

Marrying for America

Dawne Moon

Jaye Cee Whitehead*

University of California, Berkeley, Department of Sociology

MOON@SOCRATES.BERKELEY.EDU

In recent years Americans have experienced a substantial increase in the federal budget deficit. The Bush administration's increased spending on military technology combined with tax cuts resulted in a \$304 billion deficit forecasted for 2004 (*Times Union*, 2/1/03). Before Bush increased tax cuts and spending for the United States military, he announced the new agenda for reducing federal spending dedicated to the welfare program (2/27/02). Bush's new welfare bill, which has all but officially passed in Congress, offers a meager \$17 billion per year from 2003 to 2007 in federal spending for welfare programs. In an effort to respond to the budget crisis, Bush has decreased state funding for the poor, and instead earmarked \$300 million of his budget for federally mandated, but state implemented marriage promotion programs (Bush, 2/27/02).

Bush's welfare proposal comes at a time when sociologists increasingly argue that marriage is positively correlated with individual economic success, healthy children, and disciplined citizens. In the following analysis, we indicate how and why marriage emerges in the American imagination as an appropriate solution to national economic problems. We argue that marriage expresses and performs the ideology of American individualism: in the institution of marriage the state can mask and legitimate economic inequality through the illusion of personal choice. In this sense, marriage operates to obscure other solutions to the United States' fiscal crisis, as well as alternative forms of

* The authors are listed alphabetically, and have contributed equally to the production of this paper.

organizing intimate life. We also argue that marriage can seem to be a solution because certain people want it to be one. Already disciplined to see the marriage ideal as their own and to follow its scripts, people who identify with the American dream are willing to take on individual responsibility for the nation's successes and failures, to submit to a formalization of the discipline already internal to them, because marriage promises them rewards in exchange. Those who have been less well-served by the state, on the other hand, have less to gain by entering its formal institutions. The Bush administration seeks to entice them into taking on individual responsibility for the current economic situation by proffering to them a more explicit deal—submit to explicit disciplinary procedures in exchange for overtly offered economic benefits. While making the consequences of turning down the choice ever more severe, the administration nonetheless maintains choice as an illusion.

After a brief review of the literature and an explanation of our methods, we examine how marriage works ideologically in Bush's welfare reform plan to shift the responsibility for poverty from the state to the individual. Then, we examine marriage ideology as it is packaged for the American public as a whole—as it is dramatized in so-called reality TV. By juxtaposing these cases, we show how the ideology of marriage works to enforce a politically conservative and gendered notion of individual responsibility and choice by wrapping a romanticized notion of choice around a pecuniary incentive to follow a certain script.

We draw from Foucault's (1977, 1980) notion of discipline to analyze how the American marriage ideal is proffered as a source of hope for America. By analyzing marriage ideology, we set aside questions concerned with individual motivations for

marriage, patterns that predict long lasting marriages or divorces, and the effect of marital status on rearing children. Instead, we ask how marriage operates as a mode of power, offering an image of security in exchange for compliance to a particular sexual and economic order.

To study marriage ideology requires a method that can capture the illusive and ambiguous qualities inherent in ideologies. We trace the languages government and media elites use to articulate definitions of marriage—what they see as essential to it, what they see as its purposes, and what they foreclose in defining it. We thus draw from Foucault’s concept of discourse (1978) to trace how power and culture work together to shape how people think about themselves and their options. By examining how some people have expressed these discourses as their own, we look at social scripts—the socially structured dispositions people enact as they live their lives. But unlike the symbolic interactionist notion of a script (see, for instance, Goffman 1959), we see these scripts as disciplinary apparatuses; as people enact them, they reproduce power.

We examine the Bush administration’s attempts to enforce a particular discipline where it does not emerge as a more-or-less automatic consequence of class and status reproduction; in fact, we examine how Bush offers an explicit, rather than implicit, bribe to induce poor people to take on responsibility for the nation’s social and economic troubles. Thus, we first analyze the announcement of President Bush’s Welfare Reform Agenda on 27 February 2002. We then juxtapose the explicit “bribe” offered therein with that offered in a dramatization of the American marriage ideal by analyzing the reality television program, *Married by America*.

