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Saving Marriage One Relationship at a Time: Culture, Family, and Social Change in Christian Premarital Counseling

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

SAVING MARRIAGE ONE RELATIONSHIP AT A TIME: CULTURE, FAMILY,
AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CHRISTIAN PREMARITAL COUNSELING

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

COURTNEY ANN IRBY

CHICAGO, IL

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ABSTRACT

Despite concerns about the decline of marriage in the United States, research has consistently revealed that getting married and staying married remain important to Americans. The value attached to marriage, however, is coupled with an ethic of individualism that results in a focus on personal satisfaction and fulfillment in marriage. While this individualized marriage has been established at both the macro level as part of an American marriage culture and at the micro level in the preferences and actions of individuals, less attention has focused on how communities mediate, respond, and react to these beliefs. I draw from a comparative study of Catholic and evangelical Protestant marriage preparation programs to analyze how religious communities interpret cultural shifts in marriage and provide their members with lenses to understand them in their daily lives. In addition to research at six archives, the study includes ethnographic observations of four marriage preparation curricula and seventy interviews with participating couples and leaders of these and other programs. Through this research, I examine how religious groups craft discourses on the “good” and “Godly” marriage by drawing from broader therapeutic discourses and religious imagery. In addition to showing how this has implications for constructions of gender and sexuality, I consider the reception of these messages among premarital couples. My findings help to contextualize analyses of religious and marital change by situating recent cultural shifts within the broader development of a therapeutic culture. .

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Nearly twenty years after his wildly popular *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman, an evangelical marriage and family therapist, published a book reflecting his personal and professional surprises about marriage. To introduce *Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married*, he notes that “No one gets married hoping to be miserable or to make their spouse miserable” (2010:9) but that “we all know that the divorce rate in Western culture continues to hover around fifty percent” (9-10). As he explains it,

Divorce is the result of a lack of preparation for marriage and the failure to learn the skills of working together as teammates in an intimate relationship. What is ironic is that we recognize the need for education in all other pursuits of life and fail to recognize that need when it comes to marriage. Most people spend far more time in preparation for their vocation than they do in preparation for marriage. Therefore, it should not be surprising that they are more successful in their vocational pursuits than they are in reaching the goal of marital happiness. (10)

Working against the cultural cliché of “love conquers all,” Chapman equates marriage (and by extension romantic love) with the work and training of a profession. But what is “marriage preparation”? Where does one go to receive this education? Unlike professions where people can expect that obtaining a higher education will provide them with a knowledge base that employer’s own job training can build upon, the sources for relationship skills are less clear.

While people may spend far more time formally preparing for occupations, most also informally invest significantly in the type of self-work that they believe will help

them to find a romantic partner and obtain their imagined type of intimate relationship. As comedian, and aspiring sociologist, Aziz Ansari (2015:24) observes “searching for a soul mate takes a long time and requires enormous emotional investment.” Drawing attention to the heightened stress and potential reward of this process, he notes that “taking time to develop ourselves and date different people before we get married helps us make better choices” (26). An implicit culture of marriage preparation exists in how people engage in a process of self-work and exploration to help determine who they are, what they want in a relationship, and to learn more about their potential options in spouses. Scholars have argued this seemingly individualistic pursuit for the best relationship is part of a broader cultural shift of the late modernity that privileges the notion of the self “as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible” (Giddens 1991:75). Importantly, this emphasis on individual responsibility has been associated with a decline in traditional sources of authority, identity, and a general weakening of social norms (Bellah et al. 1985; Cherlin 2004; Giddens 1992; Lasch 1979; Popenoe 1993; Silva 2012). Perhaps because of this attention on the increasing significance of individualism, contemporary accounts of relationship formation and marriage often investigate individuals as isolated units of decision, assessment, and reflection, who are essentially “choosers.”

As a sociologist of families *and* religion, my research has examined how the self-work individuals engage in as they search for a soul mate occurs within community contexts. In a study of dating among evangelical Protestant young adults, for example, I found that their religious communities shaped expectations of what a “good” relationship should look like through the provision of discourses and resources critical to the self-

reflexive process of sorting prospective partners (Irby 2013, 2014a). To gain greater insight into the mediating role that religious communities can play in individuals' lives, the present research examines Christian marriage preparation – Catholic and evangelical Protestant.¹ As an example of a brief, but formal, intervention by religious communities into the lives of individuals, premarital counseling (as it also sometimes called) involves an explicit discussion with engaged couples on what makes a marriage good, healthy, and, even, Christian.² Ranging from group classes with other couples to individualized sessions with a premarital counselor, this moment of intentionality allows unarticulated beliefs, anxieties, and assumptions to surface and be showcased.³

Marriage preparation programs, thus, offer an ideal lens through which to study shifts in both religious and family institutions because they represent an intentional articulation of marriage ideologies and relationship scripts by faith communities. As Kathleen Gerson (2010:5) describes the recent social transitions since the postwar era, “These intertwined changes in intimate relationships, work trajectories, and gender arrangements have created new patterns of living, working, and family-building that amount to no less than a social revolution.” Precipitating and occurring along with these cultural shifts, religious communities have offered premarital counseling to engaged couples as a form of religious education and a way to cultivate relationship skills to stave

¹ Smith and Woodberry (1998) argue that the term “conservative Protestant” should be used to replace both “evangelical” and “fundamentalist” because it more expansively captures a similar set of movements within American Protestantism in recent years. While I see the conceptual value in their argument, I continue to use the term “evangelical” because emerged empirically. The individual people and organization in my study more often used this term to describe themselves and their communities.

² I use the terms “premarital counseling” and “marriage preparation” interchangeably. In practice, I found that evangelicals tended to prefer the former and Catholics the latter. In Chapter 2, I historically contextualize this distinction.

³ While not everyone is formally or professionally a “counselor,” I use the term “premarital counselors” to succinctly describe the person(s) that conduct and facilitate marriage preparation.

off divorce. In fact, Catholics began to institutionalize marriage preparation programs during the post-war era – a time often considered a “golden age” of family and religion (Coontz 2005; Edgell 2003, 2006; Farrell 1999; Marler 1995; Wuthnow 1988) – out of fear that “the forces of materialism, secularism, and relativism” would “weaken the unity of marriage” (Burke 1957:2-3). As a cultural and institutional practice that has survived these decades of social change, marriage preparation has the potential to reveal significant insights into the shifts of meaning within these institutions.

Shifting Landscapes of Belonging in the United States: Families and Religion

Jerry Pankhurst and Sharon Houseknect (2000:7) argue that “religion and family stand out as two institutions that deal with the person as a whole and not as a segment.” In part, this may stem from the fact that they contribute to a sense of “belonging” for people, providing them with a personal identity and connection to others. For instance, selecting a faith community and a romantic partner both represent relationships that people actively pursue and form because they reflect their own sense of self and/or help to accomplish a desired form of self. However, many scholars argue that what it means to “belong” to both of these institutions has dramatically transformed in recent decades (Bellah et al. 1985; Coontz 2005; Cherlin 2009; Edgell 2006; Farrell 1999; Gerson 2010; Roof 1999). In particular, a common causal culprit – individualism – has been targeted. As I review, scholars independently studying each institution have argued that a growing emphasis on individual choice and fulfillment has drastically altered and destabilized the traditional authorities associated within both realms. To theoretically overcome this *problem of individualism* identified by scholars of religion and family, I draw on an interdisciplinary

body of literature to shift the analytic focus to examine the *self as a project within a therapeutic culture*.

The Problem of Individualism

Despite Americans having long been characterized by their individualism (Toqueville 2007/1841), scholars reflecting at the end of the twentieth century consistently argue that this cultural tendency has reached a new apex (Ammerman and Roof 1995; Bellah et al. 1985; Cherlin 2005; Popenoe 1993; Putnam 2000; O'Brien 2015). Perhaps because the “public” sphere of work and politics already had been thoroughly individualized during the Enlightenment era (Coontz 1992), discussions about the recent individualizing of American culture have focused on the “private” spheres of family and religion. Unlike families, religion is not always solely associated with the private sphere but both institutions share assumed characteristics of reciprocity and altruism (Ammerman 1997; Bellah et al. 1985; Berger 1967; Hart 1986; Houseknecht and Pankhurst 2000).

Additionally, as Kevin Christiano (2000:44) argues these two institutions “occupy, and in some senses govern, the realm of personal intimacy for Americans.” After a supposed “golden era” in the 1950s for both institutions, however, individualism permeated even these “havens” as norms of reciprocity were replaced with an ethos of personal satisfaction and self-development.⁴

⁴This process, and the associated anxieties it produced, are clearly gendered. As Stephanie Coontz (1992) has argued the previous individualization of the public sphere rested on the gendered and unequal structuring of the separate spheres ideology which segmented the interdependent and altruistic obligations to women and their realm of the private sphere. As she explains it, “The precondition for ‘freeing’ men from traditional obligations, hierarchies, and interdependencies to become individualistic economic and political actors was a magnification of women’s moral obligations and personal dependencies, both in the family and beyond it” (52). Thus, it may not come as much of a surprise that as women entered into the thoroughly individualized and “rationally egotistic” sphere of work and politics during the 1960s and 1970s that individualism once again became viewed as threatening. Not surprisingly, the framing of this rise of individualism as “selfish” is also the same criticisms placed on women during this time.

Within families, scholars argue that the structural and cultural shifts of recent decades have overhauled marriage as an institution by changing how people find meaning within it (Amato et al. 2007; Bellah et al. 1985; Cherlin 2004, 2009; Coontz 2005; Cott 2000; Gerson 2010; Farrell 1999; Hackstaff 1999; Illouz 2008; Stacey 1991; Thistle 2006). With rising expectations that marriage should be personally fulfilling, and an accompanying increase in divorce rates, scholars began to conclude “after centuries of being the bedrock of the American family system, marriage is losing its privileged status and becoming one lifestyle choice among many” (Amato et al. 2007:2). Despite a general agreement with this assessment, its significance has been heatedly debated among scholars, politicians, and even pastors. In assessing this literature, Paul Amato and colleagues (2007) argue that two perspectives emerged: marital-decline and marital-resilience. At the heart of this disagreement exists a dispute about the impact and significance of individualism upon marriage, with the marital-decline school tending towards criticism and the marital-resilience perspective towards celebration. Scholars working to demonstrate a decline in marriage frequently cite a weakening of social norms and increased focus on the self with descriptions that verge on claims about a rise in selfishness (Blackenhorn 2007; Glenn 1993; Popenoe 1993; Waite 1995; Waite and Gallagher 2000; Wilcox 2006). In a classic example of this perspective, David Popenoe (1993:528) contends “people have become less willing to invest time, money, and energy in family life, turning instead to investments in themselves.” In contrast, marital-resilience scholars contest the idea that Americans have become *excessively* individualistic (Amato et al. 2007) and instead see a democratic potential in the cultural shift towards self-fulfillment (Coontz 2005; Gerson 2002, 2010; Schwartz 1994; Stacey

1991). As Stephanie Coontz (2005:306) argues “Marriage has become more joyful, more loving, and more satisfying for many couples than ever before in history.” Importantly, these scholars contend this possibility is not in spite of individualism but because of it. Drawing attention to a “rupture” in the ideological power of marriage that “imposes mythical homogeneity on the diverse means by which people organize their intimate relationships” (Stacey 1991:269), these scholars view the proliferation of individualistic strategies in relationships as evidence of people’s ability to craft more personally fulfilling marriages. This even contributes to a more optimistic reading of divorce that views it as “a second chance at happiness” (Amato et al. 2007:7).

Despite the differences in the vantage points, both perspectives point to individualism as a key explanatory mechanism in the “deinstitutionalization” (Cherlin 2004) or “disestablishment” (Cott 2000) of American marriage. According to Andrew Cherlin (2004), this process occurred because of two key cultural transitions in the twentieth century: the increasing importance of emotional satisfaction that followed from the recent emphasis on romantic love and the ethic of expressive individualism. Seeking to understand the paradox of why Americans continue to marry when it is no longer “necessary” – that is, it no longer affords them the practical advantages that it once did – he argues that marriage now represents a “choice” that people can (and generally do) make because it continues to have symbolic significance. As opposed to the “companionate marriage” (Burgess and Locke 1945) of the mid-twentieth century which posited that men and women obtain emotional satisfaction through fulfilling clear roles, Cherlin argues people now form “individualized marriages” and do so “less for the social benefits that marriage provides than for the personal achievement it represents” (857). A

key feature of this new form of marriage is that traditional sources of identity, including religion, have lost influence in shaping who people form relationships with, as well as when and how they form them. Thus, marriage, he argues, is characterized as “something to be achieved through one’s own efforts rather than something to which one routinely accedes” (855).

As with studies of families over the past few decades, scholars of religion have noted similar processes that have contributed to a deinstitutionalization of faith. While American religion has long been characterized by disestablishment that some argue created conditions of greater vitality and innovation (Finke and Stark 2005; Warner 1993), shifts in the religious landscape since the postwar era have resulted in debates about the privatization and individualizing of religion (Bellah et al. 1985; Beyer 1990; O’Brien 2015; Roof 1999; Roof and McKinney 1987). This dispute bears striking resemblance to those within the sociology of family, often marked by disagreement about whether individualism (as well as volunteerism and privatization) indicates a decline in religion or provides a more conducive context for it to thrive (Ammerman 1997; Finke and Stark 2005; Edgell 2012; Warner 1993). For many years this “secularization debate” contested whether or not religion (writ large) could or would survive in a context of disestablishment, however, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and continued vitality of the American religious marketplace eventually resulted in a theoretical shift (Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Following Mark Chaves’ (1994) challenge to replace the analytic category of “religion” with “religious authority,” the problem of individualism in the subfield’s debates transformed into questions about the difference and overlap between spirituality and religiosity. Rather than ask “Are we secular yet?” (Edgell

2012:249), scholars of religion have turned to debate the meaning and significance of the growth in individualized forms of spirituality that are less dependent on formalized religious authority (Ammerman 2007, 2013; Bellah et al. 1985; Bender 2003; Dillon 1999; Ellingson 2001, 2007; Lyon 2000; Manning 2015; McGuire 2008; Miller 1997; Roof 1999; Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 2007).

