author of *One Marriage under God: The Campaign to Promote Marriage in America* (New York: UP, 2012).