SEXUAL MISGIVINGS: Producing Un/Marked Knowledge in Neoliberal Marriage Promotion Policies

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This article draws on what Brekhus has called "the sociology of the unmarked" to illuminate the construction of knowledge in the debate over heterosexual marriage's significance in society. It conducts a qualitative content analysis of archival data written by marriage advocates from 1990 to 2010 and finds that marriage advocates use discourses that incorporate unmarked assumptions concerning heterosexuality and marked knowledge about single motherhood and same-sex marriage that is linked to neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility and self-reliant family life. This article uncovers how cultural battles over marriage's significance are connected to a neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility, negotiated through boundary work that marks single motherhood and same-sex marriage as in need of special consideration.

Scholars of sexuality have noted the historical coincidence of the passage of laws in 1996 regarding "two seemingly contradictory threats to the American body politic: poor, presumably heterosexual, single mothers who fail to marry, and same-sex couples, presumed to be economically privileged, who seek to marry" (Cahill 2005:170). In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), also known as welfare reform, which fundamentally changed the nation's welfare system to replace the federal entitlement program for low-income families with state-administered block grants. In the same year, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defined marriage as a union of a man and a woman, and gave states the right to refuse recognition of same-sex marriages performed in other states. While a Republican-led Congress passed the bills, it was Democratic president Bill Clinton who signed them into law, demonstrating bipartisan support. The goals of these two laws appear to be at cross purposes—PRWORA promotes marriage as "the foundation of a successful society"; this would suggest that allowing lesbians and gay men to marry would be beneficial to society. Meanwhile, until June 2013, DOMA barred lesbians and gay men from marriage's benefits, even in states that had legalized same-sex marriage.

What motivated this apparent paradox? The answer can be found in the underlying assumption of PRWORA that posits *heterosexual* marriage to be good for society. Once the assumption of heterosexuality is made visible, the paradox is solved. The laws have compatible goals to promote and strengthen a particular kind of marriage grounded

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in the reproductive, nuclear family, and to exclude lesbians and gay men from the institution.

This article draws on what Brekhus (1998) has called "the sociology of the unmarked" to illuminate the construction of knowledge in the debate over heterosexual marriage's significance in society. Specifically, I address the question of how knowledge producers—professional knowledge specialists situated mostly outside the academy (Camic, Gross, and Lamont 2011)—exercise their influence on what counts as knowledge based on *social markedness*, knowledge that conveys special interest, and *social unmarkedness*, knowledge that is ordinary and commonplace (Brekhus 2007).

Based on qualitative content analysis of archival data written by marriage advocates from 1990 to 2010, I find that these actors use discourses that incorporate unmarked assumptions concerning heterosexuality linked to neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility and self-reliant family life. Neoliberalism argues for the necessity of shifting economic power and control from governments to private markets, and for economic policies tied to market deregulation, trade liberalization, and reduced government spending on entitlements. The neoliberalism of the 1980s and 1990s dramatically challenged the liberalism of the period following the Great Depression and World War II, which offered a greater economic role for governments in social spending, market regulation, welfarism, and unionism (Centeno and Cohen 2012). In the United States, neoliberal policies promote paid employment as the basis for social rights and favor marriage as a care structure that reduces state responsibility to support the vulnerable and needy (Whitehead 2011; Lavee and Offer 2012). Marriage advocates rely on unmarked knowledge to legitimate and depoliticize the potentially contentious issue of what is known as "marriage promotion"—the idea that promoting and strengthening marriage can work as a solution to reduce poverty among impoverished single mothers (Randles 2012; Heath 2012b). The concept of same-sex marriage acts as a marked parallel to the unmarked, generic concept of marriage with its implicit assumption of heterosexuality.

In the following, after introducing the theoretical perspective of un/markedness and the history of marriage promotion, I analyze how cultural battles over marriage's significance are connected to a neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility and are negotiated through boundary work that marks single motherhood and same-sex marriage as in need of special consideration. I further examine the ways that the production of marked knowledge renders heterosexuality as the unremarkable norm.

MARKING KNOWLEDGE IN THE CRITICAL STUDY OF HETEROSEXUALITY

The sociology of the unmarked is rooted in a tradition of cognitive sociology concerned with sociocultural factors that drive human thought. Brekhus (1998) used the term to draw attention to the problematic tendency in sociology to focus its research agenda on phenomena marked as social problems, such as violence in the inner city marked as male and black, compared to unmarked social phenomena, such as in the case of research on serial killers where the significance of whiteness is often not

addressed. This pattern of knowledge construction in sociology reflects a broader cognitive structure in meaning-making where social unmarkedness depends on its parallel, social markedness, the first being understood as ordinary and unremarkable (the semiotically unmarked), and the second as special and even astonishing (the semiotically marked) (Zerubavel 1997; Brekhus 1998).

Classification is a key element of the social marking process, and sociologists such as Michele Lamont (2001) and Judith Howard (2000) have focused attention on the way that power plays a central role in the symbolic and political manifestations of classificatory systems and differentiation. Lamont, in particular, has theorized the importance of boundary work in creating mental maps that result in symbolic boundaries. Lamont and Molnár (2002:171) argue that "typification systems or inferences concerning similarities and differences" facilitate an institutionalized definition of membership. The concepts of *markedness* and *unmarkedness* elucidate the boundary-making processes that distinguish an explicit social category as either positive or negative and push other categories in the background as unremarkable.

Research on the political dimensions of producing marked knowledge uncovers the important role that controversy can play, where the boundary issues between knowledge, politics, and policy are contested and visible rather than in the background and invisible (Jasanoff 1996, 2005). Cognitive structures in boundary work are subject to ongoing negotiation and struggle (Laqueur 1990; Zerubavel 1997; Fuller 2003). By examining the socio-cultural components of discrimination and classification and the creation of what Zerubavel (1991:21) has called "islands of meaning" that involve processes of grouping items into mental clusters, cognitive sociologists have shown how boundaries can be highly contested and facilitate struggles over social relations in general. The sociology of the unmarked can make visible what is often taken for granted in such controversies. It calls for the need to recognize how being white, heterosexual, middle-class, male, and nonelderly influences power and knowledge.