While religious individualism has a longstanding history in the United States (Bellah et al. 1985; Hatch 1989), it historically operated within the more bounded framework of religious traditions (Ellingson 2007; Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1988). However, as Wade Clark Roof (1999:4) describes, “Boundaries separating one faith tradition from another that once seemed fixed are now often blurred; religious identities are malleable and multifaceted, often overlapping several traditions.” Referencing cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s that created a zeitgeist of doubt and distrust of social institutions, he notes that a “quest culture” now exists “both inside and outside the religious establishments” (53). In some cases, this produced “seekers” who operate within this new context comfortably picking-and-choosing from a variety of religious communities to craft their own faith not bound to any one tradition (Ammerman 2007; Bellah et al. 1985; Manning 2015; McGuire 2008; Roof 1999). In what has become the quintessential example of this, Robert Bellah and coauthors (1985) provide the case of a woman whose “radically individualistic” (235) faith she names after herself: “Sheilism.” Seekers, such as Sheila, construct an individualized religion that rests on their own ability to discern over and above external sources of religious authority. Yet, even those operating within the more confined space of a single religious tradition now appear to do so with increased confidence in their authority to (re-)interpret and contest dominant or

official discourses (Baggett 2009; Dillon 1999; Irby 2013). Often the term “spirituality” has been used to capture these more disconnected faith systems with “religiosity” reserved for those that operate more obviously within a formal religious tradition (Ammerman 2014; Bender 2003; Ellingson 2001). In either case, an increase in religious individualism has been associated with people actively pursuing a faith they find personally meaningful with little regard to the formal views of faith traditions. Indeed, scholars have increasingly focused on new modes of being that ground religious authority in “experience and practice instead of in belief and doctrine” (Ellingson 2001:257; See also Ammerman 2014; Avishai 2008; Edgell 2012; McGuire 2008; Williams, Irby, and Warner 2016).

As presumably the last vestiges of institutionalized relationalism and reciprocity, the substantial shifts in religion and family at the end of the twentieth century have resulted in significant and heated debates. For scholars of both social institutions, the problem of individualism emerged as they sought to understand how it had reshaped the presumed norms of belonging within these contexts. However, these attempts to address this issue often myopically emphasize people’s fraying or absent connections to communities. The general disconnect between these two broader subfields helps to illustrate this point.⁵ As Penny Edgell (2003:162) notes, “religion and family are tightly linked and interdependent institutions, rapid and fundamental changes in one institutional arena may trigger responsive changes in the other.” To help ground and contextualize

⁵ While an existing body of literature has examined the intersection of religion and family, the subject matter has been of less interest to sociologists of religion lately (D’Antonio Newman and Wright 1982; Edgell 2006; Pankhurst and Houseknecht 2000). Additionally, studies within the sociology of family appear to have continued the legacy of envisioning religion as either a mechanism of social control or social support in family life (D’Antonio, Newman and Wright 1982; Thomas and Cornwall 1990) and have not been particularly cultural in their theoretical approach.

these questions about how individualism has recently impacted changes in the institutions of family and religion, I draw on an interdisciplinary body of literature that has examined how this time period has also been marked by the stabilization of a “therapeutic culture.” Doing so, provides greater theoretical leverage on central underlying questions within these debates: How do people meaningfully construct a sense of self? How do social institutions and communities provide contexts and cultural resources in this process?

Self as a Project within a Therapeutic Culture

During the last half-century, American culture has been transformed by the emergence and stabilization of a ubiquitous therapeutic ethos (Aubry and Travis 2015; Bellah et al. 1985; Furedi 2004; Illuz 2008; Imber 2004; McGee 2005; Moskowitz 2001; Rakow 2013; Silva 2012; Wright 2008). Researchers examining this phenomenon contend that it is not simply that traditional sources of authority and identity – such as religion and family – have declined in favor of the power of the individual but, more precisely, that therapeutic discourses and logics have served as a replacement. Without having dismantled the preexisting structures of identity that divide people, scholars contend that for everyone a sense of self has increasingly become defined by “interior feelings” (Aubry and Travis 2015:1) and there is a shared belief that “happiness is the ultimate goal and psychological healing the means” (Moskowitz 2001:1).

Early scholars observing this cultural shift echoed the pessimism of some of their compatriots in religion and family fields with overwrought claims about a rise of a narcissistic culture (Lasch 1979) and even assertions that these developments may contribute to the moral collapse of Western culture (Rieff 1966). Motivated by communitarian concerns about the place of community (and religion) within modernity

(Illouz 2008), these early scholars worried about the actions and motivations of the atomized individuals they imagined increasingly populating society. While earlier approaches centered on criticizing therapeutic discourses from cultural decline or social control perspectives, more recently scholars have called for researchers to adopt “ambivalent” (Wright 2008) or “agnostic” (Illouz 2008) approaches to the therapeutic turn of late modernity. In addition to drawing attention to the contextualized and varied ways that therapeutic discourses manifest in people’s lives and in broader social institutions (Aubry and Travis 2015; Illouz 2008; Wright 2008), this provides the conceptual room to examine “how therapeutic culture is implicated in shifts in the gender order” (Wright 2008:326).

Recent scholarship on this topic, thus, has sought to examine how therapeutic and psychological discourses have increasingly become embedded within “the cultural imperative for self-construction” (Silva 2012:507). Historically, construction of the self was expected to occur along distinctly gendered lines with women crafting a meaningful sense of personal development through the care of others and men through the cultivation of independent achievement (Coontz 1992; Gerson 2010; Hackstaff 1999). Today, however, both men and women “are searching for new strategies for reconciling an ‘independent self’ with commitment to others” (Gerson 2010:9). Interceding in this anxious and uncertain process, “the language of therapy has...reshuffled the cultural boundaries separating and regulating the public and private spheres, the masculine and the feminine, making private selfhood a narrative to be told and consumed publically” (Illouz 2008:239). Rather than simply bemoan the “blurring of the line between the private and the public” (Furedi (2004:17) associated with the rise of a therapeutic ethos,

these insights redirect analytic attention to the relationship between self and society. Instead of broadly villainizing the rise of public discourse on emotions and personal emphasis on self-fulfillment as a sign of narcissism or as an example of being “caught on a treadmill of meaningless self-improvement” (Wright 2008:333), the gendered anxieties undergirding the problem of individualism become more apparent.

The democratization of religious authority and increased orientation towards marriage as personally fulfilling operate within this broader therapeutic culture. As such, this framework can helpfully illuminate the self-work and meaning-making that individuals engage in within their families and religious communities to craft lives they find personally fulfilling. While scholars have noted the ubiquity of a therapeutic ethos within a variety of social institutions (Aubry and Travis 2015), it is especially important to examine the impact within relationships and faith. In addition to often being the target of concern as representatives of the supposedly diminishing private sphere (Furedi 2004; Lasch 1979; Rieff 1966), therapeutic logics have often focused heavily on both of these institutions (DeRogatis 2015; Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Jenkins 2014; Lofton 2015; Myers-Shirk 2009; Rakow 2013). From formal authorities, such as therapists and psychologists, to more informal structures of self-help literature, the vast networks of knowledge systems that produce, reiterate, and modify therapeutic insights often purport to help people improve, process, or recover in their religious and relational lives. In sum, religion and family are key sites for the attention and operation of the therapeutic culture, and the therapeutic culture, in turn, is often aimed in practice at those institutions.

Despite therapeutic logic sometimes being indistinguishable from religious teachings (Rakow 2013), scholars of therapeutic culture have often continued to

problematically base their analysis upon assumptions rooted in secularization theories (Loss 2002). Many have conceptualized the elevation of a therapeutic self having come at the cost to spirituality and religious authority (Aubry and Travis 2015; Furedi 2004; Lasch 1979; Moskowitz 2001; Rieff 1966). In describing what she calls the “therapeutic gospel,” Eva Moskowitz (2001:1) argues, “Today Americans turn to psychological cures as reflexively as they once turned to God.” Likewise, Frank Furedi (2004:89) contends that the therapeutic ethos initially filled a need created by the decline of religion but that over time this resulted in its colonization. In presenting a turn *towards* therapeutic explanations as a move *away* from religion, these accounts too narrowly conceptualize religion as a grand narrative that necessitates a totalized system of meaning. Recently, however, sociologists of religion have shifted away from focusing on questions of “growth” and “decline” to instead investigate a “broader range of religious expression” which has helped lead to “a decentering of the metanarrative of religion’s fate in the modern world and an orientation to religious authority and identity that emphasizes contestation and fluidity” (Edgell 2012:251). Part of the problem, as Katja Rakow (2013) details, is that much of the writing on therapeutic culture, especially the more critical assessments, never actually studied religious groups or how they employ therapeutic approaches for their own purposes. As such, despite the central role religion has occupied in the discussion of therapeutic culture it has been largely suppositional and lacks a significant grounding in empirical or theoretical understandings of how religion (or religious authority) operates in the lives of individuals or communities.

In fact, religious groups have in the past, and continue today, to represent key producers and points of access to therapeutic knowledge for people (Davis 2010; Flores

and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Jenkins 2014; Jorstad 1993; Lofton 2015; Loss 2002; McGee 2012; Myers-Shirk 2009; Rakow 2013; Wright 2008). Rather than imagine too fine of a differentiation between religion and therapeutics, scholarship should explore the interplay between these cultures, organizations, and beliefs. Instead of drawing a clear line between “prior generations [that] turned to their local pastors” and “twenty-first century Americans [that] tend to believe that mental health experts hold the answers to their problems” (Aubry and Travis 2015:1), it is important to remember that some people in the past never turned to clergy, today some people continue to turn to clergy, and some seek guidance from both. Furthermore, the tradition of pastoral counseling and religious self-help literatures have long served as producers and carriers of sacralized therapeutic messages (Jenkins 2014; McGee 2012; Myers-Shirk 2009). In addition to contributing an important corrective within studies of therapeutic culture, an examination of this intersection helps to theoretically enrich both fields. After all, scholars of both topics seek to better understand: How do individuals come to understand themselves embedded within communities (of discourse and relationships)? How do formal knowledges systems become translated into everyday modes of being, acting, and thinking?

Embedded Relationships: Contributions of a Meso-Level Analysis of Marriages

Stephanie Coontz (2005:11-10) argues that, as a result of recent rapid structural and cultural changes, “Today we are entering uncharted territory, and there is no definitive guide to the new marital landscape. Most of what we used to take for granted about who marries and why, or how to make a marriage, is in flux.” To understand these transitions, recent scholarship on the changing meaning of marriage has carefully examined the recent macro-cultural transitions that have led to “individualized marriages” (Cherlin

2004; see also Celello 2009; Cherlin 2009; Coontz 2005; Cott 2000; Dizard and Gadlin 1990) as well as how people must negotiate the new tensions that have arisen from the expectation for mutual fulfilment in work and family within individual relationships (Ansari 2015; Damske 2011; Garey 1999; Gerson 2010; Hackstaff 1999; Hochschild 1990/2003; MacDonald 2011; Stone 2008). This scholarship on the individualization of marriage, however, runs the risk of sidelining analyses of communities as a source of information on the meaning of marriages, a space to enact visions of marriage, or a mechanism of accountability. Operating from the vantage point of cultural sociology, I argue that a more in-depth analysis of marriage at the meso-level can theoretically enrich understandings about the processes of meaning-making within families for several reasons.

First, communities act as social carriers of cultural ideas and symbols for individuals. From religious groups to music subcultures, communities mediate, translate, and give specific meanings to broader and more nebulous cultural ideas. In providing access to ideas, however, communities operate from a particular position that emerges out of their sense of “who we are” and “how we do things here” (Edgell Becker 1999:11). Amid these recent transitions in marriage that require that “young men and women must search for new answers and develop innovative responses” (Gerson 2010:7), communities offer a cultural repertoire for how to think and talk about family life. Language, after all, operates as a “system of categories that shapes our minds, our fundamental ways of understanding the world and ourselves within it” (Moon 2004:9). By providing individuals with the language to articulate views on how marriage should look, and even how it has changed, communities can discursively extend their influence

into the daily lives of individuals. However, it is important not to envision community influence as uniform and, in fact, the amount of consensus represents an important empirical question (Spillman 2002) since groups, as well as individuals, search for answers and must develop responses to shifts in marriage. Discussions, debates, and even conflict can point to cultural cleavages on the topic of marriage that may indicate topics communities may mobilize around. Likewise, these points of disagreement could indicate a form of vulnerability within communities that individuals may use in adopting divergent points of view and to challenge more authoritative views. Communities, therefore, can offer an important, albeit refracted, source of information and cultural schemas on family life.

Second, examining the marriage cultures articulated and institutionalized by communities helps to consider more broadly the public dimension of marriage (Cott 2010; Heath 2012). While marriage is often viewed as a private affair that couples must negotiate within their household, “to *be* marriage, the institution requires public affirmation” (Cott 2010:1, emphasis original). With the “marriage promotion” policies that have recently codified and incentivized certain family forms, scholars have highlighted how the individualized marriage has become a politicized and contested public symbol (Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012; Coltrane 2001; Cott 2010; Hays 2003; Heath 2008; Randles 2016). As Nancy Cott (2010:1) notes, “Radiating outward, the structure of marriage organizes community life and facilitates the government’s grasp on the populace.” Religious communities also play an important role in articulating marriage as a public good in a manner that not only seeks to ensure its legal arrangement but also may politicize the topic for members within the community.

