

**The American Marriage Narrative:
Culture, Structure, and Unmarrieds' Resistance**

BY

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THESIS

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DEDICATION

This dissertation research project could not have happened without SO very many people. First, thank you to my one-and-only sibling, my sister, Lindsey Jo-Erin Cloutier (1983-2014), without whom I would not have survived childhood and today without you here physically. Your essence surrounds me always; we were best friends. Dr. Timothy Ortyl and Dr. Allan G. Johnson, who left this earthly realm far too soon, too; you are my sociological inspirations. Your ideas imprinted in my mind. My work here is in honor of your clear disdain for inequalities and hope for a better future. Thank you.

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SUMMARY

A qualitative sociological study of American/cultural marriage logics and social structure was carried out using oral history interviews that provided narrative data from 13 individuals who are in long term intimate relationships that do not include marriage. Information about magnified moments across their life course related to intimacies, sexuality, marriage, and family formation coalesce to provide insight into growing up as an American cultural citizen who is expected to marry as the impetus to family formation.

Findings suggest that there exists a cultural and social structure of marriage in the United States of America that serves to enforce and reinforce participation in the legal institution of marriage in order to have an “American Family.” “The Family,” characterized in this way is a rigid, boundary-laden, social construct against which all family forms are compared and, in many cases, subjugated, marginalized, and relegated to an inferior family status compared to those who choose to include legal marriage in their family formation. In other words, there are consequences for deviating from the normalized path to forming family in the United States. Family form inequality and marriage inequality presents a crisis tendency in the fabric of American culture.

Since the passage of “Marriage Equality” in 2015, marriage and family formation rules and norms are made more visible. In sum, American families that do not include marriage and the visibility of a federally legitimated form of family (those that include marriage that now lesbian and gay same-sex partners are able to take part), throws into stark relief for whom marriage and family formation boundaries are meant to keep out and are most constraining. That is, families that do not include marriage highlighted in this research experience micro- and macroaggressions (consequences at the individual and systems level of society) related to their unmarried family status.

PREFACE

AMERICAN MARRIAGE: REVERED, REVILED, AND REVISITED

I have been considering ways to open this project and found the task daunting. I would open my computer to “really get to work” on the “Introduction” of my dissertation and quickly find myself quibbling over some, albeit perhaps, obscure, new lynchpin to my analysis for the theoretical section of “Chapter Four”. In short, I have avoided it. I avoided going back to the beginning of this project and it was thwarting my progress to bring it to completion. Thankfully, the little bit of progress I was making in the substantive chapters allowed me to feel not quite as shitty as I was feeling about wrapping the project up that included writing this “Introduction.” So, here I am writing the “Preface” of this project, to my dissertation.

Why am I beginning my project in this way? The answer to that question comes in two parts. First, the oral history data that I present in this dissertation is someone’s very personal experience of intimate relationships and marriage while living in the United States of America in the current socioecopolitical moment. My respondents gave me their time and allowed me to ask questions about their reasons for remaining unmarried (despite the longterm-ness of their relationship) in a celebratory cultural moment for marriage. I wanted to know how they felt about being asked, “So, when are you getting married?” Especially, now that folks seemed so happy about marriage. Further, though Marriage Equality passed in 2015 allowing same-sex couples to marry legally in every state, same-sex spouses and those who wish to marry must contend with the regular call for repeal of the Act, thus putting the state of their union in constant jeopardy. This is but one argument around and over the institution of marriage across United

States history. There exists and remains not only a personal/institutional investment in marriage but a cultural investment as well.

Second, I have realized as an adult who found families strange and interesting, that marriage shaped me. As a child, I was not able to foresee marriage in my future. Marriage had taken on particular meaning for me as a childhood sexual assault survivor and as the child of a divorcée/intimate partner violence survivor. Marriage was something not revered but reviled. I did not want to see my mother hurt again by a husband. I did not want a husband by which I could be hurt. But, I got married to a man anyway at the tender age of nineteen years, had children with him some years later, and found myself in a wicked divorce some years after that. Nineteen years later, I am remarried, this time to a woman, and find that I still have contentions with the institution of marriage. Yet, I am a participant.

However did I find myself here? The answer is not short but can be summed. As a Master's student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I proposed a thesis project that would put bisexual women who were married to men and long term partnered with women at the center of analysis. I took up this project at a time when literature on bisexuality was scarce but bisexuality in the family was mostly unheard of. Despite the discouragement of being told that my project was not publishable, I completed it. And, I published it. It is a work that I am proud of; however, I left the project feeling even more perplexed about the institution of marriage.

Specifically, I continued to ponder the reason for which bisexual people chose to participate in an institution that potentially limited their life experiences as a bisexual human. The question of "marriage" never left me. I realized that, while I may have explored the lives of people who were married, I did not know enough about how individuals learn to participate in

the institution and why they chose to participate (or not) at all. This is my intervention in the literature on marriage in the United States of America. This is where my dissertation needed to go...

I am here to talk marriage and culture, marriage and institutionalization, and marriage and social control. As a tool of socialization/enculturation, Americans are taught that marriage is the right way to form a family. As a tool of functionalism, marriage tells us how to interact with humans to participate “properly” in American family culture. In fact, because of the value placed on marriage, even folks who might not otherwise seek participation in the institution (gay/lesbian liberation participants) are now getting married since the passage of Marriage Equality in 2015.

Marriage and subsequent family formation is considered a building block of American society. So, how is it that marriage is largely taken for granted and what does it look like when marriage is taken for granted? Post-Marriage Equality is a good place to look. Pressure from the State pushed same-sex couples to marry when domestic partnership regulations fell away in favor of marriage. As a tool of socialization and functionalism, one may now look at marriage in a new way: as a tool of social control and malaise.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

TO PARTICIPATE OR NOT PARTICIPATE? THAT IS THE QUESTION: (POP)CULTURAL LOGICS OF AMERICAN MARRIAGE DURING THE FIGHT FOR “MARRIAGE EQUALITY”

Illinois Marriage Equality Bill Signing Event: **An Ethnography of and Introduction to American Marriage Culture**

The vibe coming off the crowd was frenetic...
As I walked closer to the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Forum, I could hear their voices rise. Some of the voices were chatting about the impending event, Marriage Equality in Illinois. Others were sharing stories about their experiences of discrimination as a result of their status as “same-sex” couples.

More still were smiling, giggling, laughing loudly; they expressed their emotions in an infectious and happy way. Smiling, then, I took my place in the very long line of folks (mostly in black overcoats, the cold weather fashion trend in Chicago), pen in hand and pad of paper ready to record it all. Standing in line to witness institutionalization and rights-granting due to an American social movement was exhilarating!

I watched as same-sex marriage rights activists, Catholics, politicians, and peddlers of “gay goods” gathered in support of gay marriage...

...I watched those people standing just outside of the Forum doors who, so eager to gain entrance to this event, must have arrived very early for their prime spot. Then, as the ever-growing line behind me rounded the corner of Halsted Street and Roosevelt Road, I noticed the single group protesting this event. Anti-Marriage Equality protesters were given a space to carry

out their wishes, neatly placed in the corner of the plaza in front of the Forum. There were only two of these dissenters, only two individuals among hundreds in support of “Marriage Equality” and no one seemed to pay attention to their dissenting ideas.

Once through the doors of the Forum, I was greeted with and given a small rainbow flag with the state of Illinois and the date printed on it. I heard squeals coming from the large room meant to accommodate the day’s guests. Upon entering, I saw many children running and playing with the same kind of flag I held in my hand. They played with other children and their parents, along with welcoming adults to whom the children did not seem to belong. The children were vibrant, beautiful, and excited. Most of all, the children were happy.

I settled into a seat on the outskirts of the large, well-lit room to watch the videos streaming on two big-screens behind the stage. Photos of individuals and couples in support of Marriage Equality decorated the screen in front of me. This was a nice complement to the stage and room decorated with American and Gay Pride flags. The lights dimmed to welcome state and local politicians to the stage, each giving their statement of support for the legislation that Governor Pat Quinn had signed into law. My eyes welled with tears.

In his State of the State address, Quinn said that, “This new law is an epic victory for equal rights in America [...] Illinois is moving forward. We are a model for our country. If the Land of Lincoln can achieve marriage equality, so can every other state in the nation.”¹ It was with this statement that Marriage Equality topped his list of legislative priorities. Governor Quinn followed through with his vision, making Illinois the sixteenth state to sign marriage equality into law on November 20, 2013.

*

¹ Illinois.gov

This dissertation research project takes up the case of thirteen individuals who have chosen not to marry despite their status as participants in long-term intimate relationships lasting four or more years. The current long-term relationship of those who resist marriage is evidence that individuals are choosing to form families without the norm of marriage. To form families as coupled-dyads *without marriage* is a cultural/historical shift in relationship and family formation in the United States of America and, more generally, in the West. The individuals in this study are arguably as close to marriage as one can get without participating in the institution. The experiences and perspectives of these individuals have been missing in the sociological literature on marriage, family, and gender.

Western/American culture dictates that marriage is an important and logical event in the human life course and indicates a shift from childhood to adulthood. Further, Western/American culture prescribes a clearly gendered-relationship pattern that situates marriage as the central tenet in legal family formation—considered by some to be the very foundation of American society (Cott 2002). Significance placed on marriage in this way highlights its cultural importance. The cultural significance of marriage also highlights the ways in which individuals participate in it. The cultural significance of marriage, and one's participation in it, has been in the spotlight for several years now due to the LGBT Marriage Equality social movement. The current cultural, social, and political moment with regard to marriage appears particularly ripe for sociological analysis. My dissertation research does this by exploring individuals' participation in and experience with American marriage culture. Specifically, I examine the narratives of those individuals who choose to participate differently in a culture that supports marriage.

In order for marriage to be understood as an American institution, there must be patterned ways that individuals participate and a culture that supports individuals' participation in these patterned ways. In other words, the way that marriage culture is constructed illuminates the importance of American citizens following a logic that teaches them how to participate in it or how to be marriageable, thus properly supporting the institution. A marriageable human identity is closely tied to the social construction of gender and sexuality and is that which an individual constructs through available cultural repertoires or logics about family formation, intimacy and romantic love, and the institution of marriage. In interaction, the marriageable identity is recognizable to others and is meant to attract others who similarly value this identity.

As I discuss in this dissertation research project, a marriageable human identity is formed via teaching and learning norms, values, and beliefs about gender and sexuality through the life course. The *rhetoric* used in this teaching and learning is what I define as the “American Marriage Narrative” (AMN). The AMN is a *rhetorical tool deployed to pass cultural knowledge from one generation to the next about the ways that gender and sexuality co-construct normalized intimacies, sex, and family formation through the institution of marriage in the United States.*

Centering on life course, oral history narratives elicited from individuals who participate differently in United States marriage culture by partnering without marriage, at a moment when marriage, as a rights-granting institution, is allowing more individuals in is particularly timely. I began this chapter with an ethnographic account of my experience at the Illinois Marriage Equality bill-signing event hosted by then-governor Pat Quinn. This experience informed my dissertation research concerns and questions as well as my personal participation in United States marriage culture. Next, I provide a brief discussion about the history of American marriage as

guided norms of specific epochs and resultant legislation. Then, I explain the usefulness of sociological research methods that capture the experiences of those who, despite their long-term relationship status, choose not to marry in a moment when marriage is regularly highlighted in conservative/liberal media, is called into question, and is experiencing a crisis. Collectively, the information that I present in this dissertation introductory chapter outlines why it is necessary to study American marriage from a sociological perspective in this particular and peculiar historical moment.

The Construction of Contemporary American Marriage Culture

Same-sex couples are now able to get married nationally in the United States. That this has been a great hurdle for so many gays and lesbians sometimes obscures the fact that access to the institution of marriage has been publicly fought over for more than a century. For example, marking the end of a system of coverture in the late 19th/early 20th century, suffragists fought and won a similar battle over equal rights and access to property within the institution of marriage for (most) women. Legally, women as “wives” were no longer men’s as “husbands” property, nor were women considered only part of a single human being as British/American/Western marriage doctrine at the time suggested (Chernock 2010).² Instead, women were granted the right to representation (the vote) and property.

However, as suffragists and their allies were excited by this new legislation in 1920, those for whom this legislation did not apply became clear. Equal access to voting rights and rights within marriage were reserved for land-owning men and their wives (mostly white husbands and wives); thus, leaving out those who could not accumulate enough capital to own

² Upon marriage in coverture, women and men become one and her position is that of subordinate juxtaposed with dominant husband (Blackstone 1765; Chernock 2010).

land (primarily black men and their wives/families). This is a case wherein rights-granting jurisprudence and social norm/doctrine quite simply did not line up. Oppressive norms and social structures continued to persist in the lives of African-Americans as the bonds of enslavement reverberated in all sectors of life during this, the Jim Crow Era. Coverture then, while defined as a marital status in the lives of white women, primarily, can also be understood differently for African-Americans and descendants of slaves. Through forced “marriage” between privileged, dominant colonizers and oppressed, subordinated enslaved persons, America was built. The enslaved, like wives in coverture, had no right to representation, compensation, property ownership, or autonomy *and* marriage among slaves was denied. African American women, post-slavery, married or not married, were still denied rights to ownership, autonomy, and representation because Jim Crow disallowed it.

Later, in 1967, there would be more marriage legislation to recognize mixed-race couples as legitimately marriageable citizens of the United States. In *Loving v. Virginia* (388 U.S. 1 [1967]), the equal protection and due process clauses under the 14th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States were cited. Section 1 of the 14th Amendment explicitly defines United States citizenship and states that, “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Disallowing Virginia residents, Mildred Jeter, a black woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, to marry was in direct violation of Section 1 of the 14th Amendment.

The court ruled in favor of the couple and interracial marriage became legal in all 50 states. Kluttz (2008) finds that the primary connection between *Loving v. Virginia* and the

current legal debate over same-sex marriage is their use of the 14th Amendment. Simply stated, if one is a citizen of the United States of America then they should be granted the rights and privileges of citizenship—including the right to marry. *Loving v. Virginia* set a precedent for current same-sex couples who wished to do away with marriage bans in states where same-sex marriage was still outlawed.

The institution of marriage governs individuals' behavior as the cases above illustrate. Take the current movement for "Marriage Equality" as an example. This social movement has propelled individual action to make more equitable access to the institution of marriage for the lesbian and gay communities who had been previously banned from participation. In this way, the institution of marriage and the boundaries connected to it were *acted against*; activists were agentic in pushing for change to the rules/law of marriage practices in the United States. However, at the same time, individuals were propelled to *protect* the status quo of marriage as well. Specifically, conservative individuals and organizations sought to ensure that the sanctity of marriage, between one man and one woman, would be preserved and protected against lesbian and gay entry into the institution per their interpretation of (primarily Christian and Catholic) religious scripture. This example shows some of the institutional characteristics of marriage. The institution of marriage is a governing, action-oriented, action-catalyzing, organizing principle in American culture.

Moreover, marriage is an institution in the United States because it is legally-defined. As I noted above, pre-"Marriage Equality" America allowed only *one man and one woman* to marry. This statute became *law* in 1996 under President Bill Clinton in the "Defense of Marriage Act" or DOMA. However, more importantly, another feature of a social institution is that it is meant to serve some basic need in society. The basic need that marriage originally served was a

way of passing down property rights and bloodlines; in other words, it was a patriarchal kinship mechanism that allowed men to reign supreme. Further, marriage was considered the impetus for family formation. This is important because in the United States, “Family,” is considered a foundational building block of American society (Cott 2002; Moss 2012).

Despite the fact that marriage is no longer needed for those basic, institutional reasons, it continues to persist. And it continues to be a rights-granting institution. The rigid boundaries of the hetero- and, now, homonormative structure of marriage allow many to participate but inevitably still leave many out, such as those people residing in states where access to same-sex marriage is available but procuring one could be dangerous (“outing”). Legal protections for LGBT individuals at home or in the workplace remain elusive in many areas of the United States, leaving them to perhaps out themselves and face repercussions like job loss and lack of access to fair housing. Another example are those people who practice polyamory, since multiple marriages are outlawed in all states. Access to the institution is unequal; therefore, rights are restricted. This situation has resulted in social justice and rights movements that respond to restricted access to the institution of marriage.

As I sat in the audience of the Marriage Equality event at the UIC Forum, I found myself wondering: How did the call for marriage equality ascend so quickly and so dramatically to such heights? How did marriage go from being taken for granted as the province of heterosexual couples (so much so that no one thought to include that qualification in their marriage laws) to the litmus test of whether United States society was going to treat same-sex couples equally before the law? Though different from previously mentioned historical moments in American history involving marriage, the Homosexual Liberation Movement had a hand in shaping discourse around marriage as a rights-granting institution. Suffrage and miscegenation rights

activists (mentioned in Chapter Two, “Literature Review”) wanted to gain access to available resources *through* the institution of marriage, conversely, some gay and lesbian activists wanted freedom *from* the institution of marriage in the formation of intimate relationships and family.

In the late 1960s and 70s, at the same moment that activists had fists in the air to support civil rights, the homosexual community marched for their liberation from “straight” social institutions, like marriage. Defining their needs as “different” in this way *enabled* gay and lesbian-identified individuals to speak out about their perceived/experienced danger byway of participating in straight-identified institutions—namely, marriage; however, medicine is another example.

American medicine, as a straight-identified institution, deemed homosexuals “mentally-ill” for decades. The homosexual community *and some* medical practitioners found this moment ripe to promote their radical message: We (homosexuals) are not ill; we simply do not adhere to the tenets of “straight” society. Central to this argument was a distinct distaste for the institution of marriage and what the institution represents. The Homosexual Liberation Movement was the impetus for the 1970s and 80s radical call, “We are here! We are queer! Get used to it!”

The Homosexual Liberation Movement made clear that there exists a contingent of people who actively choose not to participate in straight institutions. *A Gay Manifesto*, penned by Carl Wittman (1970), provides insight into the demands of the Movement. Here, I provide a host of excerpts from the *Manifesto* that explicitly call into question and frame queer resistance to the institution of marriage.

Wittman (1970) begins pointedly by stating, “Homosexuality is not a lot of things; it is not the result of broken homes except inasmuch as we could see the sham of American marriage. Homosexuality is the capacity to love someone of the same sex.” However, at the same time

acknowledging that (1969), “We are the children of straight society. We still think straight: that is part of our oppression [...] We’ve lived in these institutions all our lives.” Using the power of self-definition and the sociological imagination, Wittman is able to place the homosexual population within the broader context of American culture. This is a wholly sociological act. Wittman suggests that American citizens, gay or straight, have been socialized similarly. This socialization makes marriage and the subsequent family formation (supposedly in that order) a normalized part of the life course; a part of the life course in which gay and lesbian identified people were not allowed to participate in due to their deviant and dubious diagnoses. In regard to marriage, Wittman (1970) writes,

“Marriage is a prime example of a straight institution fraught with role playing [sic]. Traditional marriage is a rotten, oppressive institution. Those of us who have been in heterosexual marriages too often have blamed our gayness on the breakup of the marriage. No. Marriage is a contract which smothers both people, denies needs, and places impossible demands on both people. And we had the strength, again, to refuse to capitulate to the roles which were demanded of us [...] Gay people must stop gauging their self respect by how well they mimic straight marriages. Gay marriages will have the same problems as straight ones except in burlesque. For the usual legitimacy and pressures which keep straight marriages together are absent, e.g. kids, what parents think, what neighbors say [...] To accept that happiness comes through finding a groovy spouse and settling down, showing the world that “we’re just the same as you” is avoiding the real issues, and is an expression of self-hatred.”

It is particularly interesting to juxtapose this radical alternative to gay and lesbian thinking around marriage with the most current legislation of “Marriage Equality.” The Homosexual Liberation Movement wished not to be “just the same as you;” they wanted to be *allowed* to be different with the same protections and rights as other humans in the U.S. The Movement wanted the power to define themselves, their intimate relationships, and families in the ways queers best see fit and, instead of assimilating to straight culture, proffered alternatives to traditional, dyadic, mixed-gender, marriage.

Wittman (1970) acknowledges that there are perfectly good explanations for an individual to desire marriage, least of which is love. He states, “People want to get married for lots of good reasons, although marriage won’t often meet those needs or desires. We’re all looking for security, a flow of love, and a feeling of belonging and being needed.” However, as stated above, the notion of marriage equating love is reconciled by Wittman’s (1970) suggestion that simply settling down with a “groovy spouse” avoids the very real issue of access to resources that meet the needs of queer people and equality under the law. In this vein, he asserts that queer alternatives to marriage will move away from tenets of straight marriage through,

“[...] 1. Exclusiveness, propertied attitudes toward each other, a mutual pact against the rest of the world; 2. Promises about the future, which we have no right to make and which prevent us from, or make us feel guilty about, growing; 3. Inflexible roles, roles which do not reflect us at the moment but are inherited through mimicry and inability to define equalitarian relationships [...] Liberation for people is defining for ourselves how and with whom we live, instead of measuring our relationship in comparison to straight ones, with straight values.”

Liberation looks like the receipt of human rights. This harkens back to the Human Rights Act (1948). However, this kind of liberation does not come without a price. The label of “different” also comes with the constraint of an “outsider status.” Gays and lesbians, as well as gender nonconformists, were subjugated to (and continue to be) violence and threat at every turn. Further, while physical violence was prevalent, symbolic violence in the way of discrimination in work, housing, and medicine were equally painful. This outsider status had an impact on the gay and lesbian community in terms of increased drug use, mental health complications, suicidal ideation, and transmission of HIV/AIDS.

Internationally renowned sociologist Raewyn Connell’s articulation of what she terms a “crisis tendency” is useful in helping to make sense of the ways in which Westerners/Americans feel about marriage and participate in it—of course, including those LGBTQ+ individuals.

Connell (2008) states that “contradiction” or “crisis tendency” is one of the three dynamics of social change for gender equality to come to fruition. A crisis tendency is defined as, “...internal contradictions or tendencies that undermine current patterns, and force change in the structure” (Connell 90). That marriage is the root of the nuclear family speaks to the ways in which same-sex couples were written out of marital and family jurisprudence. The pattern that the current same-sex marriage debate interrupts is that marriage is no longer specifically defined and designed as a heteronormative institution.

Heteronormativity, according to Berlant and Warner (2005), is defined as “...the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is organized as sexuality—but also privileged” (p. 549). Further, Moss (2012) adds that heteronormativity is “...the social construction of heterosexuality as the norm against which all other sexualities are compared and ultimately subjugated” (p.408). Here then, patterned heterosexual hegemony within the institutional settings of marriage and family is questioned and interrupted. Thus, calls and struggles for legal recognition of same-sex marriages presents a “crisis tendency” because what was once taken for granted by many—marriage as a “heterosexuals-only” institution—is interrupted by same-sex couples and their allies demanding justice that includes legal access to the rights and privileges of marriage.

Beyond law and politics, the struggle for same-sex marriage equality was also visible in popular culture. We saw über famous, same-sex couples flocking to the altar, such as actor Lily Tomlin and her longtime partner, Jane Wagner, in 2013; *Modern Family* star, Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Justin Mikita; and Sara Gilbert of television shows *The Talk* and *The Big Bang Theory* (not to mention *Roseanne*) and rock star, Linda Perry, who married in March 2014. Importantly, famous different-sex couples have made statements in support of same-sex

marriage, stating that they choose not to get married until marriage is the province of all human beings.

Despite the visibility of same-sex marriages and debates about it in popular culture, marriage boundaries continue to be both contested and policed heavily. Heavy policing of these boundaries is easily documented. We can see narratives of “proper” marriage represented in popular culture and through ways of teaching and learning about marriage. For example, even in films considered subversive by Hollywood standards, such as *The Kids are All Right* (2010), the lesbian-couple-headed family had a very clear gender structure or “regime” (Connell 2008) in their home—one woman was the “butch” and one woman was the “bitch” in all of those horribly gendered ways, resulting in a heterosexual, extramarital affair between Julianne Moore’s and Mark Ruffalo’s characters. Some critics of the film suggested that the heterosexual affair storyline was necessary to sell the film to mainstream audiences. Through this example, we see that, while individuals may choose to do marriage differently by deviating from the heterosexual norm/model, there is still an underlying socio-sexual script that must be satisfied—at least in order to sell films.

Poet, essayist, and feminist theorist, Adrienne Rich (1980), wrote an essay that speaks to the heteronormative socio-sexual script that Americans see play out on screen and in their everyday lives. In “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Rich (1980) describes a cultural dictate that prescribes proper behavior for gendered bodies to attract an intimate mate; that is, the heterosexual script prescribes a “marriageable” identity. Once an individual attains a “marriageable” identity, the socio-sexual script is fulfilled and the individual is properly “heterogendered” (Ingraham 1994). “Heterogender” is a redefinition of gender in terms of heteronormativity; Ingraham (1994:204) states that, “reframing gender as heterogender

foregrounds the relation between heterosexuality and gender.” The heterogender identity in interaction streamlines who an individual should attract and who an individual should be attracted to in the pursuit of becoming a marriageable adult in the normalized life course trajectory. But, to be sure, the narrative is not somehow “one size fits all.”

The heterogender relationship socio-sexual script is powerful in that, in many ways, it is a salient feature of American society. As I point out, we can talk of a general but powerful marriage culture in the United States. However, the marriage script or narrative may also look different depending on one’s social location, i.e., marriage may not be seen by some groups as a viable way to form a family (Edin and Keflas 2005; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). I draw on the concept and literature of intersectionality to both recognize and account for the importance of different individual social locations while also exploring how the script/narratives may also be similarly encountered and engaged with by different groups. For example, Edin and Keflas (2005) find that poor women tend to subvert the social norm of marriage before the addition of children into the family. The women Edin and Keflas’s (2005) research live in eight poverty-stricken areas in Philadelphia and tend to become mothers before they become wives. Women in the study have children without intention of marrying the child’s father. Reasons such as purpose, validation, and companionship, rather than stereotypes of lack of education and use of contraception, propel them to have children “out of wedlock” (Edin and Keflas 2005).

The realities of ways that the heterosexual/marriage socio-sexual script cuts across social locations to create differences in individuals’ experiences of the institution of marriage is just one way to understand the importance of family formation in this current epoch. Moreover, marriage is a political hot button and fodder for popular culture; that is, the institution of marriage is invested in and intersects with other institutions (media being but one of these

institutions). Given the above examples, it is not difficult currently to make an argument for the importance of studying marriage in this cultural context.

Prior to the June 26, 2015 Marriage Equality ruling, there were near-daily newspaper articles and television news reports about the most recent U.S. state to contest bans on same-sex marriage or lessons one learns from the GOP regarding fundamentally religious meanings of marriage and their votes in legislature to arrest gay marriage's development. However, while the fight for same-sex marriage equality was highlighted in the media, there has been little in-depth analysis of an "American marriage culture" in which reformers and traditionalists are situated. Marriage culture in the United States is *more than* those institutional characteristics. Instead, a culture of marriage relies on *individuals and institutions to uphold and communicate norms, values, and beliefs* about romantic intimacies, sex, and family formation in an American's pursuit of a long-term relationship in which to form a family. Missing the voices of those who do not wish to hop on the bandwagon to wedded bliss leaves out the perspective of, perhaps, the most marginalized in a culture that reveres marriage—"marriage resisters."

I offer the concept of the "American Marriage Narrative" (AMN) as part of a Western social/cultural construct that suggests that there is a specific trajectory to become a successful candidate for marriage in the context of the capitalist and consumerist American Dream. The AMN is marriage and family formation cultural rhetoric that is used to sway individuals down the marriage path to create a family. The AMN is a story one learns from others (i.e., individuals and institutions) and teaches themselves about through processes of learning, internalization, and habitualization of actor action.

An individual relies on AMN-related cultural knowledge in order to construct a proper intimate relationship with another person; this person too, ideally, will hold a "marriageable"

identity. In the formation of a proper intimate relationship, an individual makes comparisons against what they have learned is the “ideal mate;” then, they make choices about whether to pursue specific intimacies. In one’s pursuit of forming a family (through processes of comparison and decision-making), Americans continuously reference that *enculturated, ideal, and normalized* relationship/family formation about which they have learned to uphold—the *nuclear family model created through the institution of marriage*. The onus is on the individual, then, to procure a long-term intimacy that meets the approval of these relationships’ standards and norms that are dictated by meanings of cultural citizenship.

Importantly, commentary on and systematic analyses of those affected by the institution of marriage—specifically, those who resist that cultural logic—are rarely seen. Further, and more rarely still, do we ask questions about the cultural logic of marriage, such as the ways in which the logic is institutionalized, challenged, and undermined in the everyday lives of individuals. As part of this research, I explain differences in and similarities between individuals’ experiences of an everyday life in Western/American marriage culture. Specifically, I elicit narratives from individuals who participate differently in marriage culture by choosing not to marry. Those who resist the cultural push to marry seem to be left out of the marriage research in sociology. In my definition, marriage resisters are those individuals who are as “close to marriage as one can get” without having the legal documentation that states that one is married. Resisters are long-term romantic partners who are not legally married and who must navigate the American marriage terrain in everyday life just like everyone else.

Conducting this research allowed me to answer questions about life in marriage culture for marriage resisters. Specifically, this dissertation research explores how a “non-married” status might affect life experiences one has, how an individual chooses to remain unmarried in a

culture that reveres marriage, from where ideas about marriage and family formation came, and how those ideas played out in real experiences. Moreover, I investigate how resistance to the institution of marriage privileges or constrains individuals and their families due to the “non-married” family form and social status. Studying individuals’ marriage resistance provides insight into the larger United States culture in which a “crisis” is unfolding in the institution and social structure of marriage.

At present, there is a tendency in American marriage culture, the institution, and structure toward “crisis” (Connell 2005). As the marriage cultural crisis is exposed, inequalities rooted in norms, policy, and law are also revealed. These inequalities push individuals to react by pushing against the boundaries and calling into question marriage standards, those deemed “unfair.” This is the crisis tendency of marriage as a culture, an institution, and a social structure. As more structural inequalities are exposed, the more robust the tendency for the structure (and its related levels of analysis/society) to be “in crisis;” thus *forcing structural change* (Connell 2005). It was my aim to gain a better understanding of the crisis tendency that is occurring in American culture around marriage and access to the institution by investigating the narratives provided by those who resist marriage. Their oral histories tell us something about the privileges and constraints of an “unmarried” social identity and the possibilities/opportunities for other alternatives to building long-lasting partnerships and family forms.

Dissertation Chapter Organization

In Chapter Two, I provide an overview of the feminist, equity-based argument for a more inclusive institution of marriage in the United States of America. I bring together literatures from the sociology of gender, sexuality, intimate relationships, and family formation with the study of

cultural logics to show that (a) the fight for marriage justice is a long and winding road, and that (b) sex/gender/sexuality and family scholars have called the institution of marriage into question for a variety of reasons. For example, one reason that scholars are interested in marriage is that it is an organizing institution in American society. That this is so has many implications.

Chapter Three focuses on the study research methods. I explain my use of an oral history data collection method as best fitting the questions I explore in my study. The field of marriage has been widely studied in sociology, though not through this particular lens. Oral history research allows for a very deep dive into a limited number of lives—what emerges is rich, thick description of experiences had by research participants describing their interaction with and introductions into American marriage culture. To further contextualize my respondents' data, I deploy autoethnographic accounts of my time contending with this marriage culture, as well. The autoethnography in this dissertation research is a secondary source of data rather than primary, but similarly allows for thick description and rich accounting of how I (eventually) saw myself as a participant in my research endeavor. This was decidedly not a position I wished for, as I later explain.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six are the data analysis and synthesis chapters. In Chapter Four, I discuss the ways in which respondents were socialized to be cultural natives in United States marriage culture. Parents, peers, and media are the primary socialization agents in children's lives and, as such, are discussed at length in this chapter. Chapter Five draws on respondent narratives regarding the trajectory they took to their current relationship status as "unmarried marriage resisters." Individuals' lives are permeated by cultural and institutional logics of American marriage via the rhetoric they learn through the AMN. Respondents' interaction with AMN rhetoric in pursuit of their romantic intimacies has consequences and

provides them with additional cultural knowledge about such endeavors as they move toward a more permanent romantic intimacy intended to be the foundation of one's family unit.

Finally, Chapter Six elucidates the connections between individual level barriers and inequalities that are connected to the structure of American marriage. Here, I show that marriage can be theorized as a social structure in the United States using data from respondent narratives about their interaction with institutions as adults attempting to establish non-normative families that do not engage in the institution of marriage. Marriage and family formation inequalities can be seen and experienced at each level of society/analysis as I show through the lens of "micro- and macroaggressions" related to an individual's "unmarried" social identity and status. That aggressions occur personally/privately via conversational exchange *and*, more publicly, via lack of familial recognition and rights suggests that marriage moves BEYOND a culture and institution; marriage is, indeed, a social structure.

In the final chapter, I bring together the data analysis/synthesis and move to theorize "heterogender [social] structure" (Moss 2012) in the U.S. as experienced by my respondents. I consider the ways in which the cultural moment of "Marriage Equality" does not necessarily create equal outcomes, discuss the implications of my research, and provide suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW: RIGHTS, FIGHTS, AND JUSTICE ON THE PATH TO “MARRIAGE EQUALITY”

On the Hierarchical Organization of Marriage: Classic and Contemporary Thought

In 1776, as her husband participated in the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia, Adams wrote her most famous letter that the Founding Fathers “remember the ladies.” She added, “Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could.”

Abigail Smith Adams (1776) in a letter to her husband, the second President of the United States, John Adams (National Women’s History Museum; Michals 2015).

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Kinship rules organize claims of men on domestic units, and men dominate kinship. Culturally and politically, the public sphere dominates the domestic, and hence men dominate women.

Nancy Chodorow (1978:10)

The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender

Introduction

The Cultural, Institutional, and Structural Construction of American Marriage

The story of American “Marriage Equality,” as a social movement, cannot simply begin with contemporary understandings of LGBT individuals’ place within it that is promoted in popular culture. Despite popular culture’s insistence and often singular focus on LGBT people and

“Marriage Equality,” the origin of this movement began hundreds of years ago, crossed the Atlantic Ocean to become law in the United States, and includes other marginalized members of society beyond the LGBT community.

One must look to the historical record of nation- and empire-building in the United States and from where ideas about marriage and family formation came. With European colonization of the United States, norms, traditions and folkways were retained and implemented by those in power in the 1600s. At this historical moment, institutionalization of an “American culture” was shaped by primary institutions and their stakeholders—the British throne, the Church of England, and the Vatican. For these reasons, in order to understand marriage as an institution, a culture, and a social structure, as well as marriage’s impact on individual Americans, one must know the history of marriage’s embeddedness in the very foundation of the United States of America.

The overarching theme in the history of American marriage is the struggle over entry into and access to the institution, rights and privileges gained upon access to the institution, and the shift from economic marriage to romantic marriage. Economic marriage is marriage in which individuals participate because of economic gains/stability or *property*. The many tensions around institutionalized marriage, such as concerns about gender parity within marriage, equal access to marriage, and alternative family formations, put to question the persistence of the institution of marriage across time and space.

Before women got the vote in 1920, many times, marriage was the only way for women to have access to power and other capital. However, the analysis of an underlying pattern in marriage that is closely tied to the gendered and sexualized (and raced) nuclear family form seems to be missing. Historically rooting this research is necessary to build on the work that scholars of gender, sexuality, and family formation have been discussing for many years. In this

literature review, I begin with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' discussion of the family form, drawing on multiple classical theorists to examine marriage. Chronologically, I show – through the literature on the sociology of gender, marriage, and family – the ways in which roles associated with gender and sexuality structure the institution of marriage; thus, the idealized nuclear family form. I proffer a frame through which to view the current project—a “heterogender structure (theory)” of United States marriage and family formation (Moss 2012). Then, I explain the ways in which culture intersects with institutions to create a normalized path to marriage. Finally, I end with a discussion of cultural logics. specifically the cultural logics of marriage in the United and the importance of studying a population who do not follow the logics of marriage.

A Chronology Addressing Gendered Inequalities in Marriage and Nuclear Family Form

“American” marriage practices and rules are holdovers from British colonization of the Americas. In this section, I align classical sociology’s thinking about marriage as the foundational argument *against* an American marriage culture that promotes *inequality*. I spend more time with the classical and later literatures on marriage and family formation than those that appear in the mid-twentieth century because the mid-century texts served the purpose of exalting the family as an economic unit; thus, marriage went under-analyzed and taken-for-granted at this time. The literature in this section lays the groundwork for conceptualizing marriage not just as an institution, but as a culture in the United States of America with rhetoric that pressures one’s participation.

After the death of his friend and co-author Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels found himself with many questions about the family, its formation, and its purpose within the political

economy. While Marx (1848) was concerned with the bourgeois (owners of the means of production) and the proletarians (alienated wage laborers) regarding ownership of the means of production in the economic sector, Engels began problematizing the home and its occupants' positions within it using notes written by Marx that were recovered posthumously (Hunt 2010). Engels made connections between the similar configuration of the industrialized workplace and the home the workers occupy.

Prehistory, ancestral "group marriages," according to Engels (1886), provided more gender parity than the contemporary monogamous marriage. He asserted that we must look at the first-class oppression, the oppression of women within the home, rather than Marx's conception of alienated workers and the owners of the means of production. The role played by the father versus the role played by the mother is compared to the bourgeois (man/father) and proletarian (woman/mother) in Engels' analysis.

While Engels was concerned with the anthropological origin of the family and the family's configuration, Marianne Weber, wife of Max Weber, wrote about the sociological importance of restructuring marriage for the betterment of society. Despite Weber's deep belief in marriage as foundational to a moral society, she rejected legalities associated with marriage that disenfranchised women. Namely, Weber pointed out that women ought to have authority over their lives and the economic autonomy within a marriage to do so (Bermingham 2003).

W.E.B. Du Bois, too, was concerned with the economics of the household, the creation of strong family systems, and the disparity between white and black families dating to chattel slavery. Because of widespread industrialization, white families experienced a mass exodus of men from the household to the workplace. Men became the sole breadwinners while women were expected to support and nurture the family within the home by providing domestic labor.

Black families experienced something very different. Black men found this new economy very trying. They were unable to secure jobs at the same rate as white men in the factories. Instead, the surge in wealth and the creation of the leisure class for white families with men working outside of the home created a need for domestic laborers within these well-to-do homes. Black women were primarily employed in this realm, thus creating a similar mass exodus of black women from their homes into the paid labor force. Therefore, in contrast to white families, the primary breadwinner in black families was the woman earning a meager wage as the domestic caretaker of white homes. Frustrated black men were unable to find jobs that earned a living wage and black families found themselves without structure and money and with limited agency to change their economic situation. Du Bois (1919) pointed to the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, prominent social theorist and activist, who named this shift for black families as the creation of “cheap women” (p. 207).

Concerns about the links between (re)production of inequality and marriage were also raised among those who focused on the psyche. Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalytic theory, drew attention to sexual object choice and subsequent gendered positionality and status within the home. Freud (1975) pointed to marriage as the concretization of an adult sexual identity and sexual object choice within the life course of an individual. Sexual object choice is a result of the Oedipus complex, or a childhood (and lifetime) of repetitive attachment to, jealousy of, and desire for those like one’s mother and father. Individuals, then, construct for themselves a sexual object to which they are attracted from this active process of being taught by the adults in their home of origin and learning behaviors and attitudes that they emulate from these adults.

Knowledge about the American Marriage Narrative (AMN) that an individual takes away from their childhood home matters, according to Freud. Further, Freud (1975) stated that

heterosexual coupling in which men's desire for women like their mother, and women's desire for the phallus as well as their father, recreate gendered roles within the marriage, family, and home. Freud's understanding of heterosexual marriage and coupling is that many times, unconsciously, the sexual object choice is made without recognizing the way it was constructed. Evidenced by my study respondents' contentions with the gendered nature of marriage, Freud's ideas about heteronormativity, marriage, and how the two are socially/psychically recreated in everyday life are relevant for my analysis of their narratives about marriage and their resistance of it.

As an individual progresses across the life course relationship trajectory, they choose much like their parents did, without much consideration for their own happiness, because it is what they know – it is what they have seen done. How, then, can the formation of families via marriage be equitable? Classical theorists suggest many solutions. Through common ownership of the means of production or a socialist/communist economy, Engels (1858) asserted that the family will no longer be the economic unit of a society; private housekeeping will become a social industry; childcare and education will become a public matter; and all children in society will be cared for equally, regardless of whether or not they were born in wedlock. Weber and Gilman (1898) wished for legal reforms so that women would be able to be full citizens. These legal reforms would happen broadly, according to Weber and Gilman; for instance, women should have their views and experiences represented within the government through voting rights and equitable property rights upon marriage. Du Bois asserted that equal access to resources for black families is key to the black mother/wife's struggle for equality.

Beginning in the 1700s and through the 1800s, many scholarly suggestions were made about ways to make marriage and family formation more equitable in the United States of

America. That these suggestions were made is somewhat disconcerting. While it is true that women have made social and economic advances since this early historical period, many of those suggestions made by early family scholars have gone under-addressed or ignored altogether by policymakers. This begs many questions, but specifically, “What if?” What if those in power had taken those suggestions seriously at the time? What would advances for women look like today had they been taken seriously?