Sociological Perspectives on Marriage as America's Solution

The popular American imagination understands marriage as a personal union between a man and a woman, the definition of a successful relationship. From this point of view, marriage exists as an intimate choice, often eluding calculated reason. Sociologists, however, continue to point out that marriage is not only a private bond, but also a public institution, that rather than a mystical happenstance, it is an institution subject to sociological analysis. As with any other social phenomenon, sociologists focus on the logical patterns that predict who will get married to whom, the larger social predictors of divorce, and the necessity of marriage as a social institution. While we agree that marriage is more than a simply subjective phenomenon, we look beyond its functions as an institution to the languages people use to define and legitimate it.

Many analyses of marriage in sociology tend to be framed in terms of its stability as an indispensable social institution. This sometimes-unacknowledged functional analysis of marriage implies sociological questions focused on why marriage seems to be faltering as a social institution in the United States, explaining such trends as increasing divorce rates and the increasing age of first marriage. As a result, many sociologists understand these demographic trends as a social problem (because they tend to be associated with poverty) that demand an explanation and a solution. Some sociologists find that married people experience financial and emotional benefits from marriage. Linda Waite (2000) uses data from the GSS to compare never-married, previously-married and currently-married men and women on scales of happiness and well-being to assess the utility of marriage. She finds that married people, male and female, do better or the same as the non-married on all of the happiness and financial well-being scales.

Lichter, Roempkey and Brown (2003), from an analysis of data from the National Survey of Family Growth (1995) argue that while marriage is not an economic benefit for all couples, it is positively correlated with lower rates of poverty and welfare use.

One of the most forceful arguments about the necessity of marriage is that it increases the financial and emotional well-being of children. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), for example, argue that while marriage is only part of the answer to the problems that children face in the United States, the evidence clearly indicates that kids are more healthy, educated, and stable if they are raised by a married couple. David Popenoe (1996) distorts this argument in his endorsement of heterosexuality as the only healthy family form for children, where a man and a woman are necessary for the development of normal children. He argues that the declining participation of fathers in their children's lives leads to increased levels of juvenile delinquency, teenaged pregnancy rates, and violence against women.

Sociologists engaged in this debate are presented with a peculiar problem: if marriage holds so many benefits for children and adults, why are divorce rates increasing? In response to the question, an analysis of culture enters as a possible explanation to the declining normative investment in marriage. These sociologists focus on the values that individuals possess that might predict a decrease in their devotion and trust of the institution of marriage. They argue that American culture as a whole is less supportive of marriage because of the rise of the "culture of divorce" (Gallagher, 1996; Whitehead, 1997; Waite, 2000). From Barbara Whitehead's (1997) point of view, Hollywood and capitalism create a consciousness that draws people away from marriage by advocating a permissive and irresponsible way of life. She argues that the family must

rise against capitalism and reclaim values of loyalty, commitment, and obligation. The culture of divorce, from Waite's (2000) perspective, explains why even though marriages work well for individuals (in terms of financial success and overall happiness) there are fewer marriages—because it is easier to get a divorce when couples experience temporary hardships. Maggie Gallagher (1996) argues that this culture of divorce explains that some Americans still desire marriage, but are unable to achieve it because American culture in general remains unsupportive.

These studies implicitly draw from Talcott Parsons (1961), seeing marriage as an institution that serves an integrative function, and culture as the coordination of individuals' thoughts to legitimate it. For these authors, culture is relevant to the study of marriage as a diagnosis of an assumed social problem of failed marriages. This model works by assuming that the institution of marriage fulfills its function if particular individuals value it, and the culture as a whole is supportive of these individual values. While feminists have long challenged this functionalism by asking for whom marriage functions (see for instance, Fraser, 1989; Hartmann, 1979; Pateman, 1988; Stacey, 1990; Thorne & Yalom, 1992), we focus not on marriage's micro-level benefits to men, but on its macro-level service to the ideology of individualism.