Third, communities also importantly serve as a space to embody the institution of marriage. Being married entails a series of cultural expectations for what men do as husbands and what women do as wives (Coltrane and Adams 2008; Cott 2010; Irby 2014b; Risman 1998). Communities represent a site where people can be held accountable to these ideals because acting in a way that is inconsistent with these views may result in judgement from others. While this process can be articulated through direct comments, communities can also organize their activities in a manner that showcase what it means to be a “wife” or “husband” within their group. Sociologists of religion, for example, have found that ministries are often organized around the assumption that adult men and women are married (Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997), sometimes offering women’s ministries during weekdays indicating an implicit bias towards the homemaker-breadwinner model (Edgell 2006).

Finally, a more developed meso-level analysis of marriage would help to avoid the tendency to follow modernization theories that posit a rise in individualism has produced a decline in communities. As Nancy Ammerman (1997:351-352) warns, “It is not that community has disappeared, only that it now exists alongside other types of relations and can be (indeed must be) constructed by the persons involved.” As previously noted, analyses of individualized marriages have tended to problematically assert communities influence on people’s relationships as a feature of the past. This focus on individualization, thus, has masked the type of influence that communities have within the context of late modernity. For as Ammerman (1997:353) continues to explain, “We only know who we are individually as we build that identity out of the attachments in which we are embedded. It is the multiplicity of those attachments – not their absence –

that produces the celebrated individual freedom of the modern world.” In other words, even within an individualistic culture of increased choice, people rely on their embedded relationships and communities to construct a sense of self they find meaningful. In addition, communities can also constrain this process by embedding people within social networks that hold normative understandings that individuals may internalize. Recognizing this tension in how communities enable and constrain individuals, it is important to open analytical approaches to explore the influence of communities, including recognizing ambivalent commitments (Avishai 2008) and attempts to differentiate oneself (O’Brien 2015).

From this perspective, an analysis of communities may help to bridge the macro-level studies of how marriage has changed and the micro-level studies of peoples’ daily lives with a meso-level account of how people come to understand the significance of these cultural transitions. While a number of types of lifestyle groups – such as gamers, music subcultures, artists – could similarly be analyzed from this meso-level, I have opted to analyze marriage from the perspective of religious groups. In particular, I ask the following questions. How do religious communities, respond, facilitate and/or contest the recent individualizing trends in marriage? During this process of translating expectations of marriage, how do religious communities also provide a local context for people to enact their relationships? In doing so, what type of resources do communities offer individuals to accomplish marriage and how do they operate as a potential place of accountability to public visions of marriage? Finally, how do religious individuals themselves conceptualize the influence of their religious communities?

Studying Christian Marriage Preparation: Project Description and Chapter Outline

To answer the above research questions, I chose to focus on a structured practice within religious communities that involves the intentional articulation by spokespeople of the communities on how to form and maintain a good and Godly marriage. As an example of religious education and relationship skill counseling, Christian marriage preparation can provide theoretical insights into religion and families after American culture's therapeutic turn. Given the underlying questions about how these institutions have changed and the implicit state of flux they currently operate within, I employed a variety of data collection methods to best understand the type of changes that have occurred and how people make sense of these transitions. In particular, I draw on historical methods that include textual analysis and archival research to answer the former and contemporary ethnographic observations and interviews to discern the latter. In the methodological appendix, I provide more detail regarding the data collection processes. For now, I introduce the various types of data and briefly explain how they inform the analysis within the following chapters.

Given the nostalgic tendency to look back to the 1950s as an idyllic era when life was simpler – especially for families and churches – I knew any analysis of change in either institution would need to be grounded historically. Seeking to complicate narratives of a simple rise in individualism or a decline in religious authority, I sought to explore the “ambiguity and inconsistency [that] are built into social change and family transitions” (Coontz 2000: 291). From a perspective of interpretive historical sociology, I explored extensive organizational documents of groups and publications produced by and for people to coordinate marriage preparation within their religious communities. This

helps to distinguish this project from other sociological studies of religion and family that have relied on religious individuals' perceptions of how these institutions have changed (Edgell 2003, 2006; Gallagher 2003; Konieczny 2013; Marler 1995).

My experience of immersing myself in the fears, hopes, and aspirations of premarital counseling for prior generations importantly helped to orient my understanding of religious change. Rather than imagining religious communities' embrace of the therapeutic principles of premarital counseling as reactionary or as a slower adoption of secular practices, across the time periods in the study I encountered a process of critical examination of the beliefs in faith tradition and secular culture. While drawing from different ideas and sometimes arriving at their own conclusions, religious groups similarly sought to craft what they viewed as the best advice on how to form marriages that have the greatest chance to be happy and offer a means of sanctification. Of course, during any time period the process of critical examination only goes so far with a number of ideas remaining unchallenged and unnoticed. I explore these issues in Chapter 2 – Catholic Marriage Preparation and Evangelical Premarital Counseling from a Historical Perspective – where I provide a historical context for the development and changes to the practice in each faith tradition. Starting with the postwar era when Catholics first began to institutionalize marriage preparation and evangelicals adapted the practice of pastoral counseling from their mainline counterparts, I consider who offered counsel on behalf of their religious communities and what they taught couples would help to improve their relationships. In doing so, I present two parallel stories about the elevation in lay positionality and how this has helped to lead to a greater democratization of religious authority.

Most of what follows emerges from the contemporary data on evangelical Protestant and Catholic marriage preparation programs in Western Washington. Given the Pacific Northwest’s reputation as the most “unchurched” region in the country (Silk 2005; Manning 2015; Wellman 2008), it may seem like a surprising location to collect data on the intersection of religion and family.⁶ The Northwest, however, offers a unique opportunity to examine how religious communities actively translate their faith in a setting where a religious commitment cannot be taken-for-granted. Furthermore, unlike many other parts of the country neither Catholics nor evangelical Protestants have dominated the local culture (religious or secular). As a result, this provides a rare opportunity to compare these two religious traditions within a more equitable context.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 explore contemporary practices of marriage preparation from the perspective of religious communities. In Chapter 3 – What is Premarital Counseling? – I provide a wide view on the divergent organizational forms and styles. Whereas Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the four groups that offered marriage preparation in a collective setting, I first place this type of programming within the broader context of organizational options.

Table 1. Description of Types of Marriage Preparation

Type of Marriage Preparation	Description
Collective Programming	Along with a group of other couples, an engaged couple listens to organized talks on marriage.
Individualized Counseling	In a one-on-one format, couples meet with someone to discuss their relationship history and receive personalized advice about how to prepare for marriage.

⁶ While the Pacific Northwest has long been the home to the most unaffiliated people, or religious nones, areas such as the Northeast are beginning to have similar rates (Manning 2015). As such, this may reduce some of the potential idiosyncrasy of this region’s religious culture.

I recruited both types of programming by emailing Catholic parishes and evangelical congregations to ask about if and how they conduct premarital counseling. This open strategy introduced me to a variety of organizational styles and helped to ensure a relatively wide sample of congregations.⁷ In addition to identifying the 4 programs where I conducted ethnographic observations, I conducted 26 interviews with people responsible for facilitating marriage preparation. To respect the privacy of those participating in the individualized counseling, I rely on the interviews with the people that I informally refer to as “premarital counselors.” As I detail in Chapter 3, these two organizational approaches produced distinct styles – personal/confessional and educational in the collective classes and facilitation in the individualized – that transcended the range of professional backgrounds and expertise of the premarital counselors. Additionally, in Chapter 3 I explore religious groups’ motivations to offer marriage preparation and analyze the particular way they construct marriage as a public good. While imagining it as worthy of local investment, premarital counselors did not connect this community investment to broader political discourses about marriage promotion.

In addition to the premarital counselors that operated in pastoral settings, such as churches and denominational retreat centers, I conducted supplemental interviews with people that worked and/or were trained in an evangelical graduate therapy program also located in Western Washington. While I had initially hoped to recruit a similar Catholic program, I did not find any in the area that offered a graduate therapy degree that

⁷ As I review more in-depth in the methodological appendix, particular demographics of Western Washington (white and educated) resulted in a sample that was more organizationally varied than it was diverse in term of race or class. In particular, the premarital counselors I interviewed tended to be white and college-educated. However, there was greater class, educational, and ethnic-racial diversity among the premarital couples.

emphasized premarital education. However, my congregational recruitment strategy resulted in 2 interviews with therapists that offered services in a parish setting. In the end, this difference reflected a broader approach to who premarital counselors were and how they position their authority a theme that I discuss throughout the subsequent chapters. Importantly, by conducting interviews with premarital counselors that work within pastoral settings and ones that work within therapeutic contexts, I was able to more carefully examine the ways Christian and therapeutic principles operate together in marriage preparation.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I narrow the focus to hone in on the particular content taught in marriage preparation. Due to my limited ability to speak to the specific teachings within the individualized premarital counseling sessions, these chapters draw from my observations and interviews with the four groups that offered collective marriage preparation programming. While these programs are not representative of all Catholic or evangelical premarital education options they do share some important commonalities and analytical points of difference. Using the same open recruitment process throughout the whole project, I purposefully selected two sites for each faith tradition to better ensure that I identified themes from the broader religious cultures and not only a particular congregational style. For each tradition, I sampled one urban site and one non-urban site to capture greater organizational and cultural diversity. In the below table, I provide a brief introduction to each group. (For more information on how often I observed and recruited at each site please refer to the methodological appendix).

Table 2. Description of Collective Marriage Preparation Research Sites

Marriage Preparation Program	Description
Evangelical Weekend Retreat	A team of 3 married couples coordinated a weekend retreat at an evangelical retreat center in a relatively rural part of Washington. For each of the 11 sessions, they presented on a topic by sharing their story and occasionally discussing social-scientific and/or religious insights. After each presentation, individuals journaled on the topic by answering a list of provided questions. Finally, the couples reunited to read and dialogue on these writings. On average 6-8 couples would attend and they were drawn from across Western Washington (although sometimes people would also come from Western Oregon and Central Washington). Each couple had to pay a not insignificant amount of money to participate.
Evangelical Congregation	An urban megachurch offered 2 classes on premarital relationships – dating and engaged – to serve the high number of professional young adults. The dating class was led by 2 lay married couples and the engaged class was led by 1 married couple. All of the husbands were trained and practicing therapists, whereas the wives had other professional careers. Classes were held Sunday evenings at the same time as an evening service for 8 weeks. On average 12-20 couples participated in each class with attendance ranging weekly and generally dwindling over time. To participate, couples did not have to be members of the church but in most cases at least one of the people attended.
Urban Catholic Parish	The program was overseen by the parish religious director who recruited different married couples to present for one of the 5 sessions. The classes occurred on a weeknight evening and on average 4-7 couples participated. Since the parish is located in a city with many transplants, a number of the couples were participating in this program but planned to return to a home parish in another state for the actual wedding. In other cases, the couples had selected the parish because of the beauty of the building, its availability, or its wedding guidelines. As far as I know, none of the couples I encountered had grown up in the parish or regularly attended church there.
Non-Urban Catholic Parish	Three lay couples coordinated a parish program located in a small city surrounded by a relatively rural area. For 5 weeks, classes occurred immediately after the Sunday evening service. Each week the leadership team rotated to present on a different topic. On average 3-5 couples participated in each session. They tended to be local (including some

	from the nearby rural areas). Due to a nearby university, there were some transplants but most had settled in the town and were planning their wedding at this church.
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In Chapter 4 – The Good and Godly Marriage – I explore in-depth the intersection of religion and therapeutic culture in these four sites. In particular, I describe how the premarital counselors construct a *covenant rhetoric* to distinguish between the goals of a Christian marriage and secular models that they view as poorly positioned to lifelong commitment. Contrasting what they consider to be a “contract” orientation towards marriage, they seek to train couples in a marital work ethic and inculcate a therapeutic self as a means to prevent future divorces. In Chapter 5 – Gender (and) Difference – I turn to examine how and when gender differences emerged as part of the construction of an ideal, healthy marriage. Despite the general orientation towards gender complementarianism among both traditions, I found that gender inconsistently emerged as an important topic to teach engaged couples. While marriages were certainly presented as a gendered institution predicated on heterosexuality, the extent to which religious leaders sacralized this orientation or put it on display varied across the programs.

In Chapter 6 – Couples’ Perspective on the Process of Marriage Preparation – I draw on 31 interviews with couples that participated in these programs to examine the reception of the information presented. To ensure a range of experiences I visited programs multiple times to elicit volunteers, most often towards the end of a term. Admittedly the perspectives I obtained reflect those people that continued with the full program and those that felt comfortable enough to volunteer. During some of the observations, I witnessed couples have emotional responses to the materials or appear to reject the presented views and rarely did these couples volunteer to be interviewed. It is

important to note, however, that I did not hear uniformly enthusiastic evaluations of the programs. Additionally, when applicable I draw from the observations to discuss the reception on teachings. Despite only recruiting through the collective programming, a number of the couples had also participated in individualized premarital counseling allowing us to talk about those experiences.

