

Marriage and the Modern American Family: Preserving the Heterosexual Family and Pursuing Marital Bliss

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Introduction

Historians Rebecca L. Davis and Daniel Winunwe Rivers examine how sexuality shaped Americans' concern for preserving heterosexual marriage during the twentieth century. Both authors begin at different historical moments; Davis starts with the advent of modern marriage counseling during the 1930s whereas Rivers begins with the emergence of gay and lesbian rights during the Cold War. Despite their temporal differences, each describes the social and political upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s as a turning point in the history of marriage and the construction of the American family. In *More Perfect Unions*, Davis argues that since the 1930s marriage counselors have taught heterosexual couples to pursue marital bliss by performing normative gender roles, although each generation redefined the extent to which a "more perfect union" could be found through personal fulfillment or socioeconomic stability.¹ More concerned with the role of sexuality and conceptions of the ideal American family, Rivers's account showcases how gay and lesbian families helped dismantle the assumption that all families are heterosexual. In *Radical Relations*, Rivers claims that since 1945, lesbian mothers, gay fathers, and their children recast the relationship between sexuality and the family by creating new childbearing relationships that demonstrated the compatibility of homosexuality and parenthood.² Together, *More Perfect Unions* and *Radical Relations* provide a dynamic and nuanced understanding of how Americans redefined marriage, sexuality, and family relationships during the mid-twentieth century.

In *More Perfect Unions*, Davis looks at the theories and practices that professional marriage counselors, clergy, social scientists, and psychiatrists used to promote normative gender roles and heterosexual relationships. She explains that up through the mid-twentieth century, couples around the world received marriage advice through community networks, churches, and physicians. During the Great Depression nobody questioned the argument that heterosexual marriage strengthened the economy. State relief programs and birth control clinics, for instance, promoted marriage counseling as a way to escape the economic turmoil found in their families and the nation.³ WWII programs like the Rosie the Riveter campaign brought women into the

¹ Rebecca L. Davis, *More Perfect Unions: The American Search for Marital Bliss* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 9-10.

² Daniel Winunwe Rivers, *Radical Relations: Lesbian Mothers, Gay Fathers, and Their Children in the United States Since World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 10.

³ Davis, *More Perfect Unions*, chap. 2.

workforce and disrupted normative gender roles by turning women into breadwinners. The sudden increase in female employment also served as a way for marriage counselors to incorporate the new rhetoric of psychoanalysis during marriage counseling. Counselors and social workers argued that female employment led to unhappy marriages and “socioeconomic chaos” because women’s economic independence made them neurotic housewives and encouraged men to shirk familial duties like providing wages.⁴ Here Davis suggests that during the postwar years marriage advice promoted quantitative testing inspired by social scientists like Lewis Terman and the American Institute for Family Relations (AIFR) as a seemingly objective way to obtain a healthy “marital adjustment” where wives ascribed to certain personality traits that encouraged them to rely on their husbands for emotional support and affirm their husbands’ masculinity.

Davis concludes by arguing that from the late 1960s through the 1970s, marriage counseling moved into churches, where it survived the counter culture’s attack on gender norms and the heterosexual “marital adjustment” by aligning with New Right evangelicalism.⁵ Clerical marriage counselors incorporated elements of the new field of humanistic psychology, such as self-actualization, into counseling services. These marriage counselors, however, diverged from modern scientific developments, such as the Kinsey reports, which challenged heterosexuality and gender norms; they used counseling to prevent premarital sex, discourage the use of contraception, and prevent couples from divorcing. Davis clarifies that throughout the 1970s and 1980s, marriage counseling literature, including Marabel Morgan’s *Total Women*, maintained the assumption that by protecting normative gender roles—including female deference and male breadwinning—couples could redeem society from the perils of a rising rate of divorce and homosexuality. By the twenty first century state-sponsored marriage counseling programs like the Healthy Marriage Initiative claimed that heterosexual marriages were capable of eradicating child malnourishment and preventing delinquency. Heterosexual marriage and two-parent families, proponents optimistically maintained, could even prevent poverty and ensure the nation’s socioeconomic future.⁶

Davis’ work is an important contribution to the literature on marriage and the American family because it reveals how new developments in psychology contributed to the belief that heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family would cement the nation’s socioeconomic future. Still, *More Perfect Unions* falls short in its discussion of the evangelical New Right. Davis argues that those concerned with saving marriage (evangelical preachers and psychologists) survived the counter culture’s attack on heterosexual marriage because they allied with the New Right. For instance, Davis argues that evangelical self-help publications like *By His Side: A Woman’s Place* and *Total Women* were best-selling works that garnered the attention of the Christian community and helped to legitimize marriage counseling.⁷ However, the degree to which Christian couples read and applied ideas in self-help publications, such as wifely submission and marital bliss, to their lives and political decisions remains unclear in Davis’s

⁴ Davis, *More Perfect Unions*, 99.

