INTRODUCTION

MAKING MARRIAGE WORK

Nestled in an article about St. Petersburg, Russia, in the July 28, 2003, issue of the *New Yorker* is a Mick Stevens cartoon that pokes fun at the mores of contemporary American relationships.[1] It features two well-dressed, white, heterosexual couples walking toward one another on a city street. On the left, the female member of the couple rides on the man's shoulders. On the right, the woman carries the man. The latter woman, with an infuriated look on her face, exclaims to her mate: "Now *there's* a relationship that's working." The cartoon thus cleverly transforms what sociologists refer to as the "emotion work" of personal relationships into a physical burden.[2] In a similar manner, the drawing gently mocks the gender norms associated with such endeavors. The angry woman's comment is funny because it acknowledges the novelty of her male counterpart's efforts. She expects (however reluctantly) to shoulder the weight of her relationship and is thus jealous of the other woman's free "ride."

Stevens's cartoon assumes that *New Yorker* readers are readily conversant with one of the most sacred rules of personal relationships, and especially marriages, in the early twenty-first century: they require effort on the part of one or both of the partners in order to succeed. The pairing of "marriage" and "work" is so pervasive and

"Now there's a relationship that's working!"

Mick Stevens's cartoon from the *New Yorker* transforms the emotional burden of working on a relationship into a physical one. © The New Yorker Collection 2003 Mick Stevens from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

reflexive that it is difficult to imagine a time in which this was not a guiding maxim of American unions. Before the twentieth century, however, Americans did not work on their marital relationships. Rather, the "marriage as work" formula became popular in response to specific changes in marriage patterns, most notably the growing incidence of divorce in the white middle class. Furthermore, what it meant to work at your marriage, as well as the question of who performed this work, was by no means static, and, indeed, frequently contested. Beneath the seemingly timeless quality of this common wisdom, in other words, lies a far more complicated story with significant ramifications for how Americans thought about and went about being married in the twentieth-century United States.

This book, then, explores how Americans came to understand

marriage as an institution that couples, and especially wives, needed to work at in order to succeed. Beginning in the 1920s, a diverse group of experts defined and shaped the character of marital work in response to heightened fears about an increase in divorce and family breakdown. While these experts promised new levels of companionship and intimacy for married men and women, by the 1950s a successful marriage was, quite simply, one that did not end in divorce. Even when second-wave feminists posed a significant challenge to this state of affairs in the 1960s and 1970s, they rarely denied that work was an important element in any marital relationship. Decades of visits with marriage counselors, of reading advice columns in magazines and newspapers, and of watching portrayals of marriage and divorce on film had ingrained the "marriage as work" formula in the minds and lives of American women and men.

Two interrelated forces decisively influenced this history: deep-seated anxiety about divorce, on the one hand, and Americans' desire to have stronger, more satisfying marital relationships, on the other. While historians most frequently treat marriage and divorce as distinct areas of inquiry, this book demonstrates the centrality of the concerns and the debates about divorce to the history of contemporary American marriage.[3] Throughout the twentieth century, Americans demonstrated great faith in marriage, even as they simultaneously worried that the institution was on the verge of collapse. The knowledge that every marriage had the potential to end in divorce (the United States had one of the highest divorce rates in the world throughout the period in question) clearly influenced the efforts of experts to strengthen the institution. The desire to avoid divorce and to be happily married, in turn, led American couples to seek out the experts' advice and to embrace the idea that hard work could save their relationships.

Experts and the public alike, therefore, engaged in a constant negotiation between trying to hold on to "traditional" relationships and transforming marriage into a thoroughly modern institution that could survive in the face of prevalent and relatively accessible divorce. The ongoing nature of this process points to the importance of analyz-