With the exception of three cases, I interviewed the couples together and allowed them to collectively tell me stories about their relationship, their engagement, their faith, views on Christian marriage, and perceptions on any marriage preparation activities they had participated in.⁸ This range of topics allows me to situate their views on the lessons from premarital counseling within a broader context of narratives about who they are individually and as a couple. Therefore, I discussed not only their perceptions on the lessons but also how, or if, the ideas resonated with their preexisting frameworks on religion and marriage. In considering all of this, Chapter 6 discusses couples' motivations for participating and what they felt they acquired from the process. Whereas evangelical couples attended these programs early in their relationship and often more than once, Catholic couples waited until a wedding date and venue had been selected. Despite this tendency for evangelical couples to conceptualize the religious practice as a *resource* and for Catholic couples to treat it as a *requirement*, those belonging to both Christian traditions recalled the process having made more of an impact than the actual content.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I review the overall analysis and return to two central themes that have undergirded this project. From its inception, I have sought to use the study of Christian premarital counseling as a way to examine shifts in the religious and

⁸ In each case, I interviewed a woman whose partner was absent. In none of the cases, was the couple engaged: two evangelical women were in dating relationships and the one Catholic woman was civilly married.

marital landscape over the past half-century in the United States. Towards this end, Chapter 2 analyzes the historical transitions and Chapters 3, 4, and 5 at times consider how religious groups today understand these social transitions. I draw these vantage points together in the conclusion to consider the consistency of social change in both institutions, as well as present a case for more closely considering the active role that religious groups can play in family change. Additionally, I return to the emergent theme of therapeutic culture to consider how premarital counselors co-opt therapeutic discourses and practices to further the goal of teaching couples how to have a marriage that will please them and God. In doing this, I make recommendations for how scholars interested in this topic can refine their understanding of religious authority.

Unlike many ethnographies within the sociology of religion, the following chapters will not provide a reader with an intimate or in-depth look at the everyday life of communal religious life. The practice of marriage preparation exists outside the daily lives of the collective communities and the religious individuals that populate them. Instead, premarital counseling is meant to offer both individuals and communities an intentional, set apart time in which to reflect on the meaning and significance of specific dimensions of everyday life. As such the following chapters provide an analysis of a religious *practice*, as opposed to a religious *place*.

CHAPTER TWO
CATHOLIC MARRIAGE PREPARATION AND EVANGELICAL PREMARITAL
COUNSELING FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

*“Narrow is the gate to marital bliss and few who enter therein; but with a
consciousness of its hazards and a determination to avoid them, by the
grace of God, you can make a grand success of your marriage.”*

Charles Hugo Doyle, *Cana is Forever*¹

Many of the soldiers returning home from World War II were reuniting with wives to turn their attention to the postponed task of creating homes and the families to fill them (Celello 2009; Moskowitz 2001). Yet, this likely highly anticipated reunion often did not go smoothly, leading to a peak in divorce rates in 1946 and 1947 (Davis 2010). Despite being poised on the precipice of what people today consider to be the golden decade of marriage, the institution actually was a central feature of social anxieties of the time (Coontz 2005). Fearful that young people were rushing to the altar without considering the gravity of their decision or the sanctity of the institution, movements developed within religious communities and among secular experts to educate and protect marriage. From the perspective of two Catholic family movements – Cana Conference Movement and Christian Family Movement – American families were under an assault by secular

¹ Doyle, Charles Hugo. 1949. *Cana is Forever: Counsel for Before and After Marriage*. Tarrytown, NY: The Nugent Press.

forces that encouraged individualism over commitments like those found in marriage. Likewise, the budding field of marriage counseling reached new levels of prosperity during the postwar era with people increasingly turning to them for assistance (Celello 2009; Davis 2010). In each case, preparing engaged couples emerged as a potential mechanism to stabilize American marriages.

During the postwar era many different types of “experts” surfaced to offer advice on how to be happy and successful in marriage – women’s magazines, religious ministries, and marriage counselors – each worked within their own particular fields but agreed that through hard work people could find fulfilment in the home. In particular, they encouraged couples to *conform* to a particular articulation of marriage and taught that a failure to do so would be disastrous. However, their advice also contained the seeds of new social ideas on marriage that left the institution – and the people within it – transformed by the end of the 1960s. In constructing marriage as a project for individuals to work not just *in* but *on*, this contingency of experts also taught individuals to articulate their emotions, viewpoints, desires, and frustrations (Celello 2009). Over time, these self-reflexive insights would destabilize religious leaders’ claims that happiness comes from conforming to an external model of marriage and in the process help to democratize religious authority by profoundly impacting the relationship between lay knowledge and clerical authority. For Catholics, a concern about the spiritual vocation of marriage would elevate lay concerns in the church, whereas evangelical Protestants’ embrace of psychology would enable lay expertise to be religiously authoritative.

Teaching Conformity to Marriage: Christian Premarital Counseling, circa 1940s-1960s

Catholic Movements Prepare Couples for Marriage to Combat Secularism

On April 16, 1946, in the midst of a year that would eventually mark a national high in American divorce rates, the first Pre-Cana Conference was held in Chicago (Burns 1999). As a branch of the broader Cana Conference Movement that served married couples, Pre-Cana developed to translate similar principles to engaged couples to help them obtain a holy and happy marriage. This first event occurred because Patty Crowley – a local lay leader in the Christian Family Movement – wanted her sister to be better prepared for marriage than the cursory education occasionally offered by parish priests. Along with some friends, she scoured approximately a dozen parishes to locate enough interested newlywed and engaged couples (Burns 1999). From these inauspicious beginnings, Pre-Cana rapidly spread across the United States. By 1950, 31 dioceses across the country reported hosting Pre-Cana with an estimated 27,500 in attendance (Clemens 1953). The Archdiocese of Chicago, in particular, reported that by 1951 nearly 75% of Catholic marriages were preceded by a Pre-Cana with couples attending one of nearly 100 conferences averaged each year.²

Pre-Cana operated organizationally and ideologically within the broader Cana Conference Movement that imagined itself as a means to combat the threat of secularism. Speaking at a weeklong conference of Cana leaders, Alphonse Clemens, a sociologist involved in the movement with his wife, characterized the larger vision of Cana as an effort to “re-Christianize” marriage.

² ADC, Cana Conference of Chicago, “The History of the Cana Conference of Chicago.”

Every aspect of marriage and family must be reintegrated with Christ. Cana must deal with nothing less than the totality of family life if it is to rout secularism. You might rout a certain degree of secularism by getting people to Communion more frequently. But these people might still continue to be quite secularized in their recreational habits, in their economic habits, in their lovemaking habits, and in many other aspects of marital life.³

To alleviate this problem of a secularized household, they focused their efforts on improving Catholic homes. Cana joined the legions of voices during the postwar era that sought to reinstitute the importance of home life, as well as help couples ensure a smooth domestic adjustment to the gender roles that experts asserted were necessary for every happy household (Celello 2009; Davis 2010; Moskowitz 2001). Cana leaders articulated these motivations within a spiritualized frame, however, that linked mundane household tasks to the vocation of marriage. Doing so required reimagining the understanding of spirituality within the Catholic Church. Unlike the universal connotations of the term in contemporary usage, amongst postwar Catholics “spirituality” tended to be applied to the celibate priesthood. By arguing that “marriage is a special vocation,” the leaders of Cana hoped to expand theological discussions on spirituality to combat the tendency to view marriage as an inferior vocational trajectory (in comparison to Holy Orders).⁴ With the awareness that “marriage is a difficult vocation,” however, Cana sought to also help couples determine how to be happier in the institution as a means to ensure their own sanctification.⁵

³ Clemens, A.H. 1950. “A Larger View of Cana Content.” Pps. 7-13 in *The Cana Conference: Proceedings of the Chicago Archdiocesan Study Week on the Cana Conference, June 28-30 1949*. Chicago, IL: The Cana Conference. Pg. 7.

⁴ CUA, Clemens, 4/4 “Pre-Cana Lectures.”

⁵ Delaney, John. 1951. “The Need for Cana.” Pps. 15-22 in *The Cana Conference: Proceedings of the Chicago Archdiocesan Study Week on the Cana Conference December 27-29, 1950*. Pg.20

Pre-Cana was well-positioned to address these issues from the perspective of Cana leaders who imagined engaged couples as a blank slate on which to imprint practices and beliefs. Whereas married couples attended Cana Conferences because their marriages “needed brightening up,”⁶ the clergy and laity that coordinated Pre-Cana hoped that by intervening they could “get marriages off on the right foot.”⁷ Optimistically imagining Pre-Cana as both a type of remedy and vaccination, one priest hopefully observed, “Until the children of our Cana couples come to us, Pre-Cana must reach back to supply what has been lacking in the home.”⁸ While covering similar topics as the husband-wife conferences, Pre-Cana approached the subject matter from the viewpoint of the needs of couples not yet married. It operated within an informational frame that involved a series of talks – given by priests, married lay couples, and Catholic doctors – on basic principles of how to love in a manner that produces “happiness and perfection in marriage.”⁹ From the perspective of the leaders that coordinated Pre-Cana, engaged couples attended the conferences anxious and excited for these insights. Between wanting to know more about what marriage will be like and how to ensure that they would be happy within their own, Cana leaders envisioned engaged couples as “eminently ready to be challenged to embrace the highest ideals.”¹⁰

⁶ Egan, John. 1959. “Education for Marriage: The Cana Conference.” *Religious Education* 54(3):344-8. Pg. 344

⁷ UNDA PMRH 129/06, “The Cana Conference: A Practical, Up-to-Date Plan for Lasting Happiness in Marriage.” Chicago, IL: The Cana Conference of Chicago.

⁸ Fishcher, Matthias. “Approach and Content in the Pre-Cana Conference.” Study Week (Fischer 1951:48)

⁹ CUA Clemens 4/4, Director’s Outline for Pre-Cana Conference

¹⁰ Imborski, Walter, ed. 1957. *The New Cana Manual*. Chicago, IL: Delaney Publications. Pg. 72.

The primary challenge that priests identified involved reeducating couples on the meaning of love and marriage. Believing that marriage had become “a strictly personal affair with couples almost selfishly seeking their own happiness,” they sought to replace this with a vision of sacrificial love.¹¹ Their theological discussions of God’s vision for marriage and the importance of this sacrament were subsumed in broader discussions of the meaning and practices of love. While they presented love as a bridge and solution to most problems in marriage, it also could be done incorrectly, resulting in conflict, unhappiness, and, potentially, divorce. At a Chicago Pre-Cana Conference, engaged couples learned “if marriages are not successful, it is largely because most people no longer know how to love.”¹² Learning to love according to God’s design, therefore, became the goal of the priests’ talk.

The priests’ presentations on God’s intentions for human love were predicated on gender differences, as well as complicated by them. On the one hand, priests detailed how men and women lived such separate lives from one another that it made it difficult to forge connections. These “daily divorces” frequently meant that husbands and wives did not understand or appreciate what the other person did with their day, how they contributed to the household, or the sacrifices they made. As a result, one priest explained how this meant after a long day of work husbands could be left “fed up with people,” whereas wives had spent the same day alone “yearning for loving companionship.”¹³ The rigid sex role division idealized within postwar homes operated as a barrier to marital

¹¹ Imborski, Walter, ed. 1957. *The New Cana Manual*. Chicago, IL: Delaney Publications. Pg. 72

¹² Archdiocese of Chicago. 1950. “Pre-Cana Conference Outline.” Pps. 7-13 in *The Cana Conference: Proceedings of the Chicago Archdiocesan Study Week on the Cana Conference, June 28-30 1949*. Chicago, IL: The Cana Conference. Pg. 102.

¹³ CUA, Clemens, “Pre-Cana Conference Outline.”

intimacy. One priest even chastised men who say “I can’t understand women” as usually “using this as an excuse for not trying.”¹⁴ On the other hand, the recognition of how the modern structure of gender roles inhibited happiness in marriage did not preclude a view on gender differences as part of God’s plan for marriage. Presenting men and women with different “natural endowments,” priests taught that men’s more aggressive nature helped them in their job as a provider and women’s devotion served her well in her calling as a wife and mother.¹⁵ God, they argued, created love as a means to bridge these differences while also pulling men and women into marriage. To successfully overcome the combination of these “natural” gender differences and the predominant family arrangement, love had to be other-oriented. As the lecture notes for one priest detail, “If each will take care of the need of the other, [then they] will find one’s own need met.”¹⁶

In intimately linking happiness with sanctification, priests normalized a particular mode of faith and a form of relationship. As one priest explained, “You cannot succeed in marriage unless you accept marriage and its responsibilities fully as God intends you to.”¹⁷ Rather than offer an interactional conception of marriage based on its meaning emerging from what individuals bring together, priests presented universalistic and externalized definitions of marriage that required couples conform in order to be happy and fulfill their spiritual calling. They described the meaning of marriage as a given and deviation was not encouraged. In teaching “happiness and holiness equal the same thing,” priests articulated a worldview that conceptualized home life falling under the authority

¹⁴ Imbierski, Walter, ed. 1957. *The New Cana Manual*. Chicago, IL: Delaney Publications. Pg. 80

¹⁵ CUA, Alphonse H. Clemens Collection 4/4, “Pre-Cana Conference Outline.”

¹⁶ CUA, Alphonse H. Clemens Collection 4/4, “Pre-Cana Conference Outline.”