The analyses about marriage as a critical site of inequality offered by these classical sociological and psychological theorists disrupts the structure of hierarchical marriage—marriage as an institution in which men are wholly in control and women are relegated to servicing the needs of men. This idea is foundational in the construction of the “American Marriage Narrative” (AMN). Rhetoric about intimacies and family formation that uphold and lead one to marriage placed women at the bottom of the hierarchy from the conception of the United States of America. American marriage norms and mores were actively and publicly fought against *before* their migration from Europe. Sociologists questioned and critiqued standard practice of American marriage and family formation, the structure of “the family” and family life in the United States, and the hierarchies they construct. In other words, the AMN’s existence can be traced to the inception of the United States and has created pressures, privileges, and constraints around the institution of marriage since then.

The next phase of scholarship on marriage was far less radical than classical sociology. In what I refer to as the “Middle Works” on marriage and family formation, researchers examine gendered “roles” within the family to determine if the family is a *healthy, functioning economic unit of society* (Parsons 1955; Parsons and Bales 1955; Zelditch 1955). Sociological literature on the family and marriage published during the mid-twentieth century reflected the assumption that

“the family,” as constructed during that time period, served an important stabilizing function in American society. Therefore, little analysis concerning gender parity or gendered power within marriage was undertaken.

During this moment post-World War II, Americans were in the process of repairing a culture torn apart by death and separation of family members who were part of the war effort. Consequently, literature published at the time reflected this cultural attitude about marriage and family relations. That is, rather than focusing on the problematics of the marital union or family (again, likely due to the historical moment in which this writing was done) the literature of this time focused on the *strength* of the “economic family unit” through the lens of gender complementarity, compatibility, and “gender role” language (Parsons 1955; Parson and Bales 1955). As such, gender parity, gendered socialization/outcomes of socialization, and inequalities experienced by marginalized families were generally overlooked. The sociological literature during this time, then, served to reinforce the status quo of family formation *through* the institution of marriage in the United States. By suggesting that gender complementarity in marriage was of the utmost importance and individual participation in the institution of marriage was the best way to form family, sociologists in the middle of the twentieth century reinforced norms of intimacy and family formation.

Post-mid century feminist scholarship contested the utility of “role” language to understand gender in marriage and families (Lopata and Thorne 1978; Rubin 1975) citing its lack of acknowledgement of power relations. Critique of gendered power in relationships and persistent inequality within the family structure and home is the focus of Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) project on mothering. Chodorow contributes to the literature on the “American Marriage Narrative” (AMN) and its construction by developing theory that accounts for the ways in which

women are taught to be subservient in the heterosexual family structure by their mothers who are already (and perhaps always) oppressed in the existing gender structure. Chodorow (1978) points to the individual psyche as the primary way in which gendered behaviors and structural inequalities persist. In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Chodorow focuses on women's mothering as a project that is passed down to female children; specifically, the way women's mothering behavior and position within the family structure is passed from generation to generation. In her research, Chodorow (1978) states,

“Women's mothering determines women's primary location in the domestic sphere and creates a basis for the structural differentiation of domestic and public spheres. But these spheres operate hierarchically. Kinship rules organize claims of men on domestic units, and men dominate kinship. Culturally and politically, the public sphere dominates the domestic, and hence men dominate women” (p.10).

Rather than this psychoanalytic explanation for gendered inequalities within the family, Arlie Hochschild (1989) uses a socioemotional or social psychological approach to understand gender hierarchies within the home in her book *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*. The socioemotional lens, then, is applied to the ways that “moments” across one's lifecourse are specifically “magnified” due to their emotional importance in the individual's life. Hochschild defines “magnified moments” as,

“Episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich...One thing a magnified moment magnifies is the feeling a person holds up as ideal. It shows what a person, up until the experience began, wanted to feel. Thus, there is an ideal expressed in the moment and there is culture within the ideal. Magnified moments reflect a feeling ideal both when a person joyously lives up to it or, in some spectacular way, does not” (Hochschild 4).

Further, in his research on men's performance of allyship through dressing in drag and participation in protests against sexual violence, Bridges uses “magnified moments” as a method of identifying key themes related to significant life course events in his data. He said, “This

approach allows us to highlight the significance of events that may only take place only once a year but meaningfully illuminate aspects of social reality often taken for granted” (Bridges 2010). My use of “magnified moments” across the relationship trajectory is in the vein of Hochschild’s (1994) and Bridges’ (2010) use of the concept. However, when applied to data on marriage resisters, magnified moments are defined differently. In this case, moments are related to one’s learning about intimacies, dating, and sexuality, as well as, marriage and family formation.

Hochschild’s depth and breadth of sociological research on the family, home, and emotion can be understood, in total, as an examination of the roles that women learn to take on from their lessons on mothering/wifedom in childhood through “magnified moments” (Hochschild 1994). Hochschild’s and Chodorow’s work (drawing on Freud [1975]) serves to explain the ways in which men and women are socialized to perform emotion at work and in the home as complementary beings, each with their own set of characteristics that include specified behaviors that are predetermined and unequal. The lessons learned within the home, the rhetoric of the AMN, thus teaches children *unequal* “roles” expected of them in pursuit of intimacy and family formation in the United States.

Feminist sociologists in the decade of the 1990s decidedly ruled out the use of the term “roles” and instead critiqued its use, finding innovative language to describe the power of gender as a structure and gender as structuring institutions (Ferree 1990; Ingraham 1994; 2008; Lorber 1994; Moss 2012; Risman 2004). These feminist sociologists stand on the shoulders of giants. Rubin’s³ (1975) concept of the “sex/gender system” and Lopata and Thorne’s (1978) idea that

³ Though, Gayle Rubin is *not* a sociologist.

power relations go unaccounted for in theories of “gender roles” (and through the use of “role” language) laid the foundation for this critique twenty years earlier.

Toward a Heterogender Structure Theory of American Marriage: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

In this section, I present feminist sociological research and theories that move toward a consideration of a “heterogender structure” of American marriage. Through the work of Judith Lorber (1994), Chrys Ingraham (1994; 2008), and Barbara Risman (2004), I show the construction of a theoretical frame that I find useful for this dissertation research—heterogender structure theory. I begin this discussion with Lorber’s (1994) famous essay found in her book *Paradoxes of Gender*, “Night to His Day,” wherein she provides an explanation for gender to be understood as an institution.

In “Night to His Day,” Lorber (1994) uses a social-constructionist perspective to explain how gender shapes behaviors and interactions within institutions; indeed, Lorber (1994) asserts that the “status of everyone placed in the category ‘woman’ is ‘night to his day’—she is the repressed that ensures the system’s (gender/[family]) function” (p. 53). Further, Lorber states “the purpose of gender as a modern social institution is to construct women as a group to be the subordinates of men as a group” (1994:53). Lorber’s (1994) account of gender and *power* and gender as an institution folds into Chrys Ingraham’s (1994) concepts of “heterogender” and the “heterosexual imaginary.” Ingraham (1994) similarly asserts that institutionalized gender inevitably organizes power relationships. Ingraham (1994) defines “heterogender” as “an alternative to ‘[gender] role’ language; the redefinition of the social construction of gender that is rooted in heteronormativity and provides ideas about the “normal heterosexual man” and

“normal heterosexual woman.” Further, heterogender serves to account for the *power* of heteronormative social structure in the American “heterosexual imaginary.”

The “heterosexual imaginary” is the “institutionalization of heterosexuality in social relations; it is an historically embedded process in the social structure [...] a catalyst for the distribution of economic resources, cultural power, and social control [rooted in gendered expectations for human bodies]” (Ingraham 1994:204). According to Ingraham (1994), the concepts of the heterosexual imaginary and heterogender rather than gender role theory, models, and language, is useful for understanding the power dynamics/inequalities that arise in American heterogender culture as well as those that arise in same-sex cultures. In this way, Ingraham (1994) and Lorber (1994), theorize (hetero)gender at *all* levels of society and through their analyses find that power is the problem in gender relations and gender structure.

These theorizations of (hetero)gender can be extended to the institution, culture, and social structure of marriage and its related rhetoric—the American Marriage Narrative (AMN). Ingraham (1994) finds that, in the process of becoming institutionalized, heterosexual/heteronormative gender is concealed, made invisible, and therefore taken-for-granted. Ingraham’s (1994) assertion here gets at the root of the question, “Why Marriage?” Or, “Why does marriage persist as the idealized family form?” The answer is, *ideology*; or, the ways in which ideology connected to one’s personal experience allows marriage to persist in light of the “crisis” the institution is currently experiencing. I elaborate further below.

By connecting one’s personal experiences/narrative to the cultural and institutional logics that one relies on in their storytelling, the ideological underpinnings of culture, institutions, and structures are laid bare. For example, while addressing their relationship trajectory, respondents referenced current “hook-up culture” and its differences from (historic) ideals of dating and

intimacies, marriage, and family formation. They make connections between former intimacies their current long-term relationship, and the *imaginary* relationship they have with the institutional structure of marriage and family formation, more generally, in the United States. Moreover, and importantly, cultural logics of marriage and other American institutions *depend on ideology perpetuated by these institutions*. In other words, the American Marriage Narrative (AMN)—relied upon by study respondents in their storytelling—that cultural logic of family formation in the United States, is a loaded ideological stance taken up by institutions that govern American society.

When an individual expresses a desire to marry, this is no benign statement. Instead, they are externalizing that already habitualized ideology learned from institutional agents and cultural guides—love, marriage, and baby carriage. They are repeating, thus, reinvesting in the idea/ideology of normative family formation through marriage and constructing a reality by their hope or wish to get married. This is the process of reifying what is already considered “normal.”

Reification of the “normal” gets at the definition provided by Ingraham of Lacan’s concept, “ideology.” Ideology is “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1994; Lacan 1971:52). Ingraham’s use of Lacan’s (1971) definition of ideology to explain the obscuring of heterogender relationship patterns of society through the “heterosexual imaginary” is akin to my use of the American Marriage Narrative (AMN) to highlight the way that patterns of intimacy are obscured by heterosexual marriage. Individuals use the imaginary relationship between themselves and the institution of American marriage to make decisions about intimacies early in the life course and beyond. From dating and sex to family formation, reliance upon the AMN is consequential in respondents’ lives and evidences the connection between one’s personal narrative, logics, and ideology. The “heterosexual

imaginary” *and* the AMN make clear the patterned ways in which gender *as it intersects with* sexuality, then, is the main culprit of “gendered-inequalities;” I similarly assert that gender and sexuality intersect to make “marriage and family inequalities.”

In the 2000s, Risman builds on Lorber’s (1994) and, inadvertently without recognition, Ingraham’s (1994) understanding of gender at multiple levels of analysis. Risman’s (2004) multilevel, integrative model showed that gender is present as a social structure. This means that “gender” structures institutions, interactions, and individual understandings of the self. This is evidence that gender is a structuring phenomenon in social relations. Gender as a structure no longer allows theories of gender to be reducible to only one of three levels (individual, interactional, or institutional/organizational); instead, this integrative model helps to explain gender stratification and inequalities not captured by simplistic “role” models. However, and importantly, without a full consideration of Ingraham’s (1994) insights about heteronormativity Risman’s (2004) analysis about gender is missing a holistic account of the ways that gender *and* sexuality co-construct a social structure: heterogender.

In my 2012 article on bisexuality within the family structure, I build on Risman’s (2004) model of gender structure theory to include Ingraham’s (1994) concept of heterogender. In this article, I state that marriage and family inequality is as much a part of the American fabric as are gender inequalities and other intersectional variables (Moss 2012). Due to unequal treatment before American culture, its citizens, and social institutions (including the law), unmarried people in long-term intimate relationships find alternative ways to navigate their lives by creating families that defy the traditional definition of the “American Family” (much like the bisexual women who wish to form families who I discuss in my 2012 article). Understanding

those families that deviate from the expected norm can be done through the heterogender structure of American society. I articulate “heterogender structure theory” in this way:

“I combine Risman’s (2004) gender structure theory and Ingraham’s (1994) concept of heterogender to discuss what I call heterogender structure theory as seen through my collection of oral histories. I am able to conceive of the idea that while gender structure is the apparent structural agent in the relationships that the [bisexual] women engage in, it is not enough to end the analysis with gender. It is really the heterogender structure of institutions that organizes these relationships. In their resistance to the status quo of marriage, the women in this study are unwilling to adhere to the norm of monogamy, by allowing themselves to be partnered with not only their husband but also with their female partner; thus, the women are doing bisexuality in their day-to-day lives” (2012:413).

Heterogender structure theory, then, is the presence of heteronormativity or heterogender at all levels of analysis and/or society. Ability to resist American marriage culture and AMN rhetoric depends on one's ability to persist remaining unmarried in a culture that is structured through and by heterogender. “Heterogender structure theory” is more inclusive of the inequalities that individuals face because it brings together and shows the intersection of gender and sexuality norms in the United States of America. Gender and sexuality norms continue to oppress those who do not adhere to the dichotomies of a binary gender and sexuality system.

The cultural rhetoric and social structure of marriage is highlighted in the next section of this literature review. Cultural logics of marriage and family formation are those processes that underlie our ability to take paths of lesser or greater resistance in the trajectory that leads one to forming a family.

From American History to an American’s Biography: Making a Marriageable Human Through Culture and Structure

The kind of teaching done by parents/adults and learning behaviors done by children, described by Chodorow (1978) and Hochschild (1989; 2003), creates what Bem (1993) calls a “cultural

native.” Bem cites the process of enculturation, or teaching and learning cultural norms, as that which creates a cultural native. She states that this teaching may not be done intentionally and that children may learn these norms subliminally. To this point, Bem states, “Cultural knowledge can be considered a kind of subliminal pedagogy...” (1993:141). However, importantly, Bem points out that this process is psychological and sociological. Bem states,

“Gender schema theory maintains that children in gender-polarizing societies internalize the lens of gender polarization and thereby become gender polarizing (or gender schematic) themselves. This internalized lens, in turn, helps lead children to become conventionally gendered” (1993:138).

Quite understandably, then, as children learn cultural norms of gender and gendered embodiment, norms of marriage and family, too, are confronted. This means that, as gendered- and sexualized-humans, children must interact with the notion of “romantic love.” To learn the contours of the emotional state of love, even as a cultural native, is no easy task. Learning to love is, too, a gendered process that suggests that women are “simultaneously responsible for and objects of male desire [and] a woman who is doing femininity ‘right’ makes herself alluring to men so that she can ‘keep her man satisfied’ (Gilman 1911; Bartky 1998; Lorber 1994; Wolkomir 2004; 2006). Appropriate masculine response—desire and commitment—therefore becomes a testament to how well a woman is doing [embodying and behaving] femininity” (Wolkomir 2009:501). And men are confirmed in their masculinity when a woman is doing femininity well in this configuration. Further, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) detail this relational aspect of gender in their work on masculinities. They find that hegemonic, or idealized, masculinity relies on hegemonic or “emphasized femininity” as asymmetrical positions in the patriarchal gender order (Connell and Messerschmidt ([2005:848])). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) state, “...patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity” (p. 848). The norms, values, and

beliefs of this interactional process between heterogender heterosexual men and women, therefore, concretize a power imbalance in the very formation of their intimate relationships.

Ann Swidler provides a framework through which to view the making of a cultural native in Western “love” culture. Swidler states that the “institutional demands of marriage continually reproduce the outlines of the mythic love story [and] the institutional properties of marriage may explain why dramas of love retain their popular appeal” (2001:129). But, Swidler asserts that it is not quite correct to assume that mythic love and the institution of marriage are synonymous.

Rather, Swidler finds that,

“Love describes the inner contours of individual action (and feeling) oriented to marriage [...] People learn to ask themselves whether their feelings for another person are ‘real love’—love that can be exclusive, certain, life-transforming, and enduring. They reconstitute the institutional characteristics of marriage as intrapsychic states” (2001:130).

Beyond organizing one’s internal gendered love schema, Swidler further explains the ways in which marriage organizes and makes sense of the self in the social world. When Western culture reproduces mythic love at every turn—through films, books, television shows, news, and the Internet—individuals consistently interact with the inner contours of love and marriage; thus, the power imbalance is reproduced in these intrapsychic states and in interaction each time romance blossoms out of attraction to one who does gender normatively. Swidler finds that the combination of love and marriage is an exemplar of the interplay between culture and institutions (2001:130). Moreover, she states,

“Love and marriage provide a perfect example of [the] relationship between culture and institutions. Individuals...develop strategies of action that provide them with a basic life organization. An institution like marriage solves many problems of life organization simultaneously. In general, marriage settles one’s living arrangements—with whom one shares a household, and usually income and expenses; one’s sexual obligations and opportunities; with whom one socializes; who will care for one if one is sick. Marriage defines a life-partnership, a unit that produces joint rather than purely individual goods.

Marriage changes one's public status (and sometimes one's name) and it defines a unit in the larger social world.

There is no institutionalized path to marriage as there is for finding a college or career—fill out an application, take a test, be called for an interview, wait for a letter of acceptance or rejection...[T]hus, it is up to individuals to form marriages, to link their life strategies to the institutional structure marriage provides [...] The culture of love flourishes in this gap where action meets institution. In order to marry, individuals must develop certain cultural, psychological, and even cognitive equipment” (2001:130).

Swidler concludes with the idea that to participate in the institution of marriage an individual relies on an internal cognitive schema that organizes romantic love relationships. In other words, individuals have learned over their life course ways to (read: normally) categorize and organize gendered and sexualized behaviors, actions, and experiences in order to determine whether a romantic love object shares similar life strategies and would, therefore, be a properly marriageable partner. Finally, because there is no institutionalized path to marriage, one must fall back on the culture to which they belong for norms, values, and beliefs of love and their internalized gendered/sexualized love schema to make choices regarding their romantic love object.

As the literature suggests, a cultural analysis of marriage allows for deeper understandings of the ways in which individuals communicate and interact with one another and with institutions around norms and deviations. These socially constructed norms and deviations create boundaries for what is acceptable (or culturally prescribed) with regards to premarital and marital behavior. According to sociologist Annette Lareau's study of American approaches to childrearing, cultural logics or “cultural repertoires” are “standards...[and] guidelines that [are] generally accepted” with “widespread agreement” (2003; 2011:4). She further asserts that cultural logics/repertoires differ dependent upon an individual's social location (e.g., an individual's race, class, and/or gender). Through the process of what Lareau (2013) calls

“concerted cultivation,”⁴ (heterosexual) marriage can be understood as a lesson to be learned. Concerted cultivation around marriage includes, then, specific heteronormative teaching and learning that occurs throughout an individual’s life and is conducted—often but not always, implicitly—by those individuals and institutions that have some sort of authority over them. These messages provide a “path of least resistance” (Johnson 2008; 2014) for individuals to take, or a set of choices for which the answers are predetermined and go unquestioned. This allows them to create a life that “fits” within the normative schema of adult relationships. Therefore, it can be understood that the social construction of marriage occurs in the process of transmitting information through teaching and learning specific messages already embedded in American culture. Marriage, then, is a “cultural logic” that both enables and constrains individual participation because of rigid normative institutional boundaries.

Other scholars have also theorized and studied cultural logics, demonstrating the importance of accounting for formation and role of cultural logics in social life. For instance, sociologist Gaye Tuchman (2009) succinctly defines logics in the discussion of compliance in higher education in her monograph *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*. She states, “Both organizations and individuals use ‘logics’ to comprehend, justify, and (re)produce the social world as they understand it and so also to constitute their place within it. Logics take their

⁴ Lareau (2003, 2011) uses the concept of concerted cultivation to describe a middle-class childrearing and parenting technique. She writes that this technique suggests that children be given the ultimate space and resources to hone creative skills that will help them become successful adults later in the life course. The definition of successful adult is in line with social norms of “middle-classness,” such as attaining higher education, attaining a successful career, marriage, parenting, et cetera. Specifically, parents who practice concerted cultivation make central their child’s schedule of extracurricular activities at the expense of their own calendar to ensure proper, normative socialization. I am drawing on Lareau’s concept to highlight the cultivation of specific ideals and points of view in much the same way that the middle-class parents cultivate their children to reflect their ideals such as movement up the social class hierarchy.

meaning within a social context” (2009:192). More specifically, and rather jargony, anthropologist, Fischer defines cultural logics as,

“...[G]enerative principles expressed through cognitive schemas that promote intersubjective continuity and are conditioned by social, political, and economic contingencies. Both change and continuity are integral to the concept of cultural logic [...] they are mutually constitutive in lived experience” (1999:474).

I will offer an example to illustrate Fischer’s definition. Individuals are gendered at or before birth through processes such as buying specifically “girl” or “boy” products (the pink/blue gendered-color distinction dictated by Western corporation/business, marketing and consumption markets) and the use of gender-specific pronouns to refer to the child. By doing so, adults in the child’s life produce and reproduce heteronormative gender for the child. Despite the fact that children change as they grow, the continuity in clear gender expectations remains.

According to Fischer, then, cultural logics are social norm cognitions (knowledge that shapes the thinking and perception, what we know, and how we know it) created via socialization into multiple stake-holding institutions. Additionally, Friedman, a neoliberal economist, notes, “...the way to understanding the production and reproduction of culture depends on an understanding of the changing constitution of identity spaces and their concomitant strategies” (1994:457). To clarify, identity spaces are the defined boundaries of behaviors, actions, and characteristics that form a person’s sense of self and group belonging. Also, identity spaces tend to be politicized. The boundaries of a given identity space are policed by those who exist within a category (to be sure that only those who “belong” are allowed in) and contested by those who exist outside of that category. For this reason, identity spaces fluctuate and change across time and social contexts. Going back to the example, then, children learn to identify with what is normalized, valued, believed, and expected. They create a personal identity out of existing cultural repertoires or logics and, of course, some people choose to

deviate from these proffered models. But, most do not—as shown in the chronological review of literature that I have provided above.

To bridge these scholars' conceptualizations of cultural logics and to highlight how cultural logics matter in social life, I proffer the following line of reasoning: identity spaces are bounded by the politics of who is within and outside these spaces. There are institutional stakeholders who seek to define the boundary of the identity space. Norms, values, and beliefs are developed to define the space and individuals are taught to behave accordingly. For example, children in the United States are expected to be students, an identity that is typically salient for their first eighteen years or so of life. During that time, multiple institutions and the social structure reinforce this social fact including, but not limited to, the institution of education, family, law and governance, economy, and even the media. The persistent reminder that attaining a high-school diploma is important and necessary shapes the thinking and perception about the centrality of a “student identity”. Eventually, in late adolescence, the individual must make a choice about how to proceed with the rest of their life—should one, for instance, further their education, obtain a job, establish relationships, form a family, et cetera?

However, because the necessity and importance of attaining a high school diploma has been repeated many times by various figures, institutions, and structures/systems to the individual, the message becomes a regular part of the individual's life. This is habituation (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Once something is habituated, it is not a leap to consider it natural, normal, or even inevitable. Drawing on the example, then: if a person by the age of eighteen does not know what they would like to do with the rest of their life (because of the extant pressure of following norms, values, and beliefs), they may believe that they have somehow failed, not followed the right path, or worse, let someone (including their self) down.

Marriage, too, is habitualized in the West. Implications of this line of thinking for those who resist marriage in a culture that upholds marriage is the possibility that one's self worth is dependent on whether or not they are personally "marriageable." Like the individual in the example above who is unsure what to do with their life post-"student identity," the individual who resists the cultural push to marry, despite the cultural prescription to do so, could face social pressures. These pressures could contribute to a whole host of potentially negative life outcomes for individuals who resist marriage, such as trouble with mental/physical health or an increased risk of suicide (Bachem, et al. 2017; Levenkron and Levenkron 2007).

By bringing together sociological literature on gender, families, and culture, it becomes clear that there exists a reproduction of the gendered division of labor within the home. Moreover, the norms, values, and beliefs of Western love culture and the cultural logics of family formation create a construct of marriage and marriage's intended participants. The existing literature helps explain reasons for which individuals follow the path of least resistance in their decision-making about intimate partnerships and marriage; for example, children learn and internalize gendered-love and relationship schemas.

The heteronormative cultural script (schema or model) of love culture prescribes that marriage is the logical next step in a long-term romantic relationship trajectory. Further, cultural logics help to coax along individuals on the normative paths to marriage and relationships. However, because there are boundaries that define normative marriage, there are individuals who contest those boundaries to expose inequalities in and/or seek entrance into the institution of marriage.

Marriage, Cohabitation, and Resistance

Questions about resistance to Western love culture, intimacies, and family formation—the typified relationship trajectory—despite all of the reasons to participate in it, guided my thinking about individuals in long-term intimate relationships that do not include marriage. I read an article in a popular culture magazine that piqued my interest and intimately connected to my project.⁵ When I saw the title of the article, I immediately asked myself, “is this author writing about marriage for all? Some? Or none?” What follows next is my answer to this question and why identifying resistance to the cultural logic of marriage in Western culture is important for social/structural change and justice.

The article titled, “Benefits of Marriage Study Hints at the Horrors of Middle Age” by Maya Dusenbery (January 16, 2015) begins with, “Marriage isn’t the happiness elixir America wants it to be...” (1). This article is written in response to a New York Times (NYT) article titled, “Study Finds More Reasons to Get and Stay Married.” The upshot of the NYT article, written by Claire Cain Miller, is simple and reflects what a majority of sociological literature on marriage reflects: a “good” marriage is good for your health. The partnership that marriage creates has effects on long-term health outcomes, thereby extending one’s life. However, as mentioned in the magazine, “In reality, nobody is suggesting there’s any benefit to staying in an unhappy marriage, which has consistently been shown to be at least as bad—and usually worse—for your physical and mental health as being unmarried” (Dusenbery 1). Furthermore,

⁵ The popular culture magazine to which I refer in the opening of this section is titled *Pacific Standard (PS)*. The *PS* magazine is an empirically-driven print and online publication produced by the Miller-McCune Center for Research, Media, and Public Policy. The *PS* magazine is unique in that it takes from scholarly discourse solutions and suggestions to decrease social problems to shed light on social justice and human affairs in a way that takes seriously popular culture and the media. They deliver their messages through “...great storytelling to make vivid and persuasive what is otherwise abstract.”

Dusenbery brazenly states, "...It is impossible to control for the enormous pressure people feel to get married in many cultures. Despite the fact that in the United States nearly half of adults are unmarried and more than a quarter of all households consist of only one person, there's a veritable romantic industrial complex—aimed especially at women—reminding us to couple up and settle down before we die alone" (1). This is the great fear of middle age identified in Dusenbery's work, but she does not stop there.

Dusenbery introduces a "...new paper, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research [that is] based primarily on data from the United Kingdom. [It] suggests that there's a real causal effect of getting married" (1). Shawn Grover, study co-author, defines marriage as a super friendship (1). A super friendship happens as a result of marriage, thus the causal effect. Dusenbery (2015:1) fleshes out Grover's findings in this way:

"Marriage appears to increase life satisfaction, beyond the honeymoon period, and particularly during the slump in happiness that often accompanies middle age. The effect seems to have less to do with the legal institution than with the relationship; the benefit of co-habiting [sic] is almost as large. Noting that those who describe their partner as their best friend see double the boost in well-being, the researchers conclude that it is the friendship offered by a spouse or long-term partner that's most important."

Aha! That is it: cohabiting is good for us. The NYT article illuminated *marriage* as "good" while obscuring the more important pattern—good cohabitation partnerships are what *really* matter for health outcomes as Americans age; marriage just happens to be the most recognized way of procuring such partnerships.

This statement and the evidence that follows in Dusenbery's article aligns with the small, albeit burgeoning, literature found in the academic journal *Gender & Society* (G&S) on cohabitation as a permanent life status and a relationship/family formed in contestation of the

institution of marriage.⁶ In the next section, I will begin by using Ortyl's (2013) definition of cohabiters/cohabiting and then provide examples of the research on cohabitation as it relates to the institution and resistance of marriage.

Attitudes about marriage result from broad societal shifts in family life and the meaning of marriage, as well as life experiences that reflect the individual's various social locations, such as race, class, and gender. Ortyl's (2013) work provides a snapshot into a population for whom marriage is not central, yet who remain affected by marriage's institutional characteristics and structure. Perhaps most relevant to my dissertation research is sociologist and posthumous honorary doctorate degree holder Timothy Ortyl's (2013) groundbreaking research on long-term heterosexual cohabiters that found cohabitation as not necessarily a mere temporality. Ortyl's (2013) research approaches cohabitation as not just a temporary life stage, but also a permanent life status. He defines his study respondents as "Long-Term Heterosexual Cohabitors (LTHCs)" and operationalizes them as, "different-sex couples who have been living together unmarried for at least four years" (2013:590). In his qualitative interview study of LTHCs, Ortyl (2013) finds six themes around LTHCs' attitudes about marriage (Risk Aversion, Marriagefree, Marriage Boycott, Sexism Dissent, American Dreamer, and Economic Disincentives). Further, Ortyl calls for "...the need to reorient scholarship on cohabitation by analyzing how, for many Americans, long-term cohabitation is an enduring strategy for structuring intimate relations, shaped by broader ideological commitments, social location, and resources" (p. 584). It is my intention to answer Ortyl's call for a further investigation into individuals who have not followed the

⁶ *Gender & Society* is a highly regarded (mostly) empirical academic journal in the sociology of sex and gender that has ranked among the top twenty journals in sociology and is ranked number two in women's studies.

construct of Western love culture that leads to marriage. These individuals might consider cohabitation as a reasonable alternative to participating in the institution of marriage.

Other research, like that of Ortyl (2013), reveals insights into cohabitation as a feminist response (consciously and subconsciously) to the very rigid partnership and family formation of marriage. Vivienne Elizabeth, for instance, highlights “cohabitants who are critical of conventional marriage” (2000:101). However, because the cohabitants disclose their disdain of traditional marriage, they are subjugated, seen as different, and, thus, deviant. Edin and Keflas’s (2005) book *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* reveals that poor mothers are more legitimated by their reproductive choice to bear children than they would be in their partnership choice to get married. Therefore, the respondents in Edin and Keflas’s work find themselves cohabiting while raising a family rather than being married. Cohabitation, then, seems to be a logical next step when a poor woman becomes pregnant to assist in daily life and economic responsibility. In other words, cohabitation was found to be an alternative to marriage for groups in specific social locations for whom marriage at a given moment in the life course was not a viable option. To elucidate this point, Thomson’s (2009) research on youth in the United Kingdom finds that cohabitation may be a preferable state for the respondents in her longitudinal analysis of the shift from childhood to adulthood. Thomson (2009) finds that children who experience ambivalence about marriage and intimate relationships in childhood (due to multiple variables such as experience with parental divorce, parental serial-monogamy, and instability within the home) might consider cohabitation as preferential to marriage. Current scholarship, thus, indicates that cohabitation is not a transient state but a life strategy. While some cohabiters choose this type of intimate relationship configuration, for others it is a mode of survival and a route to sustenance. Thus, cohabitation as a state in which

adults who wish to remain unmarried, maintain a home, and form families, is a site in which those who resist marriage may reside.

Importantly tied to this project is the symposium on renowned feminist sociologist Paula England's (2010) work that appeared in *G&S*. Derived from her *Sociologists for Women in Society* (SWS) Feminist Lecture titled, "The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled," gender scholars responded to England's (2010) article. Responses were generated through various feminist lenses to address the issue taken up by England. Prokos, on England's legacy in the area of the sociology of gender writes, "It is not [...] unsurprising that a sociologist who has studied gender throughout her career would describe the progress of the 'gender revolution' as uneven and identify some aspects as 'stalled'" (2010:75). One of the responses to England's concern about the uneven and stalled paces of the gender revolution is particularly interesting juxtaposed with my research topic. Graf and Schwartz (2010) takes up the portion of England's lecture concerning the relatively small changes that the gender revolution has provided over time in heterosexual romantic relationships.

Graf and Schwartz (2010) agree with England in that there are noticeable improvements in the lives of women as they interact within the education, job, and economic sectors. But where the authors and England diverge is in England's assertion that, for women, there been little change in their intimate relationships. In fact, Graf and Schwartz find that, "Much recent research suggests that as women have increased their education, occupational status, and earnings, the characteristics of couples have changed, and with them the breadwinning dynamics of relationships" (2010:101). Further, the authors assert that,

"England's account of the lack of change in heterosexual romantic relationships is based largely on examining the noneconomic and symbolic aspects of gender, for example, the continuing expectation that men initiate dating and marriage, that women and children

generally take men's surnames, and that men and women are judged 'old' and sexually undesirable at different ages" (p.101).

Drawing on Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin (1991) and Goldstein and Kenney (2001), Graf and Schwartz (2010) describe a different lens through which to view the gender revolution. The lens that Graf and Schwartz turns on the gender revolution shows that cohabitation is an agentic space in which gender change is occurring. To this end, the authors state, "England draws a distinction between the pace of change in the worlds of work and personal relationships, but it is important to emphasize that it is the same women who have made large gains in education and work who are also dating, cohabiting, and marrying" (2010:102). Further, Graf and Schwartz explain that, as marriage rates have declined, "life table estimates predict that the vast majority of women will still marry men [and] the decline of marriage among young women has largely been offset by their increased cohabitation" (2010:102). England's (2010) response to Schwartz and Graf's statement on her work both agrees with their assertion and calls their assertions into question. However, the outcome of England's response to Graf and Schwartz (2010) is this: she agrees that cohabitation may be a space for more gender parity, but she argues that it is really the relationship between money and the individual relationship participants that matters most.

It is the specific ways in which these scholars highlight cohabitation as a potentially revolutionary space in which inequalities around gender, social class, and other social axes of oppression can be situated and analyzed. It is here that I reassert the idea of studying cohabiters who resist marriage. While some come to cohabiting by unplanned pregnancy and impoverished conditions, others choose cohabitation as a long-term partnering strategy that suits the needs of the individuals involved in the partnership. Literature on cohabitation provides a peek into a culture in which counter-narratives about marriage may be being constructed and negotiated by individuals. It is my intention to listen to, find similarities and differences in, and analyze the

positionality of individuals who resist the cultural push to marry. Those individuals may be located in the cohabiter community. Taken together, this discussion of cohabiters and cohabitation provides a space in which to imagine individuals who resist the cultural push to get hitched. This conceptualization of individual desire to marry or not proves useful in delineating why it is important to look at cohabiters as marriage resisters.

Getting “hitched,” or rather “unhitched,” is the topic of sociologist Judith Stacey’s (2011) recent book *Unhitched: Love, Marriage, and Family Values from West Hollywood to Western China*. Judith Stacey (2011) analyzes family forms that do not rely on normalized characteristics of family life. Specifically, Stacey’s analysis of families formed by gay men in West Hollywood provides a model upon which I conceptualize the long-term partnered marriage resister. On children and parenting, Stacey provides evidence of a “Passion-for-Parenthood Continuum” that suggests that, while some gay men are “predestined parents,” or people who have always visualized their “self” as the parent of children some day, others are “parental refuseniks,” characterized as gay men who have no desire to parent children (2011:55). On refuseniks, Stacey states that they, “...viewed their freedom from the pressure to parent to be one of the compensatory rewards of their stigmatized sexual identity [...] [A] pure refusenik’s aversion to parenthood was so potent that he would forfeit his couple relationship rather than go along with his mate’s unequivocal yearning to become a parent” (2011:55).

I was not looking for a “pure refusenik” of marriage. However, Stacey’s conception of the gay male parenting continuum led me to think of those who refuse or resist marriage in similar ways to her research sample. Rather than those who outright refuse marriage (though I hoped to have them represented in my research), I was looking for individuals who have resisted the cultural push to marriage (at least for the time being), during this specific cultural moment in

which marriage is celebrated. Though I expected to find some “marriage refuseniks,” I could not have imagined that in contemporary United States culture I would find the number of individuals who *want* to marry in the future, whose experiences and perspectives I explore in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

Individual participation in an already existing social system relies on enculturation, cultural guidance, choice of path, and following said path. Any social system in which people participate is historical and embedded in culture. The connection between one's history (cultural and personal) and their current set of conditions or how their milieu and habitus are constructed (environment in which they act/identify/choose in the social system) is what C. W. Mills (1959) calls the "sociological imagination." Possessing a sociological imagination allows an individual to understand that which may appear as a "private trouble" such as domestic violence, hurled racial slurs, or "gay bashing", et cetera, as a broader social problem or "public issue" like, patriarchy, racism, and homophobia (Mills 1959). Marriage resisters, as I show in this dissertation, have a grasp on contemporary marriage culture/structure and the way it is oppressive in their lives.

Conclusion

“Doing Marriage Resistance” *OR* Agency within the Social Structure of Marriage: An Old Idea Revived for New Times

Despite micro and macro level oppressions in the American social structure of marriage, those who choose to form family without marriage are actively "doing resistance" in their everyday lives. "Doing resistance" as a framework has been relied upon by scholars in many disciplinary homes and has been applied to multiple cultural groups. Further, conceptualizations of "marriage

resistance" have been deployed since and before suffrage in the United States and Great Britain; thus, "doing marriage resistance" is not a new idea.

According to scholars who have contributed to the feminist “deconstruction of marriage” literature, when marriage is not the chosen path for women or *when women resist marriage*, such women have revolutionary potential and experience freedom (Adams 1776; Chodorow 1978; Collins 2008; Connell 2002/2009; Gilman 1898; 1911; Elizabeth 1997; 2000; Ingraham 1999; 2008; Lorber 1994; Rich 1980; Ridgeway 2011; Risman 1998; 2004; Rubin 1975; Stacey 2011). Freedom from patriarchal constraints of gender and sexual mores presents a "crisis tendency" in a society that makes heteronormative marriage the focus of the family. The focus here is on how marriage resisters enact their resistance.

Resistance to the already-existing path to marriage and subsequent family formation, as well as the consequences of remaining unmarried in a culture that reveres marriage, is discussed in this dissertation. I analyze unmarried individuals' resistance to the AMN/legal marriage and consequences of their resistance through the purview of three sociological concepts: choice, constraint, and control. Emerging from the data and analyses is a picture of everyday life in the marriage-loving (marriagephile) United States of America, though not a picture of those people who wish to participate in the institutionalized intimate relationship/family form in typical ways.

Importantly, at the point at which I conducted interviews, study respondents had been participants in their current relationship for four or more years. Despite this length of time, typically considered a “long” engagement for Americans, most respondents indicated that marriage was *not* in their immediate future. This finding suggests that individuals who do not have immediate plans to marry must continue to interact with the American Marriage Narrative

and marriage structure. This perpetual interaction constrains and creates consequences in respondents' lives no matter the enduring nature of their current relationship.

American marriage resisters must make choices within constraint, take a path of greater resistance, and negotiate their way through a marriagephile culture and society that casts them as deviant. In this way, unmarrieds face multitudes of aggressions and persist despite these barriers to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. They face consequences as a result of their unmarried family status and do so for the sake of their family units' access to required life necessities and resources. In the end, then, families who have an "unmarried" status must navigate *cultural/institutional marriage and family logics* and a *marriage social structure* not constructed for them or with them in mind.

To understand the persistence of legal marriage and marriage culture, I deem it necessary to look at those individuals who are most likely facing resistance to their choices due to the norms of dominant culture. Those who exist outside of the norm are most likely not to take for granted the existence of the norm. Indeed, their lives are dictated by the norm as well. Therefore, marriage resisters are more likely to have considered marriage in ways different from those who are participating in, or have participated in, the institution of marriage. The literature reviewed in this chapter speaks to various concerns related to the long-fraught institution of marriage in Western culture over specific epochs in American history. The following dissertation research builds on and contributes to the existing literature. As I show in my analysis, despite claims of "Marriage Equality," we are quite far from "Family Form Equality" in the United States of America.

CHAPTER THREE

FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES IN SOCIOLOGY: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY FORMATION

Marriage and Family Research: A Look Back to Move Forward

Several methodological approaches informed my decision to conduct oral histories to assist me in answering research questions. In this chapter, I will first discuss my use of oral history methodology as a way to highlight my respondents as the best “knower” of their life experiences and decision-making around marriage and long-term relationships. I will then explain how I draw upon life course methodology to identify and define specific moments in which individuals make decisions about long-term intimate relationships. I also discuss my use of feminist methodology to explore the similarities and differences in my respondents’ experiences with and narratives about marriage resistance. Next, I make use of the autoethnographic research method to both explain my positionality as a researcher and to contextualize study respondents’ interview data and experiences they had related to marriage culture and the American Marriage Narrative. I end the chapter by introducing the study respondents.

Oral History Methodology

The bulk of the data for this research was gathered using the oral history interview method. Sociologist Patricia Leavy (2007) describes this research method as, “an intensive method of interview with anthropological roots that is also frequently used by sociologists and historians and is often associated with feminists” (p.153). Further, Leavy understands oral history research as the intersection of ethnography, sociology, and history. Oral history research differs from

other interview forms because it relies on *oral traditions* or passing down information from one generation to the next (Leavy 2007). This is a storytelling method in which the researcher listens and provides prompts while the respondent is allowed to be the “knower” of their life history and experiences. For example, sociologist Nancy Naples reveals in an autoethnographic essay the deeply personal experience of her father’s death and her position in the family structure at that time (Naples 2001).