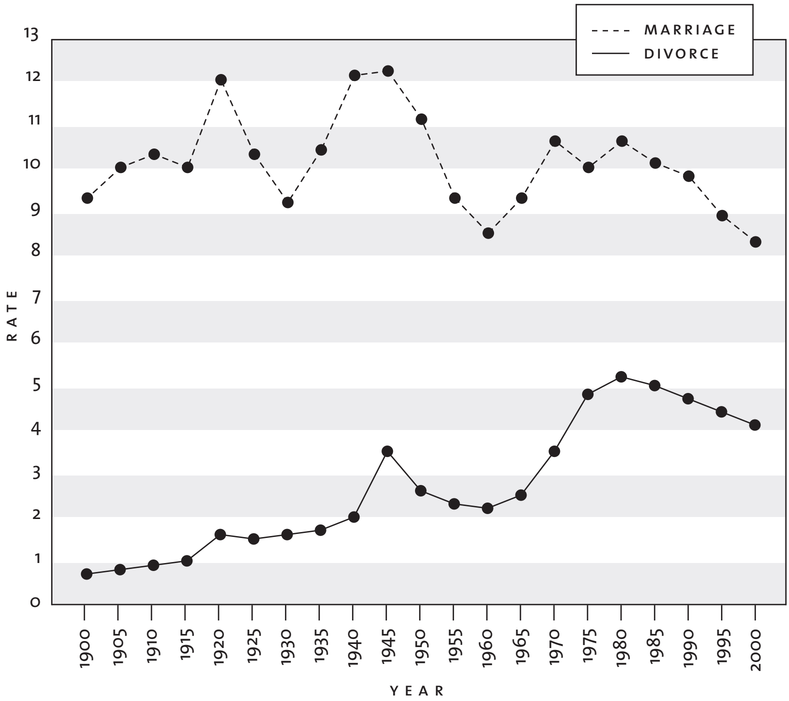

FIGURE ONE MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE RATES IN THE UNITED STATES (rate per 1,000 population), 1900–2000. Rates for 1900–1965 are from U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *100 Years of Marriage and Divorce Statistics*; rates for 1970–2000 are from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/08s0077 .pdf> (accessed February 29, 2008).

ing both continuity and change when studying the history of marriage in the United States. In the 1980s and 1990s, historians looked to combat a widespread public nostalgia for the "simpler" gender and family norms of the 1950s. In this vein, Elaine Tyler May argued that the decade did not represent the last gasp of traditional family life and rather was something new altogether, the product of political and social conditions specific to the postwar world, notably the Cold War. Jessica Weiss, in turn, demonstrated that the "parents of the baby boom" faced many of the same dilemmas about their relationships and how to raise their children that their offspring would in later decades. Recently, Stephanie Coontz has offered a revision of these analyses, asserting that the marriage patterns of the 1950s represented the "culmination" of a love ideal based on, among other characteristics, a male breadwinner/female homemaker division of labor. After the 1950s, however, patterns in family life changed so irrevocably that, in Coontz's opinion, Americans have to come to terms with the fact that they will "never reinstate marriage as the primary source of commitment and caring in the modern world."[4]

These interpretations, while compelling, all tend to overstate the extent of transformation at any given time, thereby neglecting to identify and to analyze certain recurring themes in contemporary American marriage discourse. Coontz's analysis of this history before the 1950s, for instance, is a welcome corrective to those studies that, intent on challenging romanticized notions about marriages of the era, either simplify what came before or fail to consider the first half of the twentieth century—and even earlier—altogether. It is clear, however, that expert attempts in the 1920s and 1930s to address the growing incidence of divorce among the white middle class had a decisive influence on marriage in the postwar era. Similarly, many Americans still aspired to be happily married after the 1950s, even if they lived together before they tied the knot or were more willing to consider divorce if their relationships faltered. Experts, for their part, continued to expound the value of marital work, even if the question of who ideally should perform this work and what it should entail was, at times, politicized and hotly debated.

Who were these experts and how influential were they? This book uses the term "expert" loosely, in that it includes men and women from the scholarly world and those with little or no formal schooling in the social sciences or related fields.[5] What defines their expertise is not the extent of their education but the authoritative way in which they present their views, particularly in the popular media. Paul Popenoe, who founded one of the nation's first marriage counseling clinics in the early 1930s and who gained widespread fame through his appearances on radio and television and in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in the 1950s, for instance, was a horticulturalist.[6] John Gray, whose best-selling book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, birthed an advice-giving empire in the 1990s, earned his Ph.D. in psychology from an institution that was later shut down by the state of California for being a diploma mill.[7] Notwithstanding their lack of traditional credentials (and much to the dismay of many of their more highly trained colleagues), both men portrayed themselves as marriage experts; judging by their ubiquitous presence in the media of their respective eras, everyday Americans accepted them as such. Similarly, the scholars discussed in this study, such as psychologist Clifford Rose Adams (author of the midcentury advice column "Making Marriage Work") and feminist sociologist Arlie Hochschild, have received considerable attention outside academia.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to know the myriad motivations that prompted these men and women to pursue careers as marriage and family life experts, although their personal experiences do sometimes indicate what inspired them. Sociologist Willard Waller, for example, wrote an influential 1930s book about the psychological effects of divorce after he personally went through a painful marital dissolution. Most of the experts considered in this book, however, did share common intellectual ground. First, they believed that marriage was an essential American institution and that its fortunes paralleled those of American society at large. Second, they thought that marriage was, or was about to be, in full-blown crisis. Third, most felt that the future of the nation's marital health rested on the shoulders of the white middle class, especially its women. Finally,

they believed that they could develop strategies that would fortify marriage and would assure its viability for ensuing generations.