¹⁷ Imbierski, Walter, ed. 1957. *The New Cana Manual*. Chicago, IL: Delaney Publications. Pg. 85.

of Church. Yet, this also operated in tension with a view that vested laity with the right and responsibility to cultivate these on their own terms.¹⁸

Pre-Cana, in fact, organizationally offered lay couples the opportunity to authoritatively speak on matters of faith and to represent the Church to other couples. Cana Conference more broadly prided itself on being a movement for and by laity, specifically dedicated to their vocational needs. In Pre-Cana, married couples had the responsibility of articulating theologically sensitive insights. One manual stressed the power of this practice for engaged couples, explaining

To many of the audience the spectacle of lay people talking about spiritual matters will be a revelation. This will make particularly cogent the emphasis on marriage as a vocation, a complete way of life, with its own possibilities for sanctity arising out of the very nature of the calling, and not in spite of it.¹⁹

Complementing the more abstract discussions on how to live and love spiritually, married couples offered insights on “marriage in practice.”²⁰ As opposed to an unmarried priest, these lay couples could present “a picture of the gradual adjustments in marriage which lead to unity and stability.”²¹ In addition to answering any questions the engaged couples may had, they discussed their personal experiences with topics such as in-laws, finances, creating a religious home, communication, whether a wife should work outside the home, leisure, sex, gender roles, and conflict. In their manuals, directors of Pre-Cana cautioned presenting couples to minimize abstractions and generalizations in their talks but

¹⁸ Archdiocese of Chicago. 1950. “Pre-Cana Conference Outline.” Pps. 7-13 in *The Cana Conference: Proceedings of the Chicago Archdiocesan Study Week on the Cana Conference, June 28-30 1949*. Chicago, IL: The Cana Conference. Pg. 107

¹⁹ Imbierski, Walter, ed. 1957. *The New Cana Manual*. Chicago, IL: Delaney Publications. Pg. 100.

²⁰ Imbierski, Walter, ed. 1957. *The New Cana Manual*. Chicago, IL: Delaney Publications. Pg. 91.

²¹ UNDA, PMRH 120/06, “This is Cana.”

simultaneously to avoid presenting too much about their personal haphazard experiences of finding out what works in marriage. In other words, married couples were supposed to balance their lack of expertise with simply being married.

To round out their premarital education, Catholic doctors provided sex education to engaged couples. In particular, doctors were asked to discuss “the general physiological aspects of marriage,” such as anatomy, fertilization, menstruation, pregnancy, contraception, and any type of abnormalities.²² To address common problems in sex, doctors would hold break-out sessions for men and women separately to provide an ostensibly easier context to ask questions and tailor conversations on topics such as frigidity, ovulation, and sexual adjustment to “to masculine or feminine needs and interests.”²³ One manual cautioned the doctors to adopt a “frank reverence” as they provided talks on “sex, maleness and femaleness, in its broadest and most Christian sense...with authority as a Catholic and a doctor.”²⁴ Pre-Cana leaders believed doctors could assist in the reeducation of engaged couples by “help[ing] the young people shed their false notions about sex and see it as the Church sees it.”²⁵ Warning that much of the sexual problems in early marriage emerge from ignorance and fear, these talks provided engaged couples with religiously informed knowledge on the basics of sex education. A critical part of this agenda included explanations on the problems of contraception. At this time, however, priests discouraged them from recommending the rhythm method and

²² CUA, Alphonse H. Clemens Collection 4/4, “Rationale of the Pre-Cana Program.”

²³ Imbierski, Walter, ed. 1957. *The New Cana Manual*. Chicago, IL: Delaney Publications. Pg. 110.

²⁴ Imbierski, Walter, ed. 1957. *The New Cana Manual*. Chicago, IL: Delaney Publications. Pg. 109.

²⁵ UNDA, PMRH 120/06, “This is Cana.”

instead instructed doctors to counsel couples to engage in chaste periods of marital abstinence.

Collectively, priests, lay married couples, and Catholic doctors presented engaged couples with an education in what to expect in marriage and how to understand their marriages within a Catholic framework as a spiritualized practice. As part of a generalized anxiety in the church, a central goal of the programming was to spiritualize the laity as a bulwark against secularism. Yet, to accomplish this goal religious leaders also needed to help couples have happier marriages to ensure households did not break-up. As with their counterparts in secular marriage counseling, modern marital tension was interpreted through a gender lens that attributed a failure to comply with marital roles as the root of most problems (Davis 2010). Pre-Cana, therefore, sacralized the prevalent idea among experts that marriage required hard work by linking its success to couples' future salvation (Celello 2009). Unlike marriage counseling, which few couples at this time attended, or women's magazines, which translated this ethic to women only, Pre-Cana reached thousands of men and women about to be married (Davis 2010; Moskowitz 2001). It provided a whole new generation of young people with an ideal of a successful marriage that involved love manifesting in deep intimacy and communication, even asserting that gender roles must not keep couples from this goal. Likewise, it presented the next generation of Catholics with a view of spirituality as their own responsibility and the importance of developing it outside the bounds of the church.

Evangelicals Slowly Embrace Premarital Counseling

In 1959 the mainline Protestant magazine, *Christian Century*, reprinted a letter from *Pastoral Psychology* detailing a man's regret and disappointment about his sixteen year

marriage. Blaming the officiating minister for offering little guidance and not inquiring more into the tenability of the relationship, he implored pastors to make premarital counseling a greater priority.²⁶ During the interwar period a group of predominately mainline Protestant clergy became interested in applying insights from the burgeoning field of psychology to their work ministering congregants (Myers-Shirk 2000, 2009). Unlike the Catholic marriage preparation practices that emerged out of the efforts of family movements of the postwar era, evangelical premarital counseling developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in relation to this broader Protestant practice of pastoral counseling. As such, the organizational structure and motivations differed substantially between these similar activities.

By the postwar era Protestant clergy had established a professional network of pastoral counselors with their own journals and seminary curriculum (Myers-Shirk 2000, 2009). While it included a variety of denominational backgrounds and ministers that worked in a range of settings, most of them were liberal and mainline Protestants (Myers-Shirk 2000, 2009). Given the cultural preoccupation with marriage during this time, it is not surprising that many pastoral counselors began to reflect on how best to intervene into the domestic sphere. In addition to the multitude of articles published on premarital counseling in *Pastoral Psychology*, this developing field of experts wrote manuals designed to help church leaders develop effective counseling practices. Far from the structured practice of Pre-Cana, these writings focused on teaching pastors how to practice this task by themselves. Despite the occasional suggestion that pastors consider joining with other churches to develop marriage preparation programs, greater attention

²⁶ Davis (2010) identified that *Christian Century* published this letter that had originally appeared in *Pastoral Psychology*.

was paid to instructing pastors in the art of effective and personalized counseling strategies.

For example, in 1958 Granger Westberg, a professor of religion and health at the University of Chicago, wrote *Premarital Counseling: A Manual for Ministers*, which was distributed by the National Council of Churches. In his first chapter – “Why Premarital Counseling?” – he articulated a less activist oriented motivation to preparing couples than the leaders of Pre-Cana:

The family is the legitimate concern of all ministers and they ought to devote their lives to its improvement. When an automobile is in need of repair we naturally go to a mechanic whose life is spent working with cars. When people have concerns about their family life, either before or after marriage, they should quite naturally seek out the clergyman. (5)

He encouraged ministers to think of the sessions as “premarital conversations” and to consider conducting them in informal settings like one’s own home. To provide tools for these conversations, he included an example of a quantitative questionnaire for premarital couples and sample conversations on recommended topics. The 29-item survey instrument included questions designed to compare a couples’ backgrounds, assess their level of religiosity, and learn about their parents’ approval. Each potential answer was weighted with the more desirable answers earning more points, resulting in “well-matched couples” earning higher overall scores. For example, one question awarded 15 points if the couple had the same level of education, 10 points if the man had more than the woman, and 0 points if the woman had more education than the man. As with cases such as this, couples with greater commonalities generally earned more points, such as both people being a believer (50 points), attending the same church (50 points), and coming from the same cultural background (20 points). However, if there were to be

differences they tended to support gender role ideology, such as the education example where an educated man was more desirable than an educated woman. Westberg believed the results from this survey could help a minister stimulate conversation with a couple. To help pastors recognize the value of a “conversational exchange,” he provided excerpts of potential discussions with couples on a variety of topics, including personal backgrounds, economic and cultural problems, religion in the home, vocation, and sex. In each instance, the minister did not lecture on the subject matter, as was customary of the priests in Pre-Cana, but instead acted as a counselor that helped guide the couple to talk and discover their own realizations about the relationship.

In her study of the history of marriage counseling, Rebecca Davis (2010) argues that in emphasizing the *science* of their profession counselors could assert the superiority of their advice over common wisdom. In practice, these claims to objectivity often legitimized preexisting prejudices. While less explicit in its articulation than Pre-Cana about what marriage *should* look like, mainline Protestant premarital counseling practices also operated from the perspective that marital happiness and success more likely occurs when couples conform to authoritative and external views on marriage. Mainline Protestant pastoral counselors used social scientific insights to construct a more implicit construction of a healthy Christian marriage, but one as equally based in strict gender roles, heterosexuality, and the indissolubility of a Christian marriage.

During the time that pastoral counseling developed among mainline Protestant clergy, their counterparts within conservative Protestantism had become more culturally withdrawn and separatist. After the modernist-fundamentalist conflicts of the early twentieth century that culminated in the Scopes Trials, a pervasive antagonism towards

scientific knowledge permeated these communities (Noll 2000; Smith and Woodberry 1998). With few exceptions, psychological insights and counseling practices were treated with suspicion (Noll 2000). In this state of relative isolation, fundamentalist Protestants began to develop their own infrastructure of knowledge production and dissemination, including universities, publishing presses, and radio programs (Smith et al. 1998). Starting in the postwar era, a group of self-proclaimed “evangelicals” within this community began to imagine a relationship with secular culture that would maintain fundamentalist orthodoxy but replace its isolationism with an engaged theology (Marsden 1982; Schafer 2011; Smith et al. 1998). By the 1960s this new ethos would help evangelicals create their own separate network of “Christian counselors” (Myers-Shirk 2009), but during the 1950s a few lone voices began to blaze this path.

Wayne E. Oates (1958) wrote *Premarital Pastoral Care and Counseling* specifically to help Southern Baptists pastors recognize their responsibility to instruct engaged couples. Considering the practice from the perspective of the religious community, he argued that as part of the “fellowship of Christians” congregations owe their members premarital instruction and that pastors must remember that they represent their church when they oversee weddings. For example, he maintained that pastors should only agree to marry practicing Christians because otherwise the church would be “consciously yoking two people together unequally” (5). He also believed that preparing young couples for marriage would help to instill in them a responsibility towards the church and avoid the common problem of “losing them.” As opposed to the attempts at scientific neutrality among his mainline Protestant peers, Oates’ organized his advice on premarital counseling around pastor’s roles within their churches: preacher, worship

leader, teacher, organizer, and administrator. Under “preacher,” for example, he listed a series of scripture references for “New Testament teachings on relationships within the family” to help pastors “develop a careful exegesis on the biblical materials on the husband-wife relationship” (14-15). His manual lacked any quantitative measures or case studies in conversational dynamics. Instead, he reimagined the “counselor” as a teacher responsible for instructing couples in appropriate actions and beliefs.

In contrast to the clergy-centric advice of pastoral counseling, Clyde Narramore began to translate psychological insights more broadly into the conservative Protestant subculture. In addition to his radio program “Psychology for Living,” he wrote numerous books, including *Life and Love: A Christian View on Sex* and *The Psychology of Counseling – For All Who are Engaged in the Art of Counseling*. While the latter was oriented to Christian ministers and counselors, the former was written to help young people answer such pressing questions as: “How can I be sure I’m in love? What does the Bible say about sex? How does the body develop and function? How can I be certain of happiness in marriage?”²⁷ Similar to the talks provided by the Pre-Cana doctors, the book offered the reader basic sexual education, with chapters dedicated to physiological development in young men and women, pregnancy and childbirth, and a Christian view on sex.

While most of *Life and Love* focused on sex, one chapter – “Looking Toward Marriage” – discussed a Christian view on marriage to give young people “a firm foundation on which to build a happy life” (Oates 1956:82). Counseling them on how to discern when love is strong enough to serve as a “safe foundation for a permanently

²⁷ These questions are listed on the front cover of the 1956 edition of his book.

successful marriage,” he stressed the importance of “common interests, mutual ambitions, devotion to Christ, and a similar background” (60). He warned, however, that without maturity shared interest and love would be insufficient conditions for marital success. To help discern this about oneself or one’s partner, the chapter provided guidance from studies on happy marriages and vignettes of young couples to impart: the importance of marrying the “right” Christian; the need to reflect on the three families a marriage will create; God’s intention of blessing couples with a sexual relationship; and keys for successful financial planning. As an example of the type of self-help book that would dominate evangelical publications in following decades, it used an accessible writing style aimed at non-experts to translate a therapeutic message that linked faith with individual happiness in relationships.

As opposed to Pre-Cana’s origins as a social movement activity to combat secularism and re-Christianize American society, evangelical premarital counseling developed as a depoliticized project among Protestant intellectuals. Despite the overall similarities in their efforts to prepare couples for a happy and holy life, these two practices emerged amongst different sets of interlocutors. For the most part, all of the works by mainline and evangelical pastoral counselors were written by individuals with graduate degrees and who were often associated with universities. The writings reflected the isolationist tendencies of evangelicalism and indicate little concern about fighting secularism, their attention instead was turned inward to their own communities. Within these contexts the advice focused on ensuring young Christians remained faithful and married someone from a similar background. These early small-scale efforts at evangelical premarital counseling sowed the seeds for the growth of the cottage industry

of self-help books on relationships, sex, and gender. By the 1960s evangelicals had more fully embraced the practice of pastoral counseling, which they inherited from their mainline colleagues, and had begun to disseminate self-help literature as means to offer counsel that considered individuals' souls and psyches.