This article examines the importance of the marked and the unmarked specifically concerning heterosexuality and its relation to marriage. The critical study of heterosexuality emerged in the late 1990s as an important alternative to the once dominant deviance model for studying sexuality (Ingraham 1999, 2005). While theoretical frameworks such as labeling theory shed light on the nominal construction of "the homosexual" and its relation to determining "normal" and "deviant" sexuality (see McIntosh 1968), these approaches have often failed to elucidate the systems of knowledge that produce heterosexuality and its dominance in relation to other sexualities (Namaste 1994; Stein and Plummer 1994). Critical heterosexuality studies calls into question taken-for-granted understandings of heterosexuality as coherent, and investigates its multiple meanings, institutional arrangements, and hierarchies (Heath 2009, 2012b).

Past research has illuminated the ways that theorizing the social processes of producing the marked and unmarked are important to understanding sexual identities and structures. An example is the transformation of what was once seen as "the problem of homosexuality" into "the problem of heterosexism" (Kitzinger 2005:477).

This move to study the concept of heterosexuality as a system of discrimination reflects a general trend in recent years to turn a critical eye on unmarked categories—including heterosexuality, masculinity, and whiteness—that assume a normative and unremarkable character in everyday life.

Research has also shed light on the ways that historical processes and national identities shape the relationship between the marked and unmarked. Jonathan Ned Katz (1996) offers historical perspective on the emergence of the concept of heterosexuality from the dark shadows of the nineteenth-century medical world to become a common category. By the end of the 1920s, "the heterosexual" had become part of dominant culture, in tandem with the public entrance of the concept of "the homosexual." As the concept of heterosexuality became the dominant category of sexual identity and development, it eventually receded into the background, and the marked category of homosexuality became something to scrutinize and control. Studying the social construction of identities, Stein (2001) examined how individuals in a small Oregon community negotiated identity boundaries when faced with civic disputes involving lesbian and gay rights and who counts as "the stranger next door." In this article, I examine the importance of marked and unmarked knowledge over a controversial policy that seeks to promote marriage to strengthen American society.

THE HISTORY OF MARRIAGE PROMOTION IN THE UNITED STATES

Since the mid-1990s, the symbolic meaning of marriage has been contested in the United States. At the heart of these disputes is the question of the social consequences of changing family structure, including legal recognition of same-sex relationships, the rise in divorce and single motherhood, and the impact of unwed childbearing on welfare "dependency." Intimate relationships in the United States have since the 1960s gone through significant reconfiguration. For example, rates of marriage have declined, divorce rates have fallen slightly after reaching a high of nearly 50 percent (Hackstaff 1999), and single parenthood, remarriage, and "blended families" are now routine (Amato 2000). Lesbians and gay men are opting into parenthood in increasing numbers and seeking legal sanction of their families, fueling the so-called "gayby boom"—the trend of gay men and lesbians becoming parents that began in the 1980s (Dunne 2000). These transformations in intimate life coincide with public policies that increasingly privilege neoliberal principles of individual responsibility, self-reliance, private ownership, and reduced dependence on social structures like the welfare state.

In response to these transformations, a coalition of academics, religious and civic leaders, public officials, family therapists, educators, researchers, and others founded a grassroots national marriage movement at the turn of the 21st century. Early manifestations of the movement in mid-20th century include the National Council of Family Relations (NCFR), with its focus on family research, and the marriage preparation programs of the Catholic Church. Building from these early efforts, a number of programs emerged in the 1970s, including Howard Markman's foundational research on marital distress that became the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP).

By the mid-1990s, marriage and fatherhood organizations had begun to emerge to promote marriage and "responsible" fatherhood, including Smart Marriages, the National Fatherhood Initiative, the Promise Keepers, and Marriage Savers. In 2000, the marriage movement brought numerous actors together to mobilize for revitalizing and promoting a marriage culture.

The movement involves a network of policy-oriented and academic organizations, including the Institute for American Values (IAV), whose president is David Blankenhorn, author of *Fatherless America* (1995) and *The Future of Marriage* (2007), and the National Marriage Project, a research and public education initiative. Diane Sollee, a family therapist, founded the Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education (CMFCE) in 1996, a clearinghouse for the movement that sponsors the annual Smart Marriages conference to bring together those interested in rebuilding a marriage culture. The final 14th conference was held in 2010, and the National Association for Relationship and Marriage Education (NARME) was formed with the mission of disseminating the instruction of marriage and relationship education, the idea that basic principles can be taught to strengthen and promote marriage.

During the George W. Bush administration, promoting and strengthening marriage became one of the nine priorities for the Administration of Children and Families (ACF), and the Assistant Secretary for ACF, Wade Horn, launched the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative. After much controversy, the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act reauthorized welfare. The Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Act established a new grant program to fund "healthy marriage" and "responsible fatherhood" programs. Funding for programs has meant substantial growth in activities across the nation to promote and strengthen marriage and has continued under the Obama administration when Congress approved $75 million of its proposed Fatherhood, Marriage, and Family Innovation Fund in 2011.

Many actors and organizations promote marriage with a goal of reestablishing the boundaries of sexual relations and childbearing within the confines of heterosexual marriage. Thus, these marriage advocates promote marriage because they have the moral conviction that it creates a better society and is the best kind of family (Cherlin 2003). For them, not just any marriage will do. Instead, they argue, the morally superior family joins one man and one woman to raise their biological children. Central to the project of marriage promotion is boundary work that relies on an *assumptive heterosexuality*, such as in the example of the apparent paradox between PRWORA and DOMA discussed in the introduction to this article. Thus, boundary work is key in understanding cultural conflicts concerning the marriage debate.