⁵ Davis, *More Perfect Unions*, chap. 5.

⁶ Davis, *More Perfect Unions*, chap. 7.

⁷ Davis, *More Perfect Unions*, 210-211.

work. Admittedly, it is difficult—and even at times impossible—for historians to trace the receptibility of ideas. But purchasing self-help publications that promoted heterosexuality and normative gender roles is not akin to ascribing to and acting out heterosexuality and normative gender roles. That aside, Davis successfully demonstrates the prevalence and longevity of the idea that marriage could be both a source of personal happiness and a responsibility to the state.

Davis is interested in how the state used marriage counseling to promote heterosexuality and socioeconomic stability while Rivers is more concerned with why Americans and the state assumed all families were heterosexual. He looks to a wide variety of sources—LGBT rights and family organizations, newspapers and periodicals, personal papers (uniquely including one activists' day planner), court cases, and over one hundred personal interviews—to showcase how homosexual families created a “family revolution” by entering the public spotlight amid a broader reproductive rights movement and sexual revolution.⁸ Rivers begins by looking at Cold War-era gay and lesbian rights efforts. He argues that while many gay and lesbian parents “came out” to themselves, and sometimes their spouses, few were able to be open about their sexuality. Many feared that police raids, sex-crime panics, and vice squad entrapment would lead them to lose custody of their children.⁹ Rivers explains that the widespread assumption that motherhood and fatherhood were heterosexual led judges to argue it was “in the best interest” of children to be removed from the care of their lesbian mothers and gay fathers.¹⁰

The second half of *Radical Relations* looks at the way that lesbian mothers and gay fathers founded support organizations like Dykes and Trykes and fought for legal rights. Radical feminists during the 1970s, for instance, formed separatist (and sometimes female-exclusive) lesbian communities where they taught children the importance of equality. The shared experience of losing custody rights and dealing with legal bias among gay and lesbian families convinced them to form grassroots activist organizations in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a move that changed the fight for parental and adoption rights and improved legal outcomes for gay and lesbian families.¹¹ Gay and lesbian baby boomers' legal contests, in the wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, led to some legal victories like the establishment of second parent rights and domestic partnership status.¹² Rivers concludes that these limited successes, along with the *Lawrence v. Texas* decision to strike down sodomy law, not only moved gay and lesbian families from the periphery of the LGBT rights campaigns but also ensured that gay and lesbian families would become central to contemporary same-sex marriage debates in the 1990s and 2000s.

Importantly, Rivers's *Radical Relations* has incorporated gay and lesbian families in the existing literature on marriage and the American family. Yet there are also a few moments where Rivers's focus on legal reforms sought by gay and lesbian families obscures their connection to the larger historical context. Throughout *Radical Relations*, for instance, Rivers argues that the movement for gay and lesbian families' rights was part of the reproductive rights movement and sexual revolution—it was really a “family revolution”—because a new generation of gay and

⁸ Rivers, *Radical Relations*, 5-6.

⁹ Rivers, *Radical Relations*, chap. 1.

¹⁰ Rivers, *Radical Relations*, chap. 3.

¹¹ Rivers, *Radical Relations*, chap. 6.

¹² Rivers, *Radical Relations*, chap. 7.

lesbian couples pursued artificial insemination or adoption and brought homosexual families out in the open.¹³ Rivers provides sufficient evidence to demonstrate that this reproductive and legal aspect of the “family revolution” produced a substantial lesbian and gay-by boom by the 1980s. Yet he is less clear about how gay and lesbian couples in the “family revolution” felt connected to or disconnected from some of the larger ideas like free love, bodily autonomy, and anti-monogamy that permeated the sexual revolution and reproductive rights movement. Still Rivers breaks new ground by showing that ideas about the family and sexuality are inextricably linked because of the long-held assumption that the American family is necessarily heterosexual.

Rivers’s discussion of homosexuality, marriage, and families complements Davis’s scholarship by highlighting one response to the New Rights’ emphasis on protecting heterosexual marriage. And, importantly, both Davis and Rivers showcase how people responded to the state’s presumption that marriage and the family were heterosexual in the mid-twentieth century. Davis focuses on campaigns to preserve and bolster the idea that personal fulfillment and socioeconomic stability could be found through heterosexual marriage whereas Rivers emphasizes how homosexual families challenged the assumption that all American families were heteronormative. Taken together, *More Perfect Unions* and *Radical Relations* provide a comprehensive and engaging consideration of sexuality, marriage, and how the state has helped define and ascribe meaning to the American family during the mid-to-late twentieth century.

¹³ Rivers, *Radical Relations*, 173-175.