While many sociological analyses of marriage provide firm evidence for the Bush administration to advocate marriage as the solution to poverty, they do not capture how marriage works to shift the burden of poverty from the hands of the state to the poor themselves. These studies share some of the assumptions of the conservative Bush administration: (1) that marriage creates fiscally disciplined couples who will then form a disciplined society, and (2) that marriage is the moral building block for America as a

nation—that marriages can create moral individuals who will then form a moral nation. In this sense, marriage, as an institution, has a magic about it. Just as individuals in faltering relationships might, for instance, see getting married as the thing that will miraculously transform them into happy, strong relationships, national leaders, looking for inexpensive solutions to the country's social problems, can invoke it as the magic solution. In what follows we demystify the magic of marriage, and uncover some of the social prerequisites for marriage to enter the American imagination as a solution to social problems. In the end, we ask what alternatives are foreclosed in the process.

Stable Heterosexual Couples, Stable Nation

In President Bush's 2002 budget, he proposes "strengthening families" to help raise richer, more stable and more successful kids. In his speech of 27 February 2002, he tacitly invoked the work of sociologists such as Popenoe, Waite, and McLanahan & Sandefur in his argument for increased state-sponsorship of marriage. He remarked: "Statistics tell us that children from two parent families are less likely to end up in poverty, drop out of school, become addicted to drugs, have a child out of wedlock, suffer abuse or become a violent criminal and end up in prison" (2/27/02). Obscuring the fact that the overall differences among kids from one- or two-parent families are not absolute and that most kids do fine (Stacey, 1997), he concludes with the solution, to "give unprecedented support to strengthening marriages." The \$300 million per year he earmarks for state-led marriage promotion programs would fund workshops for single Americans that "include pre-marital education and counseling, as well as research and technical assistance into promising approaches that work" (Whitehouse factsheet, pg. 1).

The Department of Health and Human Services already channels federal funding into what are called “Fatherhood Initiative Programs,” and separate programs for single mothers to find and keep a husband (Boo, 2003).

These workshops and programs help individuals work on themselves, so that single mothers and absent fathers learn with state support what they have apparently not learned well enough by informal means: therapeutic techniques for marital discipline. From this perspective techniques of marital discipline translate into disciplined selves. In the speech, Bush expresses the hope that the poor and unmarried will undo what he posits as their ignorance; they will learn that it “is more rewarding to be a responsible citizen than a welfare client: it is better to be a breadwinner and respected by your family... Too many families are strained and fragile and broken. Too many Americans still have not found work and the purpose it brings” (Bush, 2/27/02). Through welfare policy, these problems can be solved by the discipline of marriage. For example, in a recent report in *The New Yorker*, Katherine Boo (2003) writes about a state-sponsored marriage class in Oklahoma City, where the rare woman who found a potential husband discovered that, on \$250 per week, he was more concerned with taking care of his son and keeping his car from getting repossessed than with getting married. The marriage class encouraged women to learn communication skills and to understand the state’s calculus that two paychecks were better than one, but the teacher of the class mourned that the responsibility for enacting the state’s program seemed to fall exclusively on rooms full of women.

However, this policy makes sense to Bush because as he defines it, marital discipline includes learning effective techniques in dealing with conflict, learning

patience, and practicing self-sacrifice while enhancing independence. Bush invokes premarital counseling programs that address serious marital problems by “teach[ing] couples how to resolve conflict, to improve communication, and, most importantly, to treat each other with respect.” Thus therapeutic techniques will help to solve the problem of poverty in America.