Marriage advocates perform boundary work based on marked categories of single mothers and same-sex marriage that allows heterosexual marriage to maintain its position as natural and unquestioned. Actors who promote marriage rely on abstract and invisible knowledge concerning a hierarchy of sexualities that establish abnormal and deviant forms (Rubin 1984). That is, promoting heterosexual marriage relies on boundary work that positions the "normal" in relation to the "abnormal." In this article, I argue that marriage advocates use social scientific evidence to mark single

mothers as deviant, making visible the marked category of welfare "dependency" to promote marriage among poor women in the context of unmarked knowledge about the procreative, heterosexual family as the appropriate institution for managing life's dependencies of poverty, childhood, aging, illness, and death. While the marriage movement has predominantly sought to distance itself from the same-sex marriage debate, its ability to treat marriage as if it were fundamentally heterosexual depends on the marked status of same-sex marriage as something outside marriage's universal definition. In this way, marriage promotion is a hybrid project that brings together a neoliberal ideal of personal responsibility, marking single mothers—particularly poor women of color—as "not quite heterosexual," and a nostalgic vision of the married, nuclear family where dominant concepts of heterosexuality are shadowed by the menace of same-sex marriage.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study comprise an extensive body of archival materials ranging from the years 1990 to 2010. I began collecting major articles, reports, and statements written by marriage advocates in 2004 to complement my fieldwork as part of a broad ethnography to study a statewide marriage initiative (Heath 2012b). I joined the Smart Marriages listserv and received daily e-mails about all relevant materials relating to marriage promotion. In 2004, the ACF established the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, which acts as a clearinghouse for resources and information on marriage promotion. I conducted searches on this database to fill in any gaps in my archival data.

The data collected include two major position statements issued from the marriage movement in 2000 and 2004, marriage-related reports, news items and opinion pieces, books, and position statements published or promoted by leading movement organizations, including the Institute for American Values, the National Marriage Project, the National Fatherhood Institute, and the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy. Reports were included from left-leaning/centrist organizations, such as the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and the Brookings Institution, and from right-leaning ones, including the Family Research Council and the Heritage Foundation. Congressional hearings for welfare reform reauthorization between 2002 and 2005 were included, offering expert testimony on marriage promotion. Sampling includes articles that address at least one of the following goals of the marriage movement: marriage as an antipoverty strategy, the need to renew a marriage culture, and the importance of government policies to promote/strengthen marriage. News articles addressing these goals and/or controversies are also included. I sampled three prominent books based on their citations in the rest of the sample: Blankenhorn (2007), Hymowitz (2006), and Waite and Gallagher (2000). Altogether, the data comprise a total of 140 publications. There were relatively few documents to analyze from 1990 to 1999 before the marriage movement issued its first statement, and many of the more prominent reports and statements were published in the earliest years, from 2000 to 2006. The founding of NARME in 2010 has narrowed the scope to focus more on marriage and relationship

education. My sample comprises documents up to and including the NARME statement of 2010.[1] It includes news items and opinion pieces up to 2012.

In addition to the archival data, I attended two Smart Marriages conferences in 2003 and 2004, an annual gathering of movement leaders and marriage education practitioners that, until 2010, was sponsored by the CMFCE. The Coalition formed to advance the field of marriage education. The first Smart Marriages conference in 1997 drew about 400 attendees, and participation rose steadily over the next several years, with attendance in 2006 reaching 2,263 (Smart Marriages 2006). The conference offered plenary sessions featuring prominent activists, movement leaders, and marriage experts, and smaller workshop/seminar sessions that relate to important issues of marriage-related subjects. I analyzed transcripts of 21 sessions at the 2003 conference and 20 sessions at the 2004 conference.

The data were gathered and analyzed consistent with the constant comparative method for systematic qualitative content analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Thematic codes were not predetermined but emerged from the data in the process of reviewing and comparing the articles and reports and conference field notes. In conducting my analysis, I did a systematic comparison of broad themes that receive more attention and are more carefully scrutinized by the movement (unwed childbearing, single mothers) with those that are not (same-sex marriage). All data were coded using a qualitative software program, Atlas.ti (Berlin, Germany), searching for references regarding prescriptive understandings of marriage, gender, and sexuality. I used Atlas.ti to code all documents, and I hand coded the three books. To analyze the construction of marked and unmarked knowledge, I first coded broad themes and then identified subthemes (see Table 1 for frequency and number of times a theme/subtheme appeared). After coding, I analyzed the documents to capture the role of unmarked categories—such as heterosexuality, whiteness, and masculinity—in the construction of knowledge about marriage. I also paid close attention to the relationship between more and less prevalent codes to examine the relationship between marked and unmarked knowledge.

This analysis of marriage movement documents shines a light on the ways that knowledge is constructed regarding the movement's identity, goals, and conflicts. I examine official documents to uncover the ways that the marriage movement employs marked and unmarked knowledge to justify the need to rebuild a marriage culture and to deal with controversy. In the following, I analyze the evolution of marked knowledge concerning single mothers and same-sex marriage that enables heterosexuality to remain hidden in the dominant understandings of the need to promote marriage.