Questions and prompts regarding socialization processes through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood by parents, schools, and other authority figures are those I was most interested in and which are integral for the purpose of this study.⁷ An oral history methodology allowed me to get at marriage resisters’ recollections of the ways in which they learned ideal relationship forms and made decisions about their personal intimate relationships – specifically, the long-term relationship that led them to participate in this research study.

Life Course Methodology

Life course research broadly seeks to identify moments or periods of time that are particularly important to individual growth and cementing social norms. The trajectory upon which individuals move through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood is generally understood as predetermined, characterized, and standardized in very specific ways. The life-course literature in sociology is rooted in the relationship between time and human behavior (Hutchison 2014). Further, the life-course perspective looks at “how chronological age, relationships, common life transitions, and social change shape people’s lives from birth to death” (Hutchison 2014: 8). For example, infants are gendered upon birth based on the shape and size of their

⁷ The interview schedule is located in Appendix A.

genitalia/sex organs. This neatly places them into “girl” or “boy” boxes for the purpose of “proper” gender socialization. The latent function of gendering at birth sets up for them the necessary gendered relationship trajectory that should/could result in heterosexual marriage. Personal experiences and/or events already in line with institutionalized norms of the age-stratification system are documented in research on the life course.

Age stratification can be defined by chronological age, biological age, psychological age, and spiritual age. Further, cohorts are often a way in which the life course is conceptualized in sociological research. For the purpose of this project, I will focus on three life-course stages that happen before the shift to middle-age adulthood occurs: childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Sociologist James Henslin (2014) identifies six life-course stages from birth to death: childhood (birth to age 12), adolescence (13-17), transitional (early) adulthood (18-29), early middle adulthood (30-49), late middle adulthood (50-65), and older adulthood (approximately 65 and over) (pp. 97-99). The three life-course stages on which I will focus are those that usually occur *before* an individual chooses to get married.⁸ According to life-course literature, paths to marriage vary by social location and, as such, age at first marriage now varies more dramatically as well. Contemporarily, marriage tends to happen later in the life course than in previous epochs. Shifts in age at first marriage align with current economic conditions (Berzin and De Marco 2010). For example, the most recent increase in age at first marriage might be attributed to the Great Recession and the notion that cohabiting is more socially acceptable than ever before (Cohn et al. 2011). However, this correlation is not entirely clear. The authors make clear

⁸ Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends Project (from data collected in 2010) reports that “barely half of all adults in the United States—a record low—are currently married, and the median age at first marriage has never been higher for brides (26.5 years) and grooms (28.7)...” (Cohn et al. 2011). Age at first marriage has increased from “23 for women and 26 for men in 1990 and 20 and 22 in 1960” (Barkhorn 2013).

that those who are marrying the most and earliest are college-educated white individuals, while those who are marrying the least and latest in life are black women and men (Cohn et al. 2011).

The narratives of those I refer to as *marriage resisters* provide specific clues to the social construction of a culture that continues to support legal marriage. This approach allows me to ask questions related to age-time parameters or stages across the life course for a case of non-married, long-term partners. Moreover, I am able to discuss what their resistance to marriage means during this specific sociopolitical *and* economic moment in which marriage is culturally significant and politically central. The centrality of marriage at this particular moment, coupled with the explicit denial of the right of some citizens to participate in the institution, presents a crisis and/or crisis tendency (Connell 2008) during which major decisions about marriage are being made at a national level.⁹

Feminist Methodologies: Intersectionality and Autoethnography

This section highlights two additional methodologies that I utilize in this research—intersectionality and autoethnography. While life-course methodology identifies recognizable “stages,” it also cautions against assuming that the life course unfolds the same for all groups. Research must account for variations associated with gender, race/ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and other “axes of oppression/privilege” (Collins 2000; Thomson 2009). According to McCall, intersectionality is the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations (2005:1771). Traditionally, intersectionality theory was useful in providing a nuanced and contextual understanding of the lives of black women and marginalized groups who have gone unrecognized and, thus, under-theorized. In particular, intersectionality,

⁹ The Supreme Court of the United States, during the week of January 12, 2015, decided that they would hear arguments to determine if same-sex couples are not equally protected American citizens at the national level.

or intersectionality theory, allows the researcher to examine multiple social locations and understand the behavioral similarities and differences of individuals and groups. Collins states that “axes of oppression” (that is, social phenomena such as race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, ability, et cetera) cross over one another at the center to form the “matrix of domination” (1990/2000). This is not an additive model of oppression (King 1988). Instead, this model is fully integrated and can be seen at each level of analysis (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990/2000). Each axis upon which an individual is oppressed constructs very specific life trajectories. According to Collins (1990/2000), the center of the matrix is where the lived experiences of individuals exist; this is what we can understand to be their social locations, which can determine life experiences and outcomes (1990/2000). I draw on an intersectional approach to recognize and account for experiential differences and similarities in American marriage culture related to one’s social location. I also use this approach to consider the ways in which the “American Marriage Narrative” (AMN) is encountered and engaged with by different groups.

When Mine IS NOT *All* Mine: Ethics of Autoethnography in Sociology and My Approach to Marriage and Family Studies

In this section, I highlight the utility of the autoethnographic method in sociology. I begin with a brief narrative.

*

As a young person in middle and high school, after *already* experiencing several “failing” marriages (and “failing” divorces, really) via my parents’ personal divorce and their later divorces/separations from other long-term intimate partners, family members, and friends’ parents, I concluded as a fourteen-year-old that I never wanted to marry or have children. This

was the same year that I had my first serious romantic relationship in which I found myself “in love.”

I found “the one” in eighth grade. We made it official the summer before ninth grade. We stayed together through all of high school. We were to leave our small Midwest town to go away to “Big State University” after graduation. However, I went and he did not. I was forlorn. By this point, as a seventeen-year-old college freshman, I knew that I was going to marry this guy.

And we did. We married after I could not stand being away from him; I moved home from “Big State University” after just one semester. I never wanted to be without him again. We got married when I was nineteen years old, even though I was told by close relatives not to get married. They said that I was “recreating my parents’ relationship.” My parents began dating in middle school and were together through high school, too. I understood why some of my family members would say these things, but I did not and would not agree. He was different. He was not my father.

When I began the sociology graduate program in the fall semester of 2008, I was not a “typical” student. I had already spent more than half of my life in this intimate relationship—fifteen years in our relationship, nine years of marriage, and four years as parents. Two years later, in the summer of 2010, I was told that he no longer wanted our marriage. I state in Chapter Three that I am, too, a “temporal/situational marriage resister” (TMR). Again, this is not an identity and/or category that I initially intended for myself. Instead, my life and relationship trajectory took an unexpected turn and previous group-belonging (such as belonging to the group of “married people”) that I had experienced, vanished.

The narrative that I provided above and the shift in my relationship trajectory are partial explanations for my choice to introduce autoethnographic research methodology to this study of

American marriage culture and structure. Retrospectively, it is clear that two things in my life coalesced that led me to conceptualize this project—previous research in family studies through a sociological lens *and* my lifelong confusion around the institution of marriage in the United States of America.

Autoethnography and Reflexivity in Feminist Praxis

Decisions to use autoethnographic method were not made in haste. With care, consideration, and insightful conversation with my dissertation committee members, I integrate my own “marriage narrative” (discussed in Chapter Six). I outline there some of the experiences across my own life course relationship trajectory (in ways similar to the narrative above) that led to my position of the “Passion-To-Marry Continuum” as a TMR.

My positionality as a feminist qualitative researcher who is fully aware of their social location and attempts to make that location clear in praxis, in many ways, informed my decision to include important moments across my relationship trajectory within this dissertation.

Reflexivity in praxis is key to the feminist sociological research endeavor (Hessey-Biber and Leavy 2007; Leavy 2011; O’Connell-Davidson and Layder 1994; Sprague 2005). Pursuit of making clear one’s standpoint relies on reflexive practices. While reviewing and coding the interview data, I began to see the themes from the literature that aligned with them; however, I could begin to see my personal experiences reflected in them, too.

Over time, and in close consultation with my advisor, we chose to include my observation and reaction to attending the “Marriage Equality Bill-Signing” event and my interaction with an educational institution due *explicitly* to my “unmarried” status. Other autoethnographic data that I present contextualizes those “magnified moments” of my relationship trajectory. I was impacted in these moments *and*, through interviews with study

participants, I could not deny the links I was seeing between their narratives and my own. Recognizing themes that connected respondents' experiences and mine led me to use autoethnography. However, my use of it also must include my critiques of it. Namely, those life changing moments for me can be seen as idiosyncratic, personalized, and simply my perception. That is, my experiences are my own and parallels between my behavior and others are "blips" in the universe. Through my study of sociological practice, however, recognition of patterned human behavior is the goal and sociology's "promise" (Mills 1959).

Simple recognition of the connections between respondents and myself was not enough for me to include my own experiences, however. Ethical concerns about using autoethnography arose as I reflected on what I might include here—the first of which is making clearer my positionality as a researcher. The second, though, is at least equally concerning and that is answering the question, "who are the study respondents in autoethnographic research?" I explore answers to this ethical question below.

To answer this question, I draw heavily on British social scientist and qualitative research specialist Dr. Sarah Delamont, Co-Founding Editor of the academic journal *Qualitative Research*. Delamont (2007) presented an *intentionally controversial* paper at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Institute of Education, University of London, September 5-8, 2007. Delamont's (2007) presentation titled, "Arguments against Auto-Ethnography," was fashioned as a critique of this method through the lens of academics' qualms with autoethnography in social science research. Delamont (2007) does not necessarily hold these positions against autoethnography herself. Instead, she looked at her current ethnographic research agenda on the "capoeira diaspora," a Brazilian dance and martial arts practice, to consider what it would mean should she conduct an autoethnography of her participation in

capoeira spaces. In other words, she takes on the position of the autoethnography naysayer and does so using her personal research.

Delamont began her presentation (2007) with an account of the “explosion” of autoethnographic research in academia, in which she specifically explained,

“Journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Qualitative Studies in Education* regularly feature autoethnographic papers. In the first edition of Denzin and Lincoln [*Qualitative Research* (1994)] there was one index entry for Autoethnography, in the second (2000) edition there were thirteen with a chapter by Ellis and Bochner [“Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity” (2000)], while in the third (2005) edition the number had grown to thirty seven, and there was a dedicated chapter by Jones [“Autoethnography” (2005)].”

Almost immediately after this review and heavy critique of existing published autoethnographies, Delamont (2007) said, “I see this [autoethnography’s utility] as almost entirely pernicious.” Delamont continued by saying that this method is “essentially lazy, literally lazy and also intellectually lazy.” Delamont is arguing against so-called, “Me-Search” in the academic realm. Delamont deliberately deploys language hurled at qualitative researchers who use this method. Her use of this language illuminates the presumption of researcher “laziness.” However, autoethnography *is not* lazy, nor is it autobiography (though, I would argue that autobiographical writing is not a lazy endeavor, either). Through this deliberately harsh analysis, Delamont (2007) outlined six key critiques of autoethnography. I list them below:

“1. Autoethnography cannot fight familiarity—it is hard to fight familiarity in our own society anyway even when we have data (see Delamont, 2002).

2. Autoethnography is almost impossible to write and publish ethically: when Patricia Clough published poems about a lover’s genitalia, did he agree to them, when Carol Rambo Ronai (1996) published ‘My mother is mentally retarded’ did her mother give ‘informed consent’? Other actors cannot be disguised or protected. Readers will always wish to read autoethnography as an authentic, and therefore ‘true’ account of the writer’s life, and therefore the other actors will be, whatever disclaimers, or statements about fictions are included, be identifiable and identified.

3. As Paul Atkinson (2006) argues research is supposed to be analytic not merely experiential. Autoethnography is all experience, and is noticeably lacking in analytic outcome.
4. Autoethnography focuses on people on the wrong side of Becker's (1967) classic question ('whose side are we on?') Autoethnography focuses on the powerful and not the powerless to whom we should be directing our sociological gaze.
5. It abrogates our duty to go out and collect data: we are not paid generous salaries to sit in our offices obsessing about ourselves. Sociology is an empirical discipline and we are supposed to study the social.
6. Finally and most importantly 'we' are not interesting enough to write about in journals, to teach about, to expect attention from others. We are not interesting enough to be the subject matter of sociology. The important questions are not about the personal anguish (and most autoethnography is about anguish). Sociologists are a privileged group. Qualitative sociologists are particularly lucky as our work lasts: what sociology is remembered for—the great ethnographies: *City of Women* (Landes, 1947), *The Silent Dialogue* (Olesen and Whittaker, 1968), *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1955), *Boys in White* (Becker et al., 1961), *Tally's Corner* (Liebow, 1967)."

Delamont (2007) ends by asserting, "Autoethnography is an abuse of that privilege. Our duty is to go out and research the classic texts [...] not sit in our homes focusing on ourselves." I can appreciate the final words of this manuscript in that it gives me precise ways to consider my privileged position as researcher, as most often understood as "the knower" (Sprague 2005).

My intentional use of autoethnography, not as the *primary source of data* for this project but as *secondary and contextual* data, alleviates several of the concerns discussed by Delamont (2007), including recognition of my privilege. Before considering my place in American marriage structure as "situationally resistant," I collected *all* of the interview data for this project. That is, not until I received committee member feedback did I consider *me* on the "Passion-To-Marry Continuum!" Instead, I only viewed my position as a "marriage resister," writ-large, as I did when I initially began conceptualizing the dissertation at the "Marriage Equality" Illinois event in 2013. I explain the above to make clear that I did not consider *me* as the primary source of data. The data I present in this project was that which I used to capture themes from the

literature *first*. Secondly, I considered my place as my own relationship trajectory was in flux at moments while in the field.

It was my intention to make the study respondents “knowers” of their personal narratives. Pseudonyms given to research participants protect their identity and the identities of those they referenced during the interview. I would like to afford myself the same opportunity to be “knower” of my story and owner of my experiences. However, I am clear, as the title of this section suggests, “what is mine, is not *all* mine.” In other words, while my story is my own, I must consider with whom my story is told. I must consider who the “respondents” are in *my* autoethnography—my parents, my ex-husband, my children, and my spouse. Further, because I am using my legal name, I must consider that identities of respondents in my narrative cannot be protected. I take this seriously.

After deep consideration of the topics that I discussed here, I chose to include my story. I made the decision to use autoethnography because feminist research/praxis suggests making clear my standpoint and power relationships related to it. My experiences aligned with respondents’ narrative interview data. It would be *unethical* for me to deny the links between respondents’ lives related to the institution of marriage and my own. To leave this information out is disingenuous. As such, I include autoethnographic accounts across my relationship trajectory and present, “My Marriage Narrative,” as the primary source of data for “Macroaggression #2” in Chapter Six.

Methods: Research Design

As a result of the institutional rights and privileges bestowed on individuals who choose to participate in marriage, studies of marriage have mostly taken a top-down approach—studying

long-term effects of marriage via health outcomes, economic outcomes, and life-course outcomes (Peterson et al 1985; Kowaleski-Jones and Dunifon 2006; Willoughby et al. 2014). Through a cultural analysis of marriage, I studied marriage from the bottom-up using individuals' accounts of the ways in which they learned about marriage. This bottom-up approach will also be useful in understanding how and why some people choose to reject the normative relationship trajectory that usually incorporates cultural adages like, "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage" and "Love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage."¹⁰ Conducting research on the marriage narrative offers the possibility of gaining insight into an oft-neglected portion of what is perceived to be the normative life course: that which comes after the decision to get married (or not) takes place. This micro level analysis of intimate relationship narratives of marriage resisters in the United States provides important insight into the macro level processes at work in the institution of marriage, specifically cultural logics.

I am using qualitative research methods because they are most useful for this project. They allow me to gain rich insight into the ways in which individuals navigate marriage boundaries and intimate relationships, including the context in which research respondents make meaning around their intimate relationships outside of marriage. I am interested in the process of meaning-making in intimate relationships that do not adhere to the normative life trajectory of love and marriage: e.g. how people engage with, construct, and understand the marriage narrative despite their lack of participation in the institutional context of legal marriage. Though this project forsakes generalizability beyond the scope of the sample, the importance of giving

¹⁰ Gilbert, author of memoir, *Eat, Pray Love* (2007) thinks of this quip differently. In her newer book, *Committed: A Love Story* (2011), she sarcastically notes, "...marriage and divorce are like a cart and a horse."

voice to a mostly invisible yet growing population outweighs the need/ability to make general claims. Specific narrative histories about those who commit long-term to intimate partners without being married fills a gap in the literature on the sociology of marriage, family, and intimate relationships. The data presented in this project on marriage resisters allows for future research in the direction of families formed without marriage to expand the sociological literature on marriage and family making it more inclusive.

Sampling Logic and Strategy: Access to Marriage Resisters

Sampling populations that are socially invisible is a difficult task. Gaining access to individuals who have had little or no voice or who have had those in power belittle their experiences presents researchers with decisions about how to approach marginalized/oppressed populations. Scholars in feminist methods/methodology provide insights for sampling difficult-to-reach populations.

This research looks at individuals who have chosen not to engage with the institution of marriage at a time when American culture celebrates the extension of equal access to the legal rights of marriage for same-sex couples. The rise in media coverage (conservative/liberal and religious/nonreligious) and scholarly work in the area of marriage equality has left out narratives of those who do not wish to marry at this time and/or who wish never to marry. Because this research rests on sociological understandings of gender/sexuality in marriage, it is important to note that studies including marginalized groups and those on sexual minorities present their own set of strategies. Sociologists O'Connell Davidson and Layder (1994), editors of an anthology on research methods and ethics, focus on deviant populations. They cite Connell's (1992) discussion

of the usefulness of qualitative approaches to research minority populations in which Connell states,

“[Narrative-based] qualitative research is concerned with smaller numbers of cases but with more intensive analysis. [Further,] qualitative enquiry deals with non-random samples in which there is no way of estimating the probability of the units in the universe (the total population of the group or community) being included in the sample that is actually studied. This is especially the case with deviant forms of activity...” (1992:739).

O’Connell Davidson and Layder (1994) continue by stating that, though “representativeness is aimed for [in the accessibility of deviant groups], the whole point [of qualitative research] is to select individuals who fit the parameters of the research for in-depth analyses” (p.173). The authors conclude with further insight from Connell by stating that laying out the social structure for readers before delving into the lived experiences of marginalized populations is useful because marginalized populations, too, exist within that structure (1992:739). My participants, too, have been born into/experienced the Western culture in which we exist. Simply because individuals take a path of greater resistance in marriage culture does not suggest that these individuals somehow grew up in a world *without* Western culture and its norms, values, and beliefs.

I located respondents for my study in multiple ways. Calls for respondents using a flyer were disbursed via listservs such as those available at each university that I am affiliated with (one in Chicago – University of Illinois at Chicago, and one in northern Indiana – Indiana University South Bend). I also posted study recruitment flyers at places such as local coffee houses, grocery stores, and restaurants in each city. I used the snowball sampling method. In this way, I asked interview respondents if they knew of other individuals in long-term intimate relationships that are structured similarly to their own. Again, the sampling method did not allow me to generalize findings to the broadest degree; however, the differences in geographic

location, age, race, gender and sexuality of my study respondents proffers findings that are beyond one-dimensional.

Studying the relationship trajectory and marriage narrative of individuals (age 22 or older¹¹) who are unmarried but long-term partnered provides an opportunity to investigate marriage culture in the United States. Individual marriages and marriage culture seem to persist in heterosexual, lesbian, and gay communities, despite the current national divorce rate. Also, it was not imperative that the long-term partners cohabit at the time of the interview.

I located respondents in areas and ways accessible to me. In the following section that I title, “Respondent Snapshots,” I provide relevant contextual information about my study respondents. It was my intention initially to locate my respondents in only two locations: Chicago and northern Indiana/southwest lower Michigan. However, due to the nature of snowball sampling, potential study participants began to roll in from areas outside of the predetermined locales. The variety of individuals who qualified for and participated in this study share and differ in opinions, political slants, levels of religiosity, and more.

It was my goal to obtain 30-40 oral history narratives for this project and I ended with thirteen oral histories. This is a study limitation due to the difficulty I had recruiting individuals to participate in this research. I coded each interview using grounded-coding method. Themes continued to emerge, at which point I went back to previous interview transcripts for recoding. Saturation was reached after coding interviews ten and eleven; however, I wished to add narratives to my dataset as long as individuals would be willing to provide them. In the end, with thirteen oral history narratives, I spent an average of two and a half hours with each respondent.

¹¹ Twenty-two years of age is the youngest a respondent could be to fit the parameters of the study. Respondents had to be at least 18 years old (adult age status) *and* have spent four or more years in their current relationship. Therefore, 22 is the age of an individual who would have spent the requisite number of years in relationship to be included in this research.

Upon reflection, I realize that there are reasons that I found it incredibly difficult to recruit participants for this research. I have two hypotheses about this. First, oral history research takes a long time to conduct. I asked for two to four hours of participant time. Considering what that amount of time means for various populations, in a world where “time equals money,” I realize that I asked for a lot and without compensation.¹² Second, using the Internet as the primary means for recruitment leaves out those who do not use the Internet regularly. My call for participation was shared many times online. However, that might leave out those who do not or cannot use this form of communication/information gathering: e.g. low income, technologically averse, and those “later adulthood,” 65 and over, individuals. For these reasons, and others no doubt, recruitment was difficult for this population of individuals who resist marriage and who are in long-term intimate/romantic relationships, but saturation was reached.

Data Collection

I asked participants if they would be audio recorded and let them know that their identities would be protected. Moreover, I explained that I would assign pseudonyms immediately upon the completion of our conversation. I transferred the audio files from my voice recorder to my work computer that exists in a locked university office. At the time of the transfer, the files on the audio recorder were destroyed and pseudonyms were used to name each file on the computer.

I chose oral history interviews because of its strengths and benefits to get at the data that could answer my research questions. Patricia Leavy (2011) states that the ontological basis of oral history research is to “view the data collection as a process, not an event” (p.7). While the interview schedule for oral history interviews is generally much shorter than those for in-depth,

¹² This research was not funded and, as such, I did not offer compensation for participation.

structured interviewing, oral history interviews tend to be much longer and in-depth than qualitative interviews that are not oral histories. Oral history researchers rely on the narrative presentation and conversation with research respondents, not just answers to a specific question. Oral history researchers must listen carefully and prompt respondents to continue talking. This is not easy to do. One of the risks associated with oral history data collection is that it may be difficult to get the interview to turn into a conversation. The respondent must talk a great deal while the researcher listens. If the researcher is not prepared to motivate the respondent to continue the discussion the data collected could be weak. However, because I have experience conducting oral history interviews, this risk is greatly decreased.¹³

Oral history data collection has many strengths that are of note. According to Leavy (2011:14) there are six main benefits of using the oral history approach: “(1) tapping into processes; (2) micro-macro linkages; (3) comprehensive understanding; (4) bearing witness and filling in the historical record; (5) collaboration in the meaning-making process; and (6) a focus on the participants’ perspectives (which may or may not be the case with in-depth interviews).” I hoped to and was able to capitalize on each of the benefits provided above. The oral history data collection method allowed me to ask questions about the upbringing and current intimate relationships of respondents and to give respondents time and space to talk, discuss, and explain their position in marriage culture.

Another risk associated with oral history interviews is that the respondent may experience emotional strife when discussing the ways in which they do/did not fit into normalized paths to marriage. It may be painful for respondents to recall life experiences or events in which they found themselves persecuted for their beliefs, but it is not uncommon for respondents to find that

¹³ See Moss (2012), “Alternative Families, Alternative Lives: Married Women *Doing* Bisexuality” in the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*.

expressing their experiences is liberating as well; one's preparation to discuss these elements of everyday life is a must. I was able to talk through these and other scenarios and provide answers to questions that they had about my personal background or how I related to what respondents' experienced.

Data Coding and Analysis

I used clues from the literature and schemas provided here to code for evidence of resistance to American marriage culture through the narratives provided by my research participants. I coded by hand because it kept me closer to my data than using qualitative coding software. I looked for ways in which participants took paths of lesser or greater resistance around norms of traditional gender and sexual roles and/or behaviors within specific institutional contexts. It was my goal to understand from where respondents' ideas about coupling and intimate relationship creation are learned. I looked for similarities and differences of individual life outcomes for those who have chosen a different path to romantic relationships that do not include marriage. As I suggest through the literature that I presented in Chapter Two, enculturation into the nuclear family form through institutionalized marriage is in question.

In terms of thinking through and analyzing the data I gathered, I used a materialist feminist lens and discourse analysis. Sociologist Nancy Naples (2003:27) relies on Hennessy and Ingraham's (1997:7) description of the materialist feminist lens as "the conjuncture of several discourses—historical materialism, Marxist and radical feminism, as well as postmodern and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity." Further, Naples (2003: 28) describes Ramazanoglu's (1993) definition of discourses as "historically variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth—what is possible to speak of at a given moment" (p.19). What can be spoken at a given

moment depends upon the sociopolitical context, one's social location, and "relations of ruling" or tensions around hierarchical power transmitted through language and interaction (Smith 1990).

To the notion of power and discourse, Foucault (1978) states that, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (p.101). I analyzed narratives provided by my research respondents to locate similarities and differences in magnified moments of personal agency and structural privileges/constraints regarding their teaching and learning about marriage and how they have negotiated a broader marriage culture when they have chosen not to participate in it.

Positionality and Standpoint

It is important for me as a researcher to describe and disclose my positionality and standpoint. Sprague (2005:42) notes that political scientist Nancy Hartsock developed standpoint theory as something different from spontaneous thinking. Before the development of standpoint theory, the social location of individuals and the similarities and differences in experiences went largely ignored. Hartsock endeavored to explain that one's standpoint is not just their opinion or "spontaneous thinking." Instead, Hartsock found that one's standpoint could account for power relations through work relationships due to who is allowed to create and pass along knowledge claims. This is similar to Patricia Hill Collins' theoretical discussion of black women's standpoint to speak power to knowledge of oppressed groups (1990/2000).

Hegemonic or normative thought and practices in relation to marriage dictates that marriage is a natural or normal part of the life course. However, to privilege the experiences of those who resist marriage will illuminate the ways in which resisters' point of view can be a distinct basis for developing new knowledge about a marginalized group. In other words,

highlighting the ways in which resisters take the path of greater resistance in marriage culture by either not participating in it or participating differently in it will provide a new knowledge base for ways of thinking sociologically about marriage culture in the United States of America.

The event that I attended to celebrate Illinois Marriage Equality brought my social location and standpoint into clear resolution. Bearing witness to such an event is exhilarating. However, as a researcher, I found that this exhilaration was compounded by questions of an intersectional nature. For example, the room I—a mixed-race, female-bodied, queer parent and partner who is low income and has been since childhood—occupied with other revelers during this exciting moment was overwhelmingly white. I also wondered how so many people were able to afford time off work to be there with me. I asked myself if this was indicative of privilege and social class. Then bigger, far broader, questions began to rise such as 1) How do those who are as “close to marriage as you get” (long-term romantic partners who are not legally married) navigate the marriage terrain? 2) What sort of marriage narrative do they present? 3) How was their marriage narrative constructed? 4) Where did the ideas come from? 5) How might the marriage narrative get at the heart of larger questions about the persistence of marriage?

Because I wish to centralize my research participants’ standpoint, it is important to make my standpoint clear. I have chosen no longer to participate in the institution of marriage; I participated in it with my ex-husband for twelve years (I married at nineteen years old). My family configuration at the time of the divorce was polyamorous (a polyamorous, closed-triad “V” configuration to be exact). As a member of my polyamorous family, my current partner of five years (who is female-bodied and queer) went through this contentious divorce with me and has since become another residential parent to our children. Together we experienced a member of our family withdraw and use the court system to exit. It was a devastating experience that

neither of us wished to repeat. Through these experiences, I became part of the American public described by Swidler, who reminds us that, “Middle-class Americans are sharply critical of the romantic love myth,” (2001:128-129) but are willing participants in love culture. Moreover, even as a fierce resister of marriage, personally, I still engaged, again, with the institution. Therefore, I can place myself on the “Passion-To-Marry Continuum” that I define and describe in Chapter Five. I am, indeed, a “temporal/situational marriage resister” or TMR. I resisted participating in institutionalized marriage and marriage culture as much as and for as long as possible. In other words, my family and I took a path of greater resistance (Johnson 2014) in American marriage culture to form a family that worked best for my partner, our children, and me. However, we could only resist for so long before our rights and benefits were infringed upon by the State. In the end, we *had to marry* to maintain our health insurance. Therefore, I only resisted marriage temporarily and situationally.

I only disclosed my identities to research participants at their request. I did not openly discuss my life experiences or identities unless asked direct questions by respondents. However, I was reminded that it was those questions that I asked myself at the Equality event I described at the onset of this dissertation research that made me realize that marriage is something that folks *want* to celebrate. They want to revel in it! Sitting there, I, too, wanted to revel in it!

Despite my recent divorce from a man, having had the childhood experience of divorce three times with my residential parent, my mother, and having a feminist education that has taught me that traditional marriage is akin to slavery, *I still wanted to revel in this glorious moment!* Are Westerners *as* critical of the institution of marriage as the manifestation of mythic love? Do Americans overlook or wade through their contentions with love culture on the path to marriage? Or, perhaps are we equally critical of love and marriage?

My previous personal experiences aside, however, I found myself marveling at the fact that I was in love with the idea of marriage equality. I found marriage equality hard to resist! Perplexed by my wish to participate in activism surrounding this important social movement juxtaposed with my previous difficult experiences with the institution of marriage, I began wondering *why* I might simultaneously be in love with and reject marriage writ-large. Those broad questions that I asked myself at the Equality event began to take shape and become more clear and narrow: a) How were individuals taught and what did they learn about the marriage narrative? b) How do individuals negotiate these lessons about the marriage narrative in the formation of their own partnerships (that have not followed this “marriage formula”)? And c) what are the challenges they encounter in “straying” from the lessons learned of the marriage narrative? What follows in the data presentation chapters of this dissertation research is the illumination of American marriage resisters’ upbringing and enculturation into, personal action and behaviors related to, and eventual decision making regarding whether to be a participant in United States marriage culture.

Respondent Life Course Trajectory Narratives: A Snapshot

This dissertation data is reported and analyzed in the vein of Eva Illouz’s (1997) monograph, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Her (1997) research on social class consumption patterns via the valuation of an “American Dream” and romance in United States culture is an important reference for my work. My use of oral history interview data in combination with contextual information parallels the research methodology used by Illouz (1997). As such, I provide here brief study respondent “snapshots” in addition to data analyses in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. These snapshots allow the reader to

consider the context of the individual's upbringing and gives more information about their current milieu.

Perhaps more importantly, Illouz's writing style informs the way in which I set up data analyses in each chapter. For example, Illouz's (1997:247) final substantive chapter (Chapter 8), titled, "The Class of Love," is not simply a lesson on romance and working-class values for me; instead, her analysis style accentuates the respondents' life stories, elevating them to the center of analysis. Illouz uses long, narrative-style quotes for which she provides a guiding question, short description of concept under examination, or a limited discussion of a theme/pattern. After the pronouncement of the item under scrutiny, Illouz (1997) provides one, two, three (sometimes more) examples in a row. Her scholarly writing and data presentation style knits together respondents' stories making them front and center. Illouz's (1997) scholarship is an example of feminist methodology and, specifically, the bringing forth of lives often left out of public and academic discourses. For these reasons, I am following the trail blazed by Illouz (1997). For her guidance by scholarship, I am grateful.

All respondents confirmed that they are currently in intimate relationships that have lasted four or more years.¹⁴ Below is a snapshot of the life course trajectory of those who responded to my call for their participation in this research. Importantly, from the snapshot, readers will have a sense of each participant's childhood and adulthood social location. Specifically, American cultural norms, values, and beliefs about intimate relationships/marriage/family formation are made more visible in these short life course trajectory narratives/snapshots that I provide.

¹⁴ Location of information on respondent selection based on participant screening can be found in the "Methodology" chapter. Note: length of relationship beyond definition of "long-term" was not included in the interview schedule, thus, not significantly discussed.

Categories and identities used here are reported in the respondents' own words. The only exception is Lara; for whom, when asked about her sexuality/sexual identity she answered, "None". I shifted her language in order to reflect written grammatical rules. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of research respondents¹⁵.

Asher/24/Black and White, Caucasian and African American/Male/Hetero

A child of schoolteachers, Asher's experience differs from many of my respondents in that he was homeschooled through all of primary and most of secondary school. He moved to public school in eleventh grade and it was not an easy transition. Asher grew up in a Catholic home with his father and never really knew his mother. His father remarried when Asher was two or three years old. Despite the length of time his stepmother has been in his life, Asher does not "really care for" her. Further, he said his family "bounced around everywhere in Indiana and Michigan," so he "never really had a home other than [his last childhood home] which was like five years."

Asher stated that his white, female, 26-year-old partner is "hetero, as far as I know" and describes that they are monogamous in their long-distance relationship. She is a communications specialist and earns approximately \$40,000.00 per year. Asher is currently a low-income undergraduate student and works for the university in the capacity of executive director of a student organization. To my question regarding whether he and his partner plan to have children, Asher vehemently stated, "Heck no! Not my thing!" However, when I asked him whether his partner wanted them, his response was a far more subdued "hope not."

Beth/35/White, Jewish/Female/Bisexual

Beth grew up in the Midwest and reports that, despite two siblings, she was "basically an only child." Beth's parents were married to others prior to their 36-year and counting marriage; subsequently, children were conceived. As a result, her siblings are substantially older than her.

Currently, Beth is working toward her doctoral degree in anthropology in Washington D.C. and earns approximately \$40,000.00 annually. Beth is monogamous in a long-distance intimate relationship with a straight, white, male who is 43 years old. They share no children. However, he is a parent and is not monogamous. Beth's partner is a married professor in Indiana and has a single child with his spouse. Beth is unaware of her partner's income.

Candy/44/White/Female, Woman/Hetero "Sorta"

¹⁵ Please see the "Methodology" chapter and Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval for respondent privacy and identity protection protocols.

Candy very quickly identified her family as “thoroughly religious” when our time together began. Candy and her three male siblings grew up in an evangelical church in which her parents were regularly involved. Candy said that she and her family spent at least three days a week at the church: two weekdays after school/work and Sunday. About Candy’s level of religiosity now, she says, “I still love Jesus and believe in God, but I no longer proselytize.” Candy, now a parent of two and in a long-term relationship with her children’s father, said, “I know that some look down on me for my choice to not marry my kids’ father. But it is my choice. I do not think Jesus or God care about the legalization of my relationship. I know they say that intimate relationships should be concretized in the church. I don’t buy that.”

Mentioned above, Candy has two children with her white, male partner. Candy met her current partner at the post office where they are both employed. She works the counter at the post office, and he delivers mail. Together, they earn approximately \$60,000.00 annually. Like other interesting responses to questions of monogamy in their current relationship, I asked Candy if she and her partner are monogamous in their relationship. Candy replied, “I AM! He better be, too!”

Isaac/30/Black/Male/Straight

Isaac grew up with his mother and sister after his parents split up (not divorced – they were never married) when he was five. In Isaac’s early life, the death of an older brother and the subsequent mourning that his family experienced shaped the way in which he viewed his future. Isaac said, “Not too surprising; my family sort of split after my bro died. My father was so devastated. He drank. And, he was not nice when he drank. I knew then that I did not want kids. No kids for me. I did not want to experience that loss.”

Today, Isaac lives in the lower Midwest and is a welder who earns \$50,000.00 per year. He lives with his white, straight, female partner who is an elementary school teacher earning \$40,000.00 annually. As mentioned above, Isaac and his partner have no desire for children. They are both monogamous in their relationship.

Lara/26/White/Female/No Sexual Identity

Daughter of divorced Norwegian mother and American father, Lara’s and her brother’s lives have taken place internationally. She explains that her father lived in Norway where he met her mother and they wed thereafter. Lara was the first child for her parents. Of her early life, Lara narrates, “I grew up in Norway with mainly my mom, she had the main care. I was at my dad’s every second week. They got divorced when I was two or three; so, they were divorced as far as I can remember. He moved to the States when I was twelve. So, mainly I grew up with my mom and she’s been single, or she’s had boyfriends sometimes but mostly been single. So, I haven’t really been fed that having a traditional family is like the norm or like the building block of society.” Lara’s narrative illustrates that life as a binational human is complicated by the duality of culture specific to family and intimate relationships.

Currently, Lara is a law student studying in, Oslo, Norway’s capital city and she earns 150,000 Kroner/20,500.00 USD. Her male partner is a 33-year-old attorney with whom she cohabits and

he earns 500,000 Kroner/69,000.00 USD. Lara identifies him as heterosexual, “I think,” as she notes that she had never really asked him about his sexuality. Through laughter, about whether she and her partner are monogamous, Lara quips, “I hope so! There haven’t been any instances so far!” They have discussed parenting children and have decided against it in the immediate future.

Niki/37/Mixed, White and Asian/Queer

Niki’s upbringing began on non-United States soil. Niki’s mother, who is Japanese, and father, who is American, met in Japan in the late 1970s. Niki has one younger female sibling. Despite her initial introduction to Japanese culture, Niki said, “I am 100% American! I don’t really speak Japanese even though my mom does. I went to school in America; I found love in America; I live in America; I am American!”

Indeed, Niki resides in the Midwest United States. Currently, Niki is finishing her undergraduate degree in economics and working part-time as a server at an upscale restaurant. Earning around \$12,000.00 annually, she said, “I don’t make enough money to live on my own. Thank god I have her!” She found love in a Latinx, female-bodied, queer person. Niki’s partner is a manager at a retail store and earns \$50,000.00 per year. The couple would like children in the future and, while currently monogamous in their relationship, Niki previously identified as polyamorous. She was in an “open, mixed-gender triad,” polyamorous relationship for five years prior to meeting her current partner.

Noel/25/White/Female/Bisexual, Complicated

Northeastern United States born, Noel grew up with her (still) married mother, father, and two siblings. She was raised in the same home throughout her childhood. Noel’s parents’ marriage is notable because it does not reflect experiences they had as individuals growing up with divorced parents.

Noel did not choose her first sexual experience. Sexual assault and harassment are part of Noel’s narrative and those experiences have colored the way she has had to consider proceeding in subsequent intimate relationships. Currently, Noel and her male partner reside together in the southeastern United States. Noel is a graduate student which affords her an assistantship and a bring-home salary of approximately \$15,000.00. Her partner is a full-time art student who is unemployed and relies on his parents for financial support. The couple do not want to have children.

Summer/35/White/Cisgender Woman/Straight, “Yeah, I guess”

Summer has lived in the same general area in the Midwest throughout her life. Summer’s experience with marriage is a bit different than other respondents. Her biological parents divorced while Summer was a late-teen and she has been married before her current intimate relationship. That experience of divorce (her parents’ and, eventually, her own) shapes the ways in which she understands intimate relationships and marriage for herself at this stage of her life.

Currently, Summer and her cohabiting partner (a 33-year-old white, straight, cismale) are busy, fully-employed parents of two Pre-K children. She earns \$40,000.00 per year as a case manager and he earns the same as the owner of a screen printing business. Summer credits meeting her partner for ending her “years of serial monogamy.”

Rob/28/White/Male/Gay

Rob dreamed of becoming a princess when he was a child. Rob said that he was always more “girlie” than boys his age. However, he notes, as his parents’ only child, they were very kind and open to him expressing himself in whatever ways he wanted, unlike the kids at school. Rob was bullied throughout primary and secondary school for his “effeminate qualities” and while he knew he was gay from a young age, he did not “come out” until he was twenty years old.

Now, Rob is partnered to a Latinx male who is also gay. Together, they live in an urban area in the Midwest. Rob works in public relations and earns \$60,000.00 per year. His partner, an electrician, earns about the same. They “might” have children in the future but there are no immediate plans. Rob and his partner are monogamous in their relationship.

Rose/22/White/Cisgender Female/Straight

Rose had a tumultuous childhood. Moving multiple times throughout the Midwest, intimate partner violence, and divorce make up many of her recollections. Rose does not remember much about her biological father in early childhood though he reappeared in her life. She primarily grew up with her mother, brother, and grandmother. Despite her difficult experiences of marriage and intimate relationships, Rose is very happy in her current relationship and marriage is in her future.

Presently, Rose completed her undergraduate degree and is a barista while deciding on graduate studies. She lives in the Midwest and earns \$20,000.00 annually and lives with her 22-year-old white male fiancé. They are planning their wedding. Rose’s fiancé is a Human Resources supervisor and earns \$30,000.00 per year. Neither of them is interested in having children and both are monogamous in their relationship. Like others’ responses when I asked whether their partner is monogamous, Rose paused and said, “As far as I know!”