Individual discipline can be legitimately posited as the solution to the nation’s economic crisis through Bush’s image of the “compassionate conservative.” In the February 2002 address, he offers each of his fellow Americans the opportunity to “be a soldier in the armies of compassion... to make America a hopeful and strong and decent country for all of us.” This discourse subtly releases the state from its social responsibility by positing the helpful neighbor model: “In times of personal crisis, people do not need the rules of a bureaucracy; they need the help of a neighbor” (Bush, 2/27/02). The helpful neighbor stands in the place of state assistance, and brilliantly constructs scaled back state assistance as “a compassionate welfare system that knows the true strength of country lies in the hearts and souls of our fellow citizens” (Bush, 2/27/02).

Bush brings potential critics on board with his explicit support for single mothers. Positing these women as “heroes” in the face of men’s irresponsibility, he seeks to strike a chord with the more feminist-leaning public, while solidly blaming poor men for the nation’s poverty. He invokes Sherrie Jordan, “a mother of four and former welfare recipient,” who is overwhelmed with her own sense of possibility, earning the respect of her fellow citizens and her nation through work. Jordan may be a hero, internalizing American discipline, but her glory comes at a price: she must admit that she is personally responsible for the nation’s economy.

Bush's plan echoes the program Jacques Donzelot analyzes in his 1977 book, *The Policing of Families*. In 18th century France the state designed a similar program to decrease its fiscal responsibility for illegitimate children through state forced marriages. In this case, the French working class was not invested in marriage, by and large, because marriage was more of a cost than a benefit to working class men (they generally married within their class and thus did not receive the benefit of a dowry). To commit working class men to marriage the state needed to offer them a bribe – the free domestic labor of women – in order to align working class family patterns with bourgeois ideals and control the undisciplined working class men. The bribe for working class women was the “feminine career” which offered them surveillance power in the home in order to discipline working class men. Bush's proposed solution to the state fiscal crisis in the United States is similar, offering impoverished women money for taking on responsibility for the social problem of poverty.

Why Would Americans Want to Join Bush's Army?

Why should Bush's policies resonate with Americans? Why would Americans answer the Bush administration's call to imagine marriage as the solution to the problem of poverty? We argue that the American population can consent to this attribution of responsibility because marriage: (1) perpetuates the illusion of individual choice and empowerment, that the decision to behave in a certain way will meet with rewards, while (2) obscuring alternative arrangements which might better serve their interests. We see three components to this ideology: the bribe, the script, and the illusion of choice.

In the case of welfare policy it is fairly clear that the poor would be forced, rather than invited, to join the “Armies of Compassion.” In his proposed plan, welfare benefits could be dependent on participation in marriage workshops. Furthermore, state TANF funding would be distributed based on increasing rates of marriage within the particular state’s welfare rolls. In this sense financial assistance from the state forms a bribe for poor individuals to marry, as if their “failure” to follow the marriage script is a simple matter of individual choice.

The case of welfare policy touches on an example where the apparatus which disciplines people of means fails to work. With its explicit deal, however, Bush’s policy offers the promise, in the words of one of the women Boo followed, of “a healthy, wealthy, normal-lady life” (Boo, 2003:106), in exchange for behaving like those with more resources—as if behavior creates resources and not vice versa. But how does this disciplinary apparatus work in more ideal situations? We now turn to a dramatization of that ideal—one which works as much by its failings as by its successes—a so-called reality TV show called *Married by America*, which aired on Fox in the Spring of 2003.

Starting in the late 1990’s with *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?* American television producers launched a series of reality television programs (such as *Joe Millionaire*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Mr. Personality*) pitched towards American television viewers’ dwindling sense of public efficacy and anxieties over the strength of marriage bonds. All of these reality television programs share a basic plotline, starting with a single but attractive man or woman, television viewers and producers are asked to find the one and only perfect life partner suited for marriage. In tandem, television producers in the United States created a set of competitive reality

television programs in search for an ideal representative of America (such as *All American Girl* and *American Idol*). In each of these programs, contestants are selected on their potential to embody Americanness, and American viewers are asked to settle the competitions by granting celebrity status to some “common” yet true American.