MARKING POOR WOMEN IN A SYSTEM OF NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE

Fraser and Gordon (1994:311) argue that the term "welfare dependency" emerged in the 1980s as a racially-coded term to mean "the welfare mother," often understood as "a young, unmarried black woman (perhaps even a teenager) of uncontrolled sexuality." Under Reagan, the language of welfare dependency had been connected to an understanding of the "welfare queen" who was promiscuous, immoral, and cheated the

TABLE 1. Theme and Subtheme Frequency and Number of Documents

Themes and Subthemes*	Frequency	# Documents
Class	701	125
Family formation	1201	125
Gender	670	120
Marriage	1507	140
Neoliberalism	268	87
Public/Welfare Policy	623	99
Race	150	115
Sexuality	199	69
Single motherhood	930	100
Advantages of nuclear family structure	840	89
Culture of poverty	86	35
Deviance/social problems	735	85
Fear of deinstitutionalization	80	43
Importance of personal responsibility	304	75
Racial stereotypes	35	15
Same-sex marriage debates	75	20
Use of social science evidence	983	123
Value of marriage	930	125

*Subthemes are indented.

system. Single motherhood became a marked category of deviance and sexual turpitude. In the 1990s, marriage advocates built on this language of overt moralizing to focus on social scientific findings which they claim demonstrates a causal relationship between single motherhood, poverty, and ultimately poor childhood outcomes (Stacey 1996; Heath 2012a).

In the early 1990s, Dan Quayle triggered a national controversy in his now-famous speech during the reelection bid of President George H. W. Bush in which he criticizes the TV character Murphy Brown for discounting the importance of fathers in the character's glorification of unwed childbearing. Quayle's comments on fatherlessness set the stage for arguments of the marriage movement concerning the importance of marriage to combat poverty. In his 1992 speech at the San Francisco Commonwealth Club, he states:

> A welfare check is not a husband, the state is not a father. It is from parents that children learn how to behave in society. . . . And for those who are concerned about children growing up in poverty, we should know this—marriage is probably the best anti-poverty program of all. (Quayle 1992 in Cohen 2008:451*)[2]

Quayle's words mark poor mothers on welfare for turning to the state for support. He suggests that single mothers are misguided in their sexual conduct because they lack a breadwinner and a father who can properly socialize their children as gendered beings to contribute to civil society.

Building on the key themes of dependency and the importance of the biological, two-parent family for positive child outcomes, marriage advocates began garnering social scientific research on the crisis of the divorce and the unwed childbearing "revolutions" (CMFCE, IAV, and RCFP 2000:3*). In her widely read *Atlantic Monthly* article on why Dan Quayle was right, journalist Barbara Dafoe Whitehead (1993*) offers one of the first extensive arguments on the negative impact of unwed childbearing and divorce on children's well-being. She contends that single mothers are vulnerable to a particularly "debilitating form of poverty: welfare dependency:"

> The dependency takes two forms: First, single mothers, particularly unwed mothers, stay on welfare longer than other welfare recipients. Of those never-married mothers who receive welfare benefits, almost 40 percent remain on the rolls for ten years or longer. Second, welfare dependency tends to be passed on from one generation to the next. (Whitehead 1993:62*)

Whitehead links the problem of "dependency" to the increasingly prominent trend in American family life to pursue "greater individual happiness—a lifestyle choice" (p. 84*). While she decries the increasing importance of adult choice, freedom, and happiness that has a negative impact on family structure, Whitehead spells out the importance of intact, heterosexual, reproductive families to neoliberal governance: "The family is responsible for teaching lessons of independence, self-restraint, responsibility, and right conduct, which are essential to a free, democratic society" (Whitehead 1993:84*). David Popenoe (2008:2*), a prominent family sociologist and marriage advocate, describes the emergence of public debate initiated by marriage advocates like Whitehead and based on the idea that "Children are being hurt, fathers are important, and marriage is essential."

Marriage advocates focus on marked knowledge about single motherhood based on social scientific evidence that low-income women who bear children outside marriage will likely also condemn their children to lives of poverty and welfare dependency. This social scientific claim has inspired significant scholarly disagreement, particularly about whether *marriage* itself can reduce poverty (see Manning and Lichter 1996; Lichter, Graefe, and Brown 2003; Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012; for scholars who support the marriage–poverty argument, see Waite and Gallagher 2000*).

The PRWORA law of 1996 drew on this growing literature that argued for a causal link between single-mother families and child poverty, and it ignored other considerable evidence pointing to the importance of national policies in shaping the economic security of single-mother families (Brady and Burroway 2012). Specifying the negative consequences of raising a child in a single-mother family, the law's language focuses on survey findings such as the fact that 9 percent of married (heterosexual) families with children under 18 years of age live below the national poverty level compared to 46 percent of female-headed households with children. This focus on national statistics does not acknowledge cross-national research that documents the importance of policies such as publicly subsidized childcare and paid parental leave in ameliorating the

association of single motherhood and poverty (e.g., Sorensen 1994). PRWORA concentrates on altering the sexual behavior of single mothers through marriage (and work) and thus makes invisible the role of national policy in the economic circumstances of single mother families. It forces poor women to reconcile the competing ideals of workforce participation and their obligations as mothers (Hays 2003; Hennessy 2009).

In 2000, the marriage movement's release of its *Statement of Principles* set out the major premises that motivate the need for renewing a "marriage culture." The statement calls attention to the greater likelihood that children in single-mother families are poor. By the time George W. Bush entered office in 2001, the dominant framework for understanding welfare reform focused on single mothers' marked status as the producers of poverty because of unwed childbearing. Wade Horn, the founder and director of the nonprofit National Fatherhood Initiative, became the Assistant Secretary for the Administration of Children and Families (ACF), making the goal of strengthening marriage one of nine priorities, and in 2002, the ACF launched the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative, with a Web site listing the benefits of healthy marriages for communities taken from an Institute for American Values (2005*) report.[3] The list suggests that society's social problems can be remedied by lowering the rates of single motherhood and divorce, since more marriage leads to lower crime statistics, lower teenage pregnancy rates, lower juvenile delinquency, and decreased need for social services.

Marriage movement documents spell out the ways that the social problems of single motherhood and divorce hurt mainstream society, specifically by costing taxpayers. The movement's initial *Statement of Principles* (CMFCE et al. 2000:11*) makes this argument:

> Divorce and unwed childbearing create substantial public costs, paid by taxpayers. Higher rates of crime, drug abuse, education failure, chronic illness, child abuse, domestic violence, and poverty among both adults and children bring with them higher taxpayer costs in diverse forms: more welfare expenditure; increased remedial and special education expenses; higher day-care subsidies; additional child-support collection costs; . . . and many other similar costs.