Teaching a Self-Reflexive Marriage: Christian Premarital Counseling, circa 1970s-2000s

Catholics Reorganize and Re-envision the Purpose of Marriage Preparation

In 1971 Cana Conference of Chicago celebrated its 25th anniversary amidst what they felt was a general sense of excitement and confusion in the Catholic Church.²⁸ Unlike the confidence among postwar Pre-Cana leaders that envisioned marriage preparation as an instrumental tool in the transformation of the church and secular culture, the sub-committee that met in 1971 to discuss the implications for the programming in the Archdiocese of Chicago had a more jaded assessment.²⁹ In response to their main question – “What expectations should we have for Pre Cana’s effect?” – a consensus agreed on “very little impact, limited expectations.”³⁰ During the quarter of a century they had offered this program, divorce rates had continued to rise and it appeared family life had only become more unstable. Scaling back their goals, they explained “Pre Cana, hopefully, can provide a climate in which the couple can talk to each other.” Despite this less-than-optimistic evaluation of the effectiveness of the program, marriage preparation

²⁸ ADC, Cana Conference of Chicago, “The History of the Cana Conference of Chicago.”

²⁹ ADC, Cana Conference of Chicago, Report: “Implications for Total Program”: Sub-Committee of Pre Cana Think Tank Committee.

³⁰ ADC, Cana Conference of Chicago, Report: “Implications for Total Program”: Sub-Committee of Pre Cana Think Tank Committee.

became the primary focus of Cana Conference of Chicago during the next three decades and even began to be required prior to any Catholic marriage.³¹

In dioceses across the country, however, new marriage preparation programs emerged competing with Pre-Cana. Engaged Encounter, in particular, became highly popular and its programming reflected the increasing emphasis on the authority of the individual. Engaged Encounter inverted many of the underlying assumptions in Cana about how to transmit knowledge to couples and the best way to make an impact on marriage. Whereas Pre-Cana manuals emphasized *teaching*, with leaders authoritatively presenting the correct way to have a Catholic marriage, Engaged Encounter sought to cultivate *learning*, with leaders facilitating conversations in couples. While covering similar topics – the state of marriage in the modern world, sex, sacrament of marriage – a manual from 1976 provided very few examples of the content to be presented on these issues.³² Privileging “self-knowledge” in both the leaders and attending couples, Engaged Encounter shifted discussions of a “good” marriage away from accomplishing an external goal towards an internal journey of reflection and communication. As a result, this orientation circumscribed the role of the priest because they could not offer peer mentoring on marriage nor model the desired pattern of open communication within the institution.

As the lay-centric model of Engaged Encounter spread across the country, some dioceses, such as Chicago, began to consolidate their authority over Catholic marriage. In contrast to the sense of mutual affirmation between priests and laity during postwar Cana,

³¹ ADC, Cana Conference of Chicago, “The History of the Cana Conference of Chicago.”

³² National Marriage Encounter. 1976. *Engaged Encounter Manual*. St. Paul, MN: National Marriage Encounter.

a growing sense of separation, and even antagonism, began to characterize this relationship. Priests began to complain that discussing faith with engaged couples had become “a source of unspoken tension.”³³ Feeling like “an interrogator” that represents an “unnecessary roadblock on the way down the aisle,” priests critically evaluated their role in the process of getting married.³⁴ While some questioned whether they should even continue to be involved, the Archdiocese of Chicago eventually chose to follow dioceses across the country by establishing a centralized and mandatory “common policy” for marriage preparation. In 1979, the Archdiocese of Chicago published their *Pastoral Guidelines for Marriage Preparation*.³⁵ Compared to earlier decades of lay leadership, this manual unambiguously privileged the role of priests in the process. Despite recognizing marriage preparation as a “shared ministry” that can include participation in the preexisting lay coordinated programs, the diocese contended “the Church gives the main responsibility for preparing couples to the parish priest.”³⁶ In response to one priest that questioned this shift by asking – “What has happened to the teaching that couples have the natural right to marry?” – they reaffirmed the priest’s authoritative role by explaining that “while people have a natural right to marry, they don’t have a natural right to the *sacrament of marriage*.”³⁷ Marriage, thus, had become increasingly differentiated as priests and laity diverged in their views on the institution.

³³ ADC, Pastoral Notes, The Cana Conference of Chicago, circa 1978.

³⁴ ADC, Pastoral Notes, The Cana Conference of Chicago, circa 1978.

³⁵ ADC, Pastoral Guidelines for Marriage Preparation. 1979.

³⁶ ADC, Pastoral Notes, The Cana Conference of Chicago, circa 1979.

³⁷ ADC, Pastoral Notes, The Cana Conference of Chicago, circa 1979.

The period of introspection about the purpose of marriage preparation also brought about a significant expansion in programming. The Archdiocese of Chicago realized that if they were to require participation for all couples seeking to get married in their parishes then they would need to better serve the diversity of their parishioners. Acknowledging the racial-ethnic diversity of Chicago Catholics, and to a lesser extent the emergence of alternative family trajectories, the Archdiocese developed Pre-Cana Conferences that catered to specific populations such as second marriages with children, older couples (over 30), Hispanic couples that spoke Spanish, Hispanic couples seeking a convalidation (church approval of a civil marriage), Hispanic couples that spoke English, and African-American couples. In each case, the same content was somewhat revised and presented by a team of married couples recruited from the specific community in an effort to better reflect their particular situation. While most dioceses across the country offered marriage preparation at this time, few had this range of “special” programs. For those that did offer alternative conferences, they were more likely to be in the case of a marriage that occurred after an annulment or during a pregnancy (O’Rourke et al. 1983).

By the 1990s the Archdiocese of Chicago had to revise their *Pastoral Guidelines for Marriage Preparation* because the reliance on priests had become untenable. The original version from 1979 had not only placed greater expectations on the parish priest to conduct individualized meetings with engaged couples to determine whether they *should* marry but the expansion of Pre-Cana programs in the 1980s had also created more work. During this time married lay couples began to dominate more of the teaching in Pre-Cana, although there remained an expectation that priests should be present to witness and provide some minimal contribution. A report from 1984 estimated that 99%

of marriage preparation programs continued to have a priest present but by the 1990s this number had significantly declined to only 20% of programs.³⁸ The territorial tone that had pervaded the first manual had been replaced with a more conciliatory one. While priests continued to have a “serious responsibility” to engaged couples, their basic role had been redefined to “extend support and help a couple in their decision to marry.”³⁹ No longer was a priest instructed to act as an arbiter over three sessions to assess the validity of a marriage but instead he was encouraged to try to get to know couples over a couple brief meetings. Additionally, the lay couples that had to take a more active role in marriage preparation programs were encouraged to acknowledge the “new issues confront[ing] couples.”⁴⁰ From recognizing the presence of interfaith couples to being aware that couples may be living together, they were advised to make it clear “we are not here to judge you, but we are here to ask you to think about your up-coming marriage in terms of the *sacrament of marriage* and the permanent commitment that you will be asked to [make to] one another.”⁴¹ While priests had hardly relinquished authority over marriage, they had loosened their grip again and even encouraged a greater role of Catholic laity to speak on marriage. Compared with the religious leaders worry about spiritual laity during the postwar era and the compartmentalization of the lay perspective in the 1970s-1980s, marriage preparation at the end of the 20th century revealed laity had located some space from which to authoritatively speak on their vocation.

³⁸ ADC, Cana Conference of Chicago. Cana Newsletter, Spring/Summer 1982; ADC, Cana Conference of Chicago. “50 Years Later.”

³⁹ ADC, Family Ministries Office – Cana Conference. 1991. *Pastoral Guidelines for Marriage Preparation*. Chicago, IL: Archdiocese of Chicago.

⁴⁰ ADC, “Cana’s 50 Years.”

⁴¹ ADC, “Outline – Marriage in the Lord.”

Evangelicals Embrace Therapeutic Culture Industry

In the 1973 inaugural issue of *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Clyde Narramore's nephew, Bruce, penned a treatise on how to improve relationships between the church and therapeutic culture. While he considered how "the rapid growth of the psychological sciences and professions may...be viewed as an encroachment on the ministry of the church" (3), he believed integrating biblical and therapeutic knowledge would provide "a comprehensive understanding of the human part of God's creation" (13). After years of the (evangelical) church being dominated by fears of the psychological realm – their science, their view on humanity, their emphasis on emotions, and their discussion of sex – he contended that "Christian counselors" needed to help bridge these worlds. Shedding much of their previous resistance to psychology, the next few decades witnessed the growth of a cottage industry of evangelical therapeutic advice from both professional counselors and lay authors.

During the early years this group of self-identified "Christian counselors" felt as if they straddled two worlds and had to defend themselves in each.⁴² Following the model of their fundamentalist predecessors, they created an extensive alternative infrastructure of academic journals, universities, and professional associations. Major evangelical universities, such as Biola and Fuller Seminary, offered graduate degrees in psychology. They differed from the separatism of fundamentalism, however, in that they did not withdraw from the secular professional world of psychology and counseling in the process. The universities ensured they were accredited and individual practitioners looked to secular professional associations such as American Psychological Association

⁴² Following Myer-Shirks (2009) example, I use the term "Christian counselors" in this section because it is consistent with how this population identified themselves.

or the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy for certification (Myers-Shirk 2009).

In the process, evangelicals also worked to distinguish their approach from their mainline counterparts that practiced pastoral counseling. For example, Fuller's School of Psychology specifically selected to provide a Ph.D. in clinical psychology that integrated theological insights rather than training individuals in pastoral counseling (Marsden 1987). Historian Susan Myers-Shirk (2009) describes how this oppositional relationship also aided in the development of a "conservative moral sensibility" that privileged the authority of scripture and God's transcendence, as well as maintained a belief in the inherent sinfulness of human nature. From the perspective of the mainline pastoral counselors who had cultivated a "liberal moral sensibility" that emphasized the importance of cultural context, human relatedness, and personal autonomy, evangelical counselors appeared overly narrow and disrespectful of people's needs. In fostering their view as distinctive from mainline Christians, these evangelical "Christian counselors" helped to redeem psychological knowledge by translating its insights into an acceptable and less threatening discourse.

Evangelical Protestant counselors differed from their mainline or Catholic brethren because they were predominately psychologists or therapists and less often clergy (Myers-Shirk 2009). While some may have offered premarital counseling within their individual practices, churches continued to serve as the primary location for this work and sometimes provided people with their first foray into counseling (Davis 2010). Pastors across the country likely conducted premarital counseling by only relying on their own theological understanding of marriage without turning to therapeutic insights but

over time it became more difficult to not engage these views. The development of counseling and psychology degrees in evangelical seminaries introduced more pastors to these ideas. Additionally, evangelical Christian counselors continued the tradition of translating professional and academic insights directly to pastors by writing manuals on how to conduct premarital counseling.

For example, a professor at Biola and a licensed marriage and family counselor, H. Norman Wright (1977/1981) wrote *Premarital Counseling: A Guidebook for Counselors*. In addition to describing how the changing state of marriage has made this ministry even more necessary for churches, he provided an incredibly detailed discussion of how to conduct sessions and provided various resources. Generally, he recommended that couples be required to attend a minimum of six sessions which should include time to meet with each partner individually. He additionally incorporated an opportunity for his wife to join in the final session by having the couple over for an informal dinner at his house. The book more closely resembled the premarital counseling guides of the postwar mainline pastoral counselors than the earlier evangelical ones. At almost four times the length of Westberg's book, however, it included substantially more detail. For example, in his chapter on "Resources to Use in Premarital Counseling," he reviewed multiple types of quantitative assessment which he required couples complete in advance of their first meeting with him. As opposed to the 29 question survey Westberg provided, Oates recommended using 125-item PREPARE and the Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis (although he only briefly reviewed them for the reader). Throughout the manual he included a wide range of recommendations for books that pastors could read themselves or suggest to couples, such as *Intended for Pleasure* on issues of sex. As evidenced by the

conservative moral sensibility throughout his book he offered an evangelical perspective on premarital counseling but the book was also grounded in a wide range of sources including references to writings by secular social scientists, other Christian counselors, evangelical pastors and authors, women's magazines, newspapers, and even materials published by the Cana Conference of Chicago.

A lay individual interested in improving their relationship could have likely read these counselor books, but they were not intended for non-expert usage. At this time, evangelical presses such as Moody and Zondervan began to extensively publish books aimed directly at helping the relationship life of the average evangelical person. In a number of cases, Christian counselors used these publishers as a way to speak more directly to premarital couples. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s a number of psychologists and therapists made a name for themselves publishing widely read books, including P. Roger Hillerstrom's *Intimate Deception: Escaping the Trap of Sexual Impurity*, Gary Chapman's *The Five Love Languages*, and Les and Leslie Parrott's *Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts*. Often, as with the first two examples, these texts served as resources in the premarital counseling process that could be referenced or recommended for couples in need of more in-depth help on a particular issue. In the final example, the book could operate as a curriculum with accompanying workbooks available for purchase (separate ones for men and women).

From an early point, however, Christian counselors were joined by others within the evangelical community – medical doctors, pastors, married couples, and even parent and child teams – producing a vast array of self-help literature. In fact, during the 1970s and 1980s as Christian counselors began to develop their professional networks, the

evangelical popular culture industry flourished (DeRogatis 2005; Jorstad 1993). Expanding upon the earlier precedent set by Clyde Narramore, the late 1970s witnessed an explosion in evangelical sex manuals that also doubled as marriage guidebooks (DeRogatis 2005). In 1976 Tim and Beverly LaHaye published *The Act of Marriage: A Christian Guide to Sexual Love* that discussed sex by examining its religious significance, physiological conditions, and social impact in marriages. While this type of publication was generally intended for married audiences as a form of marital counseling and adjustment, the 1980s experienced a surge in materials broadly oriented to family life issues (DeRogatis 2005; Jorstad 1993).