The Fox network’s program *Married by America* combines both types of reality television program by exploring the insecurity of marital bonds at the same time it considers what it means to a true “American” couple. It is the epitome of the growing trend in television programming that indicates something sociologically important about the way Americans are called to imagine themselves and their reality (Anderson, 1991). Although it bears the title of a reality television show, its importance does not come from reflecting a recognizable reality to viewers, but by playfully creating and fulfilling a desire to toy with anxieties about marriage and national security. This show is explicitly on the edge. Viewers are not expected to support the televised whirlwind courtships and arranged stranger marriages the show presents, but to laugh at the failures and bloopers that emerge from altering the traditional private aspects of monogamous coupling.

Married by America offers what its announcer calls an “experiment in arranged marriage.” The show begins with five people seeking partners. The parents and family of those seeking a partner ask three available people of the other sex questions about them in hope of finding a good match. American viewers vote for the best match for each bachelor and bachelorette. These couples are engaged on television before they actually see or meet each other (each man slips a ring on his fiancée’s finger while she is behind a screen). After the engagement, the five couples go to an upscale ranch-resort and begin their videotaped courtships. They will be judged and eliminated by a panel of three

“relationship experts,” but of the last two couples, viewers select a winner by internet vote. Finally, of the remaining two couples Americans choose the best couple. If this couple decides to marry they receive \$100,000 from Fox, a large house and an S.U.V. In a period of three weeks the ideal-typical American courting and dating process is condensed as each couple starts with a first date and hopes to end with a marriage.

In *Married by America*, Fox producers combine a sense of reality and seriousness of marriage tradition with a paradoxical sense of entertainment, experimentation and play. The introduction of each episode attempts to capture the audience with the sense they are participants in a grand experiment with prolific consequences.

What if the first face you saw in the morning and the last face you saw when you went to bed at night was the face of a total stranger? What if you changed everything you knew about love and marriage? What if you abandoned your ordinary life to embark on an extraordinary experiment? These five couples did just that. Committing to marry complete strangers, sight unseen. Bound to live with their fiancés on an secluded 300 acre estate. The lives of these new couples will be forever intertwined. You will witness every move they make as personalities clash and passions ignite. They must learn to love each other for better or for worse. The clock is ticking as each hour brings them closer to their wedding day.

In one sense, this introduction invites the audience to understand the situation in front of them as so extraordinary that it must be a joke, a playful experiment in an otherwise serious life decision.

On the other hand, the program also retains a sense of seriousness by appropriating marriage traditions even though they are brought to a context of a three-week, televised arranged courtship and marriage. After the five couples are selected by the parents of the contestants and American viewers, the final five episodes take place on a private ranch. Each episode starts with a shortly condensed next step in a prototypical engagement and ends with the elimination of the least compatible couple. First, the five

couples live in separate suites in the estate's main house and are given a suitable first date (such as mountain climbing, horseback riding, or biking). After the elimination of one couple, the remaining four couples take the "next step" in forming a marriage by living in private villas on the estate to test their compatibility in a domestic situation. The couples are then shipped off to meet each member's parents, and in keeping with the patriarchal tradition of marriage, each groom asks the bride's father or "father figure" for "his daughter's hand in marriage." After three couples have been eliminated, the final two couples fly to Las Vegas for the bachelor and bachelorette parties which include strippers as a traditional test of future marital fidelity and the final mourning of the imminent loss of sexual freedom.

The traditional and naturalized progress of marriage preparation masks the skillfully contrived and plotted events of the Fox marriages. The show sets the limits of these relationships, all the while retaining the image of free choice. While *Married by America* is a clearly public event, the success of the specific marriages is understood as the formation of a private, intimate bond between a man and a woman. For instance, when one couple has sex almost as soon as they are alone together, speculations fly as to whether their "passion" will be a strong enough foundation for a marriage. At the same time, individuals who do not wish to share a bed, kiss, or have sex quickly enough (within the first week or two) are accused, implicitly or explicitly, of being frigid (if they are women) or potentially gay (if they are men), or just simply not committed to making it work. In either case, individuals, rather than the structure of the courtship, receive blame for the failure of the relationship. In a sense, the show performs magic analogous to marriages outside the television studio. While marriage is a public, state held contract

between a man and a woman, well-disciplined individuals misrecognize this state contract as a purely private and natural progression in monogamous relationships.