The idea that unwed childbearing and divorce is detrimental to taxpayers fits well within the neoliberal logic that frowns on footing the bill for people's "bad choices." Unwed childbearing means greater welfare expenditure, and divorce results in more single mothers who experience economic vulnerability. In both cases, single mothers are marked as unable to raise healthy children without the presence of a father. Situated as unmarked in this reasoning is an idea of "proper" heterosexuality connected to the nuclear family where women wait until they are married to bear children.

The conservative Heritage Foundation marks single mothers as too broken to fix and argues for the need to mend the problem before women have children outside of marriage:

> Most welfare mothers have poor relationships with their children's father: In many cases, the relationship disintegrated long ago. Attempting to promote healthy marriage in these situations is a bit like trying to glue Humpty-Dumpty together after he has fallen off the wall. By contrast, a well-designed marriage initiative would target women and men earlier in their lives when attitudes and relationships were initially being formed. (Rector and Pardue 2004:5*)

The emphasis on voluntary choice fits well within a neoliberal logic that prioritizes individual responsibility and independence, making marriage-promotion activities more palatable to a range of liberals and conservatives. In harmony with the language of PRWORA, the majority of the literature regarding healthy marriages fails to address structural conditions such as low wages that have produced the ongoing feminization of poverty in the United States (Pearce 1978).

Hearings to reauthorize welfare reform, which culminated in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, continued to ignore structural factors and instead fostered language that marked single mothers as perpetuators of poverty. The language of these hearings and related symposiums marks single mothers, and specifically African Americans, for their failure to marry and participate in the civic order that depends on the nuclear, procreative family. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report set the stage for marking black single-mother families, which he characterizes as a "tangle of pathology" (Moynihan 1967:93). Black single motherhood is marked in relation to the unmarked whiteness that is implied by the idea of a healthy nuclear, married family. A 2005 symposium sponsored by the Brookings Institution and Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School brought together more liberal-minded marriage advocates, such as sociologist Kathryn Edin and Brookings Institute senior fellow Isabel Sawhill, to discuss how to overcome barriers to marriage. While this group tended to recognize the need for economic supports to strengthen families among low-income populations, the focus on the problem of unwed childbearing and the view that "the black family is failing" again marked single mothers (and particularly black single mothers) as the key problem. Sawhill, for example, remarks, "I think we need to put more emphasis on reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing. That really is what's driving the problem here. That's what's caused the growth of single-parent families and those are the families that are most disadvantaged and that are struggling the hardest in our economy" (Brookings Institute 2005*).

Another strong voice in favor of the neoliberal idea of lifting poor women out of poverty through marriage has been Manhattan Institute fellow Kay Hymowitz (2006*). She favors a free-market capitalist ideology essential to a "bourgeois normality" for American families based on the American dream, personal freedom, assimilation, and individual responsibility (p. 148*). Explaining the intergenerational transmission of poverty, Hymowitz argues that low-income, single mothers are unprepared to carry out what she calls "The Mission." She explains this to mean:

> [T]he careful nurturing of their children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, which, if all goes according to plan, will lead to the honor roll and a spot on

the high school debate team, which will in turn lead to a good college, then perhaps a graduate or professional degree, which will all lead eventually to a fulfilling career, a big house in a posh suburb, and a sense of meaningful accomplishment. (2006:25*)

In contrast, she argues, young mothers who have children outside marriage condemn their children to a life of perpetual poverty, locked outside the American dream that is made possible by the (white) heterosexual, married, procreative family.

Marriage advocates have attributed nearly all of the explanation for why families experience poverty to changing family structure. The movement's *Statement of Principles*, for example, credits changing family structure for causing 99 percent of poverty among white families and 97 percent among black families. By pointing to the failures of "our" culture to stem the unwed childbearing and divorce "revolutions," marriage advocates have denied seeking to denigrate single mothers (CMFCE et al. 2000*). Relying on social science evidence concerning the importance of the procreative family for childrearing does not directly blame poor women for their poverty. Instead, it blames America's declining marriage culture: "[O]ur embrace of unmarried childbearing has led not to greater equality for women, but to the feminization of both parenting and poverty" (CMFCE et al. 2000:3*). Yet, concerns about women's sexuality and fatherlessness focus attention on the need to strengthen marriage as the union of "biological strangers" who form a "procreative bond" (CMFCE et al. 2000:9*).

Thus, marriage advocates fortify the marked status of poor single mothers as producers of poverty because of their sexual and unwed childbearing practices. Their neoliberal solution of promoting marriage and work places responsibility on poor women's shoulders to gain relationship and work skills. Within this logic, single motherhood is situated outside what Gayle Rubin (1984) calls the "charmed circle" of the sexual hierarchy, where heterosexual sex is fundamentally monogamous, practiced after marriage, and whose purpose is procreation. Thus, the neoliberal logic that envisions the nuclear, heterosexual family as the repository for managing life's dependencies and promoting self-sufficiency also marks single mothers for their outside status. They are marked as not quite heterosexual in relation to the unmarked married, nuclear (and implicitly white) family. Some childless heterosexual marriages, especially those centered on romantic love and mutual companionship where the adults choose childlessness, are potentially also marked for contributing to a society that focuses more on selfish needs of adults than children, but these families do not concern marriage advocates as much. The next section analyzes a similar logic in the case of same-sex marriage that enables heterosexuality to remain unmarked and invisible within the neoliberal logic of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility.