Whereas much of this literature focused on improving the lives of already married couples, commentaries on the premarital stages, such as dating and engagement, began to occur more frequently in the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, the publication of Joshua Harris' (1997) *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* has been credited with bringing the relationship needs of unmarried evangelicals to the light (Irby 2013). Unlike many other authors, prior to writing this book he was neither an established pastor nor a counselor, but instead a young man beginning his career in ministry (Harris 1997). By the start of the twenty-first century evangelicals had accepted the validity of therapeutic knowledge to the point that it had become ubiquitous within the subculture. From the colleges and universities that offered advanced degrees, to the development of professional networks of "Christian counselors" that allowed people to be counseled by a therapist from the community, to the extensive self-help literature aimed at improving relationships, the impact of the therapeutic turn could be felt widely.

Conclusion

Both Catholics and evangelical Protestants have invested substantial time and resources over the past half-century to develop strategies to aid couples in the transition to marriage. At various points both traditions have been motivated by fears of divorce, concerns over secularism, a desire to improve relationships, and a need to ensure marriages faithfully follow community expectations. In tracing these shifts over the latter half of the twentieth century, I show that religious communities embraced therapeutic principles, helped to transmit them widely, and ultimately found themselves changed by them, like the rest of American culture. I do not, however, see this as a sign of diminishing religious authority but as a transformation of religious authority.

For both faiths the early years after World War II were characterized by a centralization of religious knowledge and authority. In each case clergy dominated the discussions of what marriage should be and how to make it happy and holy. Yet, by embracing, even at this stage, the idea that married life should be personally fulfilling they helped to create an opening for lay knowledge and standpoints. In the Catholic case, this involved the elevation of the sacrament of matrimony and the active involvement of laity in the transmission of religious education. For evangelicals, this manifested in the application of non-clerical and secular insights from psychology and counseling which transformed the ways pastors discussed marriages and expanded the make-up of religious authority among evangelicals. For both traditions, these shifts culminated in enabling lay expertise to be religiously authoritative.

Alongside evidence of the individualization of religious authority, this reveals a separate process of the democratization of religious authority. Over this time period, both

Catholics and evangelicals increasingly approached their churches as a place to make individual choices that they believed would lead to self-actualization. This shift, however, was also encouraged by religious leaders who sought to cultivate an active faith in the everyday life of the laity. Laity also brought their own experiences and expertise to bear on how the faith traditions should understand the significance of marriage as a means to sanctification. In Chapter 3 I turn to explore the legacy of laity speaking on behalf of their faith communities by examining the organizational forms and styles of contemporary marriage preparation in Western Washington.

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN PREMARITAL COUNSELING?

We never had premarital counseling, but we spent the first year of our married life in therapy. Once a week, we met with a counselor who helped us iron out the wrinkles we never even saw before getting married. Not that we were in serious trouble. But we had this naïve idea that our wedding life would fall naturally into place, and a marriage preparation course or counseling never entered our minds. We had dated for six years before our nine-month engagement, and we had a lot in common (even our first names). We simply thought we would tie the proverbial knot, set up house, and as the fairy tales say, “live happily ever after.”

Les and Leslie Parrott, *Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts*¹

The past half-century left congregations and couples with a veritable cottage industry of relationship experts – both within the church and from outside – to help teach, counsel, and guide people from engagement to their goal of marital bliss (Celello 2009; Davis 2010; Farrell 1999). Compared to the postwar era when Patty Crowley and her friends scoured parishes for enough volunteers to have the first Pre-Cana, today millions of engaged couples participate in some form of premarital counseling with estimates as high as 40 percent (Davis 2010). Both churches and the state itself help to drive up this number through various requirements and policies. As Rebecca Davis (2010) notes, clergy continue to officiate between 75 and 85 percent of American weddings and most of them require some form of premarital counseling. Additionally, with the 1996 federal reorganization of welfare into Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), anti-poverty policies became inextricably linked to marriage promotion which can include

¹ Parrott, Les and Leslie Parrott. 1995. *Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts: Seven Questions to Ask Before (and After) You Marry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

premarital counseling (Avishai, Heath and Randles 2012; Hays 2003; Heath 2012; Randles 2016). Whereas these state-sanctioned efforts largely operate within the broader marriage movement which includes Christian conservatives, the various evangelical Protestant and Catholic premarital counselors I spoke with across Western Washington were organizationally distant from these efforts (if not always ideologically).

In this chapter, I introduce contemporary premarital counseling practices by contextualizing them ideologically within other approaches to relationship education and by reviewing different organizational forms and styles. Compared with the more differentiated approaches to premarital guidance discussed in the previous chapter, I found contemporary Catholic marriage preparation and evangelical premarital counseling now share many organizational similarities. Both traditions offered examples of *collective* programming involving a leadership team presiding over a class of couples and *individualized* counseling with a single couple receiving tailored feedback. While I discuss the thematic style that unified each approach, I also note the variations by factors such as religious tradition and size of congregation.

Relationship Education in Premarital Counseling

As Orit Avishai, Melanie Heath, and Jennifer Randles (2010:35) define it, “Marriage education is founded on the belief that relationship success is rooted in individual skills and couple dynamics, and that couples can learn specific skills to help them stay together.” As one pastor explained to me, “premarital [counseling] is all about tools and things.” Describing it as “investigative,” he explained, it “aims to help a couple discover their relationship blind spots [that] they need to talk about or [have] never thought about.” The pastors, therapists, and lay people that meet with premarital couples

developed programming that they believed would teach couples various relationship skills and prepare them for the most common examples of marital conflict. Topics across the programs included: communication; sex; finances; conflict resolution; personality types; relationship roles; expectations of marriage; views on children; plans for the future (including career aspirations); family of origin dynamics; and faith. For all these issues, premarital counselors sought to facilitate conversation between couples, ideally revealing unspoken assumptions and expectations. Towards this end, an important goal in premarital counseling often centered around getting individuals to recognize their own expectations about marriage and to see how those do, or do not, fit with their partner's worldview.

Unlike preexisting scholarship that has considered premarital counseling within the context of the marriage movement (Adams and Coltrane 2006; Randles 2016), the Christian premarital counselors I met were largely concerned about their own religious communities which often made them cautious advocates of marriage. All of them dedicated considerable professional and personal energy to guiding couples towards marriage, but not because they believed marriage offered any type of solution to social problems. Unlike the evangelicals (and presumably Catholics) that formed coalitions targeting marriage as a solution to youth violence, poverty and any number of social ills in broader society (Coltrane 2001; Heath 2012), the Christian premarital counselors I studied were more narrowly concerned with the relationships of people within their own (predominately white, middle-class) communities. While many believed marriage preparation has considerable value and could ideally even change the state of American marriage, they did not imagine this impact occurring through promotion but rather

deterrence. As an evangelical therapist explained to a room of engaged couples, “It’s important to disabuse you of the idea that marriage is a solution to your problems. Rather, it’s the birthplace of most of your questions.”

For example, after I introduced myself at another evangelical program, Paul, the lead husband encouraged the engaged couples to volunteer for my study because “marriage is under-assault” and he “hopes my work will help to prepare people for marriage.”² Yet, it was also here that I first realized the error of assuming these local Christian marriage preparation programs belonged to the broader marriage promotion movement. To truly *prepare* for marriage, premarital counselors stressed that couples had to be willing to consider whether the present relationship should make it to the altar. To introduce the purpose of the weekend, for example, Joseph, another member of the leadership team, told all the couples, “You are all present because you are focused on your relationship. The goal in these dialogue sessions should be to begin to look for red flags.” Challenging the couples to take this search seriously, he tells them that there are three potential outcomes to the process: “full-steam ahead,” “a sense that you should slow down,” or “a realization that perhaps you should end the relationship entirely.”

Reassuring them about these possibilities, Joseph commented

All three outcomes are acceptable as long as they emerge out of the deep dialogue and reflection of the weekend. We hope that people will take this period of reflection and examination seriously to help consider any strong warnings you’ve had without a fear about the invitations already having been ordered or what your families would think.

At some point in nearly every program I observed and in most of the interviews with premarital counselors, someone made a point to clarify that “success” in this work

² All names are pseudonyms.

includes couples postponing their wedding or breaking up entirely. In some cases, people told me they celebrated these cases the most because they believed it meant they had saved the couple from an inevitable divorce. Likewise, an evangelical therapist that worked in both a clinical and pastoral setting commented “the *reality* [is] we do such a great job of promoting this idea of coupling, mating, and getting married. And, a very lousy job of informing people and equipping them about what it means to stay married.” The assumption for many appeared to be that people already find marriage appealing – or, at least, the idea of marriage as encapsulated in the wedding – *staying* married represents a greater battle than convincing people to get married.

Echoing Andrew Cherlin’s (2009) call to “slow down,” Catholic and evangelical premarital counselors concerned themselves more with the divorce rate (among middle-class couples) than the marriage rate (among low-income couples). Both emphasized that their traditions conceptualized marriage as a “permanent” and binding *covenant*, in which “divorce is not an option.” While I explore this theme more in the next chapter, for now it is important to note that this motivated the shared focus on challenging couples to reflect on whether this is the *right* relationship for marriage; resulted in consistent and constant messages that a successful marriage requires *work*; and motivated the focus on transmitting *relationship skills* at this stage which they envisioned as more malleable.

Within this context marital love becomes a project that requires careful cultivation and constant monitoring. As one Catholic husband explained to a class, “You have to love your marriage. Difficulties will happen. And, that’s the truth of life.” No premarital counselor believed love would conquer anything, let alone the daily frustrations that emerge from differences in personality, conceptions of cleanliness, family of origin, etc.

For these reasons, premarital counselors sought to help couples enter marriage without love blinding them to the inevitable differences and stressors that accompany any relationship. In asking them to set their “love blinders” aside, collective and individualized premarital counseling programs relied on self-reflexive activities and discussions, often centering on the topics they believed were most divisive (sex, in-laws, finances, personality, communication styles). As they addressed each of these issues they sought to *normalize* difference, even noting that conflict on these issues need not result in divorce (or a postponement of the marriage). For instance, in reflecting upon what she hopes couples take away from the weekend retreat, Kelly, an evangelical wife on the leadership team at the weekend retreat, shared “You are going to encounter hard times and you don’t need to freak out. That’s a normal part of relationship[s] and there are tools to help you work through that.” As such, a tension emerged in the characterization of marriage, with premarital counselors simultaneously stressing the idea that any marriage will be able to survive, assuming both spouses put in the required work (part of what I later describe as the *covenant rhetoric*) and the idea that not all relationships are marriage worthy.

Organizational Forms of Marriage Preparation

Engaged Christian couples in Western Washington can (and do) choose from a variety of different forms of marriage preparation. From weekend retreats, to Sunday-School type classes, to personalized consultations with pastors, private sessions with therapists or meetings with marriage mentors from their church. The particular offerings of any church varied in part by resources and personnel, as well as perceived demand of their congregants. For instance, a number of the Catholic parishes I attempted to recruit

informed me that so few couples are married in their church in any year that they tend to outsource the requests, generally encouraging them to participate in the weekend retreat offered by the diocese. In contrast, most of the collective premarital counseling ministries I observed operated within larger congregations that appeared to have both a sizable population of young adults and more professionalized congregants from which to draw volunteers to help lead these programs. To offset the sampling bias that this created, I also contacted other churches – including smaller ones and less urban ones – to interview whoever conducted marriage preparation. While I review these two organizational forms of premarital preparation separately – collective and individualized – it is important to note that churches sometimes offered both and couples often participated in a combination of the two (even if they did so by drawing from different religious communities).

Table 3. Organizational Forms and Styles of Premarital Education

Organizational Form	Organizational Style
Collective Programming	<p>Personal-Confessional – Leadership teams share intimate details about their marriage to normalize relationship dynamics and forge connection to premarital couples.</p> <p>Educational – Leadership teams present insights from relevant social-scientific studies on marriage, especially relationship skills. To a lesser extent they also provide religious instruction on theological views on marriage.</p>
Individualized Counseling	Facilitation – Generally one person guides a couple through self-reflective exercises to allow them to examine their individual pasts and offer suggestions for how to best prepare for their future together.

Preparing for Marriage with Others

I observed two Catholic and two evangelical Protestant pre-marriage programs where engaged couples met together to listen to married couples share their experience and insights on deciding to get married, surviving marital conflict, striving for relationship success, and how to have a Christ-centric marriage. Both Catholic programs occurred within parishes, whereas I observed an evangelical pre-marriage retreat and two classes at one evangelical congregation.³ At each of the churches, the classes were held one evening per week for 6-8 weeks with each session focusing on a different topic. Whereas the Catholic parishes rotated who presented each evening, the same couple(s) presented every week at the evangelical congregation. In the below table, I briefly describe each group before I turn in the remainder of this section to discussion commonalities in their organizational style.

Table 4. Description of Four Collective Programming Sites

Marriage Preparation Program	Overview of Setting
Evangelical Weekend Retreat	Three married couples shared their stories over a weekend (Friday evening to Sunday afternoon) at an evangelical conference center. The senior leadership couple (Kelly and Paul) had been involved in this ministry for over a decade, whereas the other two couples had been recruited in the last five years. The couples ranged in how long they had been married with the youngest couple (Anneliese and Jeff) having been married less than ten years and the oldest couple (Virginie and Joseph) over twenty years. Despite individuals in two of the marriages having worked in ministry, this team saw their perspective emerging from their years of experiences in marriage. As a result, in their talks they sought to provide insight into the daily life of making a marriage work and draw connections to how they lived out biblical principles in the process.

³ The frequency of observations varied by the field sites, some I conducted observations of the same program multiple times and in others I observed once. See the methodological appendix for more details.