In their efforts to spread their ideas, marriage experts both benefited from and contributed to the nation's budding fascination with expertise and therapeutic practices.[8] The phenomenal growth of the marriage counseling profession—from just a few small clinics in the early 1930s to the plethora of marital therapy sessions attended by several million couples each year at the end of the century—is compelling evidence of this trend. Recent work, most notably Rebecca L. Davis's exploration of the complex origins of the marriage counseling movement as well as its diversity of approaches and services as it gained in reputation, has filled a significant gap in our knowledge about the profession's history.[9] This study broadens the existing scholarship by examining how marriage counselors formulated and sold their craft to the American public, ably adapting along the way to vast changes—some of which they helped to create—in the nation's marital landscape.

Of course, the married men and women who attended counseling sessions, as well as those who read prescriptive marriage literature, did not always follow the advice given to them by the experts. They decided what was relevant to their situations and, at times, discarded the experts' suggestions altogether.[10] In the 1950s, when the "best" and most commonly proffered advice was that couples should avoid divorce at all costs, for instance, approximately one in four American marriages (close to 400,000 per year) nevertheless ended in divorce.[11] Still, the fact that so many husbands and wives demonstrated a willingness to work on their relationships, especially by seeking professional help for their problems, is evidence that they believed that experts could assist them in solving difficulties and in reaching new heights of marital satisfaction.

Did experts and their advice, in fact, lead Americans too expect too much of their marriages, thereby contributing to the rise in divorce over the twentieth century? This certainly was not their intention. If anything, most experts believed that they were working to correct the "problem" of the nation's overly romantic notions

about married life. They wanted husbands and wives to recognize that, at times, sustaining a marriage would be a laborious undertaking. But in order to convince Americans that it was worthwhile to work on their relationships, experts also had to promise that this effort would yield tangible rewards, namely, improved—albeit, they cautioned, still imperfect—unions. Because they could not control how Americans interpreted such promises, expert attempts to lower expectations about marriage may have, in certain circumstances, inadvertently raised them instead.

Note, however, that higher hopes for marriage did not automatically translate into more divorces. A combination of factors, some specific to each marital situation and others related to larger social trends, contributed to the rate of divorce at any given time. Taking a longer view, it is clear that experts—even those who eventually came to believe that some unions were untenable and thus best dissolved—did far more to discourage divorce than to encourage it. Assuredly many more Americans would have divorced if they had not believed in the importance of working hard in order to stay married and if the decision to divorce had not been viewed, on some level, as a personal failure to perform this vital work.

Much of the appeal of the working at marriage formula was its universality; any married person who aspired to have a successful marriage could do so by trying hard enough. Translated into everyday life, however, this formula became far less inclusive. Experts assumed that women needed marriage more than men, for both financial and emotional reasons. This assumption led them to direct much of their advice to women and to hold them accountable for their marital successes and failures. Practical considerations also influenced their approach: for a variety of reasons (during wartime, for instance), wives were an easier audience to reach than their husbands. Many women, in turn, proved to be willing consumers of what the experts had to say. Even after many feminists argued in favor of a redistribution of marital responsibilities in the 1970s, evidence suggests that women continued to take on the majority of

these tasks. Many husbands, of course, did care deeply about their relationships and tried as hard as their wives to solve marital problems. Still, throughout the twentieth century marriage was, most frequently, women's work.

The seeming simplicity of this formula also masked important assumptions about race and class. Most experts were white and middle class and expected their audience to be so, too. Once having a "working" marriage became a badge of middle-class status and accomplishment (especially for women), it stands to reason that this development influenced how Americans who lived in this mold thought about those who did not, such as unmarried African American mothers. Their attitudes, as well as the consequences of their perceptions, are difficult to document; this question ultimately falls outside the purview of this book, although it remains an important area for further research. It is evident, however, that the experts' messages reached beyond their target audience. After World War II, for example, African American magazines such as *Ebony* and *Jet* also stressed the importance of working at marriage, frequently citing the same experts who appeared in the general media.