BOUNDARY WORK AND THE INVISIBILITY OF HETEROSEXUALITY

Within a neoliberal rationality, low-income women's unwed childbearing constitutes irresponsible behavior that might be remedied by marriage and entrance into the

low-wage labor market. The logic of marriage promotion combines this reasoning with dominant understandings of an idealized, nuclear family that makes heterosexual marriage appear to be a natural solution to society's problems. This contemporary configuration of knowledge about the ideal family engages with the marked status of same-sex marriage to demarcate the standard of normalcy.

Marriage advocates often seek to distance their mission from the debate over same-sex marriage. Most have focused on strengthening a "marriage culture," and the majority of documents analyzed do not address the issue of whether lesbians and gay men should marry. In promoting marriage, advocates assume heterosexuality in a way that reflects a history of law and commonsense knowledge where marriage is understood as naturally heterosexual. Yet, the period where the marriage movement became established also witnessed the growing debate over same-sex marriage. The movement's tendency to treat marriage as if it were fundamentally heterosexual depends on the marked status of same-sex marriage as something outside the universal definition. For example, marriage advocates argue for the necessity of upholding the public meaning of marriage where 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 2009:268*). The implicit assumption of such reasoning is that men and women will marry heterosexually.

This focus on the public meaning of marriage speaks to "meaning-constitutive traditions," defined as expression that enables the possibility for and the transmission of social actions from generation to generation. These meaning-constitutive traditions idealize the nuclear, heterosexual family to make possible "the thinkability of particular acts and projects" (Gross 2005:296). In other words, these traditions establish the way that things have "always" been done, and construct a boundary between the families we live "with" and those we live "by" or idealize (Gillis 1996:xvii). The goal of the marriage movement is to reinstitutionalize marriage to carry on the tradition where marriage is tied fundamentally to raising one's biological children. The National Marriage Project issues a yearly report on marriage, and it outlines the "State of Our Unions":

> Today, there is more "family diversity": . . . [M]ore children are born out-of-wedlock (now almost four out of ten), and more are living in stepfamilies, with cohabiting but unmarried adults, or with a single parent. This means that more children each year are not living in families that include their own married, biological parents, which by all available empirical evidence is the gold standard for insuring optimal outcomes in a child's development. (National Marriage Project 2007:6*)

This description of family diversity does not include same-sex couples, but words describing the gold standard of married, biological parents marks as other not only single-parent and stepfamilies but same-sex couples who will not both be biologically related to their children.

Meaning-constitutive traditions create a bounded space that situates the hetero-sexual, monogamous couple at the unmarked center to regulate other relationships (Brekhus 1998). Marriage advocates make their concern clear that the decline or "detraditionalization" of marriage contributes to a threatened American way of life (Cherlin 2004). A 1995 publication from an early marriage movement organization states:

> Our nation has largely shifted from a culture of marriage to a culture of divorce. Once we were a nation in which a strong marriage was seen as the best route to achieving the American dream. We have now become a nation in which divorce is commonly seen as the path to personal liberation. (Council on Families 1995:8*)

The reference to divorce as a "path to personal liberation" suggests what for many is a dystopia brought about by the counterculture of 1960s. The quote evokes nostalgia for a time before this dystopia when the norm of the American dream meant, for the majority of white, middle-class Americans, entering a lifelong heterosexual marriage and raising one's biological children, buying a house in the suburbs, and moving up the financial and social ladder.

The mental maps that situate this family ideal allow heterosexuality to remain unmarked and the nuclear family to appear as the only "natural" family form. Marriage advocates engage with ideas about relationships and marriage in a manner that assumes all relationships are heterosexual. Their approach is enabled by dominant lin-guistic norms that make it necessary to place the signifier "same sex" before marriage to signal something other than its "natural" form. In discussing marriage as a sexual union, for example, the marriage movement's *Statement of Principles* claims: "Marriage elevates sexual desire into a permanent sign of love, turning two lovers into 'one flesh'" (CMFCE et al. 2000:8*). While the use of the gender-neutral term of "two lovers" could apply to either heterosexual or lesbian/gay couples, the claim that the lovers become "one flesh" refers to a heterosexual ideal of marriage from the Genesis account of the way God created Eve by taking a rib from Adam's side. The passage states: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, New International Version). Implicit to the idea of "one flesh" is a history of Christian moral principles of marriage between a man and a woman signaling a heterosexual union. No explanation is offered of what is meant by "one flesh."

Avoiding the same-sex marriage debate has challenged the marriage movement in the current political climate where ballot initiatives restrict lesbian and gay rights and individual states legalize same-sex marriage. Remarking on the same-sex marriage debate, a *USA Today* article spells out the paradox for marriage advocates back in 2000: "The key question that the movement's leaders—and critics—are grappling with is how one can be a proponent of marriage in general but oppose marriages between gays" (Peterson 2000*). As public discussion has grown, marriage advocates decry the focus on same-sex unions. For example, Kay Hymowitz (2006:16*) states, "While

Americans have been squabbling about gay marriage, they have managed to miss the real marriage-and-social-justice issue. . . . We are now a nation of separate and unequal families." In this view, same-sex marriage functions as the marked category that distracts attention from the pressing and "real marriage-and-social-justice" issue: the inequality between (heterosexual) married and unmarried families.

The idea that marriage is naturally heterosexual allows marriage advocates to predominantly disregard it in the national conversation. A search on the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center Web site for the words "same-sex" or "marriage equality" does not yield a single article that specifically addresses the issue. Nor does the Web site include any of the scholarly articles or offer any reports on research pertaining to lesbian and gay parenting. Jamie McGonnigal, a writer for the blog "Talk about Equality," posted an entry on finding a relationship/marriage advice Web site called Twoofus.org, a "sister site" of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center and funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He says, "Unsurprisingly, after spending a few hours combing the site, searching 'gay,' 'lesbian,' 'same-sex' and a number of other terms, I discovered there was absolutely zero recognition of same-sex couples" (McGonnigal 2010*). McGonnigal sent a message to the contact e-mail address asking if they had any advice for same-sex couples or services to offer. The reply:

> While same-sex marriage has been legalized in some states it has not been instituted at the Federal level. As an organization that has received a grant from the Federal government we operate within specific, defined parameters; we do not make policy. Our charge is to share constructive information with the general public about healthy marriages and relationships, and, when needed, provide an easy way for site visitors to find local marriage educators or counselors. (Quoted in McGonnigal 2010*)

This response is not surprising given the existence of the Defense of Marriage Act at the time. Still, it fits a broader pattern of situating same-sex relationships outside the charmed circle of procreative sexuality and parenthood, suggesting that same-sex relationships have nothing to offer the broader conversation of sharing "constructive information with the general public about healthy marriages and relationships."