Consequently, the show's tension resides in the question of whether a couple formed on television can exhibit the same truth and authenticity thought to be found within more traditional couples. *Married by America* centrally revolves around a search for the *truth*: are these couples really in love and committed or are they just motivated by the prize money? The host makes this clear as the contestants arrive at the ranch by proclaiming, "This is where the truth of your relationship will come out. This is your proving grounds for your life together as a couple." When one couple has an opportunity for couple sex counseling from sociologist Pepper Schwartz, Schwartz urges them to honestly unearth their sexual desires and fantasies in order to reveal the true source of their happiness, seeing that truth as the only solid foundation for a lasting marriage. Additionally, the narrator calls the wedding itself "the moment of truth" because it will test if the couples are devoted to "making it work" or "forcing something that just isn't there." In fact, at the end of each program three experts decide the truth of each relationship and eliminate the one that will not lead to an honest bonding of a man and a woman.

In the background, the Fox prize money works to test this image of truth, by serving as a bribe for these couples to marry. If they just stay in it for the money, viewers are led to believe, then the marriage is not based on the true bond of love—it is not a true marriage and thus it will fail. The Bush administration's welfare policy has scandalized many liberals, and it might be that what people find offensive is that it too offers a bribe,

using money to entice welfare clients to marry. As Boo observes in the marriage class she attends:

“...the social scientists on whom Oklahoma relies believe that a crucial part of making and keeping a marriage is disabusing oneself of sentimental notions. Marriage is not sexual and emotional bliss between soul mates, they contend; it is a job requiring as much patience, self-sacrifice, and discipline as any other” (Boo, 2003:108).

While the truth of marriage is offered to poor people as sacrifice and discipline, in its televised ideal, the authenticity of the marital bond is seen to rest within the specific couples' commitment to ignoring the prize money and learning how to love.

The producers of *Married by America* provide an illusion of privacy to suggest that these couples' commitment *could* be authentic, if the individuals have what it takes. At the same time, the publicity of each coupling satisfies a public interest in married couples' interactions. Each relationship on the show is made to seem private to the extent that each couple has its own house in which to enact its couplehood dramas, even though this clearly is a public affair. Cameras run constantly— prime time viewers get to watch them fight and have sex, make advances and be rebuffed, and on occasion, a person will run to the bathroom for escape from the camera's panoptic eye. The show's judges occasionally confront couples about things they have seen in the videotapes, further disrupting the illusion of privacy. Nevertheless, through the magic of editing, each couple's drama is made to look as much like a private affair as possible.

The couples seem authentic to the extent that they follow a marriage script, which well-disciplined individuals follow as if by instinct. This script is most readily apparent when we look at the gender roles advocated by the shows editors and producers. We see these scripts emerge in *Married by America*, for instance, when the five couples began

their journey to their resort. As all of the brides-to-be waited outside of their hotel rooms, each was picked up by her prospective groom in an S.U.V. In all but one case the groom loaded up the luggage, opened and shut the car door for his fiancée and drove her to the estate. Kevin and Jill, the one couple who deviated from this norm, were the brunt of jokes upon their arrival.

As the show continues, the intensity and importance of naturalized sex difference increases and the scripts become more significant. For example, Denise and Stephen (the third couple to be eliminated) could not seem to “find the chemistry and passion” in their relationship. Denise told Stephen he seemed gay because he did not want to kiss her, and she expressed worry that he must think that she needed to lose 30 pounds (which would make her a complete skeleton). Stephen claimed to find Denise attractive, but told America (rather than Denise) that he was turned off by her desire to initiate affection. Alone in front of the camera Stephen confessed, “I’m the type of guy that likes to do the chasing, and I like Denise to do the running. If she would have just relaxed and put her head down on my chest then, um, I would have perhaps kissed her, it would have felt more comfortable” (3/24/03).