Russ/26/White/Male/Straight

Russ’s childhood was spent traveling for his father’s job. By the time he was ten years old, he had lived in three countries. Despite the movement of his family around the globe, Russ describes his family of origin in this way: “I feel like my family is the epitome of white, typical, American family. I have two older sisters and you know, I don’t know. I have such a typical family, I’ve never really thought about it.” Although, Russ describes his family as “typical,” his childhood narrative reveals the very gendered arrangement of his home life and the ways in which his father’s travels shaped his experience of intimate relationships and marriage.

Today, Russ focuses on his Master of Fine Arts degree in the southeastern United States and does not work. He cohabits with his female partner who is a white 25-year-old grad student.

About her sexuality, Russ laughs and says that she is “straight, as far as I know”. She earns between \$12-15,000.00 per year. They are a monogamous couple who do not desire to parent.

Sean/32/White, Some Native/Female-Bodied, Agender/Hetero-Queer

Sean lived with her (still) married parents while growing up. They do not have siblings. Further, Sean was very much integrated into adult life as a child of academics and frequently spent time on university campuses in the southern and northeastern United States. Unique to my pool of respondents, Sean was conceived via assisted reproduction technologies.

Sean is a survivor of intimate partner violence that took place in a previous marriage. Now, Sean resides and cohabits in two southeastern United States locations and is an assistant professor who earns \$83,000.00 annually. They and their partner, also a university professor who earns \$63,000.000 per year, are happily planning to marry. Sean’s partner is male-bodied and identifies as genderfluid and bisexual. The couple are monogamous in the relationship and do not wish to parent children.

Scarlet/41/White/Genderqueer/“Into Femmes, Generally”

When Scarlet was a child living in the American Great Plains, their parents’ divorce divided their siblings’ living arrangements by gender. In other words, the female siblings (two older than Scarlet, one younger) lived with their mother and the male sibling (one, younger than Scarlet) lived with his father. The divorce left Scarlet to choose with whom to live.

While it may seem a clearly-gendered arrangement into which Scarlet could take the normative familial path (boys go with Dad and girls go with Mom), this decision gave Scarlet pause. Scarlet said, “We didn’t really talk about [the divorce and subsequent living situation], you know? They told us they were getting a divorce and that Dad’s moving out. He’s gonna rent a house in [The Same Town]. They’d already gotten Dad’s house! Dad said that the new house had three bedrooms and two bathrooms; perfect for any configuration of us kids to live there with him. It was just, like, assumed that the girls were staying there, with Mom, in our house, and my brother was going with Dad. But I wasn’t sure where I wanted to live. I had all my shit [at Mom’s] already. But I felt like I would be more comfortable living with my Dad and bro. Nobody asked me where I wanted to live. So, I just sorta made the decision to go to Dad’s.”

Clearly, gender is highlighted in Scarlet’s early life history narrative and gender continues to be a social force relevant in Scarlet’s life. As a genderqueer, non-binary, adult, human, they have chosen to use gender-neutral pronouns (like, Sean above). Their choice of gender-neutral pronouns (and when/where to enforce their use) shapes Scarlet’s current social and, in some ways mental/emotional, life. Scarlet resides in the Southwest United States is “happily” coupled and “part-time cohabiting” with their white, female-bodied “femme-lesbian” partner. Scarlet is currently unemployed but looking for a job. Their partner, a nurse who is “...working a shit-ton of overtime right now,” earns \$75,000.00 annually. They do not want children and instead love their “four-legged babies.” They are monogamous in their relationship.

CHAPTER FOUR

MIXED MESSAGES IN AMERICAN MARRIAGE CULTURE: SOCIALIZING CHILDREN IN “LOVE,” MARRIAGE,” AND “BABY CARRIAGE?” SORT OF...

NOEL/24

Marriage Resister
(Adamant)

“I have this memory of myself as a child and I had a best friend at the time, her name was Michelle, and she lived up the street from me. I remember I was playing with my toys in my room like children do, like, imitating the whole “relationship” thing.

I asked my Mom, so, like, I knew people got married. I knew it was something they did but I didn’t know. I asked my mom, ‘Can girls get married to each other?’ And, she was like, ‘Yeah, I guess they can.’ And, I was like, ‘Oh, I can marry my best friend, right? That’s what you do? You marry your best friend?’ My Mom was like, ‘Well it doesn’t really work like that...’

But I guess I just kind of gradually came to understand that you basically marry your best friend and then when I learned what sex was, I learned that was also something you did with your best friend (...)

Yeah, I didn’t have a whole lot of questions. I just kind of quietly observed.”

Chapter Introduction

Mixed Messages and Magnified Moments of American Marriage and the Life Course

“Love, marriage, and baby carriage,” a famous and value-laden phrase that American children connect with in multiple ways through play and learning, is more than a simple phrase.

Characterized here as “famous” and “value-laden,” the phrase reveals something else, something more powerful, perhaps even insidious: love, marriage, and baby carriage are “magnified moments” in the American life course.

Americans are taught to think, act, behave, and plan for ways to fulfill the expectations for marriage and family formation-related moments in their lives. Noel's reflection of an interaction between she and her mother when she was approximately six or seven years old is an exemplar of teaching and learning and socialization/enculturation about American marriage, family formation, and the cultural logics of both. As her narrative makes clear, the trajectory of "love, marriage, and baby carriage (sex)" do not necessarily come across logically to young minds. As I will explain, these lessons and the confusion around them have implications in childhood, emerging adulthood, and adulthood for United States cultural citizens across the lifecourse relationship trajectory.

The American Marriage Narrative (AMN) serves to make clear the habitualized and normative socialization and enculturation that includes magnified moments of marriage and family formation. Messages about intimacies and family formation are streamlined and made normative through phrases like, "love, marriage, and baby carriage." Each word of the phrase indicates an *expectation* for future family formation. Of note, the words in this phrase are bound together through an American expectation of family formation through institutional marriage. "Love," and sex (the act that leads to "baby carriage") are *not* institutionally governed like marriage.¹⁶ Instead, notions of love and sex rely on a host of norms, values, and beliefs about intimacy that are dictated and policed by individuals in United States culture through the rhetoric of the American Marriage Narrative.

The AMN, then, is a rhetorical tool taken up by individuals that helps move along social interactions around intimacies and family formation in the United States. Take for example,

¹⁶ I do not deny that there are laws that reflect cultural ideas about love and sex, but it is through marriage as a culture that love and sex are indirectly governed.

“Love and Marriage,” (Sinatra 1953) the hit song and also the theme music for the TV show *Married... with Children* (1987-1997). Sinatra’s (1953) hook in the song that reads, “Love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage/it’s an institute you can’t disparage...ask the local gentry, they will say it’s elementary,” has been played in homes via radio and television for more than six decades.

A closer look at the lyrics/message of the song, however, illuminates an institution governed by cultural mores foundational to American society. In the show *Married... with Children* (1987-1997), Sinatra’s song is found juxtaposed with a host of comedic tragedies (in my humble opinion) related to marriage, family, parenting, and progression across the life course for a group of “American Average Joes.” In other words, the idealistic nature of the song compared with the TV “realities” of family life show that family formation and maintenance is not linear; rather, it is complicated, at least in some cases funny, and many times confusing. An institution (marriage) combined with cultural messages and artifacts related to intimacy, marriage, and family formation make visible the construction of the AMN and the confounding nature of messages related to it.

Institutions/institutional actors/stakeholders and culture/cultural guides make normal the characteristics of family formation in the United States and perpetuate messages related to it. Sinatra (1953) and *Married... with Children* (1987-1997) are but two media artifacts that aid in the cultural construction of the AMN, marriage, and family formation. That there is a culture of marriage in the United States, not just an institution, creates an additional layer of social life that young people must navigate, and this merits more examination because it creates inequities for and barriers to family life in the United States.

In this chapter, I consider respondents' experiences with AMN-related mixed messages and magnified moments. I explore the ways in which respondents (who, at the time of data collection, were participants in long-term, intimate relationships for longer than four years) were socialized around the AMN to understand (and, in the next chapter, focus on) how American marriage culture colors (or does not color) one's participation in marriage. Respondents reveal specific moments in childhood and emerging adulthood for which messaging about love, sex, intimacies, and family formation were particularly formative.

AMN rhetoric and the institutionalization of "love, marriage, and baby carriage" in respondents' lives, in conjunction with times when questions of these matters arose for them, creates a bigger picture of marriage and family formation in the United States. Focusing on the way respondents were socialized, the milieux of their lives, and their decision-making related to the AMN, I analyze the ways in which mixed messages during magnified moments combine to create confusion, distress, and even passivity related to their own participation in marriage. Emotional states of confusion, distress, and passivity are decidedly *not* what is expected of one's participation in a culture that upholds and celebrates marriage as the primary way to form family, said to be the essential and foundational building block of United States society (Cott 2002).

Institutional versus Cultural Logics of American Marriage and Social Repercussions

The AMN—described in the literature review—is that cultural/institutional rhetorical tool taken up by individuals, culture, and institutions around intimacies and family formation. The AMN more than suggests, but imposes, a life course trajectory that *should* include marriage as the precursor to family formation. Moreover, the AMN includes processes of enculturation into "proper" family formation beginning in early childhood, constructing a reality for American

children that suggests that marriage is the best and perhaps, only, way to form family. It is socialization agents and institutional actors/stakeholders who imbue marriage as the “normal” (thus, best) way to form family. Messages of the AMN from agents and actors are habitualized, enforced, and reinforced across the American life course. Take, for example, Noel’s recollections above.

Noel’s “Snapshot” (see above and in the Methods chapter) provides the context of her very American life as it relates to romantic and sexual intimacies, and marriage rules, laws, and mores of the 1990s. “Very American,” as an identity and/or category, highlights the infusion of American cultural logics about norms/mores into the lives of “cultural citizens”¹⁷ (Flores and Benmayor 1997) and/or “cultural natives”¹⁸ (Bem 1993:138). Specifically, in this case, Noel’s memories about her intimate relationship trajectory (and the actors/actions that are bound to it) highlight the “very American” confusion children experience in interpreting messages about intimacies and marriage. The locus of Noel’s confusion is twofold. First, she experienced unclear communication from an important adult in her life, her mother; and, second, it is problematic in and of itself that Noel was expected to decipher this communication from her mother at a very young age (early elementary school). However, more stinging is that she was left to interpret the meaning of her mom’s immediate message; namely that, for Noel, girls were not marriage

¹⁷ Cultural citizenship is a concept taken up by Latinx scholars to refer to the process by which an individual assimilates to a given cultural milieu (Flores and Benmayor 1997).

¹⁸ As mentioned in the introductory chapter, a cultural native is created through enculturation, or a process of teaching and learning cultural norms or a “kind of subliminal pedagogy” (Bem 1993:138). To be “native” in one’s culture is important for carrying on norms, values, and beliefs of a given society. Cultural and institutional logics of the AMN and the perpetuation of marriage as the proper/best/moral way to form family show that there is a culture of marriage, not just an institution of marriage; and, the culture of marriage creates inequities for and barriers to family life in the United States.

material. Who, then, was meant to accompany Noel in the “magnified moment” of marriage in her life? Her mother did not elaborate on what she meant in her comments to Noel.

Conversations like this, that might have been an important teaching moment, fell by the wayside. This left Noel to navigate not only this one interaction with her mother but the BIG ideas that she brought to her mother about intimacy and family formation.

Institutional logics of American marriage serve to perpetuate marriage as the proper/best/moral way to form family. Laws and policy about marriage and family formation complete this task. However, while rewards and constraints abound in United States marriage law and policy at the institutional level of society, Noel’s response to my question about the ways that she learned/was taught about intimate relationships and marriage also reveals that perhaps it is not simply an institution that governs American behavior, but also a culture working to teach normative messages.

Family, like law and policy, is an institution in the United States. Moreover, messages and lessons about personal conduct and behavior, while addressed by law/policy, are more often governed on an individual and/or interactional level through norms, values, beliefs, and boundary maintenance. The intimate interaction between mother and daughter described by Noel about “best-fits” for a marriage partner (likely a heterosexual man), entailed norms, values, and beliefs about marriage and family formation at the time (1990s). While the institutional nature of marriage is important, Noel’s experience here illustrates a moment in one’s life in which the cultural nature of marriage in the United States is salient.

Below, I explore those many times confounding “mixed messages” about intimacies, relationships, marriage, and family formation received by my study participants. Examining mixed messages related to “magnified [marriage/family] moments” learned by this group of

Americans provides insight into the social construction of these messages and the power of culture in shaping the messages provided to youth and emerging United States adults about marriage through the American Marriage Narrative.

Messages and Moments of the American Marriage Narrative During Childhood and Emerging Adulthood

Americans spend an immense amount of their young lives learning how to participate in the feelings and rituals of romantic love and, at the same time, marriage, through a culture that supports and naturalizes these events. In other words, Americans (and those who are American cultural citizens despite their legal citizenship status) are socialized and encouraged to participate properly (read: normatively) throughout the life course. The purpose of this teaching and learning is to create a cultural native in American love/marriage/family culture. Cultural and institutional logics of the AMN and the perpetuation of marriage as the proper/best/moral way to form a family show that there is a culture of marriage, not just an institution of marriage; and, the culture of marriage creates inequities for and barriers to family life in the United States.¹⁹

Respondents' interaction with institutions and a culture that shaped the way that they think, speak, and feel about marriage today is at odds with the logic of institutionalized marriage. In this vein, twelve out of thirteen respondents noted that, for them, messages around the logics of marriage and their learning how to participate in marriage culture was confusing, creating magnified moments related to intimacies and family formation for them.

In this section, I highlight the narratives provided by respondents who found mixed messages of AMN-related magnified moments to be particularly at odds with the logics of

¹⁹ As mentioned in the introductory chapter, a cultural native is created through enculturation, or a process of teaching and learning cultural norms or a "kind of subliminal pedagogy" (Bem 1993:138). To be "native" in one's culture is important for carrying on norms, values, and beliefs of a given society.

marriage culture in the United States that centralizes “love, marriage, and baby carriage.” As magnified moments of the life course go, intimate romantic relationship and family formation (that may or may not include legal marriage and children/procreation), tend to top the list as “most important”; however, the critical, cultural “why” and “how” questions about processes required to transmit such “marriage knowledge” to American children and emerging adults needs more attention.

As a reminder, demographic approaches to the study of marriage and family are typical in sociology. Similar to the study of marriage, children and childhoods are often framed in the same way. Childhood and youth/families sociologist Loretta Bass says, “Much of American sociology takes a top-down approach to the study of children and views children as being interlinked with the larger family structure. It is in this vein that family instability leading to divorce, family poverty, and family employment may affect children’s experiences” (2010:144). A demographic approach, such as that discussed by Bass (2010), is especially effective in explaining aspects of marriage as a conduit for other resources (such as life satisfaction, stability, health, and wealth). However, a top-down approach does not allow for an exploration of how life course events may shape our perspectives and experiences, such as magnified moments related to marriage and the culture that supports it. As such, and as Bass states, “The life course perspective holds that individuals of each generation will experience life in a unique way because these individuals share a particular epoch, political economy, and sociocultural context” (2010:144). In other words, individuals have experiences related to the cultural milieu in which they were raised.

It is through the oral history approach, then, that I am able to provide rich contextual data and analysis about the respondent’s life that serves to lay the foundation for their decision-making related to the American Marriage Narrative and relationship trajectory. This is the

“bottom-up approach” to the study of families and marriage found in the methods chapter and I discuss these data in two ways.

Through six respondents’ narratives, I first identify the AMN-related magnified moment that each brought to the fore of our conversation. In combination with the moment that respondents deem important, I examine AMN-related messages and from who/where they come in both their childhood and emerging adulthood. According to studies, these are the two stages of the life course when most Americans begin to hear messages about love, sex, and family formation and act upon them. These two factors (AMN-related magnified moments and rhetoric learned within the milieu of one’s life) allow for an analysis that dives into the culture through which Americans learn how to participate in marriage *and* the weight of magnified moments of the life course that serve to reinforce teaching and learning of the AMN. One’s interaction with the AMN through learning and enacting expectations related to marriage and family formation in the United States of America is not without consequence, as illuminated by my respondents’ experiences.

Childhood and Emerging Adulthood Influences on Intimate Relationships and Participation in Marriage Culture

Three time frames from the sociology of the life course literature inform my analysis: childhood, emerging adulthood, and adulthood. This section focuses on early life influences/enculturation. I asked respondents to recall for me teaching and learning done around intimate relationships and family formation throughout their childhood. Specifically, respondents and I discussed times in which they remembered learning about intimate relationships, dating, marriage, family formation and/or sex and from who they learned in their early life.

Focusing on respondent experiences between birth and high school graduation (ages 0-18, approximately), I explore consequences of this enculturation from the perspective of privileges and constraints in procuring long-term intimacies that lead to family formation. The narrative data show that, while the culture/cultural guides and institutions/institutional actors from which messages about American marriage culture may differ, the message itself rarely does. In fact, the data indicate that the message of the marriage narrative comes through loudly, though not quite clearly.

Noel's AMN Enculturation and Magnified Moment:
“[Mother] bought me *that* book and for a while that’s where I got all of *that* information...”

Again, consider Noel’s experience of mixed messages highlighted at the start of this chapter. As reflected in Noel’s experience, the social construction of the AMN leaves plenty of room for interpretation and implementation in the lives of American cultural citizens. That individuals like Noel and her mother experience the habitualization of and internalize the AMN, as well as deliver rhetorical AMN-related messages, suggests that the delivery method and purveyor of such messages are important.

The context of one’s life as the “purveyor” and as the “receiver” of AMN rhetoric comes into play. Noel’s magnified moment and the mixed messages she received from her mother illuminate the social processes of interpretation and implementation of marriage culture in American lives. Moreover, Noel’s narrative, that also included “The Book” that she alludes to, was not purchased for her until she had received public school-based sex education in middle school. This point in the data shows the expanse of time (ages 6-7 through middle school) that Noel was left to languish in the sea of questions that she had about intimacies and family

formation. Noel's magnified moment and learning through "quiet observation," together with the amount of time that passed before she was formally engaged in sex education and given "the Book," shows how confusion can ensue as a result of receiving mixed messages. When juxtaposed, the two processes (interpretation and implementation) are seemingly antithetical, perhaps especially in the life of an early elementary school-aged child, like Noel, who simply thought she could marry her best (girl) friend.

Pennsylvania-born and raised in a suburb of Philadelphia, Noel grew up with her married parents and lived in the same home throughout her childhood. Noel said, "so, yeah, they were never separated at any point or anything like that. They slept in separate bedrooms if that makes any difference..." Curious, I asked Noel if her parents ever explained their decision not to co-sleep. "That's just something that had always been. They didn't really talk about it much. My mother claims it's because my dad snores, but I think there's more to the story," Noel giggled as she talked about her parents' sleeping arrangements.

Noel's "Middle-America" life, including her habitus, cultural capital, and the field of institutions in which she most interacted in relation to intimacies and family formation, reflects a culture of marriage that was also overwhelmingly experienced by other study respondents. Noel's narrative, and that of other respondents, underscores the importance of appreciating the milieu that contextualizes conversations had about and enculturation into marriage culture in the United States. Next, I turn to another respondent's experience with AMN mixed message in childhood. Like Noel, Lara's enculturation into the AMN included observation (primarily of her mother) and experiential learning through the institutions of family and school/peers. However, Lara also mentions American media culture as another purveyor of knowledge about intimacies and marriage culture.

Lara's AMN Enculturation and Magnified Moment:
"It's not like you see, especially in American movies..."

Lara's unique social location as the daughter of a Norwegian mother and American father is particularly informative. She is a binational, bicultural native. After Lara explained that she was first introduced to intimate relationships in her early life through her parents' divorce, I asked her to talk about from where she learned about dating, marriage, and intimate relationships. Like other respondents, she said that very little of this teaching and learning came from her parents. Lara paused and said,

"It's a good question. I don't think my parents did, it's just something you observe and then slowly you acquire knowledge. I don't think my Mom talked about it, my Dad didn't either [...] especially [Dad], because he was active on the dating front. So, I saw that sometimes they come, sometimes they go. In school you don't really learn about marriage. You learn the institution of family first and foremost. I can't recall any episodes where I reflected on it, it's more like a gradual process where you start to learn about intimate relationships."

It is precisely this "gradual process" by which individuals learn about intimate relationships described by Lara that I found most intriguing. How *did* research participants learn (and from whom) and what were they taught regarding the American Marriage Narrative? An important stage in the life course is intimate relationship and family formation; however, as in the United States, Lara said that Norwegians do not explicitly teach children and young adults enough about procuring and maintaining healthy intimate relationships.

Lara went on to recall a magnified moment of the AMN that occurred through her interaction with the institution of media/film. She said that most of her education about sex, dating, marriage, and relationship came from the media and the internet. Lara explained,

"I can't really recall a specific series, but of course it was shown on TV. But, all I really remember is it was really embarrassing to watch people have sex or kissing with your parents [...] And then when growing up, you start to have the internet, and you start to Google stuff. So, Google became your friend because sometimes you didn't want to talk about it and then you Googled it. Unfortunately, a lot of the information you get from the

internet is skewed or not very well informed so that's something you maybe have to adjust later by experience.

You really don't know what you're after and then you try and then you see 'that's not for me' or 'those are positive aspects of this relationship, but it has some negatives and it doesn't weigh out;' so then, you try the next thing. I remember there was a specific movie that influenced me. It was [...] a Norwegian movie, a teenage movie. It was very outspoken. It was about four girls and I think they're about sixteen years old. The main thing was just to have sex just to get it over with. It didn't really matter with whom, but just to get it over with and I remember I was really influenced by that movie."

Lara explained that for her, early college was a time, "when you take the theoretical stuff you read about and see in movies and put it into practice; so, it's a try and fail period." Media consumption, in this way, matters in the lives of children (who are emerging adults) trying out different sexual acts. Where and from whom they learn this information matters a great deal, as Lara points out.

Lara went on to discuss the topic of first sexual encounters, pointing out that American media, film in particular, is unrealistic:

AM: Yeah, sure. Right, this idea [of the first sexual encounter] is built up over time. And, like, okay, just want that first experience done!

Lara: And then you see how anti-climatic it really is...

AM: Ha! Good point. So, what we are saying here is that the "first time" we've built up to be a major ordeal but when you finally have the experience, it doesn't seem like a big deal?

Lara: No, it's just very clumsy. It's not like you see, *especially in American movies*, where you wake up with make-up and everything is just so fine [...] so fake, so not real.

Like Noel, Lara's narrative reveals that the rhetoric of the AMN learned from cultural guides and a magnified moment that included an AMN-related film (provided by an American institution) is entangled in the life of cultural citizens. Confusion and apathy may result from mixed messages/logics that focus on intimate relationships and marriage, especially when such

moments include images of relationships that tend to be unrealistic and idealistic. However, there is no doubt that the messaging is the same.

AMN messaging perpetuates the ideal intimate, sexual, and family life upon which one compares their personal, related experiences in the way that Lara described. She said that experimentation with intimacies and sex across early parts of the life course is when youth and emerging adults, "...take the theoretical stuff you read about and see in movies and put it into practice; so, it's a try and fail period." The comparison that Lara illuminates is between "the ideal and the real" experience of intimate and sexual relationships which, in a sense, sets up a false dichotomy of ideal and real. The trouble is that the ideal represented in media is most often unattainable.

Asher's AMN Enculturation and Magnified Moment:
"We were Catholic and couldn't watch this, couldn't listen to this music, so I had no clue..."

While Asher did not have the pressures of American media culture to contend with, mixed messages of the AMN did not miss him. Asher was not allowed to consume popular culture due to his parents' devout Catholicism. His childhood everyday life was infused with institutionalized religion through his family's participation in the Church; further, and importantly, the messages from the Church were disseminated and rigidly applied in his home. Parental deployment of Catholic teachings disallowed Asher access to information about intimacies, sex, and marriage to which similarly-aged children had access. In this way, for Asher, the ideal construct of "love, marriage, and baby carriage," was concretized and became a basis for comparison for the realities of his experiences across his relationship trajectory.

Deployment of religion and shielding one from the realities of intimacies and family formation, as in Asher's case, does a disservice to children and emerging adults. When

enculturation happens, as it did for Asher, and such enculturation is juxtaposed with AMN-related magnified moments (that will inevitably happen regardless of the milieu in which one was raised), children and emerging adults situated in similar ways find themselves at an AMN information deficit. Below, Asher explains the context of his home life and how it led to a particular moment in which his knowledge about sex and intimacies was called into question.

When Asher was a child, his experiences of family and marriage were not “happy.” He is unsure if his biological parents were married and, as he discussed with whom he lived while growing up, he mentioned his strained relationship with his stepmother. Asher’s stepmother was his primary caregiver as his father worked in a factory, he said, “...[L]ike, twelve hours a day [...] he worked retail later; so, like, growing up, he’d get home at six or seven, we’d go hug him at the door and be in bed by eight.” With little time to spare, Asher’s father and stepmother’s relationship was even more elusive to him. Asher notes, “I never really saw interaction between like ‘mom’ and ‘dad’ per se.”

Asher’s home life can be described as “sheltered” before he went to public school. The context thus far described by him is rigidly religious, unhappy, and disconnected from his primary caregivers by time (with his father) and by emotionality (with his stepmother). He describes life on the move, often for his father’s change of jobs. When I asked him to recall a time that he learned about relationships, sex, or marriage, he explains, “We were homeschooled because of how much we moved and it wasn’t until, I wanna say, I actually had a little girl tell me what sex was. How old was I? I had to be like fourteen or something...” Fourteen as the age at which an American child first learns about sex is not typical. However, Asher’s atypical experience only becomes more magnified for him as he further noted, “...[A]nd some six-year-old was like, ‘You don’t know what sex is?’ And, I was like, ‘No.’ Then, I had to go home and

my parents finally, or my dad, like spilled the beans.” That a six-year-old girl educated Asher, a fourteen-year-old boy, about sex only makes this experience stand out more for him as he continued to recollect, “But, like, we were sheltered from [sex] so I really hadn't even had a thought about it. We were Catholic and couldn't watch this, couldn't listen to this music, so I had no clue.”

Asher's experience of the first sex-communication with peers through institutionalized education was not only awkward but illuminating for him, as he shared with me. He learned from a much younger child that there was a world of intimate relationships and sexuality outside of his home that he knew nothing about as a teenager. The context of Asher's habitus as a sheltered, homeschooled youth left him unaware of this important slice of human life. Like for Asher, institutionalized religion and cultural religious practices are the site of mixed messages for Rose and Candy as well. Asher's milieu and the milieux of Rose and Candy have roots in religious, working class, middle-American culture and thought. Rose's narrative harkens back to ideas expressed by Asher.

Rose's AMN Enculturation and Magnified Moment:

“I still kind of struggle with the fact that Sam and I engaged in sexual relations...”

Religion matters in Rose's life. She describes her church attendance as, "...on and off" throughout youth and emerging adulthood. But because Rose is Catholic and plans to marry her partner in the Church, she is now a regular congregant. Rose explained that it is important in the Catholic faith that, as she and her fiancé are planning to wed, they become more involved with the Church. They are also planning to have children. Rose said,

“I have not been a regular church attendee since I started college because, originally, I went into the job market, saying, ‘Hey, is it possible to have Sundays off, I attend church?’ And, the response, actually from one of my jobs was, ‘I can't give you that

leeway. If you can't work Sundays, I can't hire you.' So, I kind of just went with the fact that most people probably wouldn't be able to give me that leeway, so, we haven't really attended church. And then, Sam and I started looking into getting married and I'm Catholic. They have a whole set of rules and it was either, he gets baptized or we have to get a bunch of special permission to get married. We have to be willing to raise the kids in the faith and blah, blah, blah. So, I told Sam, 'Don't feel pressured to get baptized for me. That's not something you should do for somebody else. It's something you should do for yourself. If we have to get permission, that's fine.' And, he thought about it and said he wanted to get baptized.

Now that we are getting married, we have to attend church regularly because they have to know that we are practicing Catholics. We have to attend a marriage preparation program which is a full Saturday in length and also three sessions of natural family planning."

Institutional influence for the case of Rose and her fiancé cannot be denied, but for Rose alone, the culture of marriage and family formation has been a pressure-cooker for the majority of her school-age years. As the couple explore together the values and beliefs held dear in Catholicism while planning their future, wedding, and family, the milieu of Rose's upbringing is a reminder for her that the way that she progressed across the relationship trajectory in "love, marriage, and baby carriage," may not have been done exactly "right." Rose's life around love, sex, and intimacy with Sam has required that she navigate the beliefs of institutionalized religion and the cultural logics of the AMN through the lens of her experience and she explains the myriad ways that it has not been easy.

Indeed, the institutional logics of family, religion, and education collide in Rose's experience of AMN-related magnified moments and marriage culture. Rose recalls that in her childhood, her mother faced difficult times. As Rose discussed with whom she lived while growing up, she said, "Well, I don't remember much of my biological dad up until the age of eleven or twelve [...] He abused my mom while they were together. He actually threw her down the stairs while she was pregnant with me. So, they split up when I was one." About one year after her biological parents split up, Rose's mom remarried. Rose lived with her mom and

stepfather until they divorced in 2010. When I asked Rose from where she learned about intimate relationships and marriage at this age, she said,

“When I was younger, the conversations were, you know, ‘Well [sex is] something you should wait until marriage’ and ‘Wait until you settle down and done with school.’ Now that I’m thinking about it, looking back, I don’t think it was more so for a religious reason [...] Fourteen or fifteen is when I got baptized and confirmed and everything so it was more like, ‘Don’t be like me because I missed out on a lot.’ She always said, ‘I don’t regret having you kids, but...’

There’s a lot of divorced people in my family so there were extra grandparents from what [my] friends had. There are always a lot people around, so you start asking, you know, ‘Am I related to this person?’ [...] My grandmother, her and my grandfather divorced a long, long time ago when my mom was like twelve. But, she has always been around as much as my step-grandma and my grandpa. So, it never made sense to me how that worked [...] I never, like, pieced together until I was older that you have grandparents from your dad’s side and also from your mom’s side. So, then I was like, ‘Well how is this my grandma and this is my grandma?’”

As in other respondent cases, Rose is an adult in the same cultural milieu observing and learning through her habitus. Described as abused and going through other difficulties as a single parent, Rose’s mother made a mantra of, “Don’t be like me,” that was ingrained in Rose’s mind, leading Rose to often feeling at odds with AMN-related learning and enculturation.

The subsequent behaviors and/or actions expected of Rose combined with the realities of family, intimacies, and marriage in her life created a confounding set of situations for her. AMN-related magnified moments, mixed messages, and enculturation specific to her milieu around sex and virginity weighed heavily on Rose. The shift from a religious, private school to public school education shook things up in Rose’s purview of intimacies and family formation.

There was a point when Rose’s education about marriage and divorce shifted to consequences of sexual activity. This shift occurred when Rose and her family moved and she changed schools during her sixth grade year. The school that Rose attended before the move did not offer sexual education but the new school did—however, like Asher, Rose did not have an

opportunity to access the sexual education in her new school because she missed the course. The course happened before her arrival.

Through connections made with new peers, though, Rose learned what was included in the sex-ed course. Rose's peers told her, "It's not even a sex education program. You watch a video about puberty separately; the girls go here, the boys go here. You get a bit of deodorant and feminine napkins and that's it." She continued,

"...[B]ut we did have home ec [home economics] and part of home ec was 'Baby Think it Over' which is a mechanical baby. I didn't get that portion of the class. The only school education that I really had about STDs or pregnancy was like the scare tactics.

So, there was one specific time in that class where we all had these little cups with water in them. We went around and [the female teacher] told us to find four people to mix our cups with and now that I'm thinking about it, she meant four people of the opposite sex. But, you mix your cup and then you end up splitting it so you have the same amount of stuff that you begin with. At the end she went around and put little drops of whatever she had in our cups and I guess we originally started out a few of us had something in our cups that reacted with the drops. So, when she put the drops in she had us swirl around the cups and a bunch of our cups turned blue and she was like, 'All of the people who have blue cups because you had unprotected sex, you have a sexually transmitted disease.'

So, of course then, everyone flipped out, like, 'I don't want to do that [have sex]!' Then they give us these papers that say you know if you sleep with four people and each of them have slept with four people, this is how many people you're technically sleeping with."

Beyond "scare tactics," another form of sex education proffered at Rose's middle school was an "abstinence only" program. She described this program as one in which her peers would participate and it included students asking each other true/false questions to "see how much you knew about it and talked about STIs and pregnancy." Further, she noted,

"They emphasized consequences of having unprotected sex or sex in general but never really emphasized 'safer sex.' At the time, I agreed with it because like my mom always enforced this idea of waiting until marriage to have sex. It wasn't like I don't personally think it was for religious reasons. I think it was because she got married at nineteen, had me right before her twenty-first birthday, and she's always wanted me to have more opportunity than her. So, I think if she just hammered it in, it would sink in, so I wouldn't

just go around and ‘make mistakes’ or give up any opportunities to do anything.”

Rose went on to explain that this kind of sexual education led her to question whether there was a safe way to “do these things.” She said that it was upon the arrival of her current partner, Sam, that sexual intimacy and a way of having safer sex became a focus in her life.

Despite her mother’s and her primary and secondary schools’ cautionary tales, Rose decided to engage in sexual activity with Sam. This part of the conversation is important at this juncture because, as Rose concluded, “I still kind of struggle with the fact that [Sam] and I have engaged in relations and we aren’t technically married.” Her conclusion came amid discussion of slut shaming, Rose said,

“...but there just came a point that we knew we were going to get married, so in my mind, [sex with Sam] wasn’t that big of a deal; that’s like the bargain I made with myself. So, it’s like all of the things that they’ve [Rose’s mother and the institution of education] taught me – that’s not happening right now. But, I also struggled with the fact that, like...slut shame and we just talk about all of these things.”

It became clear that Rose was feeling uneasy about her sexual relationship with Sam. I thought it important to ask her from where she thought that message came, noting that it seemed like she would like to say more. Rose began her reply with, “Kind of...” and proceeded in this way,

“Well, there was an incident in sixth grade. There was a girl and she had sex with a kid and because contraception was not available to us at the age of twelve, I don’t know if this is actually true or if it was just rumored but it was confirmed by others, I guess they used Saran Wrap and a rubber band [...] That was the talk for probably four months at school. I guess teachers would call them out of class because they were concerned about her and, like, I don’t even know how it got started but it just kind of started putting him on a pedestal for getting laid so young and making her feel bad because she had sex [...] that’s where I started seeing the lines of you know, guys are treated better...”

That this was the note that Rose’s narrative and time with me during the interview ended on was illuminating. Rose’s narrative highlights teaching and learning from her mother, her priest, and teachers, those early socialization agents and cultural guides, as out-of-step with her experience within the institution of education. In other words, early enculturation into the AMN and how

Rose experienced AMN-related magnified moments during her secondary school education through sex-education and peer communication did not align.

The milieu of Rose's life was such that she heard messages of abstinence and not "making a mistake" in relation to sex. At the same time, she was confronted with the reality of schoolmates and teachers promoting ideas of "abstinence only" sexual education, while simultaneously, all were aware of some sexually active students. Perhaps, seemingly mutually reinforcing, Rose's *religious enculturation combined with compulsory abstinence-only sex education* did not serve to lessen anxieties around or make more understandable expected AMN-related behaviors. Instead, Rose's experience of sex-ed and Catholicism created for her a school environment wherein she perceived sex and sexuality as something made hyper-visible and as topics hyper-discussed among peers. Unfortunately, Rose noted that much of the discussion she overheard or had with peers singularly focused on judgement and disdain for those who somehow exhibited a sexuality that went against the expected. Subsequently, Rose explained that the environment that the sex education program created at school was one in which gendered-evaluation of individual's engagement in sex acts was promoted by students and consequentially "slut shaming" took place.

Especially important is the way in which Rose contends with engaging in sexual intercourse with her fiancé, Sam, before marriage. Her contention is a result of the American cultural logics *and* institutionalized education, family, and religion that promotes heteronormativity, marriage and monogamy, and abstinence before marriage through rhetoric of the American Marriage Narrative. This "magnified moment," premarital sex, is one about which she must bargain with herself, as she said, "...[I]t's like all of the things they [her primary socialization agents and cultural guides] taught me – that's not happening right now, but I also

struggled with the fact [of] slut shame," is constructed from the cultural and institutional preoccupation with and perpetuation of the American Marriage Narrative.

Also of note is the way in which Rose's family of origin/early cultural guides and stakeholders in the institution of education and religion (priests, teachers, and peers) have influenced the trajectory of Rose's participation in intimate relationships and sex. Rose, an early adherent of the abstinence-only model of sexual education in schools, realized that the model promoted a sort of fear-mongering about sex and intimacies. For example, she mentions the time above when her teacher made students participate in an experiment to the end of showing the way and rapidity with which a sexually transmitted infection may occur. However, when Rose recalls that moment in conjunction with slut shaming and her personal engagement in sexual activity before marriage, her narrative highlights a very real negative consequence of magnified moments in the relationship trajectory of one's life and mixed messages related to it.

An outcome outlined by scholars in studies of emerging American adults who participate in sex acts and who have internalized mixed messages about sex acts, intimate relationships, and family formation say that *guilt* and resultant behaviors due to guilt are but one way that youth and emerging adults cope with misunderstandings and misinterpretations of intimacies, family formation, and the American Marriage Narrative (Longest and Uecker 2018; Levenkron and Levenkron 2010).

Guilt resulting from internalized mixed messages of the AMN does a disservice to the intimate relationship seeker. The binary "ideal versus reality" model that individuals in search of intimacies and family formation rely upon sets up a context in which decision-making is under-informed, skewed, and stressful in a host of ways for American kids and emerging adults like Rose. For Rose, this binary and the comparisons made in relation to it, creates a sense of guilt

combined with associated behaviors and individual actions: Rose made a bargain with herself about participating in sexual activity before marriage. However, through the aforementioned cultural influences and institutional stakeholders, Rose found that AMN-related messages were mixed and her personal participation in marriage culture difficult to navigate. Rose and Candy share this commonality.

Candy is a middle-aged white woman whose experience with cultural and institutionalized religion runs very deep. Her life history not only corroborates the description of youth and emergent adulthood messages about intimacies and family formation provided by Rose and Asher, but her experiences of childhood sex abuse within the context and literal structure of the Church adds another dimension to youth's comprehension of mixed messages about partnership and family formation in the United States.

Emotionally driven decision-making, such as decision-making through guilt, like in Rose's case, is not uncommon for those who are heavily integrated in a religious context (Longest and Uecker 2018). Similarly, religious and emotion-driven, trauma-informed decision-making colors intimacies experienced by Candy. Descriptions of Candy's childhood family home and the event that changed the trajectory of her life begin below.

Candy's AMN Enculturation and Magnified Moment:
“[Childhood sexual abuse] did not shake my faith in God...”

Candy is the research respondent with the highest level of religiosity across the life course, and religion intersects with every area of her life including how she sees herself as a partner and mother today. Her life in the 1970s was filled with hope and dreams of living through Christ in a Christian home/family of her own. Candy said,

“I grew up in a fundamentalist Christian home. We studied the Bible together. We went to church, like, a million times a week. But, when I was a kid, it was fun. All

of my friends were there and we took in the Word. However, I tried to proselytize to my friends in public high school. I wanted them to join me on this journey with Christ. They weren't into it. In fact, they thought I was a Jesus-freak. I think I was. I built an entire fantasy life for myself through the Word of the Lord. It [proselytizing] just didn't work out. I also didn't have a boyfriend until after high school. I probably scared them all."

As a self-proclaimed "Jesus-freak," the milieu of American public education was difficult for Candy to navigate. She found solace within the walls of the family church – another "home," according to Candy – commiserating with people who shared her values and belief system. Especially important to Candy, like Rose, was virginity and abstinence before marriage as her Christian belief system dictates.

That her schoolmates "weren't into" her level of religiosity left Candy feeling isolated and not accepted. Therefore, the Church was integral to Candy's social life as the other institutional context (school) that often takes up much time at this point in the life course was not accessible to her. Church – that is, the institution of American religion – was concretized as a primary source of cultural knowledge in Candy's emerging adulthood.

While Candy found comfort in her church and participated in youth groups, chorale, and other related activities, a dark cloud hovered. At this point, while discussing her love of the learning the "Word [biblical stories]" and finding a peer group who accepted her and shared her Christian beliefs around sexual activity prior to marriage/virginity (unlike her school peers), Candy disclosed that she is a survivor of sexual abuse. Her narrative of this experience follows.

"My life seemed like it wasn't mine. I was like eleven or twelve. I was loved going to church. I loved learning the Word and hanging out with my friends there. We all, like, hung out even after whatever [event] was finished. We just really loved each other and loved spending time together. I think school was hard for all of us. We didn't all go to the same one; so, when we got together it was like the 'Island of Misfit Toys'.

But then, like, at the same time, this really, really horrible thing was happening in the same place [church]. Like, how do you even reconcile that? Like, how was I supposed to make sense of the love I felt at my church and at the very same time have my church-

going-uncle abuse me? I just couldn't make sense of it. Like, it started around age twelve. My uncle, he just started, like, hanging out at the church more. But, that wasn't weird. In fact, I think my family thought it was cool because he found that he liked our church. Anyway, he started running studies with adults and doing cool things with the kids and he was, like, super cool and accepted there, too.