Marriage advocates treat same-sex marriage—even in their disregard of it—as a marked category that stands outside the goal of creating government policies to strengthen families. This strategy was clear in 2004 when President George W. Bush announced his plan to include provisions in welfare reform's legislation for $1.5 billion to finance marriage promotion activities. The *New York Times* covered the story by analyzing its timeliness in terms of President Bush's then-recent announcement of support for a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage (Pear and Kirkpatrick 2004*). Elizabeth Marquardt (2004*), vice president for family studies at the Institute for American Values, wrote a lengthy response in the *Chicago Tribune* decrying the *Times* journalists' conflation of the "Healthy Marriage Initiative, the battle against

same-sex marriage, and election year politicking." On the one hand, Marquardt correctly points to the fact that efforts to promote marriage far predated President Bush's pronouncement against same-sex marriage. On the other, she downplays any connection between efforts to promote marriage and battles over same-sex marriage. Marquardt claims that marriage education—teaching couples communication and behavioral techniques that promote healthy marriages—is not a conservative but a liberal idea, comparing it to efforts to educate the public about drugs or sex education. She never addresses the possibility of including lesbians and gay men in the broader conversation about strengthening relationships.

While most marriage advocates have resisted the battle over same-sex marriage, some intentionally enter the fray to ensure marriage remains exclusively heterosexual. Ryan Anderson, coauthor of *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense,* sums up his view:

> Those who had been leading the marriage movement for decades had to ask themselves: Would recognizing same-sex relationships as marriages strengthen the marriage culture, or weaken it? They saw that redefining marriage to include same-sex relationships was not ultimately about expanding the pool of people eligible to marry. Redefining marriage was about cementing a new idea of marriage in the law. . . . That idea—that romantic-emotional union is all that makes a marriage—couldn't explain or support the stabilizing norms that make marriage fitting for family life. (Anderson 2012*)

Anderson makes explicit the relationship between marked and unmarked knowledge in the case of marriage. Whereas same-sex marriage is constructed as a romantic-emotional ideal similar to other nonprocreative and nonmarried family relationships, the marriage movement seeks to promote the institution of marriage as grounded in procreation and childrearing. According to the marriage movement's *Statement of Principles*, one of marriage's six dimensions is to serve as "a procreative bond [that] includes a commitment to care for any children *produced* by the married couple" (CMFCE et al. 2000:9, my emphasis*).

While the dominant strategy of the movement has been to downplay the same-sex marriage debate, internal debates over the issue led marriage advocates to release the 2004 statement, *What's Next for the Marriage Movement?*, which specifically addresses same-sex marriage as one of the great cultural and legal challenges to marriage in the 21st century (IAV 2004*). This document signed by many prominent scholars and policy experts was the last official marriage movement statement to be issued. Two signers of the document, David Blankenhorn and Maggie Gallagher, have focused their activities on debating the issue of same-sex marriage. Maggie Gallagher—a Roman Catholic and a social conservative—became the president of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, a conservative think tank that houses the webzine "MarriageDebate.com," dedicated to discussing issues concerning lesbian and gay rights and same-sex marriage. David Blankenhorn, who identifies as a liberal Democrat

and is founder and president of the Institute for American Values, authored *The Future of Marriage* (2007*), in which he argues that kids need both a mother and a father, and because same-sex marriage can't provide that, it's bad for children and for society.[4]

However, in 2012, Blankenhorn wrote in the *New York Times* of his change of heart. He explained,

> I don't believe that opposite-sex and same-sex relationships are the same, but I do believe, with growing numbers of Americans, that the time for denigrating or stigmatizing same-sex relationships is over. Whatever one's definition of marriage, legally recognizing gay and lesbian couples and their children is a victory for basic fairness. (Blankenhorn 2012*)

Blankenhorn clarified that he does not recant his view on marriage's institutional value in promoting the rights of children "to know and to be cared for by the two parents who brought them into this world." It is his hope, however, that acceptance of gay marriage will allow the conversation to shift back to focus on the problem of heterosexual marriage. He states, "For example, once we accept gay marriage, might we also agree that marrying before having children is a vital cultural value that all of us should do more to embrace?" After the 2013 Supreme Court rulings on same-sex marriage, Blankenhorn's hope for societal agreement on the importance of marriage for children will be tested as the battle intensifies to legalize same-sex marriage in individual states. His about-face points to a subtle decline in the power of heterosexuality, which mostly seamlessly secures the unmarked status of the married, differently gendered couple and biological children as the natural family. His words recognize that there might be more than one definition of marriage—that the institution is socially constructed and not just natural. Yet, this is just one actor who will no longer actively fight to define marriage as between one man and one woman. His goal, however, in supporting inclusion of lesbians and gay is to direct attention away from the issue of marriage equality and to focus on strengthening the heterosexual, married family.