The negotiation of gendered expectations exploded when another couple, Kevin and Jill (one of the final two pairs), discussed Jill’s past modeling for *Playboy* magazine. Kevin erroneously expected that Jill would willingly give up her nude modeling opportunities once they were married, and remarked: “I just feel that now that I am engaged to her and now that I am going to be marrying this woman, I don’t want her to be seen in a magazine again. I don’t want her body open to everyone else; that is how I feel”

(3/30/03). Similarly, finalist Tony worried that his fiancée Billie Jean might not be wife material because of her wild, “party girl” behavior.

In all of these examples—the three “most promising” couples by the show’s logic—gendered expectations were understood as individual proclivities rather than systematic, socially pervasive examples of the power of men over women in marriage. Although heavily scripted in American culture (and perhaps even by the show’s producers), the last three men to survive the cut all understood their desire to lead, control and have sole access to the bodies of their women as their own personal feeling and preference.

Interestingly enough, the lack of this expectation may have been what led to the failure of the first couple eliminated, Matt and Cortéz, to make the cut. In the ride to the ranch, Matt himself observed that the show’s producers assumed that the men would do the driving, and offered to let Cortéz drive. When Cortéz said she wanted a man who was more dominant and controlling, Matt said he thought that sounded messed up. No “chemistry” formed between them, and the couple was first to be eliminated. (And viewers never again got to hear Matt’s feminist critique of the show!)

Given the disadvantages three remaining women (Jill, Billie Jean, and Denise, fiancées of Kevin, Tony, and Stephen) might face with the marriages into which they were about to enter, why would they be excited to lose their individuality, control over their own bodies, and the power to initiate sex? On *Married by America*, the possible disadvantages of entering into marriage were outweighed by their sense of fulfilling a life-long dream. For finalists Billie Jean and Jill, this script started to become real as they picked out wedding dresses, and they each exclaimed that they were elated to experience

“every girl’s dream.” In speaking alone to the camera, Billie Jean expressed this childhood excitement, “It just felt like a Cinderella story right in front of my face. I felt so beautiful. I felt like a princess. I can’t wait! This is going to be the happiest day of my life. I swear to God” (4/7/03). Jill expected a “storybook ending...this is the happiest ending ever. I have found the guy. I fell in love. I have everything that I have ever wanted” (4/7/03). Both women’s dispositions were scripted, but unlike the men, they recognized the script and saw it as good. In spite of Tony’s reservations and distance, and in spite of the heated arguments between him and Billie Jean, the latter still remained convinced of the script’s magic. Similarly, Jill expressed reservations about Kevin’s conservatism and close ties to his family, but still saw marriage to him as a “storybook ending.”

It is this recognition that makes the marriage script work differently for women than for men. For a woman to recognize the marriage script’s work in her life did not threaten its power, so long as she complied anyway. In the show’s logic, for a man to recognize the script proved more threatening to marriage ideology, since this recognition itself meant an abdication of power. The gender egalitarian Matt failed, ever so slightly, to follow his script and his relationship to Cortéz never got off the ground. His failure reinforced the marriage script—refusing to be controlling, refusing to let Cortéz unquestioningly follow his lead, meant that there could be no relationship.

While Jill, the *Playboy* model, expressed belief in the storybook ending, the tensions between her refusal to repudiate her nude modeling and her desire to marry Kevin still needed to be resolved, even as they made the walk to the altar. She resolved them, in fact, by refusing to marry him, remarking that she loved him too much and that

marriage was too serious for them to rush into, and asking him to try to make the relationship work on their own, outside of the show's context. In resolving their own tension, she thus resolved the tension the show created, the anxiety that the American ideal of individual marital choice might not be any better than a television-arranged marriage after all.

This is the crux of the illusion of choice: one's ability to choose her or his marital partner (free choice marriage vs. arranged marriages) creates the illusion that participation in the institution of marriage as a whole is a personal choice, when in fact these dispositions are linked to state policies and social structure by the disciplining of gender/marriage scripts.