At the beginning, he would offer to my parents to take me home after church things when he knew that they needed to get home but I didn't wanna leave yet. In the car, he would say things about God, and our church, and how good I was at singing and stuff, give me a hug, and I'd get out of the car. I thought it was nice. But, then, I don't know how long after he started bringing me home, maybe a month or two, he started talking about my looks and my body and how it was changing. I thought it was weird, but I also thought, 'He's my uncle. He notices that I am growing up.' But, one night after rehearsal for a play that we were putting on, on our way home, my uncle put his hand on my neck, kinda like when someone is reaching across the seat to put their arm around you. But he stopped at my neck and started to rub it. It scared me. I jerked, but then settled but he continued. Then, when it was time for me to get outta the car, I hugged him like usual, but it didn't feel usual. It wasn't usual. He kissed me, like an adult kiss, told me loved me and he would see me tomorrow. It felt scary, but somehow, it felt, like, normal?"

Candy went on to describe the “grooming process” that she endured perpetrated by her uncle.

Grooming is the process by which sexual predators take care to ensure that their advances are seen by the victim as acts of kindness, education, and other seemingly benign behaviors that are in fact an attempt to create an atmosphere of safety in which the sexual abuse can commence.

Progression of her uncle's sexual advances (from rubbing and fondling outside of clothes to under-the-clothes and genital touching, never intercourse), in this way is an example of grooming.

This sort of abuse in combination with her personal religious beliefs placed Candy in a situation for which she had no information on which to rely for help. As an emerging adult in the institution of American religion, Candy eschewed school sex education ("...such as it was in the 70s and 80s") for the more favorable (in her opinion) intimate relationship and marriage information provided at church and through the Bible. Unfortunately, childhood sex abuse and

intimate partner violence were not topics that Candy recalls learning about in any substantial way.

Her uncle continued to molest Candy for approximately three years. Her church friends began to notice a shift in Candy's personality and called it into question. The physical space, the church, provided a context through which two things occurred. First, Candy was socialized to have religious beliefs and to act accordingly through her behaviors (church attendance, profession of faith, “walking the path” provided by the Bible in the way she conducted herself in the world, abstinence before marriage, et cetera). Then, as she moved into adolescence, the institutional context of the Church became the space in which her abuse took place *and* where she found solace and peace. The complexity of church as a safe space and an abusive space, simultaneously, was confounding in Candy’s life. She was saved from molestation due to her *church friends’* intervention, leading Candy to disclose the abuse to her parents.

The institutional logics of religion in the United States suggests that the physical space of religious practice (mosques, churches, et cetera) is safe despite the reality of abuses that are enacted within their walls. The lack of knowledge and life experiences at the stage of emergent adulthood creates confusion about the place of religion in one’s life if the reality of their lived experience of church membership and the ideal do not align.

Sex abuse, the Church, and the AMN coalesce to construct one, very powerful, magnified moment in Candy’s youth and emergent adulthood. Of that time in her life, Candy said, "I do not know if there was ever police involvement. I know that I never talked to the police about my uncle. All I know is that, after I told my parents, he stopped coming to church and coming around. It was like, poof, he was gone. I was like fifteen then. And, I never saw him again. It sorta feels like that time is a figment of my imagination, you know?" Candy had no contact with

her abusive uncle after this point in her emergent adulthood. Further, she continued to go to church and believe the "Word" while practicing abstinence.

Candy's path to "love, marriage, and baby carriage" has been difficult for her to navigate. The context of Candy's early life as an avid believer in "the Word" and as a church-goer juxtaposed with the magnified moment of childhood sex abuse, directly connected to institutionalized religion, created for Candy an intense sense of confusion.

For Candy, AMN-related mixed messages came in the form of scripture inclusive of guidelines around intimacies, sex, and marriage while, simultaneously, she found herself in a situation in which she was pressured to participate in intimacies and sex that violated all she knew. Mixed messages during this magnified moment shaped Candy's future decision-making in the way of intimacies and family formation. Today, unmarried, Candy is happy in a long-term intimate relationship with a man and a family that includes their biological children. While her current intimate partnership does not include marriage, institutionalizing the relationship via marriage is not out of the question, "...if there is a reason to," according to Candy.

A variety of magnified moments related to the AMN lead individuals to make decisions about their future romantic/intimate endeavors. Emotionally-driven, trauma-informed decision-making about AMN-related moments, like for Candy and Rose, as a result of mixed messages about "love, marriage, and baby carriage," as also experienced by Noel, Lara, and Asher shaded their procurement of intimacies across the relationship trajectory. By stark comparison, and decidedly *not* part of the aforementioned pattern is another respondent: Russ. Russ is the single research participant whose childhood and emerging adulthood appears not to have had a variety of mixed messages about the American Marriage Narrative.

Russ's AMN Enculturation and Magnified Moment:
“I have such a typical family, I’ve never really thought about it...”

Russ’s relationship trajectory was mightily shaped by the context of his immediate family life during childhood. Russ’s trajectory was quite linear in comparison to other respondents. He said that his observations of a “very typical American family,” despite their regular international travel due to his father’s job, has led to decision-making that will allow him to recreate a family of his own in the image of his biological, immediate family in the future. Indeed, Russ’s family – at least Russ’s description of his immediate family life – is enmeshed with the “ideal” family form, one created through marriage. In other words, “love, marriage, and baby carriage” played out in real life for Russ, his parents, and his siblings.

Russ grew up with married parents and his sisters. Russ’s mother did the majority of the parenting due to the constraint of visa policy. Russ recalls that the “working visa” policy only allowed one of his parents to have gainful employment while they were abroad in Europe. The condition of Russ’s early childhood made him yearn for more “dad time.” He said, “Because my dad was a business dude, or is a business dude, he’s traveled so much for work his entire life. There was a point in my life when I would see other people with their dads and I’d be like, ‘wait a second...’.” He further reconciled this statement by saying, “...[B]ut my dad was around most of the time, it was just kind of, you know [...] I mean, it happens.” He went on to say, “I feel like my family is the epitome of white, typical, American family. I have two older sisters and you know, I don’t know. I have such a typical family, I’ve never really thought about it.” Although, Russ describes his family as “typical,” his childhood narrative reveals the very gendered arrangement of his home life and the ways in which his father’s travels shaped his experience of intimate relationships and marriage. Russ’s experience of the gendered division of labor at home is not uncommon. Noteworthy here, though, is the way in which Russ perceived his experience

as “typical” and “normal,” as something that seemingly just “happens.” His recollections here show the ways in which the AMN and marriage culture have become natural, normal, and how their construction and perpetuation go unnoticed.

Russ’s family life was his primary source of information about intimate relationships and marriage. He said, “I learned about relationships from my parents, I mean yeah, of course, seeing them every day. But, I feel like I learned more about relationships from my older sisters because they’re five and seven years older than me. So, basically, at that point, where I was beginning to understand relationships, they were getting into relationships [...] My brother-in-law, I’ve known since I was maybe seven years old, actually.” His siblings are currently married with children.

Siblings as a source of information about marriage and relationships came up in multiple interviews in positive and negative ways. For example, Russ’s siblings and parents were far more important role models for forming families than another institution, such as the media or education. Russ stated, “Going back to my family and my siblings, seeing them go through relationships and both of them were fairly stable, that was more the influence that I had. I never wanted to seek meaningless relationships.”

In his current intimate relationship, Russ finds himself working to fulfill the role that he observed and has been laid out for him by his immediate family. Simultaneously, Russ is at odds with AMN rhetoric and his desire to marry. His social location as a Master of Fine Arts student does not allow him the important, single resource that he deems necessary to procure before marrying— money. Russ’s resistance to marriage is situational and, he hopes, it is temporary (with the compliance of his partner). He imagines marriage in his future but not until he is “financially stable.” At the moment, Russ has no income. He is able to survive with help from

his partner and his parents. I will further explore Russ's (and other respondents') decision to marry or not in the next chapter.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Life Course, Magnified Moments, and Enculturation into American Marriage

Mixed messages about important AMN-related moments persist from the home/family, to the media, and school, as evidenced by respondents' narrative accounts. The AMN rhetoric used to compare potential partners by employing an ideal versus real categorical distinction (and, decision-making based in this categorization), leaves youth and emerging adults at a cultural capital deficit. Their intimacy- and family formation-knowledge deficit, or capital loss, positions American emerging adults to lack proper and holistic understanding of such important life course moments.

Broader intimacy and family formation knowledge would have helped my study respondents better navigate American "love, marriage, and baby carriage" terrain. Equipped with big picture knowledge of American marriage culture (not simply the institution), emerging adults can seek out lovers or partners in an educated way who are best-fits and assuage the insidious comparison of the looming "ideal partner" image constructed and perpetuated by American culture.

Noel, Lara, Asher, Rose, Candy, and Russ experienced expectation, success, and failure across their relationship trajectories. By way of norms, values, and beliefs about the life course magnified moments, marriage culture, and the AMN, they compared the ideal intimate relationship and family formation to their own. These respondents heard, observed, and learned the patterns of behavior associated with AMN rhetoric considered "appropriate" on an

age/time/moment continuum from important adults and others who deliver messages from a culture that upholds marriage as the ideal mechanism by which to form families. Their narratives suggest that a picture of ideal intimacy and family life is the construct by which respondents compare and make decisions about ways to proceed in their own intimacies. Comparisons of this sort and one's own decision-making around the AMN do not happen in a vacuum. Rather, comparisons between and among potential lovers and what the relationship should look and be like are structured by patterns of AMN-related behavior and actions. These patterns tell us the ideal and how one might fail to live up to this ideal.

Marriage and subsequent family formation are no different in this way and neither are the respondents highlighted here nor their related experiences. Respondents compared their personal romantic and intimate experiences to ideal constructs of **THE** intimate relationship, relationship trajectory, marriage, and family formation. Respondents drew on information specific to their milieu *and* patterns associated with a larger marriage culture in the United States. Indeed, decisions to remain unmarried in a climate that encourages marriage can be said to have roots in one's history (enculturation) and in the AMN-related experiences that they have. That is, when history, culture, and individual choice collide, study respondents' interpretation and implementation of the AMN had consequences. Consequences for marriage resisters affect their everyday lives as I outline in the final data chapter, Chapter Six.

Emerging adulthood and experimentation with sex, gender, and sexuality shifts the sorts of comparisons and, thus, decisions that are made. Sometimes, typical family formation and behaviors fall by the wayside in favor of a more atypical, outside of the norm, gender-, sexual-, or family identity. Respondent Noel, whom I discussed at the opening of this chapter, is an exemplar in this realm. Her adult sexual orientation as a bisexual woman who also experienced

sexual misconduct at the hands of a classmate to whom she was attracted has shaped her outlook on intimacies and marriage. In comparison, unlike Russ who sees himself married in the future, Noel does not want to take part in the institution, ever. Because this is so and, as the next chapter explores, I term Noel a “adamant marriage resister.” Despite Noel’s enculturation into marriage culture through AMN rhetoric and expectations, she stands outside of the boundary of “normal” in her identity as a bisexual woman, and adamant marriage resister whereas, Russ, a “situational/temporal marriage resister,” falls within the bounds of normality despite his current unmarried intimate relationship of more than four years. Because Russ plans to marry eventually, he continues down the “path of least resistance” (Johnson 2014) in American marriage culture and behaves/acts accordingly.

One’s learning of *proper* marriage and family formation connects to broader sociological questions about the cultural and institutional logics of United States marriage and enculturation into marriage culture through American Marriage Narrative rhetoric. I have shown that enculturation into marriage and family formation, AMN mixed messages, and magnified moments of the life course elicit specific relationship trajectories and decision-making related to the milieu of one’s life.

The cultural and institutional logics of an individual’s proper participation in American marriage culture (and the institution) suggest that they are entitled to proper and full access to rights and privileges available to American *legal* citizens. If this is true, then so is the counterargument that suggests one’s improper participation in the culture and institution disallows access to rights and privileges afforded to other Americans. Therefore, it is at this stage of analysis that the entanglement between a *culture* and an *institution* that serves to uphold the

ideal family form via marriage *and* an individual's identity and position in the social structure are shown to be at odds and capable of shaping one's life trajectory.

For some respondents, AMN-related mixed messages and magnified moments of the life course are remarkable conduits of power that are able to dictate whether they decide to marry. In this way, it is clear that there exists power in how one is enculturated, in the comparisons and decisions based in an ideal versus the reality of one's partner and/or family life that they make, and in whether traumas took place – and that power can sway respondents' participation in the institution of marriage.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARRIAGE PASSION, MARRIAGE POWER:

PLACEMENT ON THE PASSION-TO-MARRY CONTINUUM AND THE POWER OF THE AMERICAN MARRIAGE NARRATIVE

The centrality of marital status to ‘organized society’ cannot be overstated given the significance of these laws to the everyday lives of U.S. citizens and immigrants. The state has a substantial stake in heterosexual marriage and protects and preserves its interests in a multitude of laws, policies, and practices.

Chrys Ingraham (1994:109)

“The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender”

The cultural characteristics of American marriage are not a thing that individuals somehow know innately, as I show in Chapter Four. Socialization agents teach these characteristics and cultural guides provide a sort of “love, marriage, and baby carriage” narrative to explain the logics of American family formation or the American Marriage Narrative (AMN). The AMN, then, helps those individuals who wish to participate “normally” on the path to institutionalized marriage. “Normals,” in this case, may reach their goal of wedded bliss by having the AMN to rely or fall back on if questions about their relationship trajectory arise, such as, “Is this person a good ‘fit’ for me to marry? To engage with in a romantic relationship? To engage with in a hook up?”

However, individuals who do not participate in the relationship trajectory to marriage as expected stand in stark relief because they are unable to draw upon the same cultural logics that help others along the life course in terms of relationship and family formation.

To reiterate then, in the United States exists a culture (not just an institution) of marriage into which individuals are socialized. This culture is more than “white weddings” and the “wedding industrial complex” (Ingraham 2008); it is also a path paved for people that “naturalizes” marriage as the primary way to form families. Ingraham’s (2008) concepts in conjunction with a broader culture that upholds “the family” as the foundational building block in American society ensures that children and emerging adults interact with meanings, ideas, emotions and behaviors related to the institution of marriage. It is the culture of American marriage, then, that teaches individuals how to interact in ways meant not simply to attain wedded bliss, but to also procure a lifetime marriage and family.

So far, the data I have outlined and explained illuminates that the AMN is the primary tool by which pro-marriage rhetoric is dispersed and by which it persists. The AMN, too, is present in respondents’ decision-making related to intimacies, marriage, and family formation across their life course relationship trajectory. This finding suggests that the AMN is a powerful tool in the iterative, psychosocial process of procuring and maintaining long-term romantic intimacies. The rhetoric of the AMN was present in respondents’ narratives as they shared the ways they went about making choices about specific intimacies across their relationship trajectory.

Aligned with the “ideal versus real image” of intimacies highlighted in Chapter Four, decision-making related to intimacies shifted the ways in which respondents either relied on messages of the AMN or not. In other words, respondents’ learning of “cultural repertoires” of

sex, intimate relationships, and family formation expanded with each magnified moment as they progressed across the trajectory to their current relationship. However, while their repertoires grew, so did the profundity of the AMN-related magnified moments in their lives. The AMN was continuously engaged with by my study respondents, reflected in key moments they shared with me in which AMN-related decision-making had consequences in their lives.

In this chapter, I expand the analysis from the existence of marriage as a culture in the United States to consider the specific ways in which marriage culture and related rhetoric shapes individuals' decisions to participate in the institution of marriage. Respondent narratives reveal that they have had powerful experiences related to marriage culture and clear ideas about their varied participation (or not) in it. Moreover, respondents provided reasons for which they will or will not choose to marry in the future.

Data highlighted in this chapter, then, captures that interaction between an individual and a culture that moves one to participate in the institution of marriage. The individual child/emerging adult learns AMN-related teaching that is conducted by cultural guides and institutional stakeholders and acts on this knowledge. Some of these AMN-related actions become "magnified moments" in the respondent's life course relationship trajectory. During AMN-related magnified moments, respondents made decisions whether to lean into or away from marriage culture rhetoric that guides one toward a marital future. In other words, respondents' decisions to marry or not marry make the individual's interaction with marriage culture visible and this requires sociological analysis.

The AMN provides respondents with a sort of running commentary that reminds them where they have been in their relationship trajectory and of where they might, or would like to, go in comparison to all they have learned about marriage and family formation. In this vein, I

explore influences and decision-making that led to respondents' participation in their current relationship/family form. One's milieu and enculturation (that which makes up their cultural repertoire) is deeply connected to their decision-making about marriage. As with the majority of Americans who continue to desire marriage as the primary mechanism through which to form family, my study sample reflects this demographic statistic. Milieu and enculturation and how they are connected to respondent decision-making is indicative of this larger pattern of Americans' *desire* (or "cultivated desire") to be marriage participants.

At the time of oral history interview wherein respondents already had more than four years of time dedicated to their current romantic relationship, data reveals a continuum upon which they exist in relationship to their desire or "passion" to one day be married. From data analyses, three categories emerged on the "Passion-To-Marry Continuum" (PTMC) and they are predestined marriage participants (PMPs), temporal/situational marriage resisters (TMRs), and adamant marriage resisters (AMRs). I discuss the categories at length below.

Importantly, as the continuum shows, not all respondents in this study wish to remain unmarried despite their resistance to marriage right now. In fact, at the moment, some are in the midst of wedding-planning! These are the individuals to whom I refer as "Predestined Marriage Participants" (n=3/4). PMPs have resisted marriage temporarily but they are clear that they would like to be married in the future. Respondents who discussed their plans to marry fall within this group, while at the other end of the continuum are those who expressed lack of desire or disdain for marriage. I refer to these individuals as "Adamant Marriage Resisters" (AMRs; n=6).

Specifically, however, I highlight a different group of marriage resisters for the majority of this chapter. Those I refer to as "Temporal/Situational Marriage Resisters" (TMRs; n=3/4);

Russ is both a TMR and PMP) are individuals who are most influenced by AMN mixed messages compared to other sorts of resisters. Overwhelmingly, TMR respondents reported “magnified moments” in which powerful AMN rhetoric was infused into their relationship trajectory as were mixed messages about AMN-related topics such as gender, sexuality, intimacies, and family formation. Respondents in this category said that AMN decision-making – that is, implementing and practicing lessons learned of the AMN in one’s life – was in many ways difficult, consequential, and *constraining*.

The American Marriage Narrative and Movement Along the Relationship Trajectory: Mixed Messages, Choices, Categories

Predestined Marriage Participants (PMPs)

Sean’s AMN Decision-Making and Participation in Marriage Culture: Mixed Messages in Practice

One might suspect that participation in a previous marriage (and divorce) could signal an individual’s future intimate relationship behavior, thoughts, and actions related to marriage. Put more succinctly, perhaps future behavior is best predicted by past behavior. However, I find that one’s previous marital experience is not indicative of future marital behavior. Two respondents, Summer and Sean, were once married before their current intimacies. Summer is a adamant marriage resister. Sean, on the other hand, is a predestined marriage participant.

Consider thirty-two-year old Sean. Sean, a female-bodied, asexual, hetero-queer identified person, said that experiences in their first marriage were “rocky” or difficult at best, violent and traumatizing at worst. Yet, they have chosen to remarry, placing them squarely in the PMP category. How did they come to such decisions? Maybe beginning life in ways atypical to

the AMN allows one to imagine a life that both integrates and goes against AMN teachings. This seems to be the case for Sean. Sean was conceived in a medical lab, not in the typified intimate space of a “bedroom” (as often portrayed in popular culture). Through the extraction of their mother’s egg, then fertilized, and propagated until implantation, Sean’s life history begins unlike many children born in the 1980s and unlike any of my study respondents. Despite the non-traditional start to their life as a “family,” Sean has maintained a “great” relationship with their parents and their parents’ marriage is healthy.

Their parents, traditionally heterogendered, married, upper-middle class and professionals, were afforded an opportunity to access reproductive technologies for Sean’s conception that are often out of reach for other people desiring to be parents. Despite purposeful conception and excitement about it, Sean’s father proceeded to have concerns related to his relationship with Sean.

Sean expressed that their father always wanted to ensure a strong connection between Sean and him. Sean did not say the same about their mother. Sean’s perception that their mother did not share a similar concern seems likely because it was her egg that was fertilized. In other words, Sean shares genetic material with their mother and not their father. Because Sean’s father lacks a biological/genetic connection to Sean, Sean believes that their father regularly had this concern about a relationship with his child in ways that their mother did not. Sean was always aware of this concern and expressed their deep connection with both parents.

Sean made clear that the connection between them and their father was “deep” across their life course. Sean stated that their father struggled with his masculinity precisely because he could not fertilize one of his wife’s eggs. For this reason, Sean cites their father’s masculinity as “compromised,” and therefore, Sean feels as though they must reassure their father of their “deep

connection.”. Sean’s desire to make their father feel secure is not a daunting task for them, however. This is the sort of connectedness that Sean desires and that they found in their current partner, “T.”

It is the sort of intimacy that Sean grew up observing between their mother and father and the kind of intimacy that they worked to have in their previous and current relationships. Sean’s AMN-related decision-making is correlated with their sense of “deep connection” to their parents *and* the deep connection that their parents share. This sort of connection was experienced as part of Sean’s enculturation and the milieu in which they were were raised. A supportive and empathetic environment combined with emotionality connected to “deep connection” became part of Sean’s AMN knowledge and Sean acted on this knowledge in following the path to their first marriage.

What followed in Sean’s childhood and emerging adulthood was also atypical. Sean, an only child, was “basically raised in the university and in the lab.” Before high school graduation, Sean’s parents, both scientific researchers, would even leave Sean to “sometimes proctor lab exams.” Arguably, not a typical experience for most American teenagers!

As Sean emerged into adulthood with good grades, test scores, and prepared to attend college, they dated, hooked-up, and usually maintained “open relationships” with their romantic partners. On this note, Sean reflected,

“You asked me about my history of relationships. I mean, I always kind of approached relationships with the attitude that having an intimate connection with someone didn’t mean that I owned them. So, I never really asked my partners for exclusivity in a relationship because in my view, my relationship with them was about my relationship with them.”

This is a point of view on compulsory monogamy that is not commonly shared among the American public regarding the AMN and marriage culture. For many, upon declaration of such

an intimate relationship, there is an assumption/expectation of monogamy. Sean's commitment to monogamy, instead, only comes with "deep connection" to their partner. That sort of connection led Sean to their first marriage. This relationship before T, their current partner, particularly stands out for Sean. We discussed at length the abuse that Sean endured in a long-term intimate relationship, then marriage, with a former partner that lasted for seven years and the time of recovery afterward. I detail their recollection and present an analysis of "in-progress, marital mixed messages" below.

As Sean and I approached the end of our interview time together, I asked if they would like to go back to topics or say something about ideas that did not come up in the course of the conversation. What ensued was nearly another hour of discussion with Sean, but this time about what they called, "Mores surrounding marriage contributing to the perpetuation of the abuse," they went on, "...that I experienced in my first marriage." Sean cited their reason for continued discussion saying, "My spouse would frequently recite *social scripts about marriage as justification for why he was behaving in an abusive manner, um, sexually and emotionally* [author's emphasis]..." To which I could only respond, "Okay. Wow..."

Sean's life in a heterosexual marriage was not idyllic. Near the end of our conversation about their abuse, Sean sums up by saying,

"I never frame my first spouse as a villain. He wasn't. He's never been a villain. He's a person who is a *product of his experiences* and his demons the same way that we all are. And the mistake that I made, I think, if I made a mistake as having so much empathy for him that I forgot to have empathy for myself. I blamed myself for everything for so long. I internalized, and you asked me about, 'messages I got from my parents about marriage?' I got the very clear message that if your partner ever hits you, leave. *But what does every upper middle class white woman say about, why she didn't leave? 'He never hit me* [author's emphasis]."

At once, Sean, a liberally educated individual whose upbringing was within the bounds of a loving, parental marriage and family, received messages in line with the AMN. However, upon

marriage, those messages were twisted into a cadre of seemingly permissible acts perpetuated against Sean's mind and body because, now, Sean was a "wife." No matter the negative outcomes of this abuse, however, Sean maintains a level of empathy for their former spouse. In some ways, this empathy mimicked the empathy that Sean has shown their father over time.

But, as Sean outlines, empathy could not soothe them out of their abuse. Their ex-husband did not hit Sean. However, the ways in which Sean's body was violated by their spouse at least equates (and, perhaps, surpasses) one's experience of hitting. Sean's former spouse regularly sexually assaulted Sean. To Sean's husband, wanting and obtaining sex from one's spouse regardless of the spouse's clear consent was acceptable marital behavior. Marital rape persists despite legislation that counters it. Sean, unfortunately, is not unique in this way. Sean's chronic condition makes sexual intercourse and other activities painful at times. Their husband did not heed Sean's call to stop when sex became painful. As a result, Sean found that mental "dissociation" became part of their lived experience of PTSD associated with their abuse. The feeling of "not being in one's body" when some stressor occurs is what is meant by dissociation. Sean tended to dissociate when their spouse forced sex but at other times as well. It was not until T came along that Sean could "...really heal."

To say that some of the acts done by their former spouse were heinous is an understatement in Sean's narrative. Heterosexual marriage was a nightmare rather than a dream in their experience. However, the once-married-and-abused divorcee now find themselves in a deeply connected (no longer dissociating) long-term intimate relationship with their current partner. Like Sean, T does not adhere to the gender nor sexuality binary. T is a male-bodied, gender nonconformist. Ze is bisexual, never married, and at present, monogamous in their relationship with Sean. Formerly, T practiced polyamory.

In Sean's purview, there was no question from the beginning of their relationship that T and Sean were attracted to one another; initially, Sean explained, they were attracted to each other's brain, thinking, and intellect. The attraction developed beyond the mind quickly and soon they were planning their future together. T was a force in Sean's recovery from their abusive past and continued support for the lasting effects of said abuse: post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociation. Further, Sean is chronically ill with an autoimmune disorder that sometimes prevents them from conducting tasks in their everyday life.

Due to Sean's childhood and emerging adulthood milieu and AMN knowledge, the decision to wed their current partner came without difficulty or surprise to Sean. What is perhaps surprising is that Sean chose to remarry despite traumas associated with their previous participation in the institution of marriage. Sean explained that they "*felt* differently" in their current relationship. They *felt* deeply connected to this other human. That Sean describes their relationship to their parents (especially their father under those specific conditions of nonbiological parent of a child) *and* to their fiancé as "deeply connected" highlights these important feelings in Sean's life across time. Sean highly values both relationships, thus, describes them similarly.

This finding shows the importance of and role that emotion plays in decision-making related to marriage and family formation. Sean's experience of "deep [emotional] connection" is that which they learned from their parents. Sean observed a married couple (their parents) who seemed to have a loving, deeply-connected relationship, that they then shared with Sean. That Sean describes their current intimate relationship with their fiancé in the same way, "deep connection," illuminates the shift of that valued emotion from Sean's childhood to their adulthood. Sean firmly stated that the relationship they had with their former spouse and the

current romantic intimacy in which they participate “are extremely different.” Sean has now connected that which was once taught and learned to action in their life through the decision to remarry to a person very different from their previous, heteronormative marital relationship. Sean and T do not want children (biological or adopted) and do not depend on the gendered and sexualized messages of the AMN despite their choice to participate in the institution of American marriage. Again, happily, they will proceed to the altar in a wedding ceremony conducted at their shared home.

Decisions made to get married, for Sean and T, were not done hastily. Instead, Sean explained that the connection between the couple allowed for imagining a future together wherein the two would wed and likely maintain two homes—not typical for married couples. This example shows that those who make choices to marry despite the amount of time in their long-term intimacy do so explicitly. Rather than passively letting the AMN take one down the path to marriage, Sean and T had many discussions about their relationship, previous intimate experiences including the aftermath of Sean’s previous marriage, and the implications of state-based marriage in their lives. In this way, the couple was agentic in their decision-making by weighing their options for long-term intimate relationships (LTIRs) and family formation that best suited them. These discussions and decisions led Sean and T to determine that marriage was a status they desired. They felt passionately about their decision to marry.

Adamant Marriage Resisters (AMRs)

On the other end of the spectrum exist Adamant Marriage Resisters (AMRs). These individuals, despite AMN-related rhetoric and a path paved in marriage culture, have chosen not to participate in the institution of marriage. Each respondent in this category experienced mixed

messages of the AMN as is true for the remainder of my respondents, including other predestined marriage participants Rose, Asher, and Russ. Russ was the *only* respondent who did not receive mixed messages of the AMN.

The AMN in conjunction with mixed messages and magnified moments in their lives led AMR respondents and those in the temporal marriage resister category to decide against marriage, at least for the time being. While the enculturation experienced and milieu in which it occurred varied, all respondents except for Russ could point to AMN teaching and learning that, when put into practice by them, was unsatisfying, unclear, scary, damaging, and, even in some cases, abusive, in comparison to the ideal intimacy promoted in AMN rhetoric.

Isaac, an African-American adamant marriage resister, was resolute in his desire to remain unmarried. Illustrated below, Isaac laid out for me a magnified moment in which mixed messages related to the trajectory of one's relationship and intimate life combined with his trauma-informed childhood. His narrative reveals AMN enculturation and subsequent decision-making through trauma. Death, addiction, and trauma more generally are not key components in AMN rhetoric. Rather, the "love, marriage, and baby carriage" rhetoric that drives the AMN plays up only positive aspects of these life stages, leaving individuals uncertain about how to navigate experiences that don't quite fit into the AMN. Such was the case for Isaac who, as a trauma survivor, found himself having to navigate romantic and intimate life as he confronted mixed messages in marriage culture. Isaac's narrative follows.

Mixed Messages and Trauma-Informed Decision-Making Abound about Intimate Relationships and Marriage: Isaac and Rob

Isaac explained that his emotionality, anger, and sadness about the death of his brother and his father's subsequent demise, led him to participate in intimacies that were decidedly not long-

term and perhaps not healthy for him. Those previous experiences across his relationship trajectory now color the way that Isaac considers his current intimate relationship partner with his “girl.” Isaac explained,

“Oh yeah man. I had dates. I had girlfriends. When my brother died and life went to hell, I just started to get fucking wild. I hooked up with ladies while I was in relationships with ladies. I was not a good guy. I don’t know that I ever really learned how to be a good guy with my Pops all messed up on liquor, you know? So, I would go out all the time. I would find ladies and get their numbers even when I was in a relationship. Now, man, now, my life has changed quite a bit and I know that my womanizing ways were because my home was a mess and I was actin’ out. I kept actin’ out because I was so mad. Damn, man, I was mad. I was mad that bro died, that Dad’s an alcoholic, that Mom is too tired, home was tough. But now, I got my shit right. I got my girl. My girl is so good to me. I wanna keep her happy. I like to make her happy. I don’t really say we date or any shit like that. We been at it too long. We a couple. A happy, not married, no kids having, making a life together couple. She just my girl.”

Previous experience across his relationship trajectory and family history leads Isaac to refer to his partner as his “girl.” This is not a term that he used for other women with whom he previously shared intimacies. He made sense of his relationship trajectory and intimacies through the emotion that he had resulting from his family traumas. “My girl” and “making a life together” denote that this is a relationship in which Isaac expects to remain and is the family form that he has chosen.

Isaac experienced barriers to adding children to his family. While Isaac no longer wants children of his own, this was not true for him and his partner at the start of their relationship. Isaac said, “She wanted kids. I didn’t care one way or the other. But, she didn’t wanna give birth. She teaches kids and I think that made her want them.” Isaac went on to explain that they had considered adoption but not seriously until a child came into their midst. Of that moment, Isaac explained,

“There was this kid at the school where she [his partner] teaches. It was known that he was a kid without guidance. He was going through the system. He was just a young fella, like 5 or 6. His mom was a druggie and the dad was nowhere. So, my girl was like, ‘Hey,

what if? ...Like, what if we tried to adopt [child's name]?' I was like, well, I know what its like living in a family like that. So, I was like, 'Let's do it.' But the courts and the agency had other plans. They wanted to know that we were stable, like, 'Yeah, we stable. We make plenty of money to support a kid and ourselves.' But it was the 'Are you married or planning to be married?' question that screwed us. We were honest and said, 'No, no plans to marry. Been together for five years. We own our home and share bank accounts.' But that wasn't good enough. They didn't like that we didn't want to get married. They thought that meant something about our 'stability.' After that experience, we were like, 'Nah. Forget it. Kids aren't in the picture for us,' And, we were done."

Their inability to get through the "marriage barrier" presented to them via the court and the adoption agency shifted Isaac and his partner's position about adding children to their family. This particular child, one who was in need of care, compassion, and stability, was not given the opportunity to join Isaac's family because the adults were not married and did not wish to be. I wondered aloud, "What would have happened if you would have told those people that you planned to marry?" Isaac's answer was humbling; he said, "Listen, if I gotta lie to get a kid to take care of, then there is something wrong with this country!"

Isaac's choice to form family without marriage *and* children can be traced back to the milieu of his childhood and emergent adulthood and should not be taken lightly. These experiences combined and defined for him the way he would like to proceed in his current romantic intimacy. Isaac's intimate relationship knowledge is a result of the additive and iterative implementation of AMN and experiences related to his procurement of intimacies across his relationship trajectory. For an individual to resist the impulse to marry and procreate in American society is no easy feat. These decisions are made within constraint and can negatively impact one's life and, ultimately, their pursuit of happiness. Isaac, a heterosexual African-American man who has chosen the permanent life status as a adamant resister, goes against the grain. He has taken the path of greater resistance in marriage culture and this decision has not been without consequence (I explore consequences of respondent resistance in Chapter Six).

In comparison to Isaac, Rob is a gay white man whose childhood and emerging adulthood trauma existed outside of the home. To remind the reader, Rob's "Snapshot" describes a young boy and teen who was bullied for his gender presentation as "girlie." His childhood home included his mother and father and no siblings. Rob seemed nostalgic, noting the ways in which his parents supported him without question, allowing Rob space enough to feel safe to be himself. Rob came out to his parents at age twenty.

The milieu and habitus of Rob's young life set him on a path to see his difference as incompatible with the AMN and his understanding of it. Mixed messages in the way of "love, marriage, and baby carriage" rhetoric came from Rob's observations of loving parents, a husband and wife couple, who very much adhered to marriage cultural logics and his own desires, pleasures, and differently-gendered embodiment. Rob's personal perceived differences left him feeling confused and often times defeated in his everyday school life and amongst his peers. About his transition to high school, Rob said,

"You know, princess at home was cool and all when I was young. But, even like in middle school, I didn't want to do that at home anymore. I don't know. It's like I felt shameful. Even when no one was watching.

[...] And then, high school was like, BAM! Everyone was talking about hooking up and sex and all that. I listened a lot. I heard stories and sometimes I thought, like, "I want to hook up!" But then, I was like, but I like boys [...] I didn't know what to do with that. Like, I almost wanted to fuck a girl because I thought it might be, I dunno? Easier? Like, I could just go along with it because it was more like, I wanted the experience of sex more than the other body to have sex with? God. I dunno..."

Rob's description of high school as "BAM" can be understood as an AMN-related, magnified moment in his life. While this may seem like an awful long "moment," his regular experience of gendered-bullying led him to compare himself to the kids around him. For Rob, his gender presentation as "girlie" aligned with his emerging sexual orientation as a gay man. Gendered-

bullying from peers made Rob regularly reflect not only on his gender but on his sexuality and sexual desire in relation to what was happening around him. These comparisons not only occurred at school but at home as well. Home, while safe for Rob, was also heteronormative. Throughout high school, Rob described himself as, “[K]inda isolated; lonely.”

As his milieu and habitus might dictate, then, enculturation and magnified moments solidified for him his social position as “different” from heterosexual boys. Rob’s emergent adulthood and adulthood included new knowledge and experiences related to the AMN (that is, additive and iterative AMN knowledge) that led him to come out as gay to his parents at age twenty. Post-closet affirmation from his parents and friends that he gained along the way allowed Rob to feel more confident and moved him to procure the relationship in which he currently exists.

Rob, like Isaac, Beth, Lara, Noel, and Summer, is a respondent who has taken a path of greater resistance in marriage culture via his AMR status. Each respondent in this category discussed value- and belief-based arguments for remaining unmarried. For example, Rob stated the following:

“The reason that Sam and I are not sure about kids is because we are sure that we aren’t getting married. He and I, like, him, he’s a queen. He’s a queen who doesn’t give two shits about fitting in. He’s like, old school, you know? At first when I met him, I thought, ‘I can’t be with no queen who doesn’t want to get married!’ I was like, so not knowledgeable about the Community, you know. But, the more I learned and the more I saw his fierceness, I knew that we were making the right decision. I love him. He loves me. We don’t need no damn piece of paper!”

Rob’s use of the term “Community” is a reference to gay men’s culture and history. Before his relationship with Sam, Rob felt no connection to other gay/queer people around him. The struggle that Rob explains is typical for members of the LGBTQ+ Community. Sociologist Judith Stacey (2012) discusses politics of visibility and equality for gay men in West Los

Angeles, or “Gay El Lay.” As she discovered through her ethnographic research on gay men and their passion to parent children, connection to “The Community” created via the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 70s is a value upheld by gay men. “The Community” is considered a source of and resource for strength and persistence due to the continued unequal treatment of gays in the United States despite the movement for “Marriage Equality.”

Through his relationship with Sam, Rob learned not only about the historic struggle for visibility and equal treatment for gay men, he also learned about the connection between their struggle and other queer minority groups continued fight for rights. Rob’s ability to connect gay/queer history to his current set of conditions propels him to fiercely refuse the AMN like his partner. They have a very clear sense of and convictions about why they are choosing to do so.

Here, the oral history data suggest that mixed messages in marriage culture and magnified moments influenced AMRs decisions to remain unmarried. AMRs are steadfast in their choice to be in an intimate relationship and family formation that works best for them and this means that marriage is not included.

Socialization and milieu are influential in the romantic and sexual lives of AMRs, as are mixed messages of the AMN, as well as living in a marriage-centric, marriage-phile culture. Through this lens, Isaac and Rob do some retrospective sense-making to explain the trajectories that led to their current family form. Through their narratives, it is clear that both men ended up in long-term intimate relationships (LTIRs) without plans to marry or have children despite the differences in the ways in which they were raised. At the same time, however, Isaac and Rob relied upon, negotiated, and examined their adherence to the American Marriage Narrative that they have in common. An intersectional analysis here allows the reader to see the ways in which,

no matter the difference in milieu and enculturation, Isaac and Rob each interacted with the AMN, mixed messages of it, and made decisions rooted in it.

Isaac and Rob share some experiences with the AMN. Confusing AMN messages, experiences, and comparisons between their real, lived experiences with the ideal intimacy are those they have in common. However, Isaac, as a black man raised in a religious home where death and addiction shaped his experiences of family life and love, and Rob, a white gay man who spent much of his childhood bullied and isolated are distinctly different, as well.

Differences in social location for Isaac and Rob made no difference in their receipt of mixed AMN messages and decisions made across their respective relationship trajectories. In other words, while the magnified moments that Isaac and Rob experienced may differ, both men relied on the AMN in their romantic and intimate lives. I proffer the following explanation for their shared reliance on marriage rhetoric despite differences in social location. Marriage and one's participation in it is a salient social phenomenon in the United States: it is expected. Norms, values, and beliefs about family formation are rooted in institutionalized marriage and, thus, social actors behave in ways related to what they know (that is, what they have learned) of this pro-marriage culture. Only through actor action across the relationship trajectory can that which was taught and learned be deployed.

Through deployment of one's cultural AMN knowledge, individuals have a sense of whether they are acting in ways that adhere to the AMN or ways that diverge from it. That is, *no matter if the individual chooses to take a path of lesser or greater resistance in marriage culture, they are still participants in the same culture*. Instead what matters is that *both* individuals had to use the same rhetorical tool, the AMN, to make sense of their personal intimate experiences. They used the AMN to *compare and contrast* their magnified moments of the relationship

trajectory to that which they learned of the ideal intimate relationship and family formation through institutionalized marriage. In sum, then, Isaac and Rob, two seemingly very different people, share the experience of marriage culture and the AMN. Moreover, they continue to rely on the AMN right now to define their current LTIR against those relationships they have had in the past. That is, the AMN remains a powerful rhetorical tool in American marriage culture to explain how one exists *outside* of the boundary of normal intimacy and family form, like Isaac and Rob.

Taken together, narratives from predestined marriage participants and adamant marriage resisters highlight two things. First, an intersectional approach to understanding marriage resistance and the underlying teaching and learning one experiences related to marriage is necessary. As I have so far highlighted, AMRs and PMPs exist at opposite ends of the “passion to marry” continuum. Their placement on the spectrum is dictated by the type of enculturation and milieu in which AMN teaching took place combined with magnified moments related to intimacies, sex, and family formation across their trajectory.