Overall, marriage advocates rely on an understanding of marriage as an unmarked category in relation to the marked category of same-sex marriage as "as a 'specialized' form that we must distinguish from its more 'generic' form" (Brekhus 1998:35). Same-sex marriage is situated outside the charmed circle of the sexual hierarchy, even as most marriage advocates seek to distance their cause from the same-sex marriage debate. On an institutional level, the relationship between marked and unmarked knowledge becomes a means of exclusion. The construction of heterosexuality becomes visible at times in relation to the same-sex marriage debate in a way that is not true of the issue of single mothers. Thus, marriage advocates have been able to deflect controversy by making it clear that their message is about "marriage" and not issues relating to lesbians and gay men. While marriage advocates view same-sex marriage as "not their issue," they rely on unmarked knowledge concerning heterosexuality that situates lesbians, gay men, *and* single mothers outside the charmed circle.

CONCLUSION

This article uncovers the importance of unmasking the relationship between *markedness* and *unmarkedness* to illuminate how invisible knowledge shapes the marriage movement's identity, goals, and conflicts. I analyze the claims and configuration of knowledge in the project of marriage promotion, which draw on the marked categories of single motherhood and same-sex marriage to buttress dominant assumptions about heterosexuality and marriage. The cognitive logic of marriage promotion relies on marking single motherhood for its problematic sexual behavior that results in poverty. In policy reports, articles and books that draw on social scientific research, single mothers are situated in relation to the standard of heterosexual marriage and the American dream. Poor women's failure to enter the institution of marriage before bearing children places them in a category of special consideration to attain the skills necessary to make them into responsible citizens. This neoliberal logic directs attention away from the structural reasons for why poverty and single motherhood are correlated in order to focus on behavior that can be modified (i.e., to offer skills that can lead to marriage). In this logic, single motherhood is marked as not quite heterosexual in relation to the procreating, childrearing, and married nuclear family. This ideal family is conceptualized as essential to the American dream and white, middle-class (or bourgeois) normality.

In addition to marking single motherhood as in need of special consideration, marriage advocates also perform boundary work based on the marked category of same-sex marriage that allows the norm of heterosexual marriage to maintain its position as natural and unquestioned. Commonsense, heteronormative ideas about the nuclear, married family of America from the past persist in our current understandings of marriage and family. Marriage advocates draw together facts about the superiority of marriage, nostalgia for marriages of the past, and a link to American identity to push marriage promotion forward as a commonsense ideology that can be easily justified. Thus, the boundary work of marriage advocates who simplify and prioritize knowledge that make a case for the superiority of heterosexual marriage shines light on the ways that these advocates perpetuate inequalities rooted in ideas about the heteronormative family. Even as attitudes toward same-sex marriage have become more accepting and perhaps will ultimately lead to legalization at the federal level, the marked category of same-sex marriage will likely continue to buttress the "normalness" of heterosexual marriage.

Applying cognitive sociology to the case of marriage promotion has uncovered the knowledge-construction practices of marriage advocates to deflect controversy. Contentious issues in American society engage values that create opposing extremes. In the case of marriage promotion, marriage advocates assemble values, knowledge, and beliefs in loosely bounded domains that make the idea of marriage promotion less controversial. Marriage promotion involves actors who approach the world from many different perspectives, yet it is a hybrid project that merges an ideology of responsibility with commonsense assumptions about the ideal of heterosexual marriage. Thus, the

public face of marriage promotion is made less controversial than other contentious cultural issues, such as abortion, abstinence education, and same-sex marriage.

In analyzing the dominant texts of marriage promotion, I have sought to elucidate the implicitly contested cognitive maps—in this case, the marked and unmarked knowledge of heterosexual marriage—that construct everyday understandings and that structure inequalities based on marriage and family. These cognitive maps structure the conditions that help to sustain punitive policies that either reject lesbian and gay families or require them to mimic the heterosexual and neoliberal ideal of family life. My findings complement those of Whitehead (2011), which demonstrate the ways that neoliberal governance has narrowed the choices for lesbian and gay activism to envision marriage as a solution to problems of dependency and risk.

Single motherhood is also a contested category situated outside of the heterosexual norm. On one hand, the marked category of same-sex marriage challenges the hegemony of the heterosexual norm. Even David Blankenhorn's reversal in his opposition to same-sex marriage still requires boundary work to establish that biological parenthood must trump other family configurations. On the other hand, the cognitive maps of marriage promotion can incorporate single motherhood into the dominant norm to conceptually incorporate poor women into the American dream, a further mechanism of perpetuating the boundaries of inequality. In essence, knowledge about single motherhood that posits it as a cause of poverty occludes the conditions that might facilitate structural change and policies to improve the economic and family situations of poor women.

Social and historical context is important to the boundary work that concerns the changing relation of marked and unmarked categories. In particular, actors seek to solidify boundaries when that which was once unmarked becomes more volatile and exposed. Knowledge claims about heterosexual marriage perpetuate the taken for granted practices that situate it at the top of sexual and family hierarchy (Rubin 1984). At the same time, boundary work can lead to social change by challenging the nature of the spaces of "us" and "them."

Archival data can only offer a partial picture of the way that knowledge is constructed as marked and unmarked. Future research might conduct interviews with marriage movement leaders and analyze texts after 2012 to offer a more complete picture of whether the unmarked category of "normal marriage" is sustained or changes over time. There is no doubt, however, that for marriage advocates the challenge of increasingly liberal attitudes toward lesbians and gay men causes stress on the implicit practice of promoting marriage as exclusively *heterosexual*. While marriage advocates continue to treat marriage as implicitly heterosexual, they are now more likely to contend with the issue of same-sex families.

NOTES

[1]There is some blurring between what was originally conceived to be the "marriage movement" and what has come to be known as the "marriage education movement." The latter is now the

more prominent organization in the field, and NARME is its main member organization. My sample focuses on documents that relate to the marriage movement, and a number of these also address the marriage education movement.

[2]All in-text citations and references included in the sample are indicated by an "*."

[3]The Healthy Marriage Initiative homepage is archived at http://archive.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html.

[4]Blankenhorn acted as an expert witness in *Perry v. Schwarzenegger* for the proponents of California Proposition 8 (2008), a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to the union of one man and one woman.

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