Marriage in the Public Interest

While in the American ideal marriage seems rooted in the truth of individuals' feelings, *Married by America* gives the viewing/voting public the opportunity to exercise its own individual choices, while performing the public interest in ideal-seeming marriages. By giving viewers the opportunity to cast votes as to which couple should marry, Fox infuses *Married by America* voters with a sense that they will change individuals' lives with their votes (a sense that was stripped of those who voted in the 2000 presidential election). Giving directions to the viewers, the host explains:

The final vote is in your hands. Over the past weeks you have seen two relationships grow and change. Based on everything you have witnessed you must decide which of these two couples has the potential to form a lasting marriage... Your votes will decide their fate tonight... The future of these couples is once again in your hands. Your votes could change their lives forever (4/7/03).

But as in the 2000 elections, in the end the votes did not matter, as the decision was taken to a higher power. The experiment failed and both weddings were called off. Instead of a Supreme Court (or the panel of relationship experts who judged the couples as they progressed), in each couple an individual called it off, thus saving the American marriage ideal's image of personal choice.

In this dramatization of the American marriage ideal, we learn that marriage “really is” a matter of personal choice, as well-disciplined Americans freely choose their partners according to available marital scripts. With such an ideal in place, we can see how the President's placing responsibility for the United States fiscal crisis not on state and corporate policies and practices, but on the potentially-married couple can seem compassionate rather than coercive, offering the illusion that individuals can choose to exit poverty at will just as freely as they would chose a marital partner. It is when the illusion of personal choice is ruptured that the state must resort to a financial bribe—the financial incentive seems to encourage particular choices, but it also reveals the economic structure behind marriage.

Bush's welfare policy skillfully masks alternatives. It masks alternative ways to address the fiscal crisis, such as increasing state revenue through a more progressive tax structure, or dismantling the capitalist economic system in which poverty is inevitable and essential. Poor individuals are bribed to take on responsibility themselves for their own poverty and relative lack of options and opportunities. Not only does this program mask alternatives to solving the state fiscal crisis and poverty in general, it also masks alternative family arrangements. Marriage, with the backing of the state, emerges as the one moral way to organize intimacy. It renders unthinkable alternatives such as

community parenting, parenting and family structures not organized by sexual desires between men and women, and the like — even if, as some have argued, these alternatives would avoid the problems of isolation and gender hierarchy fostered by traditional marriage arrangements (Stacey, 1990; Barrett & McIntosh, 1982; Weston, 1991; Nardi, 1999).

Conclusion

Marriage offers a zone of personal security, and ensures that people will not have to live alone. Marriage also offers a zone of national security, assuring Americans that if the nation gets married we will protect ourselves from dangers associated with poverty. Marriage has been offered as a magical solution to economic inequality, crime, addiction and other economic and social problems that are actually built into the American capitalist economic system. The Fox network and President Bush both construct marriage as a national, public contract while at the same time fostering or allowing Americans' belief in marriage as a private, intimate, and sacred bond between a man and a woman. The slippage between these two simultaneous definitions of marriage allow it to perpetually seem both an individual freedom and a social necessity. You have to do it even if you don't want to, but who wouldn't want to?

By juxtaposing two versions of marriage ideology as they are presented to the American public, we have examined tensions inhering in current American notions of the marriage ideal. Namely, the tension between marriage as an economic arrangement versus marriage as rooted in the truth of feelings—marriage as self-denial versus self-actualization—structures both the middle-class ideal of marriage and the way it is

packaged into a program for disciplining the poor. By examining the ways marriage disciplines people to follow its gendered and classed/raced scripts with a bribe of individual choice, we have shown how the notion of individual choice itself secures both the institution of marriage and conservative economic policy, giving people an incentive to take individual responsibility for the nation's economic problems. And at a more general level, we have traced the intersections of numerous levels of power as they crystallize in the institution we call marriage.

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