An intersectional analysis warrants a close look at those converging and divergent social forces in respondents’ lives. While the individual milieu and delivery of enculturation by cultural guides and institutional stakeholders differs among respondents, the constant pressures on the AMN do not. Further, while mixed messages, too, may differ by type and when they occurred in one’s trajectory, that AMN-related mixed messages cropped up for *all except one respondent* is indicative of the strength of the AMN. Thus, the AMN, its pressure, and mixed messages are shared among respondents despite background-related differences in their narratives. As I have stated elsewhere, then, while messages of the AMN may be mixed, the rhetoric comes across clearly to all who participated in this study no matter their social location.

Second, and related to the previous finding, the AMN remains powerful across the life course, and mixed messages abound. Mixed messages and magnified moments of the AMN do not stop with the passage of childhood and emerging adulthood. Rather, as I lay out in Chapter Six, the persistence of these messages and moments and continued resistance to marriage has high stakes in adulthood for respondents. They explain decisions to remain unmarried in a culture that reveres it, and the consequences of their choices. Their “improper” participation in marriage culture was shown at times constraining at multiple levels of analysis. Similarly, and for the remainder of the current chapter, *participation* or lack thereof in marriage culture can no better be seen than through the third group under study on the Passion-To-Marry Continuum, the temporal marriage resisters (TMRs).

Temporal/situational marriage resisters (TMRs) must regularly negotiate messages and ideals of the AMN in their everyday lives because the current context requires them to do so. Some event, concern, or situation prevents those in the TMR group from fulfilling their wish to marry their current LTIR partner and form family in the ways they choose. I explore their narratives and the predictive power of the AMN for this group of resisters below.

Temporal/Situational Marriage Resisters (TMRs)

Predictive Power of AMN-Related Mixed Messages and Placement on the Passion-To-Marry Continuum for Russ, Candy, and Scarlet

One way to see that the AMN is powerful is through the sample population in this study. That is, eight of thirteen marriage-resisting respondents currently in long-term intimacies for more than four years *still plan* to marry. Of these respondents (and the entire study sample) only Russ received clear messages of the AMN in childhood and emerging adulthood.

Because mixed messages about marriage resisting comes in many forms, the one group for which I can argue that the power of mixed messages around AMN-related magnified moments can predict one's placement on the "Passion-To-Marry Continuum" (PTMC) are those who fall in the "temporal marriage resister" category. Respondents in this group feel less in control of the decisions that they would like to make in relation to their LTIR and their family form. They are individuals for whom the context of their lives shapes whether or not they will marry and when.

All temporal resisters were able to locate precise magnified moments that ultimately led to decisions about marriage and family formation. Put another way, those who are "on the fence" about marriage had explicit reasons for being in such a position and, at any time, these individuals felt like they might be called on to make a decision (within constraint) about whether or not to marry. Reasons for potentially choosing marriage most discussed by respondents were children (procreating, adoption, and parenting) and welfare (healthcare, tax, and property benefits).

Childhood and emerging adulthood enculturation together with current understandings of intimacies and family formation, and their access to necessary resources, throw into stark relief *chosen* versus *forced* family formation. Mixed messages of the AMN created rocky paths to LTIRs and their preferred family form for TMRs. Situational resisters had to regularly negotiate and compare themselves and their current relationship without marriage to the idealized intimacy and family form through marriage. Thus, respondents explained how marriage and the prospect of their participation in the institution shaped and continues to shape their current relationship. For TMRs, then, marriage and the culture that supports it is always front of mind, regularly called into question, and confronted with consequences.

Temporal marriage resisters are a group as large as the predestined marriage participants. This is due, in part, to Russ's placement in both groups. Russ wants to be married. He made this quite clear. However, the constraint of his financial life holds him back.

Perhaps for one respondent, Russ, AMN rhetoric was useful or privileging. However, respondents more often reported various constraints in the procurement and maintenance of relationships across their lives. Russ's social location as *both* a temporal marriage resister *and* a predestined marriage participant is unique and is a reflection of his cultural repertoire. However, despite Russ's desire to marry, he is temporarily unable to do so due to his financial/economic status. Because Russ sits at the intersection of two categories *and* he does so without the receipt of mixed messages of the AMN, I begin an exploration of these themes with Russ's magnified moments without mixed messages of the American Marriage Narrative as a temporal/situational marriage resister.

Despite familial movement around the globe for his father's job, Russ's family remained very close. Russ described his family as "typical" and said that his childhood was the same. He said, "I don't know, we're...I don't know. I feel like my family is the epitome of white, typical, American family (...) I don't know..." Russ went on here to say again that he just felt as though he had such a typical family, as I discussed in Chapter Four. His description of his family is worth noting again because, as I show, it is relevant for understanding his relationship trajectory.

Russ's parents have been married for more than forty years and have raised children who seem to follow their example when it comes to family formation and intimate relationships. Noteworthy in the above quote, Russ not having to "think about" his family formation because it is "...[T]he epitome of white, typical, American family," who just so happens to travel the globe for father's work, all while remaining stable and close-knit—just might *not* be typical at all in the

United States of America. The ability to refer to characteristics of one's life as "normal" is a luxury not afforded to all and was not the way that most of my study respondents discussed their family-of-origin or their current long-term intimate relationship.

Both of Russ's sisters (who are older than him) are married with children of their own (as described in Chapter Four). His sisters, along with his parents, were primary socialization agents and cultural guides for understanding intimate relationships and family formation in his life. Due to his early enculturation into American norms, values, and beliefs about family formation and marriage, by the time he was shifting from middle to high school, he had a firm sense about his point of view and values about intimacy and sex. About that time of life, Russ said,

"Eighth or ninth grade, but definitely in ninth grade, I remember there were some classes about puberty and masturbation [...] but I was generally a timid person so there was nothing I learned from [peers, media] or anything like that; teenagers are all, honestly, teenagers are greaseballs and having two older sisters, I didn't like to be associated with people that had that mind frame, so..."

This is one magnified moment in Russ's life in which clear messages about sex and intimacy from cultural guides were more influential than those mixed messages that he heard from his peers. Russ was a bit of a loner-type throughout his high school years. Close peer relationships were difficult for Russ to keep due to his geographic mobility and, because this was so, Russ had no interest in learning about sex and intimacy from them. The closeness that he had with his immediate family and the influence of his older sisters provided enough intimate interaction for Russ so that he felt no need to listen to or be influenced by his "greaseball" peers.

As Russ began to practice lessons learned from the AMN, he found himself in a "couple short term relationships and one other long-term relationship of about three or four years." After asking Russ about the romantic intimate relationships in which he participated before his current partner, I moved to ask him about his decision to remain unmarried. I asked Russ, "Did

something or someone influence your decision to not get married or did you always know that you didn't want to marry?" I awaited Russ's response here, specifically, because he is a person whose experience of "family life" is full of marriage while he was the only member who chose to take a "path of greater resistance" (Johnson 2014) by not following the traditional, normative path to family formation via marriage. However, Russ answered,

"Um, I actually do want to get married, to be honest. I would say my prior relationship, I felt like I was so ready to get married. I was a young and foolish man and it just didn't end up working out. So, I would say that probably influenced me. I feel like I'm just, like, I'm, reluctant, one, for that reason. But I don't think that is really affecting me in my current relationship. To be honest, it's just that I don't have a career yet [...] I don't have a career yet, so I don't feel like I'm ready to get married yet. But like, you know, I don't know. I don't want to say that it's 'man's responsibility' or anything but it almost feels that way. I feel like I can't propose until I have a career."

Russ wants to get married! In my dataset, there exist two other individuals for whom the same is true: Rose and Sean. That Russ wants to get married after he obtains a career is, as he notes, because in his worldview this is traditionally the "man's responsibility". Russ feels as though he cannot support a family as what some refer to as a "starving artist." While Russ earns his Master of Fine Arts, he is unemployed and relying on funds from his parents.

Further, and importantly, there is another source of concern for Russ about his family life. Earlier in his narrative, Russ discussed the importance of the relationship he has with his sisters. He looks up to them as mentors and advisors in life and love. The intense intimacy between the siblings, likely a result of relying so heavily on one another across their moves to various countries when they were growing up, is a factor in his current romantic relationship. I asked Russ to comment on who, if anyone, supports the couple's desire to remain unmarried or if he felt as though he had experienced negativity around their decision not to marry. Russ said, "Um, no, nothing in particular. Just the normal things that are, you know, when you have a long-

term relationship and you see the other person's family a lot? At a certain point, you tend to not enjoy each other's company; you know?" He went on to elaborate,

"There is a certain point where I know that my partner doesn't like my sisters. Sometimes my sisters don't like my partner, but I feel like that's natural to a certain degree and stuff [...] Like you know, um, having moved around a lot with them, I'm very close with my family and my girlfriend just doesn't think that's normal. I guess that's really it. My girlfriend is not close with her sister at all by any means, so [...] And, like, my sister Angela, and again, she is five years older than me. My sister thinks of me as her best friend and so [...] It's not like I talk to my sister every day by any means. I talk to her maybe once every two weeks; it was more frequent in the past, maybe once a week, twice a week, or something."

His allegiance to his family and lack of movement away from the familial home shows that the messages learned from his immediate family members about love, intimacy, family formation, and marriage were heard loud and clear by Russ; there was no "mixing of messages."

Russ took those typified/normalized lessons learned and internalized them. Primary socialization agents (or cultural guides) habitualized messages of the AMN for him; then, through regular interaction with the institution of family (his experiences with families—his and his partner's) those messages became institutionalized. Institutionalization occurred in this way through reinforcement of "The Family" by stakeholders in positive (his experiences with his own family) and negative (his experiences with his partner's family) ways. Russ was not attracted to the behaviors of his partner's family and did not understand the lack of closeness between his partner and her sister. Instead, his experience of familial intimacy because of his father's work life set Russ on the relationship trajectory to marriage.

Russ's continued observation of and interactions with married, close relatives across his life course enforced and reinforced institutionalized marriage as the best way to form a family for him. Those interactions in combination with their familial closeness emphasized and amplified for Russ the AMN and marriage culture. Marriage is positively associated with family

in Russ's life and, due to continued reinforcement of the idealized family form, Russ was required to make very few choices about his path to it. Instead, Russ's current long-term intimate relationship that does not include marriage is not at all descriptive of his actual position in marriage culture. Marriage resistance is temporal and situational for him; Russ never planned to resist marriage permanently. Thus, though he is currently resisting marriage, it seems that he will eventually opt to take the path of least resistance to family formation through marriage laid out for him (even if not right now due to financial constraints).

Eventually after early socialization into the AMN, Russ legitimates and externalizes the typified relationship and family formation into which he has been enculturated by choosing to participate in American marriage culture in expected ways. Russ's narrative and path to family formation allows the reader to see that Russ has been socialized in the American way of family formation via the reification of the institution of marriage. His immediate family members, his cultural guides have, thus, constructed a "marriageable" reality for him. In the end, Russ's decision to be a "marriage normal" suggests that the AMN has been a powerful force in his approach to family formation and it informs his decision-making around marriage. Russ has, in this way, properly followed the logics of a culture (its narrative/rhetoric: the AMN) to the institution of American marriage. In short, the logics worked to achieve the desired outcome: another married American adult.

Russ's concern with the contentious relationship had between his female partner and his sisters shapes the way Russ thinks about future marriage in his life. It is clear that his sisters' opinion juxtaposed with his girlfriend's inability or refusal to accept the siblings' closeness makes Russ call marriage to his partner into question; however, Russ made clear reference to his

desire for marriage to occur between the couple. Perhaps in this moment, one intimacy, the intimacy between siblings, outweighs another: family vs. partner.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Russ sees marriage in his future. His enculturation and the milieu of Russ's family life suggests that Russ would follow suit and marry like his parents and siblings. His experience learning about intimacies, sex, and family formation led Russ to make decisions about romantic relationships across his life, ultimately, leading him to choose his current partner as the one with whom he would like to permanently attach himself through marriage. This is the person that Russ has chosen to create a family. However, his current finances prevent him from doing so. In Russ's mind, and according to what he learned of the AMN, he must be "financially stable" and this, to him, means that he must be able to support his potential spouse and home. One's social location as an artist can make the vision of financial stability elusive but, as Russ mentioned, his partner is working on her graduate degree and will add to their combined income once her education is complete.

Russ's quite linear "marriage normal" education and lack of mixed messages about the AMN, intimacies, love, sex, family formation, and marriage is an instance of privileged AMN knowledge. In other words, what Russ was taught about romantic intimacies, what he observed, and what he implemented in his life aligned with that fundamental, early enculturation into the AMN. Russ gained romance expectations and intimate relationship convictions from those early cultural guides and relied on their teaching in the procurement of his own intimacies across the relationship trajectory. Russ would make decisions about intimacies based in that knowledge and end intimacies that he did not see as "like" the other important LTIR through marriage that he closely observed throughout his life. Contentions among siblings and partner and financial barriers give Russ pause about marriage, however.

This “pause” in Russ’s relationship trajectory suggests a kind of resistance to marriage. That, while marriage is a forgone conclusion for him, his path to it has come with fits and starts. Russ’s resistance is rooted in a self- and culturally-imposed norm of financial security pre-marriage. Russ, a temporal marriage resister, then, finds himself situationally paused due to these extant circumstances. As such, Russ and his partner are in a LTIR for more than four years, at least he with the express desire to marry, but holding out for a time in the future wherein he perceives the sort of stability necessary for marriage that is purported by the AMN. For Russ, then, his enculturation and subsequent experiences of the AMN across the relationship trajectory are predictive of his placement in the categories “predestined marriage participant” *and* “temporal marriage resister.” The alignment of teaching and learning combined with decision-making and experiences reliant on the AMN suggest that Russ would lie at this end of the Passion-To-Marry Continuum.

For others, however, the path to long-term intimate relationships is not at all linear, but instead full of mixed messages and magnified moments for which decision-making related to marriage had specific and daunting consequences. Trauma-informed decision-making and intense AMN-related mixed messages and magnified moments pushed Candy *away from the institution of marriage*.

As a survivor of childhood sex abuse and incest, Candy’s vision of intimacies changed from what she learned in childhood mainly through religion. That is, Candy, while taught purity, virginity, abstinence, and the sanctity of marriage at home and at church, was at the same time forced to engage sexually with her abusive uncle. Candy’s fear around intimate relationships through this religious lens is a complex magnified moment in her life. Candy said,

“Over the course of my love life, ha, ‘love life,’ I have only had a few long-term relationships. In each of them, we called each other ‘boyfriend/girlfriend.’ But I only feel

secure in this relationship. In my others, boyfriends were sort of a scary factor. I had to be, um, you know, an upright, Christian young woman. It meant that calling someone my boyfriend knowing that he was NOT the person I was going to marry caused me lots of stress. I would feel guilty at times, like, ‘Why do I have this boyfriend? I am not supposed to participate in these sorts of relationships. What if he wants to have sex? I can’t have sex before I’m married.’ You know, like that. Guilty, scared, and religious. It was not easy. Life is much better today.”

Recall, Candy is a childhood sexual assault survivor and her abuse took place around the institution of religious life as was perpetrated by her uncle. This experience in conjunction with religious rhetoric that preaches abstinence before marriage complicated Candy’s relationship trajectory leading to her current relationship. That she notes a feeling of security in her unmarried intimacy and family form suggests that the AMN-reliant religious rhetoric she at once loved, feared, and believed has fallen by the wayside in her life. Instead, Candy finds that the relationship that she is in with the father of her children provides her relief, love, and safety. For Candy, this intimacy outweighs her socialization into the AMN.

For Candy, then, religion, trauma, and AMN-related mixed messages led to her finally find safety in this, her current long-term intimacy *without* marriage. Marriage, as a religious institution and family formation, became, for Candy, an illusion. The trauma she experienced at the hands of her uncle shaped for Candy later AMN-magnified moments as she explained above. Candy was not able to shake the feelings of guilt and worry imbedded in her psyche. Upon entering romantic intimacies before marriage, those emotions followed her and colored her decision-making about ways to (or not to) proceed in those intimacies. That Candy chose to enter a romantic and sexual relationship with her current partner without marriage, thus, should not be surprising to the reader.

Candy’s adult ambivalence about an institution that she deems “religious,” not simply “state-based,” is noteworthy. Indeed, the same religion that shaped Candy’s young life and

thinking about intimate relationships provided her comparisons upon which to decide whether or not to form family without marriage. Candy's partner, who "cares not at all" about his participation in the institution of marriage, has been a soft place to fall for Candy. The comfort and love she feels in this relationship allow Candy to state that, "Marriage is a possibility if it becomes necessary." Children, home, and family life might dictate for Candy and her partner whether or not to engage in marriage.

As such, a label of temporal/situational marriage resister makes sense for Candy. Marriage, should the necessity arise, is not out of the question for Candy and her partner; however, at this time, they have no future plans. The predictive power of the AMN and its mixed messages and magnified moments is strong for Candy. Through this oral history life course research, it became clear to me that Candy's marriage and family formation decision-making was based in early enculturation and trauma related to the AMN. Candy's ambivalence about marriage is similarly rooted. In this way, that Candy will marry if necessary suggests that if something about the milieu and/or habitus of their family life were to change because of the couple's non-married status, they would choose to marry. This is the very definition of a temporal/situational marriage resister.

Scarlet is another TMR and their "Snapshot" presented earlier is quite long in comparison to other study participants. One reason for the length of their narrative is that Scarlet's "case" needed a bit of preliminary clarification to ensure that the reader is well-acquainted with the very clear gender arrangement of their home(s)-of-origin and the familial cultural guides therein. Through their parent's divorce, gender was highlighted in Scarlet's life. As I explained in their "Snapshot," at age 10, Scarlet's parents divorced and their father left the familial home. The children were allowed to decide with whom to live; so, seemingly naturally, the children chose to

live with their same-gender parent... except Scarlet. This decision left Scarlet not just with the difficult negotiation of with whom to live more permanently, their mother or father, but also left them to consider the gendered-division of home life and their "self" in it.

Scarlet's life was changing dramatically and quickly. Scarlet explained that, no sooner than their parents told the children about their divorce did their father announce that he already had a new home. Scarlet said, "My parents had already gotten Dad's house [...] Dad said that [the new house] had 'three bedrooms and two bathrooms;' perfect for any configuration of us kids to live there..." Scarlet continued,

"It was a scary time for me. My siblings seemed less affected by my parents' living in separate houses. Sure, that they were divorcing was a scary thing that we all experienced and we kids talked about it a little. [...] But then, there was me. Like, I didn't know what the fuck I wanted. I was 10! But it was sorta like I started really thinking that I was different from my sibs then [...] When I sit back and think about it, I think, 'Was that the moment? Was that when I started to think I was gay?' Yeah, 'gay' not 'queer' back then. I thought I was gay first. I thought I just liked girls and not boys. My attractions are less limited today but I'm into femmes, now, generally [...]"

Unbeknownst to them at the time and upon reflection, the beginning of Scarlet's life as a genderqueer and sexually queer human seems to have begun with a choice about whether to live with their mother or father. This choice is presented to children in divorce milieux wherein parents are able to agree on child custody arrangements and division of the children's expenses. Scarlet now views this time of their life as the moment when gender mattered and did not matter simultaneously. Gender mattered in that Scarlet recognized the pattern of with whom each of their siblings chose to live as divided by male- and female-bodied people. This gendered living pattern for Scarlet, however, forced them to reflect on their body and their own resistance to the "sex/gender system" (Rubin 1984) in the way that Scarlet adorned their body. In this way, gender simultaneously mattered and did not matter in Scarlet's life. While Scarlet's "gender story" is

compelling at this point in their life, I find most compelling Scarlet's narrative about living their new life at Dad's house.

Scarlet's choice to live with her father while their sisters chose to stay with their mother was instructive in Scarlet's life. As they emerged into adulthood, Scarlet realized that they were now the "mother" of the home. About that time, Scarlet notes,

"Regardless of the way I dressed, as a female person in the house, I was treated like the 'girl-Mom'. My body, like my genitals, I guess, shaped the way my Dad treated me. He didn't so much care what I looked like, but he still treated me like a 'girl'. I had to cook meals and clean the house. I had to do laundry and wash dishes. I still fucking hate washing dishes. But, like, yeah, he didn't care that I didn't 'look' feminine as long as I still 'acted' feminine at home which meant being the 'wife' of the house without the sex. Ewww. Which didn't really make sense to me cuz, like, I was a 'sports-kid'; I played softball and ran track. I was into [sports] but at home. Girl."

Further, about their gender and sexuality, Scarlet said,

"I was asked by extended family constantly through high school when I was gonna get a boyfriend? I would always say things like, 'I'm so busy!' Or, 'I don't need that distraction' to get them to shut up. It felt like every time I'd see my grandparents or my aunts and uncles, that's what they'd want to talk to me about. Like, even if I had [a boyfriend] I wouldn't tell them. By that point, I was done talking about it."

Scarlet's first romantic relationship did, in fact, happen during that time of their life. Scarlet dated a male-bodied person at age sixteen, their first relationship with a female at age nineteen, and they "came out" as gay to their parents at age twenty. This is where gender mattered in Scarlet's life once again except this time, it was their lover's gender, and not Scarlet's. To say that Scarlet's mother (not parents as Scarlet makes clear) was displeased by Scarlet's coming out is to put things lightly. Scarlet recollects for me the time when she told her parents that she was gay. Scarlet said,

"My Mother lost. Her. Shit. After I told them, like, 'Mommy and Daddy...I have something really important to tell you and I am scared. No, I'm not pregnant.' And, I sort of left it like that for a minute. They did not say a word. So, I couldn't take the quiet and I just sorta told them, like, 'Mommy and Daddy, I'm gay.' It was quiet for a second after I said it. Dad looked at me and I thought I was gonna die. He just stared at me. Then,

Mother, Mother didn't just stare at me. She stared through me. I could hardly look at their faces. I'm looking down at the floor now and all of the sudden, Mom blurts, 'You will never get married and have a family.' I looked up from the floor directly at Dad's face; he was grimacing at her. He hadn't cared for my Mother for several years by that point, so he felt no obligation to keep his cool. He yelled, 'Give me a fucking break, Lady. Are you kidding me? The kid told you she was scared, and you say that?' We were in my Mother's living room, my old living room, you know? We were just in the living room, just the three of us [...] After Dad yelled, he stood up, like all in one fluid motion, he stood up grabbed my hand and said, 'Fuck this. We are gone,' and Dad got me out of there and got me out fast!"

"Coming out" as non-heterosexual makes what was invisible, visible. In Scarlet's case, coming out was empowering, enraging, and shaming. Coming out was empowering because Scarlet saw the way in which their father was supportive and affirmative of his child's identity. Coming out was enraging and shameful due to their mother's unsupportive, cruel retort. About this, Scarlet noted, "It has created a barrier between me and [their Mother]. I cannot and will not trust her with details about my life. It took me years to even introduce Mom to Marnie [pseudonym for Scarlet's current long-term intimate partner]. But my Dad, my Dad is da bomb! Marnie loves my Dad. He's been cool since the beginning." Upon mentioning Marnie, Scarlet reflected, "You know, I had 'fuck buddies' for a long time. Like, a decade or more. I just couldn't be monogamous and every time I tried, it was like, 'Fuck!'"

All said, Scarlet's road to a long-term intimate relationship has been bumpy. Though, and as she said, "I wouldn't change how I got here for anything. It was all experience, you know? It was hard when Mom got down on me, but, check out Pops, would you? He is badass and he is all I need for parents!" The exclamation point at the end of Scarlet's statement, indeed, shows that they were socialized more by their father than mother later in childhood and early adulthood. While the messages that Scarlet's mother provided stuck in that our discussion centered on their mother's behavior toward Scarlet and what Scarlet learned from that behavior (e.g., Scarlet thinks of her mother as a homophobe, still, despite increasing contact with her more recently),

their father's messages of compassion, strength, and fierce protection of his children is clearly the message Scarlet wants to externalize in their own life.

Scarlet's enculturation into the AMN and messages propagated by their mother and father, actors on behalf of the institution of family and cultural conduits of AMN knowledge, are "mixed" at best. At worst, the lessons taught about sex, gender, and sexuality by Scarlet's mother (and those they internalized) left Scarlet feeling shameful and angry, saddened and infuriated at the same time that their father's enculturation into the same American social forces was loving, honest, and compassionate. Again, mixed messages about sex, intimacy, and romantic relationships provided to American children leaves them confused; topics such as love, family formation, and marriage deserve better instruction.

For Scarlet, then, institutional and cultural mixed messages of the AMN, and their relationship trajectory related to those messages, led Scarlet to Marnie. Scarlet and Marnie are happy and hopeful for the future in their unmarried relationship. But they are also cautious. The couple is clear that they reside in a pro-marriage culture. Further, they understand that, in such a culture, their "unmarried" status is precarious. Their ability to persist as an unmarried couple, and thus, family and decisions about marriage in their future are left to chance.

Again, much like Candy, Scarlet is ambivalent about their participation in the institution of marriage. Their experience of marriage (and divorce) via their parents left Scarlet feeling disappointed, specifically, about marriage. Watching the demise of their parents' relationship led Scarlet to seek relationships that were non-monogamous for "...a decade," Scarlet said. Not until Marnie entered their life did Scarlet's ideas of monogamy and family formation begin to shift.

Now, Scarlet and Marnie's decision to remain unmarried despite a culture that upholds marriage is a form of resistance. Scarlet has no immediate desire to marry and expressly admits,

“Marriage, eh, I don’t really care. But when we move in together? Probably combine income and bills? We’ll see.” The, “We’ll see,” comment brings up the notion of, “If the need arises,” then marriage could happen. Scarlet’s upbringing and magnified moments related to the AMN, sex, gender, and sexuality are predictive of their placement on the Passion-To-Marry Continuum as a temporal/situational marriage resister. If Scarlet had not added the potential to marry upon cohabiting with Marnie, she might have been easily placed in the adamant resister category. However, their enculturation and social position as Marnie’s long-term lover gives Scarlet pause about marriage. This pause may not have been existent if there were not already plans in place to cohabit in the future.

Though, their social location dictates no “need” to marry at this point in their relationship, as Scarlet said, that could change with permanent cohabitation status. As part-time cohabiters and not parents, their location and habitus present no immediate concern or worry about marriage right now. As a TMR family without children, Scarlet and Marnie instead dote on their “four-legged fur babies” dispersed between their respective homes.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Power of the American Marriage Narrative and Placement on the Passion-To-Marry Continuum: Varying Trajectories

Children, home life, and the economics, in conjunction with enculturation into the AMN, call into question one’s ability to *choose* to form family that works best for marriage resisters. In Russ’s and Scarlet’s cases, money is at the root of decisions to marry or not and when. In Candy’s case, traumatic childhood sex abuse and a religious home life are indicative of her placement on the Passion-To-Marry Continuum. Again, for those who received AMN-related mixed messages about magnified moments of the relationship trajectory, resistance to the

institution of marriage is predictable. What is not predictable is the length of time that one may choose to remain unmarried and whether at some point in a long-term intimate relationship they may choose marriage. In this way, temporal/situational marriage resistance appears to be the outcome for individuals who, in enculturation, learned ideals and had expectations of romance in their lives. When these ideals do not pan out in expected ways, marriage is pushed off in favor of their current, permanent, long-term relationship without marriage. When and if situations present themselves to this group of resisters, decisions will be made about whether to remain unmarried or to dive into the institution. It is on the basis of access to rights and resources that TMRs may choose marriage. It is when rights and resources are lacking in the lives of marriage resisters that choices to be married tend to ensue (I explore this in Chapter Six).

Adamant marriage resisters Beth, Isaac, Lara, Noel, Rob, and Summer do not intend to let resources dictate their family form. For this group, resistance to marriage is more than situational deterrence. Instead, they resist marriage on principle; they do not care to participate in the institution due to a moral, ethical, principled concern. However, predestined marriage participants Asher, Rose, Russ, and Sean and those who remain “on the fence” Candy, Niki, Russ (again, purposefully mentioned in this count twice), and Scarlet (a group as large as the PMP group; n=4) find concern in forming families without marriage and expressed the need to potentially marry in the future. Marriage, and going without it, has consequences at the micro and macro levels of analysis. These micro- and macroaggressions related to an unmarried family status is the theme of the final data chapter, Chapter Six.

I have illustrated how American marriage culture and related rhetoric shapes individuals’ decision-making about their participation in the institution of marriage throughout this chapter. Powerful experiences related to marriage culture and clear ideas about their varied participation

(or not) in said culture via participant recollections of hook-ups, dating, and long-term romantic intimacies throughout their lives show how they relate/led to their current relationship.

Respondents make explicit comparisons, not just between “ideal/real” relationships but now as adults these comparisons are made between the experiences tucked in their cultural repertoire versus their perception of the ideal relationship *for them*—that is the relationship in which they are in now.

The way that respondents have chosen their current LTIR as *the one* in which they see themselves most permanently affixed to was dictated by mixed messages related to ideal constructs of romance, love, sex, marriage, and family formation. Further, childhood enculturation via direct teaching and learning, observations, and mimicry of those things they understood as “normal” and “natural” due to their milieu and habitus shaped their approach to and participation in this current relationship. More magnified moments of their relationship trajectory and related decision-making added to their cumulative knowledge/social capital related to the AMN and the culture that the AMN supports.

To get to those relationships in which they currently exist, respondents both *relied on and resisted* what they learned of the AMN over time. Procuring this current relationship required individuals to make decisions and ultimately (at least to the time of interview) *choose to remain* unmarried for an extended period of time in a pro-marriage culture. This decision is easier for some than others depending on one’s current milieu and resources associated with it (discussed at length in Chapter Six).

The data and analysis presented in the chapter captures the interaction between an individual and a culture that moves one to participate in the institution of marriage. Research respondents provided me with reasons for which they will or will not choose to marry in the

future. This exploration of mixed messages and magnified moments related to intimacies, marriage, and family formation via respondent placement on the Passion-To-Marry Continuum explains some of the predictive power of learning the AMN and implementing its rhetoric into one's life.

A close look at respondents' decision-making highlights what they found most important and influential in the procurement and maintenance of relationships leading to their current relationship and family form. The power to predict one's placement on the PTMC lies in the group of situational or temporal marriage resisters as they are the group in which appears a direct link between mixed messages and placement on the Continuum.

What I have outlined in this discussion connects to broader research questions about the power of AMN cultural logics and enculturation. American Marriage Narrative rhetoric comes across forcefully in the lives of temporal resisters. This rhetoric, as a guide, also restricts some people, making them feel the boundary between what is considered a "normal family" and their own. When a child is born of a "normal family" and learns and acts normally in pursuit of the same, privileges abound. Russ's narrative shows this. However, when AMN enculturation takes place in an unstable environment (like Isaac and others) or when a person feels as though they cannot live up to the ideals of the AMN (like Candy and others), negative feelings and attitudes toward institutionalized marriage can ensue. In other words, taking the path of least resistance in marriage culture is privileged while taking the path of greater resistance presents challenges, barriers, and in some instances, negative outcomes.

Resisters' interaction with marriage culture in the United States of America highlights constraints associated with non-normative family formation. Enculturation, milieu, the AMN and its related mixed messages shape the path that individuals take to form family. In this

chapter, data revealed that cultural and institutional messages about sex, intimacies, marriage, and family formation are deeply implanted in the memory of respondents. Respondents draw on their previous experiences and knowledge of the AMN to make decisions about intimacies in which they take part. That is, respondents drew on their own realities, negotiations, and magnified moments related to the AMN to make decisions about intimate relationships across the life course. This idea suggests that AMN rhetoric and experiences related to it are entrenched at a psychosocial, individual level of society. AMN rhetoric is powerful as one moves across the relationship trajectory in the creation of their own long-term intimacy and family. As part of the broader culture of intimacies, marriage, and family formation, AMN rhetoric in the United States can be seen to operate at the level of the individual.

AMN rhetoric and one's participation in marriage culture informs their decision-making about ways to proceed in romantic intimacies. This is evidence of the way that the AMN is a psychosocial control mechanism capable of predicting, at least for some marriage resisters, placement on the Passion-To-Marriage Continuum. The outcomes of such decision-making take place within the ideal intimacy outlined by the AMN. For the United States cultural citizen pursuing romantic intimacies and family formation, *control* over decisions to marry is sometimes their own and many times dictated by circumstances of their milieu.

In this way, respondents' current status as "marriage resisters" may not be the status that they want or desire; it is a status that they are made to have due to extant concerns of their milieu. Respondents in this category feel a loss of control over their life conditions. This status is dictated by more powerful entities than the individual. This means that resisting marriage in a culture that celebrates it has consequences at the micro- and macro-levels of society. Consequences of resisting marriage will be explored in further detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

MARRIAGE AS AN AMERICAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE: MICROAGGRESSIONS, MACROAGGRESSIONS, AND FAMILY FORM INEQUALITY IN TWO PARTS

President Bill Clinton: “Defense of Marriage Act,” September 21, 1996.

“President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) into law on September 21, 1996. The Act declared that no state shall be required to recognize a same-gender marriage performed in another state. DOMA also defined marriage as only between a man and a woman for purposes of Federal law.”
(Clinton Digital Library, 2013-0028-F)

Justice Anthony Kennedy: “Marriage Equality Ruling,” June 26, 2015.

“No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family [...] It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves.”
(Kennedy, *Majority Opinion*)

Justice Antonin Scalia: “Marriage Equality Ruling,” June 26, 2015.

“By formally declaring anyone opposed to same-sex marriage an enemy of human decency, the majority arms well every challenger to a state law restricting marriage to its traditional definition.”
(Scalia’s *Minority Opinion*)

President Barack Obama: “Marriage Equality Ruling,” Commentary, June 26, 2015.

“Today is a big step in our march toward equality. Gay and lesbian couples now have the right to marry, just like anyone else...”
(*Reuters*, June 26, 2016)

Republican Nominee for President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump: Public faux pas made by the nominee. A secretly recorded conversation between Trump and Billy Bush (*E! Network*) in relation to Trump’s extra-marital affairs and views of women in 2005.

Trump: “She’s still very beautiful [...] I moved on her, and I failed [...] I did try and fuck her. She was *married* [...] I moved on her very heavily. I moved on her like a bitch, But I couldn’t get there. And she was *married* [...] You know, I’m automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.

Bush: Whatever you want.

Trump: Grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything...”
(*New York Times*, October 8, 2016)

Marriage: An American Social Structure

Straying from lessons learned of the American Marriage Narrative (AMN) means that unmarrieds take an alternate path to family formation than their married peers. The married identity that one *is expected to* wish for is the prescribed foundation for American family formation. Unmarrieds, while perhaps internalizing some of the AMN logics along the way to forming their family, do not externalize the AMN in the creation of family through marriage. Instead, unmarrieds resist the compulsory nature of legal marriage in the United States and take a path of greater resistance in the formation of their families without state-based recognition.

My study participants pushed back against the institutionalization of a normalized, nuclear family form via marriage when it affected their lives. Study participant pushback against the AMN is the main concern of this chapter. I show through their descriptions of moments when intimate relationship(s) and/or family form were called into question (i.e., lack of various social supports/legal rights available to participants and their families) that respondents chose action rather than to remain silent; they are “doing marriage resistance.” “Doing marriage resistance” is the framework through which I highlight the ways that marriage resisters enact their resistance.

Data for this chapter are presented by marriage resisters’ everyday adherence to or rejection of the AMN. Microaggressions and macroaggressions they experience require them to interact within the American marriage structure in ways that are consequential. As such, I begin with a discussion about ideas and concepts that are important to consider for the current chapter frame and analyses. I provide a bit of background on marriage and family form inequality as it currently exists in the United States. Through sociologists and social theorists W. I. Thomas and Florian Znanieski’s (1918) concept of the “Definition of the Situation” (Park and Burgess 1921), Allan G. Johnson’s (2014) concept of the “One Thing,” and C. Wright Mills’s (1959) concept the

"Sociological Imagination," I investigate key patterns of micro- and macroaggressions. Then, I connect marriage resisters' experiences of aggressions to the broader concern of consequences of these aggressions and respondent resistance to the social structure of American marriage. In this way, I will analyze respondent/partner resistance to various barriers related to their family form and the challenges they faced through choices they make, constraints they feel, their ability to control their own lives, and the consequences they face in so doing.

**Agentic Behavior within Marriage Structure:
Ideas and Concepts on Choice, Constraint, Control, and Consequences**

Through "magnified moments" in which respondents took a path of greater resistance and pushed back against the AMN, it became clear to me that individuals were experiencing consequences of the AMN and marriage culture at all levels of society. In other words, my respondents explained that, while some families are accepted and protected at the state and federal levels, those not rooted in marriage are at a loss in myriad ways through lack of access to rights and resources. However, equally important are the ways in which "Family" defined as "nuclear family only" causes rifts in the everyday lives of individuals.

For example, language to refer to their family unit can cause tremors in the lives of non-married families. Marital language (husband/wife/spouse) is usually that which appears on standardized forms for institutional purposes (i.e., medical, occupational, educational). If not part of a "married" family, individuals must explain their relationships to partners and children far more intricately than a simple "husband/wife" and/or "mother/father" definition (not unlike individuals on the sexuality spectrum who do not adhere to binary gender/pronoun norms: he/she, him/her). That language remains unavailable to explain, define, and name families not formed through marriage suggests two important things: (1) Remaining unmarried in the United

States of America, defacto (or, “in fact”), defies cultural and institutional logics of American family formation; and (2) that remaining unmarried defacto defies American family formation logics and in defying these logics, “unmarried” families are dejure (or, “by/in law”) unequal.

The inequality encountered by unmarrieds indicates that marriage is a social structure in the United States of America. Marriage, socially and legally enforced through the norms, values, and beliefs attached to the institution and dyadic relationship, is foundational in family jurisprudence and policy in the United States. The nuclear family (rooted in and dependent upon legal marriage) is the family form that law and policy, norms, values, and beliefs rely upon to determine rights and privileges. Legal rights such as access to estates after death, and child custody and privileges such as tax benefits and healthcare, are a few examples afforded to those who fit the definition of "The Family" (discussed in depth later in this chapter).

In the American marriage social structure, pressures to conform are ever present, perhaps especially for those people who *wish to remain unmarried*. I find that resistance to compulsory marriage and the already existing path to United States-based family formation has consequences. These consequences are milieu-specific and also span a continuum. Examples on the “consequences/aggressions” continuum faced by marriage resisters ranges from an event or interaction that was made tricky or frustrating due to one’s unmarried status (low level—microaggression) to the potential loss of necessary rights and resources for the same status (high level—macroaggression). I show that, in some cases, the structural pressures are heavy enough to propel individuals down the marriage aisle in spite of their desired “unmarried” status. In this way, resister pushback on the structure of marriage is an active, sometimes difficult, endeavor.

In Chapter Five, I showed that the challenges and triumphs in one’s romantic life/intimate relationship trajectory (magnified moments) are deeply intertwined with their knowledge about

and adherence to the AMN. This finding suggests that the AMN is a powerful social force that my study participants must navigate and may not take for granted. Put another way, navigation of the AMN requires a certain level of awareness and consideration about its very existence. I show that current marriage resisters tend not to take marriage for granted; I do so by explaining how they rely on the “definition of the situation” (Thomas and Znanieski 1918; Park and Burgess 1921) to “name” components of their current relationship.

The “definition of the situation” is the human requirement to “...take social meanings into account and interpret his experience not exclusively in terms of his own needs and wishes but also in terms of the traditions, customs, beliefs, and aspirations of his social milieu” (Thomas and Znanieski 1996:113-120). Further, the “definition of the situation,” explained by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1921) suggests that,

“Common participation in common activities implies a common 'definition of the situation.' In fact, every single act, and eventually all moral life, is dependent upon the definition of the situation. A definition of the situation precedes and limits any possible action, and a redefinition of the situation changes the character of the action" (p.377).

For example, when one participates in the institution of marriage, naming the relationship comes without much consideration: “We are married.” However, marriage resisters must take pause when asked, “Are you married?” In other words, where the answer for one group is simply, “Yes,” for the group under study in this dissertation, to simply say, “No,” does not allow for the interaction to proceed with ease.

The “definition of the situation” illuminates the challenges that “naming” presents for marriage resisters when they encounter conforming to and straying away from the American Marriage Narrative. I examine “naming” in long-term intimate relationships; specifically, I look at naming LTIR “partners.” For example, if an individual is not a spouse, a husband, or a wife,

then, what are they? Perhaps a “partner,” a “lover,” a “boyfriend/girlfriend,” or some other descriptive word that indicates one’s LTIR partner in their lives?

Ability to communicate or explain the position of one’s LTIR partner in interaction with others is taken for granted in American marriage culture. As such, language to communicate one’s LTIR and their partner’s position in the resister’s life is, too, taken for granted. According to respondent narratives, normalized AMN language does not always describe the positionality of LTIR partners. My use of “partners” is an example: “Partners,” as a name for those who participate in LTIR without marriage, can be misconstrued and misunderstood in discussions or interactions with others, as I show when I discuss Rob’s experience with his grandmother later in this chapter.

Moreover, language to describe one’s LTIR configuration is also taken for granted in a culture that supports institutionalized marriage. Intimate relationship habits and configurations of relationships across marriage resisters’ trajectories also rely on normative AMN language. Life course, AMN-related magnified moments such as sexual hook-ups, dating/“seeing someone,” long-term relationships, and marriages do not always align with the ways that marriage resisters understand their participation in these moments. Because language is restricted to that which is “normal,” some marriage resisters find frustration in having to rely on this language.