Throughout the twentieth century, therefore, experts succeeded in introducing the idea that marriage required work into mainstream discussions about American marriage. Chapter 1 examines the origins of this process. In the nineteenth century, most upper- and middle-class husbands and wives dutifully performed their assigned marital roles and hoped that their unions would provide some level of personal satisfaction. Social and financial pressures dictated that they had little recourse if their marriages failed to fulfill their romantic expectations. As these pressures loosened—although by no means disappeared—in the early twentieth century, a rising number of spouses signaled a willingness to terminate unions that they deemed to be unsatisfying. While most religious authorities continued to discuss the immorality of divorce, a new group of scientifically minded experts stepped in to address the pressing problems associated with the country's seemingly faltering marital relationships.

These experts argued that married men and women were asking too much of marriage and were thus overeager to terminate otherwise viable relationships.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, marriage experts developed strategies to spread this message. They taught marriage education courses, founded marriage counseling clinics, and launched research projects dedicated to predicting marital success or failure. Chapter 2 explores their successful entrée onto a considerably larger stage, as they skillfully injected themselves into a fiery debate about the desirability of "war marriages" (those unions contracted by young men and women because of the now-or-never aspect of wartime conditions). While the experts proved largely unable to put a brake on the record-setting number of marriages during the war years, their opinions about whether these relationships could be made "to work" nevertheless received extensive coverage in the national media. The answer was "yes," as long as young brides were willing to dedicate themselves fully to this effort. After concerns about the fate of American marriages intensified during a postwar divorce panic, experts solidified their place in the national conversation about the health of the nation's relationships.

Chapter 3 examines the flourishing marriage advice industry of the postwar years. In magazine columns such as "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" books such as *Help Your Husband Stay Alive!* and television shows such as *Divorce Hearing*, experts emphasized the many facets of wifely work and the potentially tragic consequences of failing to perform these duties. The experts who offered relationship guidance in the 1950s, however, faced a dilemma. While they believed that they could help married couples to achieve new heights of relationship satisfaction, they remained intensely concerned about the looming threat of marital breakdown. Their solution was to tout the efficacy of their strategies while setting the bar for marital success quite low. Experts thus argued that no problem—be it infidelity, alcoholism, or physical abuse—was so severe that it could not be overcome, especially once the wife recognized her culpability for her marital troubles and decided to ameliorate the situation.

Changes in divorce laws in the late 1960s and early 1970s exacerbated a general apprehension that Americans did not appreciate the importance of finding a mate and staying married. Chapter 4 considers the intense debates about the future of marriage in the United States during these years. While some radical feminists called for the abolition of marriage altogether, many other feminists struggled to redistribute marital work in an equitable manner. They also challenged any expert who argued that wives should hold their unions together at all costs. Feminist efforts, of course, did not meet with unqualified approbation, and many social conservatives strenuously argued that marriage was rightfully women's work and that wives could do even more to improve their marriages. That men and women from opposite sides of the political spectrum made the nature of marital work a key point of contention in how they viewed the institution's future demonstrates, in turn, the pivotal role that such work came to play in shaping marriage and divorce in the twentieth-century United States.

The final chapter argues that debates about marriage and its durability only intensified in the final decades of the twentieth century, especially as more married women pursued careers outside the home and the divorce rate (while down from its all-time high in the late 1970s) remained a hot-button political and social issue. As the men and women of the baby boom generation married and started their own families, many placed a renewed emphasis on the values of intimacy and commitment. They signaled their willingness to work on their relationships, and they visited marriage counselors in record numbers. In spite of the egalitarian language that emerged from the debates about marital work in the 1970s, however, evidence from the 1980s and 1990s suggested a continuing disparity between men's and women's marital roles. On the cusp of the twenty-first century, in other words, finding ways to maintain satisfying marriages remained extremely important to American wives.

Few would dispute that the institution of marriage was, and remains today, a vital part of American life. The demographics of marriage alone make this case. Throughout the twentieth century,

approximately 65 to 75 percent of the adult population in any given year was married, widowed, or divorced. In 1900 this proportion translated to almost 32 million individuals. By 2000 the number was more than 153 million.[12] To better understand the lives of these millions of married Americans—and indeed, given the demographics, to understand the twentieth-century American experience—we need to recognize the social, cultural, and political forces and ideas that shaped their world. *Making Marriage Work* explains how one such important idea, that marriage requires work, became part of the collective American consciousness. While not every American read popular advice literature or visited a marriage counselor, the totality of the interaction between these forms and twentieth-century Americans helped construct a national language and dialogue about marriage. When Americans go to bookstores today to buy *Making Marriage Work for Dummies*, they are participating in and perpetuating this conversation and history, just as their parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents did before them.[13]