Other marriage resisters, however, do not express the same frustration around naming their intimacies. Instead, the majority of marriage resisters relied on available AMN language even if it did not fully describe or communicate to me the way they understood and felt about their current relationship. Resister reasoning and sense-making would occur in interviews when they discussed their interactions with others about the state of their current relationship. In other words, like naming LTIR “partners,” intimacy habits and relationship configurations, too, are

many times dependent on normalized AMN language. When, why, and how an intimacy “fits” into a resister’s relationship trajectory was dependent upon “the situation.” Resisters made use of, and sometimes rejected, normative AMN language to describe their participation in these various intimacies, including the one they are in currently. Naming, as such, reflects Thomas and Znanieski’s (1918) concept of the “definition of the situation.” Consequences of their “naming” practices” resulted in microaggressions (those that take place at the individual and interactional levels of analysis/society) related to marriage and family formation. Microaggressions are the focus of “Part I” of this chapter.

“Part II” of this chapter on macro inequalities, or those at the institutional and structural/systems level of society, are likely more consequential for individuals. Important to note, while microaggressions (as a concept) are more often discussed in academic literature, AMN-related macroaggressions are no less of a nuisance and potential threat to resisters' life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. However, study respondents report ways that they have persisted in the face of challenges that occur as a result of the American marriage structure. Their agentic behavior and resistance to the structure is where we can learn from marriage resisters. They opt for a path of greater resistance to family formation in American culture despite barriers and negotiate institutions via alternative paths to validation and recognition of their family without participation in marriage. Respondents acting as agents in their decisions to resist the path laid out by the American Marriage Narrative and United States marriage structure show that they are "doing marriage resistance" in their everyday lives, as I explore in this chapter.

Sociologist Allan G. Johnson, who described the paths laid out for individuals to follow in a culture, asserted, "We are all participating in something larger than ourselves" (2014:12) (social systems and structures). Further, he said that participation in social systems such as

marriage ("something larger") requires one to choose from the already existing "paths of least and greater resistance" (Johnson 2014: 14-17). "Paths of least resistance" are analogous to "ducks following in a row" behind the mother duck; that is, it takes little thought to participate in the "path of least resistance." This is the path taken by marriageables on their way to wedded bliss; it is the path of normativity in a given culture and/or society for one's expected behavior. The path requires little choice because its normativity *controls* those who might otherwise stray and individuals are praised for following the existing path. In other words, when a person is asked, "So, when are you getting married?", providing an affirmative answer to this question ("soon," "next year," et cetera) generally evokes from the questioner a validating and accepting response, such as, "Great!," "It's about time!," or, "What took you so long?" The marriageable, then, may see this as a *positive consequence* for their lack of deviance.

The "path of greater resistance," on the other hand, is one in which an individual must make decisions because the path is not already laid out for them. By taking the path of greater resistance in a structure or system of marriage, individuals cannot take for granted norms, values, and beliefs of the culture and society in which they live. As is the case for my study respondents, these individuals are likely to face *constraints* and *negative consequences* based on their decision to behave in ways deviant from the norm. The norm prescribed here, then, is family formation via legal marriage and a marriageable human identity.

In some way, not by name, all respondents in this study refer to their resistance in American marriage culture as part of something larger than themselves. They recognize their participation in a culture that, at times, is supportive of their family form without marriage. For example, they note that being unmarried and creating families today is "...easier" (Summer) than it was historically. However, some also say that they "...feel sort of discriminated against" (Niki)

because of barriers they experience around access to necessary resources and privileges. As a matter of course, then, resisters often find themselves participating in a marriage structure/system that was not meant for them.

The Study Sample Speaks!
To Marry or Not to Marry? That is the Question...

Individuals who responded to my research call for participation met the criterion that stated, “...not currently married but in a long-term intimate relationship lasting four or more years.” However, what I learned from my sample of current marriage resisters is that not all intended to resist in the future. In other words, I found that “marriage resisting” is a sort of continuum. I explain this further below.

Potential study participants responded to my call for research that explicitly stated that their current relationship does not include marriage. My sample, who I initially termed “marriage resisters,” is more complex than the term implies. To say that they simply “resist” suggests that resistance to marriage is a one-time-only event and that it is a “resistance to marriage forever” scenario. While this is the case for some of my respondents (n=6), “marriage resister,” as a term to describe the whole of this group, no longer makes sense because the majority of my sample said that they either do not plan to marry any time soon, though it is certainly not out of the question and/or they definitely plan to marry in the near future. I did not expect this outcome.

Stacey’s (2011) continuum model to explain gay men’s attitudes about parenting is a useful lens through which to understand my sample of current marriage-refusers/resisters. I learned through the deployment of Stacey’s (2011) continuum that, just because one could identify for my call for research participants at a given moment simply did not mean that their marriage/family-identity was *not already in flux*. Put another way, “marriage resisting” can and

should be conceptualized in two ways: temporal and adamant. Six out of thirteen study participants say that *they never expect to marry/have no desire to marry (adamant marriage resisters/resistance—AMRs)*. Four of thirteen respondents (including Russ) say that *they might marry in the future but have no immediate plans/desires (temporal/situational marriage resisters—TMRs)*. However, and importantly, four out of thirteen respondents say that *they are planning to marry* in the immediate future/desire to marry and are currently planning to do so (again, including Russ).

PART I

“Are You Married?”

Microaggressions, American Marriage, and Family Formation

In addition to marriage refusers (Beth, Isaac, Lara, Noel, Rob, and Summer) and predestined marriage participants (Asher, Rose, Russ, and Sean), those who remain “on the fence” are also an interesting group to consider. This group includes Candy, Niki, Russ, and Scarlet. Temporal marriage resisters had a variety of concerns around the institution of marriage that kept them from making commitments in either direction. Some respondents in the “situational” group stated reasons such as children, loss of employment, and loss of healthcare as potential reasons for choosing to marry later. Russ, for example, explained that his college loan debt burden is so steep that he could not imagine spending large amounts of money on a wedding “right now.”

The continuum model that I explained here, when applied to the study sample, allows for a reconceptualization of “marriage resisting.” Resisting marriage, while maybe a permanent life strategy deployed by some study participants, suggests temporary resistance to the structure of marriage and the AMN may be a temporal life strategy as well. Participants, like Russ, deploy marriage resistance in their current long-term intimate relationships in order to stave off marriage

until they feel prepared financially. For others, this temporal strategy may be considered if one does not feel ready to marry emotionally and/or mentally.

This section presents data on the ways in which my study respondents resist marriage (adamant and temporal) and the consequences they face at the micro level of analysis for doing so. Respondents that I discuss in this section faced microaggressions in interaction with individuals who, in some way, called respondent resistance to marriage in question. Respondents provide narratives that point to choices they made within constraint as they relate to forming a family without marriage. Varying background experiences juxtaposed with current social location explains respondents' answer to the question they often get: "Are you married?"

The first pattern gleaned from respondent narratives related to the social structure of marriage is the persistence of microaggressions in their everyday lives. *All respondents* (n=13) reported experiencing at least one instance of their "unmarried" relationship and family status being called into question. These microaggressions can be categorized in two ways as it relates to regular confrontation they receive about 1) *naming their intimate relationship partner* and 2) *defining their resultant family form*. First, I explain why language is a key site of negotiation and navigation (choice, constraint, control, and consequences) of American family formation for my study respondents. American language use and rhetoric around intimate relationships and family formation follow the normative logics described earlier in this chapter and in Chapter Two, thus relegating those who form families without marriage to a loss for words; in some cases, quite literally for my participants. I provide examples from their narratives that illustrate each of the aforementioned categories of microaggressions. Next, I show that unmarrieds resist microaggressive family form inequality or "do marriage resistance" at the micro level of society. I discuss the ways that my respondents resist the AMN in their everyday lives, some with

success and others with failure. Marriage resister negotiation of consequences (negative and positive/success and failure) can offer insight about what everyday family life is like for those who do not follow the prescribed, normative, legal family form through marriage.

**Language as a Site of Microaggressions:
Intimate Relationships, Cohabitation, and “THE FAMILY”**

I asked study respondents to recall for me times when they were asked about their current intimate relationship(s) and relationship partner(s). I asked how they describe their partner(s)’s position(s) in their lives. From this question, I wished to learn about the ways that unmarried individuals see themselves and their family (personal identity) and how these individuals discuss their family/family life when asked in their interaction with “normals” (social identity) (Goffman 1963). This is an important insight into the way that language – specifically available language – plays a role in the everyday lives of those who form families without marriage as its current foundation.

Microaggression #1

Naming Intimate Relationship Partner Across the Relationship Trajectory

Study respondents explained the ways in which they answer questions about their intimate partner and relationship depending on the context of the experience. For example, Noel who is a “pure refusenik of marriage” said, “So, I guess it changes based on the setting; so, whenever I’m in a doctor’s office or I’m filling out forms I usually list [my partner/male] as my emergency contact. And, when they say, ‘How is this person related to you?’ I always say, ‘cohabiter,’ and I have since we were together. I guess I always just use that term.” Here, Noel’s reference to interacting within an American institution (medicine) elicits from her a specific way of naming her intimate partner: “cohabiter.” As noted by Thomas and Znanieski, the definition of this

situation, or the necessity for individuals to “take social meanings into account and interpret [their] experience not exclusively in terms of [their] own needs and wishes but also in terms of the traditions, customs, beliefs, and aspirations of [their] social milieu,” (1996:113-120) is precisely what Noel experienced as she interacted with the institution of medicine as it relates to her current intimate relationship.

An emergency contact form is an important and common bureaucratic tool that is used a loved one (often a relative) needs to be contacted quickly should an emergency occur. This form is necessary to shorten the time between an emergency, contact of the loved one, and medical (potentially life-saving) decisions about care and how to move forward. However, what might otherwise go unseen about emergency contact forms and other forms of this sort is that *who* one lists as the contact is important as highlighted by Noel’s narrative. Often, these forms ask, “How is this person related to you?” Again, if the couple in a long-term relationship are married, it is very easy and concise to say, “Husband” or, “Wife.” But, as Noel mentions, she uses different language, “cohabiter,” to describe the connection between she and her partner. She must be clear and use descriptive language to explain her connection to the intake person.

Noel’s use of “cohabiter” is an example of the conscious decision to take a path of greater resistance in the use of language to describe partner and family intimacy that is not through marriage. However, Noel must choose her words carefully when discussing her intimate relationship partner with others. If she does not make clear his relationship, to Noel, when medical emergencies arise, her partner may not be contacted because he was not recognized as Noel’s “husband” or “spouse.”

Similarly, Summer's narrative regarding her intimate partnership and subsequent family formation has required that she engage with AMN-related language despite her family status as "unmarried." Summer said,

"Often, I would say whenever I was pregnant and I work with the public and oftentimes extremely religious people and whether it was a case management, or I was a server, I ran a restaurant before and I don't have a wedding ring. And, when I would say, 'my partner' they would automatically assume that I was a lesbian. But, I view it as a partnership, as a marriage.

[Partner] and I both will say, 'my wife,' 'my husband,' especially to people we don't know...[F]or short-term, easy-peasy communication, I say, we both do, [Partner] and I, "husband and wife." Even our friends do. On Facebook they'll be like, 'ehhh, your wife...' He'll reference me as his wife."

I followed up by asking Summer, "But would he say partner otherwise?" She replied, "Yes, when we are communicating with each other; we haven't used the term 'boyfriend or 'girlfriend' in years. I think that just, that was weird after our second kid. We're not fifteen!" Much like Summer, Niki said,

"Before my relationship with my current partner, I definitely called my partners, 'boyfriend/girlfriend.' Like, yo, what else is there? But, now that I am getting older, saying something like "girlfriend" doesn't make sense for me on all kinds of levels. Like, I'm 37 fucking years old. I don't have girlfriends anymore. I have partners. Even if, and I can't even imagine being with anyone else at this time, but even if we broke up, I don't think I could call a dude or a chick who is my partner, "boyfriend/girlfriend."

Summer and Niki each find that age/time parameters are important considerations for naming and explaining their long-term intimate relationships. Like Niki, Summer's reflection on naming her partner/ship was infused with AMN language and she made use of that language specifically while pregnant. Niki's use of "partner" instead of "husband/wife" suggests an identity that the couple deploys to push against normative marriage-based family language (this, despite Niki's

use of the word, “chick,” that is culturally imbued with a type of immature femininity and is decidedly *not* gender-neutral.)²⁰

The age/time parameter resonated for Noel as well. After our discussion about emergency contact forms, Noel said,

“To my friends at the beginning of my relationship I defined him as my ‘boyfriend’ or ‘significant other’ or say, ‘S.O.’ for short. But, most of the time now I say ‘partner’ and I’ve been doing that for a few years I guess because I felt that after so long of having been together and living together for almost the entirety of our relationship that ‘boyfriend’ didn’t just sound accurate enough to describe how well integrated we are in each other’s lives so partner just started making more sense.”

Integration of each relationship participant into the other’s life is a vital part of intimacy created through a family unit as indicated in sociological studies on intimacy (Forstie 2017). The age/time parameter and level of integration seems to dictate the ways in which these respondents choose to name their relationship partner. However, as Summer mentioned, when “partner” language is taken up by individuals, others’ assumptions about their sexual identity come into play. In order to continue an interaction with ease (and without question of one’s sexuality) it makes sense that the use of “partner” by marriage resisters is limited.

Summer and her partner refer to each other as “husband” and “wife” in public and “partners” in private. This is an example of the difference in personal versus social identity (Goffman 1963). While Summer and her partner see themselves as partners who care for their children and home, in order to communicate their relationship to individuals who are not familiar with them, they choose to rely on the existing, normative, AMN-reliant, names and roles of “husband” and “wife.”

Also, like Noel, Summer made note that it is within specific institutional contexts that the naming of their intimate relationship partner shifts. Summer’s statement about their friends and

²⁰ Feedback from Lorena Garcia (October 19, 2018)

the way they name the couple is remarkable in this situation. Despite a level of closeness, she said that even the couple's friends "...on Facebook..." refer to them as husband and wife. One might assume that those people close to the couple would use language to describe the couple that the couple uses to describe themselves. This is not the case for Summer and her partner.

My interviews with Noel, Summer, and Niki highlight two things. First, the definition of the situation, or institutional context in which naming takes place and descriptive language is used, is a site of intimate relationship and family form microaggressions (such as those mentioned by Summer and Noel in situations that require medical care, in the workplace, and even on social media). The lack of available language to accurately describe one's relationship and family configuration is, defacto, marginalizing. Those who do not rely on the AMN or marital language to describe their relationships are often required to explain more thoroughly for others. In cases of unavailable language, individuals must depend on their cultural repertoire to help them along in interactions.

The lack of language for my respondents to accurately describe their life circumstances forces them to fall back on language that is available. In this way, it makes sense to fall back on normative language in formal contexts like a medical office to ensure one's safety in emergency situations. That language to describe families that do not include marriage remains a contemporary problem and means that this type of American family is, dejure, unequal. Inaccurate or unavailable language to describe one's life circumstances in the way of family formation means that laws and policy do not recognize them either. This concern connects the individual to the social structure of American marriage whether they wish to be connected or not. However, when individuals make use of alternative language, such as "partner," it may be misconstrued, requiring the marriage resister to use more of their resources (time, patience,

teaching). This is a consequence of the marriage structure in the United States and the first example of microaggressions faced by those who form families without marriage.

Second, the difference in personal and social identity are at play in interaction for those who must understand their own participation in long-term intimate relationships that do not include marriage. For example, Lara also relies on AMN language to makes sense of her relationship. Lara said,

“Yeah, well in Norway we don’t have the dating term. We have, either you’re just in the dating process, but that’s usually very short and then you become boyfriend and girlfriend. And then after that, you don’t date anymore; then, you’re living together.

I followed up Lara’s explanation by asking, “Then you’re, just, together?” Lara replied, “Yeah, so I usually say that he’s my boyfriend. Yeah, so that’s sometimes, they ask if we live together and then I say, ‘Yes, we’re cohabitants.’ Yeah, but usually just the boyfriend.” This statement by Lara simultaneously goes against and aligns with the age/time parameter discussed by Summer and Niki and the context in which conversations about intimate relationships take place, like Noel.

Unlike Summer and Niki, Lara used AMN language to name her LTIR: “boyfriend/girlfriend.” Differences in cultural milieu, as a Norwegian-American citizen, and the types of magnified moments she experienced across the relationship trajectory led Lara to make use of this sort of language without concern for *how* it might come across to those with whom she is in conversation. Lara and her partner feel perfectly comfortable using the terms “boyfriend” and “girlfriend” to describe their relationship. At the same time, when further pressed on the issue of relationship length, strength, and durability, Lara must shift her language to explain that she and her partner are “cohabitants.” This point reveals that age/time parameters align with expected age at and method through which families are formed. That the simple

answer of “boyfriend/girlfriend/partner” does not provide enough explanation of their *intention* (to eventually get married, have children, remain in their current relationship configuration, and other “magnified relationship/family moments”), marriage resisters must be clear about with whom they speak and their audiences.

Each of the respondents that I have highlighted so far discusses the ways in which naming their relationship/relationship partner shifts based on the audience to whom they are speaking. Privately, within the home, Summer and her partner refer to each other as “partners,” while in other contexts, Summer (and in some cases, her partner, too) change their language to reflect normative family formation and adherence to the AMN like Lara.

For Beth, interaction around her intimate relationship looks different than for others in my sample because her partner is non-monogamous. As such, Beth explained that she is careful about what and how much she says about her partner. She stated,

“I usually keep it to so, ‘I’m seeing this guy, he’s currently married and we are not currently open about our relationship...’ so I try to keep it to generalities just to respect his privacy [...] I feel no ethical qualms because we’re working this in a way that hurts people less but I know that there is potential for hurt and I want to minimize that.”

Beth recognizes that she is a participant in a long-term intimate relationship with a man who is married and that this situation has the potential to cause hurt in the lives of others (namely, her partner’s wife and child/ren).

This situation calls for a new definition, a redefinition, as suggested by Parks and Burgess (1921) who (relying on Thomas and Znanieski [1918]) note, “A definition of the situation precedes and limits any possible action, and a redefinition of the situation changes the character of the action” (1918; 1921:114-120). In this case, the defined situation, a long-term intimate relationship, cannot rely on the prescribed language and parameters promoted by the AMN or the current “definition of the situation.” Instead, Beth recognizes that, while she has no “ethical

qualms” about her current relationship, that others could. Further, she recognizes and wants to minimize the chance for hurt that results from participating in a relationship with a person who is already married. Beth’s “redefinition of the situation” allows her to rationalize and reconcile the social identity of her relationship, one that might be viewed as “taboo,” “adulterous,” or “sinful.” In this way, Beth uses language to describe her current intimate relationship in ways that protect the privacy of her partner (and his additional family rooted in legal marriage) and to resist microaggressive questioning. Beth makes decisions about ways to persist in remaining unmarried in a long-term intimate relationship despite the pressure to account for her “deviant” relationship status.

Beth’s experience, in combination with Noel, Summer, Niki, and Lara, shows that for those who are never planning to marry or who have no plans to marry at this time, language use and milieu are especially important spaces in which relation to their partner is called into question. It is important to note here, though, that just because the relationship is called into question does not mean that individuals are required to respond. However, American culture dictates that to have ease in interaction with others requires that one responds to the individual in discussion. Individuals respond to allow for the interaction to continue or questions to be answered.

Asher, Rose, Russ, and Sean are a different story from those study respondents that I have already discussed. Each of these respondents let me know that they plan to get married sometime in the near future (with the exception of Russ; I explain his inclusion in this section later). Anecdotally, this fascinated me, as I expected far fewer individuals with whom I spoke to be invested in the institution of marriage given my call for participants; I did not expect this

much enthusiasm! The accounts provided by Russ, Sean, Asher, and Rose show quite the opposite.

Whether for ease of interaction with others or subconsciously, respondents in this category use predictive intimate relationship language to describe their current relationship and family form. These “predestined marriage participants” take a path of lesser resistance in their use of AMN-related naming. Sean explained that previous intimacies that they had experienced were, in many ways, traumatic and these magnified moments shaded the ways they were able to move forward in their current partnership.

Finding their current partner was a profound moment in Sean’s life. Sean’s interview was the longest I spent with a single study participant. In their recollection of relationships and their teaching and learning around them, Sean fleshed out the abuses they have suffered at the hands of previous intimate relationship partners. Those previous experiences combined with their experience of the present relationship in which they participate, Sean says, makes them ever so grateful and in love with their partner.

When I asked Sean to describe for me the ways in which ze and their partner describe their relationship to others when asked, they said,

“There was a lot of things that I had to do after we got engaged to get to the point where I felt like I was the best partner I could be to [my partner] but also to myself. So, [my partner] and I describe ourselves to other people from the beginning the same way we describe each other now which is ‘partners’ and now we also will use the word ‘spouse’ for each other. Actually, my medical bracelet has ‘spouse’ next to [their] name where it lists our phone number because that’s what [they are]. We’re not married yet but we’re getting married as a celebration of the partnership that we’ve shared for a long time. We’ve been engaged for like two years and we’ve just been so completely intertwined from the beginning. You know, we don’t tend to use gendered terms to describe each other as spouses, it’s either partner or spouse.”

The feelings of comfort and safety within this current relationship coupled with the emotionality and bond shared by the couple (as well as their pending marriage) may explain why Sean, an

agender, hetero-queer person, relies on normative AMN language to describe their present and future relationship.

“Spouse,” the legal term used to refer to one’s marital partner in President Bill Clinton’s (1996) DOMA decree, is nongendered language adopted by many who participate in the institution of marriage. Sean’s use of the term “spouse,” while perhaps a nongendered way of naming participants in a marital relationship, explicitly shows still one’s reliance upon AMN-language and the expected way of forming family in the United States. In other words, Sean, a person who identifies as “queer” in multiple ways still, too, falls back on the normative language of marriage that is available to them via their cultural repertoire.

The following three predestined marriage participants, like Sean, use normative AMN language to communicate their current intimate relationship. I asked Russ, Asher, and Rose each to explain their use of normative AMN language to refer to their partner.²¹ I followed up their responses to this question by asking them to spell out for me their reason for using such language. Russ said,

Russ: ...I am not sure what, like, terms it usually comes up in, you know? I guess I tell people ‘long-term relationship,’ you know? But like, in context, I would say that I am ‘practically married,’ you know?

AM: FOLLOW UP—Why would you say that you are practically married?

Russ: That’s because, one, I am in a long-term relationship it’s been almost five years; and, two, I have such strong feelings about this person, so...

Russ made reference to “context” or milieu in which these sorts of interactions might take place.

This is an important point and is a counterpart to the earlier discussion in this chapter about

²¹ I will no longer use the term “partner(s)” to describe the potentiality for humans to have more than one, long-term intimate relationship at the same time. From this point through the end of this report, it is not necessary as no respondent in this sample is currently practicing polyamory (n=0).

institutional setting and language use. How one perceives an institutional context predicts the sort of language they use in that context and language used as descriptors of the individual/couple/group. Take Russ's sort of working through my question as an example. When Russ says here, "...I am not sure what [...] terms it usually comes up in, you know? [...] but in context, I would say..." is much like Summer's comment about context/setting in which interactions take place. That Russ felt it necessary to explain to me that the context matters suggests that language within that context also matters.

Asher and Rose made no qualms about their future with their current intimate partners.

Asher said,

Asher: Now, I'm going to marry her so, "...Oh my wife" or "My other half." It's almost like we're past the dating, like (laughter), this is my best friend now and everybody on campus knows it. She went here two years ago so everybody is pretty familiar with her.

AM: FOLLOW UP—Okay, cool. So, you refer to her as though you're already married?

Asher: Yeah basically, might as well be; she takes my money and everything.

Similarly, Rose quips,

Rose: We're engaged, getting married in October [...] Um, I mean "boyfriend/girlfriend" before we got engaged. We never talked like, "Oh, this is the person I live with..." But if asked, "...Yeah, we live together."

AM: FOLLOW UP—Okay and do you call each other fiancés now?

Rose: Oh yeah, now that we got engaged we do.

Asher and Rose do not have to stop and think about the ways that they discuss their relationship with others. Instead, they have relied on the prescriptive language available to describe their current set of conditions: Americans who are preparing for marriage. They are able to use their cultural repertoire and construct a reality that is inclusive of a future marital relationship as the basis for their formation of family.

Terms that they use like “wife,” “other half,” and “fiancé,” are culturally and structurally intelligible and do not require further explanation (or reality construction) for others in interaction. Their reliance on AMN language and marriage structure to communicate portions of their lives to others occurs with ease. Moreover, there are positive consequences attached to their normative AMN participation and use of AMN-related language. The language used by current marriage resisters who plan to marry in the future (predestined marriage participants) serves to reinforce the expected path for Americans to form families through the institution.

In juxtaposition, those who are adamant marriage resisters or AMRs, too, rely on the same language in specific milieux as I have shown here. They also receive positive reinforcement/consequences for their use of normative language, such as ease of interaction, progression of conversation and question asking, and ability to rely on the AMN to understand and communicate about their family form. However, while the momentary success of easy interaction creates an immediate sense of fulfillment, the consequences of reinforcing normative language despite one’s reality is constraining long-term.

For example, that Summer notes the difference in personal and social identity for naming the intimacy between her and her partner shows that conforming to the norm of family formation and marriage in the United States is difficult to resist at the micro level of society. In milieux in which close conversation takes place (such as the workplace, out with friends, and amongst family members), Summer said that, despite her status as an unmarried “marriage resister,” she and her partner are still referred to in terms of marital language: that is, “husband” and “wife.” This finding highlights that individuals who wish not to participate in marriage have little choice regarding available cultural language to name their family form. Further, in this way, to take a path of greater resistance in marriage culture and structure illuminates the constraining nature

and embeddedness of the AMN in American society. Thus, marriage can be viewed as a form of “control” due to clear constraints and consequences of a marriage culture, structure, and the AMN in respondents’ everyday lives.

Microaggression #2

Defining Family Form

Study respondents discussed differences between their current LTIR and other intimacies that they have participated in across their relationship trajectory. First, I asked participants to recall for me intimate relationships they had *before* their current long-term intimate relationship. From this question, I wished to glean more information about the ways that individuals take knowledge learned of the AMN and then implement it (or not) in their lives.

Participant recollections cite the difference between feelings (emotion) in previous relationships as compared to their current one. They also name their current partners in ways different than they did in the past. For example, Scarlet, who is genderqueer, continues to rely on the definition of their parents’ marriage to inform their own relationship. Scarlet said,

“I call her my wife. I love her like a man would love his wife. So, I call her my wife. I love her like I thought my Dad loved my Mom. It’s really interesting. Right now, I completely, like, right now, I can see how strange that is. I never really thought of that before, huh?”

Despite Scarlet’s deviation from the heterogendered norm in terms of their own gender and sexuality, they still use a highly normalized gendered frame through which to describe their own queer relationship. In other words, Scarlet, despite their own identities, relies heavily on the AMN and marital language to define their current relationship partner and family form. At no other time and in no other relationship has Scarlet referred to a romantic partner as their “wife.” The “long-termness” of this relationship or permanency combined with language to refer to

Scarlet's current relationship in normative familial terms shows the intense power of with the AMN to assert itself in Scarlet's "queer" life.

The following three study respondents discussed at length in the previous data chapters – Candy (TMR), Isaac (AMR), and Rob (AMR) – also rely on the AMN to define and name moments of their relationship trajectories and LTIR/family form despite their current resistance to the institution. However, another look at their narratives allows the reader to learn that the definition of the situation defines for my respondents ways to describe their partners (past and present) and family formation today. As a reminder, Christian-identified Candy said,

"I have only had a few long-term relationships. In each of them, we called each other 'boyfriend/girlfriend' [...] Boyfriends were sort of a scary factor. I had to be...an upright Christian young woman. It meant that calling someone my boyfriend knowing that he was NOT the person I was going to marry caused me lots of stress. I would feel guilty at times..."

Her childhood and emerging adulthood were deeply affected by her experience of childhood sex abuse. Her relationship trajectory, colored by religiosity and abuse, made her feel guilty when engaging in romantic (non-sexual) relationships before marriage. This negative emotion is decidedly a constraint in the procurement and maintenance of LTIRs in Candy's life.

For Candy, then, the constraining nature of emotional negativity combined with AMN language to refer to LTIR partners. Because "boyfriend" had very clear and specific connotations for her, her situational use of that language prior to her current relationship was fraught. Now, happily (heterosexually) coupled with children in a safe relationship, instead of feeling fear, Candy feels relief in the context of their current family form. She no longer feels the pull of religiosity pertaining to her LTIR and immediate family without marriage. The security of her home life without marriage, again a deeply religious institution in Candy's experience, is a positive consequence of doing marriage resistance in her life.

Interestingly, while Scarlet adheres to AMN and marital language to discuss their relationship trajectory and current relationship partner, Candy does not. When I asked Candy how she describes her LTIR partner, she replied, “Partner.” Full stop. For Candy, the AMN-imbued language of “boyfriend” was associated with negative emotions and experiences. This is noteworthy given that Scarlet is queer and Candy is “hetero, sorta,” as she described herself. Candy stated that she has not acted on same-sex intimacies but has also said that it would not be out of the question. That Candy said this makes another thing clear: that monogamy or, more pointedly, nonmonogamy, is “not out of the question” if she should choose to pursue a same-sex intimacy while concurrently being involved with her male partner. In this way, Candy resists the definition of “Family” by suggesting that she could, in fact, participate in both intimacies simultaneously and through her explicit and reasoned use of the term “partner.”

That Scarlet is not heterosexual but relies on heterogendered language shows that contexts of situations matter in naming when available language is limited. Similarly, Candy’s narrative highlighted the limitations of language and the emotional effects such limitations can have across the life course of those for whom intimacies and potential marriage are fear-inducing. Both reflections are examples of a *microaggression* as a result of the lack of language to describe intimacies and family form. While she felt AMN pressures to conform to this language as well, Candy’s pre-LTIR life was more constraining for her than the definition of her current relationship. In other words, situational constraints occurred around decision-making for each respondent as they progressed across the relationship trajectory at different moments in their lives.

Next, Isaac is an African-American AMR whose life experience includes the death of his brother and having an alcoholic father. Both traumas are deeply rooted in marriage and family

formation in Isaac's life. Isaac's relationship trajectory included hook-ups with girls/women for whom Isaac never intended to engage with long-term and for whom Isaac admits that he was not a "good guy." However, he also was clear in his explanation for not being so. He said, "I don't know that I ever really learned how to be a good guy with my Pops all messed up on liquor..." In other words, for Isaac, enculturation into the AMN and experiences across his relationship trajectory until his current LTIR were shaped by trauma and lack of guidance. In the case of hooking up, Isaac said,

"Oh, yeah man. I had dates. I had *girlfriends* [author's emphasis]. When my brother died and life went to hell, I just started to get fucking wild. I hooked up with *ladies* while I was in relationships with *ladies* [...] I know that my womanizing ways were because my home was a mess and I was actin' out. I kept actin' out because I was mad. Damn, man, I was mad. I was made that bro died, that Dad's an alcoholic, that Mom is too tired. Home was tough."

Isaac's use of gendered-language in reference to the females with whom he participated in hook-ups as an angry, sad, and traumatized emerging adult shifts as he recalls a better time in his current long-term relationship. Isaac explained, "...[N]ow, I got my shit right. I got my *girl* [...] I don't really say that we *date* or any shit like that. We been *at it too long. We a couple. A happy, not married, no kids having, making a life together, couple.* She just *my girl*" [Italics are author's emphasis].

In Isaac's case, it becomes clear that language shifts with more contentment and calm in his life as emotionality relates to his current relationship. While not categorized as a microaggression, necessarily, the constraints of language rooted in situations of unmarried families comes across in Isaac's narrative. Specifically, gendered language like "lady/girl" to refer to female intimate relationship partners must be put into context. Black English typically genders intimacies in ways displayed by Isaac. To refer to one's intimate relationship partner as *my lady/girl* is often viewed as endearing and loving. However, a closer look at this language

reveals that, especially in the present relationship had by Isaac, to refer to his LTIR partner as his “girl” has other connotations as well.

As adults, women are often belittled, infantilized, and rendered less socially useful than men. As such, language such as “girl” is regularly used, even if unintentionally, to refer to adult women. In Isaac’s situation, “girl” is an important signifier of change from a less serious to a more serious intimate relationship in his life. But, from a broader view, that “girl” is what Isaac may feel most comfortable using suggests a lack of available language to define his family situation. In other words, even if Isaac does not see this lack of available language constraining personally, his narrative illuminates language that was available in Isaac’s milieu. This language lacks the ability to descriptively convey the family form that the couple has permanently chosen.

In addition to Scarlet’s sense-making through socialization and Candy and Isaac’s sense-making through trauma, sense-making through other phenomena also occurs. Misattribution and misidentification are also lenses through which sense-making and marriage resister navigation happens. Rob recalled two instances of this sort of sense-making in a quick exchange. In separate events, his grandparents and a bank teller misattributed Rob’s relationship to his partner due to the language that Rob chose to use in interaction with them. The short conversation that Rob and I had on this topic follows:

AM: So, when you are discussing your partner or your current relationship, what do you say? What do you call him? What is he to you?

Rob: [Begins by laughing] Ha! He wants me to call him, “My queen.” But that ain’t gonna happen. No really, he is my boyfriend. I sometimes have called him my partner but then people think we are business partners and not lovers. And, I think “lover” is such a weird word. I can’t believe I even said that!

AM: Where were you when you were mistaken as business partners and not lover partners?

Rob: Um, the first time I introduced him to my grandparents and called him my partner, my grandma said, “Oh! He works with you?” [Laughter] But, then, once I went to the bank and at the window when I asked the teller something about mine and my partner’s account, she replied by saying, “I didn’t know that you started a business! What is it?” Then, I found myself in this twenty-minute conversation explaining my use of the word “partner” to describe my “boyfriend.” What a pain in the ass!

Rob’s interview illustrates microaggressions based in language to describe one’s family formation within institutional settings. Rob’s final comment, “What a pain in the ass!” is important here. The extent to which one must explain their romantic and intimate life for others is a barrier. Interactions cannot proceed, as shown in Rob’s case, without taking the necessary time and consideration (“...I found myself in a twenty-minute conversation...”) to communicate the intimacy shared between Rob and his partner. Time and consideration are resources given and taken in these circumstances. For example, if Rob had simply called his partner, his “spouse,” the interaction with the bank teller would have proceeded quickly and without question. However, because Rob chose the path of greater resistance by not using heterogendered AMN-related language, he was held up and required to explain further. This is a consequence of choosing an alternative path to family formation; this is a microaggression experienced by marriage resisters.

Through microaggressions related to naming relationship partners and family forms that do not include legal marriage, it becomes clear that relying on AMN and marital language *is* a strategy taken up by study participants across the continuum of marriage resistance that was discussed earlier in this chapter. Resisting the impulse to marry in a culture and society that reveres marriage is not simply through the act of not getting married but also through the use of language to indicate their unmarried status... that is *if* individuals choose to indicate publicly said status. Again, barriers in interaction with various institutional actors make choices to deviate from the norm constraining and consequential.

“Husband,” “wife,” “spouse,” *or* language to categorize those who participate in intimacy of the marital relationship is clear, historic, and embedded in American life. Similarly, “boyfriend,” “girlfriend,” “partner,” or “lover,” is language to describe participants in intimate relationship culture that is decidedly meant to lead to legal marriage and family formation for Americans (the AMN). While not always characterized as consequential by study participants, I wish to problematize language as it is the primary symbol in a culture. Symbolic language that describes intimate relationship partners and their families is culturally specific and connotes specified roles that participants should play. The importance of language cannot be underestimated as it is only through this cultural symbol that naming – thus, recognition – can happen. As such, and again, due to respondents’ participation in the same culture as their married peers, unmarrieds are reliant upon already existing language to name and define their relationships, not for themselves necessarily, but for others who are interested/who should ask. This is a constraint for study respondents as I outline above.

PART II

What was Once a Microaggression is now a Macroaggression: American Marriage Structure and Family Formation

On their way to family formation, study respondents recall times in which their "unmarried" family status was consequential. Macroaggressions perpetrated against unmarrieds and their resistance are the focus in this section. Marriage resisters who form families are not for whom American policy and law were created. This is evidenced by the number of ways in which participants describe unequal treatment of their family before American law and institutional governance.

Family law and jurisprudence, social policy, and education are spaces in which unmarrieds' (in)ability to access necessary resources was made apparent through participant interviews. I also include here my experience as a marriage resister and situational marriage participant. I provide an autoethnographic account of the experience had by my family as “Marriage Equality” passed in the United States and subsequent consequences of this jurisprudence in our lives.

Macroaggression #1

Children/School: The Institution of American Education and Child Governance

The examples I highlight below deal with rights and restrictions based in family form and marriage through the institution of education in the United States. Five of thirteen respondents mentioned that schools/education/children were spaces in which their family form was called into question.²² I focus on Niki’s and Isaac’s experiences in this section. I do so because barriers related to children happen in different ways. Niki’s narrative deals directly with the institution of education. Isaac’s is tangentially related to the institution due to his partner’s employment as an elementary school teacher.

Niki and Isaac recalled for me times when they felt their rights were restricted because of their status as an unmarried family unit. While Niki’s recollection dials right into the institution of education and schools as a site of inequality, Isaac’s experience highlights access to parenthood, specifically through adoption, as a barrier in his life. Niki said,

“I did not give birth and I wasn’t there when our kid was born. My partner was in a previous relationship with a man and got pregnant. They didn’t marry either. I came into their life when the baby was nearly a year. She’s my baby. I raised her. I remember, when she started kindergarten. [My partner] got a call from the school that she was sick but she was working. I was like, ‘Don’t worry. I got it.’ And, went to pick up our daughter. Wouldn’t you fucking know it? It didn’t matter that I am on her emergency contact form.

²² I do not include myself in this sample number.

I was asked how I was related to my kid because we don't have the same last name. I told the secretary to look at the contact form. I'm the contact. She wouldn't get the form out. I kept saying that, 'I am her other mom!' This lady made it seem like I was trying to steal my own kid. It wasn't until the principal returned to the office that I could finally be recognized. I'd met the principal when we took her first to the open house. If it hadn't been for that principal, who knows if I'd ever got my kid. Such a shame. I felt sorta discriminated against...So sad..."

The school, itself, was a barrier for Niki because she was not the biological parent of her child. Niki mused, "Maybe she was a homophobe..." but, this comment gave me pause. Yes, maybe this person was homophobic and preventing a sick child from going home. That is the *small* of this situation, the "personal trouble," (Mills 1959) if you will. The *big* of this situation or the "public issue," however, is that Niki's unmarried family status got in the way of obtaining access to the child that she had raised for a number of years. That an official of the institution, the institutional stakeholder/actor, was barring access to the child is a macroaggression based in the American marriage structure. The amount of time it took for this exchange to occur and the concern that Niki had about not gaining access to her child highlights the level of unequal treatment that those who have "unmarried" families experience or might face in the future.

Unequal treatment of Isaac's "unmarried" family also occurred around the institution of education. He and his "girl," who is an educator, did not take decisions about parenting lightly. Isaac's partner identified a child within the school where she teaches for whom she wanted to care. She and Isaac came to the decision to pursue the child's adoption. Things did not go well.

Child governance in the United States is problematic as highlighted in Chapter Five through Isaac's frustration in procuring a specific child. The primary question asked of this couple of child-seekers, one of whom *is a teacher*, by stakeholders in the American institutions of adoption law and policy was, "Are you married or planning to be married?" When institutions learned of the couple's lack of intention to marry, no other detail of their life nor home made a

difference for institutional decision-making. Instead, upon answering this institutional question in the negative, Isaac and his girl faced a marriage-barrier. That is, not a barrier *to* marriage, but a barrier *due to* marriage on behalf of the institutions.

The court and the agency had the upper hand to define the situation as they deemed fit—*an American couple without the intention to marry*. Their decision not to marry had a very serious consequence—*no children*; due, in part, to the female-bodied partner's lack of desire to procreate. She simply does not care for a personal pregnancy. However, the two variables combined, unmarried family status *and* child-free by choice, places the couple in a category outside of the boundary of “normal” for a family. Thus, *different* treatment of the couple mimicked their *different* family status in their desire to have a family inclusive of children. Instead, this experience left Isaac and his girl as not only adamant marriage resisters, but now, they are resistant to children as part of their family as well. To say that this profound experience left a “bad taste in the mouth” of Isaac regarding marriage, family, and governmentality is a gross understatement.

Isaac and his partner refused to lie to the government via the courts and adoption agency in their answer to the question, “Are you getting married or planning to get married?” Instead, and as Isaac stated, “We were honest and said, ‘No. No plans to marry; but...’” It is expressly what comes after the “but” that is most important in Isaac's narrative regarding one's *ability* to raise children. He said, “...Been together for five years. We own our home and share bank accounts. But that wasn't good enough [...] They thought that meant something about our ‘stability’.” However, Isaac and his girl clearly outlined these social facts about their lives to those administrators in the institutional settings that they had to navigate in order to have a child in the way that they saw best—through adoption. The institutional rejection of Isaac's family

form and unequal treatment before the law left Isaac saying, “Nah. Forget it. Kids aren’t in the picture for us.”

Isaac and his partner, a mixed race, unmarried couple, approached institutional settings intent on being honest about themselves and their relationship in order to help a child in need. That their unmarried family status created a barrier, not just for Isaac and his partner, but for that child, is problematic. United States adoption and family policy/law is not set up for non-married, non-heterosexual people to obtain children as easily as heterosexual married people. American adoption is already recognized as full of barriers and restrictions making it difficult for low income and other nonconforming individuals to take part in forming families this way. Isaac’s narrative highlights this concern. Macroaggressions as a result of American marriage structure has consequences, steep consequences, when children are denied access to caring, loving parents and those potential parents are similarly denied.

Macroaggression #2

Healthcare/Insurance Benefits: Institution of American Medicine, Health, and Wellness

I did not intend to do “Me-Search.” That was never the goal of this project. The goal instead was to understand how a “non-married” status might affect life experiences one has, how an individual chooses to remain unmarried in a culture that reveres marriage, from where ideas about marriage and family formation came, and how those ideas played out in real experiences. Moreover, what is with the investment in a “right/normal/expected” way to form family?

My experience across the life course did not suggest that married life was all that great and I had never formed an attachment to the institution or the “family life” that the institution of marriage promoted. But, as I discussed in Chapter Three, I have ethical concerns about

autoethnography as a feminist qualitative researcher. However, it is simultaneously through this purview of feminist sociology that I (and others involved in guiding my project) suggest that it is *necessary* to include autoethnographic data and analysis (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont 2003; Ellis and Bochner 2000; Jones 2005; Sprague 2005). In the oral history interview process, study respondents and I co-construct a reality through which they provide their narrative data. About the co-construction process in autoethnographic research, Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont explain,

[Auto]ethnographers-as-authors frame their accounts with personal reflexive views of the self. Their ethnographic data are situated within their personal experience and sense making. They themselves form part of the representational processes in which they are engaging and are part of the story they are telling” (2003:62).

In this process, it became apparent to me that, not only was I the researcher, I was also a participant in my own research.

For this part of the chapter, I compare how portions of family/economic law and policy impacts access to affordable healthcare for individuals who are in long-term intimate relationships, but who are not married. This macro-, state-, and national-level analysis allows for a closer look at the stark contrast between federal family governance and institutional/structural-level inequality related to the American Marriage Narrative. Also in this section, I present my autoethnography of a very consequential AMN-related magnified moment as evidence of macroaggressions related to the institution of medicine, health, wellness, and the workplace.

The autoethnography illustrates my experience as a “marriage resister.” Through a brief discussion of how I have been affected by marriage (thus, my decision to remain unmarried), I provide an account of the impact of “Marriage Equality” in my home. While sociologist and scholar Michael Schwalbe was in the field conducting research on the American “men’s movement,” he similarly found himself situated in his research. Schwalbe said,

“[R]eflecting on my reactions to their activities, in light of my own biography, also helped me to understand what the men were seeking and why. Every insight was both a doorway and a mirror—a way to see into their experience and a way to look back at mine” (1996:58).

As insights from respondents poured in, I, too, felt like their insights were “both a doorway and a mirror” (Schwalbe 1996:58). I realized in the course of interviewing respondents, that the experience had by my partner, children, and me was also informative; we were not able to make choices that worked best for us as queer American marriage resisters. In this way, respondents’ data provided a “mirror” in which I could see my family’s experiences reflected. The constraint and fear we felt (along with our University colleagues who did their best to provide support) was in line with how respondents felt about their inability to make choices that best suited them. A difference, however, between respondents’ and my narrative is that my family became front page news in our hometown.

I never thought I would be a participant in my own research. It was the moment that others took up for us that I realized that my family’s experience might be particularly interesting in this historic moment. It was time spent listening to, talking with, and learning from my Norwegian/American study respondent, Lara, that put into motion for me recollection and analyses about my own experiences as a marriage resister in American marriage culture.

Despite Lara’s “outlier” status in my sample, only upon reflecting on my time with her did I realize that I was experiencing inequalities in ways similar to my study respondents. Our discussion about her equitable access to necessary resources, regardless of marital status, in a different cultural and structural context (Norway versus United States of America) illuminated the ways in which the United States, at all levels of society, discriminates on the basis of marital status.

Autoethnographic Account of American Marriage Structure

“My Marriage Narrative”

In the Preface, I explain to the reader the importance of institutionalized marriage in my life.

From conception, marriage was part of my narrative. I was conceived after my parents got married and could receive family and healthcare benefits from the Navy (my father is a United States Navy veteran). Their subsequent divorce only four years after my birth (and after as many years of my father's drug addiction and philandering ways), was my first experience of the depths with which marriage could affect me.

My California life radically changed in the moment of divorce. My father was in Norway on business (where he would meet his next wife; she is Icelandic) and my mother was left alone with two small children. She made the choice (within constraint) to return to her hometown area on the Indiana/Michigan border. In the following year, we would live with my grandparents, obtain welfare benefits, and begin our lives as a family of three without my father's help. Marriage affected me.

There are other magnified AMN and marriage moments across my life. My mother was married twice more before I left the family home. Both husbands were abusive verbally and physically to my mother. I hated them. But, the last husband, Mark (one of the abusive husbands), changed his ways for my sister and me. Though their marriage lasted but ten months and took place when my sister and I were ages eight and twelve, Mark (my sister always called him "Dad;" I did not) became a permanent fixture in our lives. He stepped in where another parent should have been. He was a savior. Marriage affected me.

My own first marriage began when I was nineteen years old. It lasted twelve years (of note, longer than any of my parents' marriages). We were children when the relationship began,

and we emerged into adulthood together. Our children came five and six years into the marriage. I was married with two children and I never expected this to be my life. Marriage affected me.

I came out to my mother as bisexual and polyamorous in 2007; my ex-husband always knew. It did not go over well with my mother. She could not believe that my husband would "go along" with it. But, my husband, my girlfriend, and I were happy raising our kids. We would eventually come out to his family. His mother was happy. She said, "I always wished I could have a girlfriend who lives with me, too." I was grateful.

Our divorce was nasty. It was a long, drawn-out process that involved mediation and a lot of money. On November 1, 2011, El Dia De Los Muertos, it was finalized. *Finally*. We had been separated for two years and I was in another relationship (this time with a woman), as was he.

The kids and I had already started our new lives with my partner in Indiana. The kids were happy and so were the adults. My current partner, Betsy, was once in a long-term intimate relationship without marriage that similarly ended in a difficult and expensive separation. She and I discussed marriage and our decision not to partake in the institution. We understood that past experience (separation/divorce) dictated our future decision-making (family formation without marriage). In other words, we decided to resist the impulse to marry despite our loving relationship, cohabiting with children as homeowners, and planning a future in which we work to remain together as a family and, for the two of us, a permanent, compassionate, healthy couple.

On the other hand, my ex-husband married again just one month following our divorce, on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2011. Our children were there and part of the ceremony. Marriage affected them. I never wanted to marry again...

**Choice within Constraint in “Post-Marriage Equality” America, June 26, 2015:
OR,
“My Queer Family’s Experience Confronting the American Marriage Narrative, Culture,
Institutions, and Structure”**

Betsy and I had been together for nearly six years on June 26th, 2015. Our family was happy and healthy and moving forward with our new lives and circumstances. In the meantime, Betsy and I had concretized our relationship via obtaining domestic partner status in 2012. Our workplace, a Midwestern state university's regional campus, provided healthcare benefits to couples who could meet the requirements of domestic partner status and provide proper documentation. We decided to take part in this program because I, as a graduate student living away from my home institution, could not access my graduate student healthcare without hassle and more than two hours of travel in each direction. In other words, it just made sense not to resist this institutional-based path to legitimization of our relationship if it allowed us to access necessary resources.

But, our access to this resource was only temporary. Everything changed on that day, June 26, 2015, the day that “Marriage Equality,” the LGBTQ pro-marriage movement, successfully accomplished the right for non-heterosexuals to legally wed in all fifty states. While many were celebrating a leveling-of-the-playing-field, others reacted as my partner and me. As we rose that morning and read the news, what filled our room was her resounding, "FUCK!"

There were murmurs heard for the months leading up to “Marriage Equality” that, should it pass, domestic partner benefits could become a thing of the past. In other words, because American governance broadened the definition of who is a marriageable human, the institution of marriage in the United States would usurp other forms of family legitimization. However, what was once a murmur became a full-on institutional conversation because the flagship of our state-school system waited mere weeks to announce that, indeed, since all could now marry, they felt

there was no further need for a domestic partner policy and subsequent benefits. Marriage was about to affect me again...

The message was meant to be celebratory. The announcement made by the flagship stated their intention to be rid of domestic partnership "...in favor of marriage" (Flagship University Document Citation). Further noted, for those whom discontinuation of the partnership policy would affect, the institution would give time, until December 31, 2016 (1.5 years) to, "...plan ahead to get married" (Flagship University Document Citation). Again, while many were celebrating this momentous occasion in American culture, for others, "Marriage Equality" meant that now that marriage is legal for all, all must comply. What ensued was a fight between the flagship school's administration and the collective action of regional campuses and their faculty to push back against the shift in policy without faculty approval. It became clear to Betsy and me in that moment that we were not the only people who did not want to take this path to family formation.

The discontent among faculty hit a fever pitch at a faculty senate meeting. When the concern about this policy was brought to the senate floor, rather than the generally reserved faculty that I have observed many times in that room, they were furious. Faculty colleagues spoke up in favor of writing letters to the administration and other campuses regarding the inequity of this policy. A task force was created to address this inequity and propose action related to it, including solutions such as a potential "Grandfather Clause" that would allow those who were already recognized as domestic partners through the university to remain so for the purpose of continued benefit maintenance and acquisition. No one in the room liked that their colleagues (known by this time that there were some two hundred people that this policy would affect from multiple campuses in our system) felt forced to get married.

The Flagship responded to our proposal by telling us that they were, "...Considering these requests" (Flagship University Document Citation). We were cautiously optimistic in those days. The more that we contacted and were contacted by effected individuals, the less it seemed a concern that the university could ignore.

But, ignore they did. More than a year passed without contact from the flagship. Meanwhile, the local press picked up the story on our local academic senate's pushback against the main campus and my family's part in it. The story was tastefully written to explain the implication of such policy changes for my family. The bottom line: to maintain access to resources, these people (us) must get married.

The outcome: the flagship never moved on the issue. They simply reiterated more than a year later that, in order for me to keep my health insurance (which is critical due to chronic illnesses), Betsy and I must marry before December 31, 2016. This news rocked our world – the world that we had created for our children and ourselves. Our kids were aghast with the arrival of this news; like us, they could not believe that there was to be a redefinition of our family from an outside force. They cared not one iota whether Betsy and I were married; they had since had very troubling experiences with their stepmother defining for them that marriage does not always make a family. But the lesson that we chose to provide our kids was that fighting for something important is always worth it. However, to keep fighting against a tide that cannot be stopped is futile and can hurt you in the end. That is the way that Betsy and I decided to frame our forced-marriage experience. Despite my reticence and resistance, marriage affected me again...

My autoethnographic account combined with the experiences had by my respondents show the ways in which systems guide Americans' ability to participate in culture and society (Johnson 2014). Economic systems provide paths of consumption for individuals. More

specifically, based on one's ability to consume or how much income they have, Americans are able to purchase necessary goods and services to maintain lives and families. However, all is not equal in capitalism and, as such, one's ability to access necessary resources, such as healthcare, is dependent on money earned and paid, and proper participation in social structures and institutions.

The unmarrieds who experience macro level inequalities or macroaggressions and resist them do so at the risk of punishment. “Successes,” such as Candy’s formation of family through a religious lens despite the atrocity she experienced through the same institution is uplifting. She continues to resist the impulse to marry and live a life that works for her and her family. Similarly, Rob, realized that he learned so much from his current long-term relationship partner about the history of Gay Liberation that he has chosen the path of greater resistance through his use of a sociological imagination in naming his relationship partner. He is successful in, if not tired by, his persistence in resisting the AMN.

Others, however, have found themselves less “successful.” Isaac, quite happy now as a result of his *choices* to remain unmarried without children in his current relationship, was not always happy about the way his choice to remain unmarried influenced whether he would have children. In this way, Isaac “failed” in his quest to form family inclusive of a child and his quest to form a family that best worked for him in a given moment. Again, this is not his fault. This is not a private issue, but a public one. He did nothing wrong except to choose a path to family formation that is not included in the public imaginary. I include myself in this category as well. My attempt to form a family without marriage, too, failed. In the end, it was necessary for my partner and me to marry to maintain health, life, and happiness. Choice, constraint,

consequences, and control are appropriate ways to consider the lives of those Americans who wish to remain unmarried in the current socioecopolitical milieu.

Discussion and Conclusions

American Marriage Structure: Recognizing Resisters' Resistance

In order to make life more equitable for those who have an “unmarried” identity and/or social status, there must be an expansion of the American culture repertoire on families. Expanding the American cultural repertoire about families and family formation will actually, defacto, lead to better acquisition of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for those who do not wish to form families rooted in legal marriage. This is said in hopes that, dejure, family equity becomes an American reality sooner rather than later.

“Success” and “failure” in study participants’ resistance to the United States marriage structure is complicated. How one navigates this social structure is deeply intertwined with the milieu of their life. At this micro level of society, interactions between individuals within institutional settings such as family, church, and banking force those who do not have an intelligible identity (e.g. “unmarried”) to waste resources such as time and patience to make sense of their identity for others. When marriage resisters choose to use language such as “partner” to describe their intimate relationship configuration, it may be met with confusion, like Summer and Rob discussed above. However, the respondents’ use of “partner” language, despite microaggressions they experienced related to its use, is a “success” in resisting an American marriage culture.

Rob’s case in which he makes use of a sociological imagination to explain his current set of conditions (marriage resister who understands the history of the gay liberation struggle) shows

that he relies on that history to inform his way of maneuvering in a heteronormative, marriageable world as a gay man in an unmarried relationship and family. The situation, as he defines it, brings together his personal and social identity within the United States marriage structure. His sociological imagination allows him to consider the history of gay rights and to proceed in his life in ways that he finds liberating even when and if he experiences negative consequences.

There exist paths of lesser and greater resistance in American marriage structure and the AMN as I have shown here and elsewhere in this dissertation research. Microaggressions related to language highlight the connection between the individual's experience to a larger, broader set of marriage and family formation rhetoric, practices, and norms. One's connection to a larger structure or system is an example of Johnson's "One Thing" (2014). One's participation (or lack thereof) in marriage culture shows "That we are always and already participating in something larger than ourselves" (Johnson 2014:3). Individual choice whether to participate in marriage culture and to follow AMN rhetoric highlights paths that may be taken in marriage culture and is evidence of the "One Thing" (Johnson 2014:3).

Individuals who participated in this research were born into an already existing American marriage structure/system over which they had no control and no choice to be born. As such, they have been educated and socialized to participate in this structure normatively. With adulthood came the autonomy of choice about how/when/if family formation should be part of their relationship trajectory and narrative. When confronted with this fork in the road, whether to engage in the institution of marriage or not to engage in order to form a family, *choice* may feel very far afield from what they have learned while growing up. Instead, *constraint* within the American marriage structure and participation-based *consequences* help make the argument that

the systematic ways in which my respondents tend to participate in this culture/structure are very controlled. It is in this way that, in the United States, marriage is a form of social *control*.

Those immediate concerns (microlevel) tend to outweigh long-term consequences when those consequences are not apparent. For example, it is not surprising that respondents were easily able to identify microaggressive behaviors towards them (e.g. verbal and nonverbal; in conversation and through language use) and had less understanding of macroaggressions (or social problems) related to their family formation. In other words, I do not find it surprising that individuals recognize less often the bigger barriers at the institutional/structural level than those immediately present at the interactional and individual levels of society.

Macro level barriers pass as *norms* in terms of marriage and family formation. Unmarrieds grew up and live in the same American culture as their married peers. Marriage and family norms, “values with teeth,” (Johnson 2014) are taken for granted or not fully understood by my sample of marriage resisters, much as the rest of the American populace. We tend to participate in systematic family formation without much consideration until we are faced with barriers as a result of the *choices* made about intimate relationships and subsequent family formation. This is a reference to the “One Thing” (Johnson 2014).

Johnson (2014) wrote that we “... cannot understand our individual participation if we do not know what we are participating in” (p.14-17). That individuals who are not sociologists do not know that they are always participating in a structure of marriage and family formation that is much bigger than them is not their fault. Social structures are invisible and serve to *control* and normatively align a society. Little work has been done that refers to “social problems” as “macroaggressions;” thus, this is a new way to conceptualize inequalities at the macro level of

society as a counterpoint to the already bigger conversation about microaggressions in American culture.

Importantly, it is true for respondents that barriers exist in their everyday lives due to their decisions to form family without marriage. However, it was also made clear that in some cases they have found ways around these institutional and structural barriers to get what they need. In other words, in the face of stressors created by a *structure* that was not built for them, marriage resisters are *agents* constructing paths to successful family forms and access to necessary resources. The consequential experiences that I have highlighted from participants' narratives and the degree/level at which they experienced these consequences for their unmarried status leads me to assert that we do not simply have a culture of marriage in the United States. Instead, (and indeed) marriage and its supporting cast, the "wedding industrial" and "wedding ideological" complexes (Ingraham 1999; 2008) create a social structure of marriage in the United States.²³

²³ See discussion of Ingraham (1999, 2008) in Chapter Five for more information about "complexes."

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

COMPULSORY MARRIAGE AND ALTERNATIVE FAMILY EXISTENCE IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

On marriage as a “trophy” in the American life course:

“A wedding is no longer the first step into adulthood that it once was, but, often, the last.

...[T]he emphasis on love and companionship is not enough to explain the same-sex marriage boom. Without doubt, most of the middle-aged same-sex couples who have married of late already had love and companionship—otherwise they would not have still been together. So why marry now? Marriage became for them a *public marker of their successful union* [author’s emphasis], providing them the opportunity to display their love and companionship to family and friends.”

Andrew Cherlin

“Marriage Has Become a Trophy,” *The Atlantic*, March 20, 2018.

This dissertation research project highlights the socio-historic case of marriage as a “rights-granting” institution in the United States by exploring the experiences and perspectives of those who resist it. The investigation was done in a “bottom-up” manner through the conceptualization of marriage as a *culture*, not just an institution, and individual’s participation or not in it. As a

rights-granting institution, marriage works to increase access to relevant resources in a given culture or society. As a culture, marriage works to shape individual's expectations, feelings, and behaviors related to intimate relationships, sex, and family formation.

The combination of marriage as a rights-granting institution *and* a culture that regulates and normalizes individuals' behaviors in procuring long-term, even permanent, family formation matters in the context of the United States. Take for example the above quote by sociologist, Andrew Cherlin. In his article published in *The Atlantic*, Cherlin calls into question the "marriage boom" of same-sex couples since the 2015 "Marriage Equality" Supreme Court of the United States ruling. Key to his assertion that middle-age same-sex couples are marrying at rates far higher than their heterosexual peers is the notion that marriage is for show; marriage is a trophy to be deployed to make clear to those around them the longevity, care, and determination of the same-sex couple's intimate relationship (Cherlin 2018). The cultural and institutional logics of marriage connect the individuals that Cherlin (2018) discusses to the social structure of American marriage and family formation. Logics of marriage serve to reinforce one's enculturation into the American Marriage Narrative regardless of their sexual or gender identity—this link cannot be taken-for-granted and this is my contribution to the scholarly literature on marriage and family formation in the United States of America.

There are many lessons to take away from understanding how marriage resisters navigate American culture and marriage social structure. In Chapters Four and Five, I show that these lessons range from norms, values, and beliefs around marriage and family formation that cultural guides and institutional stakeholders teach younger generations to the ways in which individuals make use of AMN knowledge/rhetoric that they previously learned in their pursuit of romantic intimacies. Chapter Six illustrates the consequences of the American Marriage Narrative,

marriage culture, and social structure in the lives of marriage resisters. Resisters' understanding of life in a marriage-ophile culture presents for them barriers to forming a family that works for them. For those who resist institutionalized marriage, the existence of it *and* a nuclear family form social structure in the United States creates difficulties in adding children to their family, making sense of existing children within their unmarried family structure, and more. The path that one learns to take to form family in the United States is sexualized and gendered, prescribed, predetermined, enforced, and reinforced, beginning in early childhood, as evidenced by my study participants' narratives.

This dissertation conclusion chapter considers those lessons learned of conducting research on the “American Marriage Narrative” and a “relationship trajectory” that led study respondents to create families without marriage. This chapter is organized, first, by a summary of each data chapter and, when taken together, an explanation of their outcomes. For some respondents childhood enculturation into the AMN and the milieu in which they grew up map onto their experiences of long-term intimate relationships (LTIRs) in adulthood. Exploration of respondents' relationship trajectories that led to their current LTIR revealed that marriage resistance is not a “one size fits all” phenomena. Instead, marriage resisters exist on a continuum that ranges from “pure refusniks” (Stacey 2012) of marriage, or as I name them, “Adamant Marriage Resisters” (AMRs) to “Predestined Marriage Participants” (PMPs). Next, I discuss limitations of conducting a “bottom-up” study on the social structure of marriage. It is impossible to cover all that I gleaned from this study on marriage culture because marriage has not been studied from this perspective until now. Moreover, there are some interesting findings that I cannot report in this project because more research is required to offer a conclusive analysis of them. I conclude by providing ideas for future research in the area of family

formation, alternatives to marriage, and the sociological study of gendered- and sexualized-intimacies.

The American “relationship trajectory” is culturally constructed with the expectation that an individual is to end the ark of their trajectory squarely in the “predestined marriage participant” (PMP) category. Americans are *expected* to become PMPs *without resistance to the institution of marriage*. To be part of this group suggests that “matrimony is compulsory” (Robson 2009). However, that there exists temporal/situation marriage resisters (TMRs)—a group of individuals who are situationally on “pause” in their pursuit of matrimony due to extant issues—suggests that barriers to a “married” social status persist in their lives and resistance to the institution of marriage is *necessary*. TMRs, similarly, want to married as their “PMP” peers. However, *something* prevents them from doing so; this *something* can be attributed to the *ideal constructions of romance, sex, marriage, and The Family* that are perpetuated by American culture and institutions.

Family formation, marriage, and gendered- and sexualized- intimacies are first learned and then acted upon by individuals. In “Compulsory Matrimony,” by Law and Distinguished Professor at the City University of New York’s Law School, Dr. Ruthann Robson (2009), she explains that the act of matrimony is “compulsory” in the United States. Her legal argument dovetails with the cultural argument that I am making here. The compulsory nature of marriage as the ultimate tool of family formation was experienced by *all* respondents in this study. My respondents experienced American marriage and family formation logics as micro- and macroaggressions in interactions with individuals and institutions. This finding speaks to the “very American” compulsion to not only marry, but to *promote a marriage/wedding culture* and *a marriage/nuclear family form social structure* in the United States.

“Love, [American] Marriage, and Baby Carriage:”
A Hetero/Homonormative Culture, Rights-Granting Institution, and Social Structure

American adolescents and young adults *act* by deploying the knowledge they have learned about sexuality, intimacy, and romantic relationships. This cultural knowledge/rhetoric they deploy is the American Marriage Narrative (AMN). In Chapter Four, I show that enculturation into marriage culture and the milieu in which it takes place matters specifically at the individual and interactional level of society. Through the concept of the AMN, I describe and analyze study respondents’ experiences learning this cultural rhetoric about ideal intimacy, marriage, and family formation. Moreover, that such rhetoric exists at all is indicative of a marriage *culture* not just an *institution*. This rhetoric reinforces an expectation and that which is purposefully taught—that Americans are to get married!

There is a “very American” expectation that the life course is linear, thus, one’s relationship trajectory should be linear as well. This expectation creates ideals of romantic intimacies, sex, marriage, and “The Family” against which study participants compared their real, lived experiences of intimacies, sex, and long-term relationships across time. The choices they made about, the experiences they had around, and what they learned of the AMN led them to their current social status as “marriage resisters.” These individuals have chosen to resist the cultural impulse and structural dictate to marry despite barriers and negative experiences associated with their unmarried family form.

In Chapter Five, I focus on those magnified moments of the relationship trajectory wherein resisters had to make choices about the romantic intimacies in their lives. Mixed messages of the AMN during important moments often left respondents leaning on cultural knowledge to aide in their decision-making. American Marriage Narrative-related “magnified moments” along the life course and choices about how to proceed in those moments eventually

led respondents to their current “resister” status. I found that the AMN is relied upon as a “social stock of knowledge” (Berger and Luckmann 1966) across the life course and respondents used it to make decisions about romantic intimacies in the course of procuring their current relationship. Comparisons made by respondents between “real” and “ideal” romantic intimacies, sex acts, sexuality, and marriage highlights the differences in social location and experiences related to variations in respondents’ lives. That is, I find that while a social status of “unmarried” is a shared position in the social structure of marriage and family formation for my study respondents, their experiences had as a result of the shared “unmarried” status vary widely.

As a result, narrative data reveals a continuum of marriage resistance, not simply a one-note notion of marriage resistance. The power of the American Marriage Narrative (AMN) is made clear in this chapter in two ways. First, as a cultural construct and rhetoric, the AMN is pervasive and persistent across the life course of respondents/those who resist marriage. Second, the AMN has the power to predict one’s placement on the “Passion-To-Marry Continuum” (PTMC) for individuals who, only situationally, resist marriage.

On the PTMC, there exists three categories of marriage resisters: adamant marriage resisters (AMRs), temporal/situational marriage resisters (TMRs), and predestined marriage participants (PMPs). While the third category may seem antithetical in terms of a type of “resister,” these categories are not mutually exclusive. Instead, some respondents use marriage resistance as a life strategy, a momentary “pause,” to ensure that their desire to marry aligns with the current milieu of their life. If the individual uses this strategy, then they choose to marry at a time when they feel ready and more prepared.

Marriage resistance, for purposes of personal value and belief and/or preparedness, is a decision not made lightly by study respondents. This is the topic of Chapter Six. Consequences

of one's "marriage resister" status are not only those associated with one's participation or not in institutionalized marriage. Rather, the culture that upholds marriage as the best way to form family also perpetrates consequences in the lives of my respondents. Respondents' encounter micro- and macroaggressions in their everyday lives as a result of their marriage resister status. I explained earlier that while microaggressions have received some scholarly attention, the idea of "macroaggressions" has not been examined to the same degree. This is not surprising.

Americans, more generally, tend not to look at the institutional or structural level of society for the locus of problems in their personal lives (Glassner 2008; Johnson 2014; Mills 1959; Sternheimer 2013). Macroaggressions, otherwise conceptualized as social problems, cannot be solved with personal solutions. However, macroaggressions are personalized by study respondents. This comes through in the ways that macroaggressions committed against respondents *made them feel, emote, and act* due to the aggression. Consequences of structural barriers *felt by* respondents directly connects them (the individual) to the social structure of marriage through a culture that pressures one's participation in the institution.

Evidence of micro- and macroaggressions related to American marriage requires a re-evaluation of the cultural and structural power of the nuclear family form. Similarly, monolithic cultural rhetoric used to uphold marriage and the nuclear family must be considered. Respondent narratives highlight barriers and their navigation of these barriers in their pursuit of *family and intimate relationship* "life, liberty, and happiness." Many resisters report their "happiness" in their current long-term intimate relationship and family circumstance without marriage.

However, some respondents said that their status in an unmarried family is not what they wish for their future. These respondents want to be married but economic (most often) circumstances kept them from accessing this part of their relationship trajectory at the time of interview.

Educational goals, or “finishing college” was another frequently cited reason for not *yet* being married. On the other hand, themes such as belief systems and value judgments informed “resisters” continued practice of marriage resistance. For these respondents, their express passion to *not get married* presented challenges in their everyday lives. Consequences such as time consuming conversation about and explanation of their family form without marriage, explanation of the person with whom they share a LTIR’s position in resisters lives, and parenting children cropped up in conversation.

In sum then, the data presented in this project and subsequent analyses suggest that navigating life as an “unmarried” in a family, especially a family that includes children, can be simultaneously rewarding and difficult. Through the oral history interview data provided in Chapters Four and Five on American childhood and emerging adulthood, I show that mixed messages emerged as a result of discordance between what children learned in their home-of-origin from primary and secondary socialization agents, then reinforced by institutional stakeholders, during emerging adulthood.

As respondents’ discussed movement away from home and increased institutional participation while progressing across the life course, messages of the American Marriage Narrative (that at one time seemed clear to them) became “mixed.” These “mixed messages” tended to happen during “magnified moments” of their relationship trajectory. Decidedly, *not* a good time for mixed messages. What was, then, personally experienced in intimate interactions across respondents’ relationship trajectories informed their decision-making, through comparisons of the “ideal versus real” construct of intimacies, sex, marriage, and family formation. The decisions respondents made across the trajectory led them to the current configuration of their families without marriage.

Finally, marriage and nuclear family formation *as a social structure*, at times, dictated for study respondents *when* they will marry, if at all. This is the topic of Chapter Six. Barriers in the form of micro- and macroaggressions related to their unmarried family form/social status presented, for marriage resisters, questions about whether to engage in the institution of marriage or not to engage. For some resisters, whether to participate or not in the institution of marriage felt out of their control. Instead, for these individuals, barriers to rights and access to necessary resources dictated their participation in the institution of marriage. This constraint left marriage resisters feeling lack of control over their lives and over the outcomes of their decision-making. In other words, for resisters, choices about family life are made within the constraints of the broader United States culture and social structure of marriage.

Dissertation Research Study Limitations and Weaknesses

Respondent narratives forced me to consider questions such as: Why is marriage the only legitimate way to form families in the United States? What do children learn about forming families that guides, aides, and/or supports them in decisions to create their own family in the future? Should they so choose, what resources do we have available for gender- and/or sexually-queer youth who wish to form a family in the future? Why do we not have better sexuality education for children, adolescents, and emerging adults in the United States? ...And, so many more questions came to mind. However, these questions are for future research and cannot be considered here as they are outside of the purview of my current project.

Also of note, there are links to consider between my study population—American marriage resisters—and experiences had by individuals who similarly choose to take a different path to long-term family formation. Groups in this category are single Americans (those *not in long-term relationships/do not wish to be in long-term relationships*) and individuals/families

who are “childfree by choice.” Americans who exist in either of these categories also deviate from the expectation of “marriage” and “nuclear family form” like marriage resisters. As such, their experiences of navigating the terrain of marriage culture and social structure in the United States would add to the body of knowledge about the culturally-designed pressures of idealized intimacies and families. Beyond my suggestion to consider the links between singles, child-resisters, and marriage resisters for future research, there are other linkages I have not explored or could not explore in this project for a variety of reasons. I discuss them below.

Those who stray from the American Marriage Narrative (AMN) do so in many divergent ways but then converge in the formation of family via their current long-term relationship without marriage. This suggests that (for one reason or another) enculturation into the AMN and straying away from it by choosing not to marry is a phenomenon not simply explained by theories of socialization and institutional/cultural logics. Marriage is (historically and contemporarily) a contentious topic for many of my respondents whether they choose or not to participate in it in the future. Additionally, socialization and logics cannot fully explain respondent decisions *not to take part* in the largely taken for granted institution of marriage. This begs questions such as: “For whom is marriage a contentious topic and why? And, at what point does a person make the decision *not* to take the path of least resistance to marriage, why, and for how long?” No doubt, my sample of marriage resisters would have arms raised and answers to provide for the first set of questions, but the answer to the second set of questions goes un(der)addressed in the present research and must therefore be saved for future research.

Also, and as I state in Chapter Three, oral history methodology and data collection method is simultaneously a strength and weakness of my research. The present research is not generalizable beyond my sample due to the low number of participants (n=13). This constraint, I

believe, is a direct result of my research methods in two specific ways. First, I found it difficult to recruit potential participants due to the amount of time I was asking of individuals. This project was not funded, therefore, I was not able to compensate people for their time. Second, meeting individuals for face-to-face meetings (which some potential respondents preferred) was not an option at given moments. This constraint necessitated either a telephone/videophone interview or no interview at all. Gratefully, most individuals with whom I could not meet face-to-face allowed for the alternative interviewing method. But, two potential respondents and I could not meet as a result of the problem I discussed here.

The low “n” also presents a lack of diversity within the sample population under study. Study respondent “Snapshots” located in the introductory chapter provide the reader with a sense of who marriage resisters are and how they identify in their everyday lives. While there are some axes upon which respondents vary that I discuss at length, such as gender and sexuality, it would also be useful to have broader representation in terms of dimensions such as race, social class, and ability, and other axes of oppressions that everyday American’s lives include. The addition of a dimension, such as social class, could reveal other explanations for marriage resistance and/or pressures to marry that are influenced by social capital, income, and wealth for example.

Another limitation of this research is that oral history interviews were only conducted with one relationship partner. Future research in the area of individuals in LTIRs should consider interviewing both partners. Findings from such a study would allow the researcher to analyze and synthesize common and divergent values and beliefs about institutionalized marriage and their participation, together, in American marriage culture. Studies done in this vein could elicit interesting understandings of coupled-dyad’s procurement and maintenance of such an intimate relationship and family form. Further, the inclusion of childrens’ voices should be considered

due to their positionality in the family. Collecting data from children in unmarried families would be useful because they, too, may have experiences different from their peers in married families. In the present research, I have only been allowed into reflections on childhood and emerging adulthood experiences from my respondents.

Finally, also mentioned in Chapter Three, another weakness of this project is in the way my call for participation for research was disbursed. It became clear to me as the project progressed that many of my respondents had received the call via academic or academic-adjacent friends and family members. In other words, it seems that the flyers that I put up in public spaces went mostly unaddressed. While I was able to get at some participants who vary in social class through student/recent graduate/faculty member statuses, overwhelmingly, their relationship to the institution of education was unquestionable and must be, therefore, addressed. My discussion here suggests that more and varied populations should be included in further research on *marriage* resistance, marriage adherence, marriage as an institution, and as a social structure in the United States.

Moreover on the point of my call for participation and flyers that represented that call, I now realize just how limited my conception of “marriage resistance” was at the outset of this project. In other words, with different language I might have been able to attract a more diverse range of individuals to interview. For example, I asked for potential study participants who were unmarried in long-term relationships. It would have been similarly useful to hear from individuals who waited “long-term”—four or more years—to *get married*. These individuals would, too, be considered marriage resisters, though, my call for participation for the current project screened them out. In effect, I screened out people like me—married despite fierce

resistance to marriage.²⁴ I did not sense that I would be married by the end of this project, despite my resistance to the institution of marriage. However, like some of my respondents, I, too, maintained a long-term intimate relationship without marriage, without the desire to marry, and got married anyway. For these reasons, there must be research on those “married marriage-resisters” as well.

Also importantly, further research in this area should include studies that look at couples that felt like marriage was the *only* logical option at a given point—perhaps as other rights and resources are being contested. There must also be further consideration given to policy and jurisprudence that speaks to broadening definitions of “family” and “household” as a rights-granting, resource-giving, label. Denial of human rights on the basis of varying definitions of family and household goes against the Human Rights Act (1948), Article 16. Our nation continues to deny humans the fundamental right to form family by showing us that some of our definitions simply do not count and that we must conform. I showed in this dissertation research project the ways in which American cultural citizens learn to be marriageable humans and to form families through marriage in the current socioecopolitical context. Moreover, I highlighted what it looks like for those who have learned the norms, values, and beliefs of a specific culture to enact or not enact what they have learned about marriage and family formation.

Conclusions: Forward Thinking in the Sociology of Marriage, Families, and Intimacies

What I have shown through data description and analysis is that what an individual is taught of the American Marriage Narrative (and what they learned across time) did not regularly align with the experiences they wind up having. Instead, mixed messages of the AMN and AMN-related magnified moments coalesce in ways that leave American children and emerging adults

²⁴ An important point made by Dr. R. Stephen Warner that I did not connect. Thank you, Dr. Warner.

seeking more and new information that they did not procure in their initial learning environments. Mixed-messages or no mixed messages in the lives of respondents', however, did not dictate placement on the Passion-To-Marry Continuum for all. Instead, there was one clear group for whom mixed messages and magnified moments of the AMN were indicative—temporal/situational marriage resisters. More research on this group is needed especially because of the low sample size of my study. My suggestion here is to continue to gather data on TMRs to better understand differences among them, similarities, and specific reasons for the temporal nature of the unmarried family formation. Also, on this note, research on more marriage resisters, writ large, could elicit perhaps not-yet conceptualized groups on the “Passion-To-Marry Continuum” such as those who are *married but fierce marriage resisters*.

In the United States of America, “citizenship,” has a specific legal definition that includes an individual’s *right* to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. However, this pursuit is *always* done within constraint. As I explain in Chapter Six, the primary constraint for my respondents, who are legal and cultural United States citizens, *is* living in their current family status as “unmarried/s.” Study respondents have chosen to take paths of lesser and greater resistance in a marriage culture and structure that was not constructed with them in mind. The paths they have chosen take their toll as marriage resisters confront micro- and macroaggressions in their everyday family due to their status. Importantly, because some respondents have chosen to marry in the future (or choose not to continue to resist the marriage structure) simply does not mean that their experiences here are any more or less valuable. In fact, through this research I have explained that marriage resisters’ exist on a “continuum of resistance” and their act of not marrying immediately, when others thought they should (individuals/institutions), is a resistant act in and of itself.

Additional insights gained by studying those who form families without marriage can be connected to and goes beyond the sociological literature on cohabitation cited in the Literature Review chapter. The burgeoning literature on cohabitation explicitly connects to the study presented here through studies of positive life course outcomes and relationship satisfaction for cohabiters and for unmarrieds' in long-term relationships. In essence, and in fact, respondents for these studies could be conceptualized in the same way—unmarrieds' whom live co-presently, thus forming a family without marriage. However, my study diverges from cohabitation literature in two ways. First, cohabitation *was not* required for study participation. There are many reasons that families today do not or cannot cohabit, such as employment in areas different from where one's family resides, criminal record that does not allow for all adults to live in the same household, and some report that living independent from their intimate relationship partner brings even more satisfaction than living co-presently.

Second, in my putting forth of a sort of typology of “cohabitation” through operationalizing “marriage resistance” and the amount of time required “in relationship” for my respondents varies from parameters found in cohabitation literature. Thus, while “cohabitation” provides a springboard for my study of marriage resistance, further studies using the parameters that I provide in this project will bolster the existing literature and provide more concrete connection to other sociological literatures on marriage, family formation, sex/gender/sexuality systems, and American governance of these categories. A better use of the cohabitation literature for studies on unmarrieds' would be to use a queer theory lens. I explain further below.

My hope is that through this research, the reader may envision an alternative world for families formed without marriage. I hope that this research made more clear via the narratives provided by unmarrieds' that marriage is not always what an American desires as the basis for

their family. My fleshing-out and analysis of their relationship trajectory that led them to resist the *cultural and institutional impulse* to marry shows that Americans would like *choice* when it comes to the way they form family. The narratives of individuals who currently defy the norm of marriage in their long-term intimate relationship—who sometimes *do* and *sometimes do not* see legal marriage in their future—speak to the larger concept of “American family formation,” its strengths, and its limitations. Most importantly, normative family formation through the institution of marriage is *used* (through processes described in this research) as the ideal comparison upon which all other families are compared, and often, marginalized.

Thus, to envision a future for Americans that allows one to *choose* the family form that best suits their needs must be taken up for social policy and legal change to occur. A queer theoretical lens is useful for this research endeavor. The use of queer theory allows for the expansion and dissolution of boundary-laden categories, rendering inequalities among those categories more visible and actionable. *Visibility and action* in the way of political/social movements that lead to legal protections for *ALL family forms* (not simply the ideal marital form) regardless of an individual’s personal gender, sex, racial identification, sexual preferences, and so on, are necessary and useful in discussions of fair housing, immigration, and citizenship policies. Queer theory acknowledges a bigger and far more diverse human and FAMILY universe. Thus, queer theory applied to studies of family formation, marriage participation, and intimacies across the life course opens the door to a future in which many forms of family may access the same necessary resources and cultural value as families formed through marriage.

Explicitly, I end on a note in the words of, recently deceased, inequalities sociologist, scholar-activist, and one person to whom I dedicate this project, Dr. Allan G. Johnson (2014). The individuals who so generously donated their time and shared their stories with me,

“participate in something larger than themselves,” that is a culture and structure that valorizes marriage. Their insights into how they navigate American culture as a family with an “unmarried” status, regardless of whether they continue to resist, is not the point. It is that they resisted at all given the forceful propaganda that organizes marriage culture and structure to control human bodies in the United States of America. They persist in the face of constraint because, as Johnson (1997/2014) said in, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, “...The only way out is through...”