	<p>Working from a list of discussion questions, each individual participating in the program would journal in a provided notebook on the session's topic. After approximately twenty minutes, couples would then reunite in one of their rooms (with the door open) to read each other's personal thoughts and engage in dialogue as a couple.</p>
Evangelical Congregation	<p>An urban mega-church regularly held two classes to aid couples' reflection on marriage: one was offered for dating couples to help them evaluate if they were ready and the other was offered to engaged couples to help them with the transition. The one family life pastor oversaw this (and many other ministries at the church) recruited lay volunteers to coordinate the classes. With a background in marriage counseling, he envisioned these classes as primarily providing couples with "relationship principles" He only recruited therapists to lead the classes to ensure the advice was clinically and empirically grounded. While all the leaders saw themselves as committed Christians and believed their insights were consistent with Biblical teachings, they envisioned relationship education as the priority in the classes. Two married couples, Michael and Rebecca and John and Lauren-May, led the dating class together. One married couple, Sarah and Adam, led the engagement class which also had two marriage and family therapy interns earning hours towards their degree observe and occasionally help with the group discussions. The husbands in all three couples were marriage counselors and tended to be more responsible for constructing the curriculum and presenting the materials. In both classes the leadership tended to talk for most of the class but there always made time for couples to dialogue together or in small groups with others.</p>
Urban Catholic Parish	<p>Mary, the parish's religious director, oversaw this ministry and recruited couples from the congregation that had been married at least 10 years to present for one session. Since she had struggled to locate volunteer couples in recent years, one class she co-lead with the parish priest. The lay couples that comprised the leadership did not meet together to discuss the programming nor coordinated their talks with each other. None of them had any training in religion or relationships but instead focused on providing loosely structured discussions on their assigned topics. Every week couples received a variety of handouts and worksheets. The final night involved a potluck at a nearby house of a younger married couple in the parish.</p>
Non-Urban Catholic Parish	<p>Working together 3 married couples volunteer their time to coordinate this ministry for the parish. The first week included an introduction to the full leadership team, each of them led one of the subsequent three weeks</p>

	on relevant topics, and for the final week the parish priest and wedding coordinator held a shorter meeting to discuss relevant information for the upcoming nuptials. The leadership did not have any training in religion and relationship, instead they emphasized their personal experience.
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Across these different sites, two programmatic styles emerged: *personal-confessional* and *educational*. Mirroring the type of self-reflexivity they hoped to inspire in the premarital couples, all the leadership teams adopted a *personal-confessional* approach. In fact, a number of times during my observations I found myself uncomfortable as I listened to stories that felt too intimate to share with a room of strangers (a sensation exacerbated by my furious notetaking). Based on the occasional awkward laugh, I could tell I was not the only one who felt this way either. But, quickly my discomfort would pass and I often found what remained was a sense of respect at the honest presentation of married life. I first encountered this at the evangelical weekend retreat where Jeff and Anneliese, the youngest of the married couples on the team, shared their story about “second virginity” that briefly included discussing Anneliese’s history of sexual abuse and spent considerable time detailing their efforts to avoid having sex during their engagement. The narrative finally ended with her reading a card that her new in-laws had written and given to them in a care package for their wedding night. While this story was met with an occasional awkward laugh, other confessions were more somber such as another couple detailing a “dark period” in which they could barely tolerate to sit on the same couch together and their intentional actions at reconnecting in their marriage.

The married couple that led the engagement class took this approach even further by not only recounted personal stories but embodying the confessional approach in their teaching. For instance, their first day immediately plunged the class into a surprisingly deep level of intimacy. After making small talk with the room for a few minutes while he

waited for his wife, Adam finally decided class needed to start and began without her. Looking out to the overly full room, he announced, “Welcome! You’re getting married.” Providing everyone with a sense of what to expect over the next eight weeks, he explained “We won’t tell you how to master marriage. Rather, we will help you see where you are, where you want to go, and help to draw the line between those two points. After ten or so years, you won’t remember what we’ve said. But, you will remember what occurs to you [in this process].” Therefore, he encouraged all the couples to have a notebook to take notes about any realizations that emerge during the talks. For those couples that did not come prepared for this, he passed out sheets of paper. At this point, his wife, Sarah, appeared. After briefly explaining that she had been dealing with a registration issue, Adam and Sarah continued discussing general logistics about how the class would be run and their expectations for the engaged couples. Finally, turning to introducing themselves Adam began, “We’ve been doing this class three times a year, for a long time. And, we love it. It’s a place where we come together.” Before he gets any further, however, Sarah interrupted him with “especially after we’ve been fighting all day” and began to tell the crowded class that this is the first time they had seen each other in hours because earlier they had “a blow-out fight.” Adam laughed as she confesses all this to a classroom full of couples who have only just met them for the first time and were looking to them to provide insights into marriage. Sarah continued by informing the class, “That laugh means she’s crazy.” While the class quietly sat in an awkward state of silence, Adam simply noted “Let this be the first important thing you learn about marriage. When you’re wrong say you’re sorry. When you’re right stop talking.”

The level of personal confessions only went deeper as this first evening's "introduction" continued with them taking turns to tell "their story." Included along with the obligatory details of how they met, how long they dated, their engagement, and their children, were also two unexpected (and related) details. First, Sarah described the pain of having a miscarriage not only mentioning how depressed she became over this issue but describing the wedge it created with Adam "who in a deeply, profound way didn't get it." Explaining how this wedge grew into emotional distance during which they each tried to fill with separate activities (as a means to process their grief), Adam informed everyone that he ended up having an affair with another woman. They concluded this revealing introduction by detailing the level of work that followed and the arduous process of how they repaired their relationship. In reflecting on this, Sarah noted "It's sometimes worth the fight. It's always worth fighting for it."

The most dramatic instances of this confessional style tended to occur at the evangelical sites, a fact likely attributable to a combination of organizational form and religious culture. Since in the Catholic parishes the facilitating couples rotated every week, there were fewer opportunities to open and share with a group. With the exception of the engaged class, the deeply personal revelations tended to occur later into the material and not during an introduction. While Adam and Sarah's immediate personal confession can at least be partially attributed to their personalities, this approach also is more consistent within evangelical communities. Even for those raised within the evangelical faith there is an emphasis on conversion through "born again" narratives that privilege "recounting events that have irrevocably changed one's life" (Griffith 1997:16).

As such, evangelicals privilege redemptive narratives that highlight the challenges that one has had to overcome to arrive at their present state of faith.

While I did not hear “confessions” of premarital sex or extramarital affairs in the Catholic parishes, I did learn about couples’ experiences with miscarriages, emotional turmoil caused by a grown child addicted to drugs, and struggles with a teenage daughter’s angst. As opposed to an in-depth discussion that laid bare emotional details, these examples tended not to be the central point the leaders sought to make but an aside mentioned as they discussed topics such as forgiveness, expectations of marriage, or communication styles. For instance, one married couple ostensibly charged with discussing “virtues of a lasting marriage” (but that had also been selected because of their interfaith marriage), spent time discussing children’s religious socialization. After advising the engaged couples to “seriously” consider children’s religious education, Noreen and Lou briefly described the decisions they had made. Noreen’s comment that she sent their two children to a Lutheran preschool because “one of us wanted to earn points with her mother-in-law” or the exasperated description of her now teenage daughter “who is Wiccan this week” did not carry the same emotional weight or level of detail as found in the evangelical sites. Yet, the comments similarly contained the potential to demystify marriage and reveal probable points of tension in long-term relationships.

In fact, across all the marriage preparation programs the stories shared by married couples were more often mundane. At the evangelical weekend retreat, they intentionally selected everyday type of examples to unveil the work of married life. In a session on learning about oneself, the lead wife Kelly discussed the pressures she placed on herself

as a perfectionist to maintain the perfect home and how as their family has grown (to four children) she has had to learn to readjust her expectations. At both the evangelical weekend retreat and one Catholic parish, married couples told personal stories to illustrate Gary Chapman's *5 Love Languages*. Knowing her husband's "love language" is words of affirmation, one wife left post-it notes with sweet nothings and encouraging thoughts around her husband's office. These less remarkable examples of married life importantly illustrated the type of constant and intentional work they believe must go into maintaining marriages (a theme I return to in the next chapter).

A consequence of lay married couples sharing their personal stories with premarital couples is that it helped to establish relationships within the religious communities. In fact, community-building operated as an explicit goal of the collective classes in the congregations. At both Catholic parishes, for example, the leadership was well-aware that many of the attending couples were not actively involved in church life. Marriage preparation, thus, represented an opportunity to connect with the next potential generation of Catholic families and welcome them into the parish. By rotating their facilitating couples, they helped introduce engaged couples to more people and increase the odds that if they return to a Sunday Mass they could see a familiar face. The non-urban parish more purposefully embraced this community-building potential by arranging the time of the class to occur directly after the evening Mass on Sunday and encouraging everyone to attend. For the first introductory session, they even moved class to immediately prior to the service and ended in enough time to have everyone walk over together to the sanctuary. On subsequent nights, couples could join the leadership team's pew. This coordinated effort also manifested in the talks themselves with the married

couples at this parish making a point to mention the benefit of being involved in a religious community, such as “how good the parish school has been for us.”

Whereas the evangelical weekend retreat actually worked against some of these community building activities by not including group discussion times, the evangelical congregation also intentionally sought to connect couples more into their church community. As a large church that had grown relatively quickly over the past few years, the church staff realized that they had lost some of the previous intimacy within the congregation and more people could attend without recognizing anyone. Part of the premarital curriculums required couples locate a “marriage mentor” couple to meet with over the course. While they did not require that couples select someone from the congregation, they did strongly encourage they do so to and offered the services of the Family Life Pastor to connect them with a potential mentor couple. Sarah and Adam also frequently emphasized the potential of the engaged class to help them build a community, noting “we know for certain lifelong friendships form in this room.”

While the personal-confessional style may help provide connections in the classes and build a sense of community, premarital counselors primarily envisioned the programming as a means of translating important lessons on marriage. When Virginie and Joseph first joined the leadership team at the weekend retreat Paul and Kelly provided them feedback on early drafts of their talks, telling them “Focus more on your story, your experience, what you did and what you learned and what happened and the teaching will flow out of that by itself. Don’t feel like you have to be a professor teaching the content of it.” In fact, members of the leadership team at this site once balked when I off-handedly described their talks as “lectures,” yet along with the other collective marriage

preparation programs, they followed an *educational style* that felt similar to sitting in a classroom. These programs had many telltale signs of being in school including: attendance (sometimes mandatory), homework, assigned readings, constructing lists on whiteboards, discussion break-out sessions, and they covered topical content that built upon itself. The evangelical weekend retreat even arranged the premarital couples at tables that created a half-circle facing an elevated dais from which the leadership read their talks from thick three-ring binders, occasionally displaying illustrated graphics on an overhead projector next to them. As is often the case with homework, teachers assigned work to ensure students' comprehension of the material. In the case of relationship education, this most often involved self-reflexive discussion questions and activities aimed at cultivating awareness and, hopefully, the articulation of one's own assumptions.

For example, to set the next week's session on moving from an "I" to a "We," Adam assigned the engaged class an activity to help each person learn about their own views on faith and reveal assumptions about what a "Christian marriage" means to them. Before detailing the actual homework, however, he led everyone in an activity to help prepare them. Assuming an air of authority he instructed the class to close their eyes, he quickly corrected his tone however, and more cautiously added "You don't *have to* close your eyes, but just try to see God in your mind." After pausing a moment as the class sat in silence, he told them "Take a snapshot of what you see and remember it." Next, he repeated the activity by telling them to see Jesus and to take another snapshot. With everyone's eyes wide open again and turned to pay attention to him, he explained "You have these pictures and they mean something." Rhetorically, he asked what they saw for

God and offered some possible answers, ranging from Aslan, to an ocean, to Alanis Morissette. He instructed each person to remember what they saw, and reminding them about the paper that he passed out at the start of class, he encouraged them write it down to help them return to these ideas later.

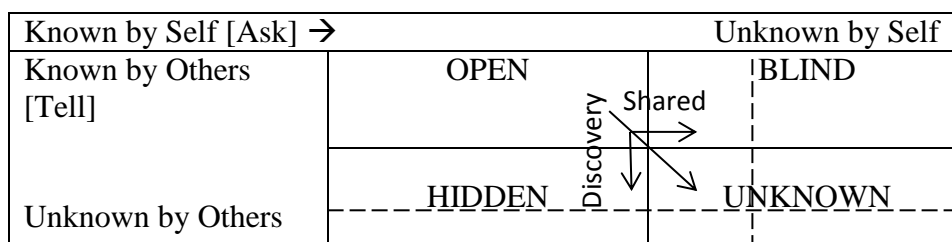
Your assignment is to explore what God and Jesus means to you as a couple and how you can knit the two views together. Everyone should do this for themselves first, then sit down and compare notes. Get really curious about what your partner saw and about what you even saw. Because if you think that the person you're marrying sees God the same way and that's the basis of your hope for a Christian marriage then that will be really painful.

Before letting everyone go for the day he warned them that he *will* ask them about the assignment next week. He followed up on that threat and each week he began by asking about the type of conversations the homework produced.

While my presence as an unattached woman often marked me as a researcher in these classes, my notetaking blended into the classroom atmosphere. At the evangelical sites, other classmates and I would wait for class to begin with notebooks open and pens ready. Admittedly, I took notes more frequently and perhaps with more earnestness than the others around me. At one site, this earned me the privilege of sharing my notes with a couple who had to miss class. At the evangelical weekend retreat and in the engagement class at the evangelical congregation, the leadership often supplied writing materials to the couples to help facilitate this effort. While I witnessed less of the self-initiated notetaking at the Catholic parishes, they were always provided with workbooks and handouts which they had to complete during class time (and which they could also use to take notes on if they desired).

Despite the tendency of the leadership’s claims that they mostly shared their personal stories of marriage, all of the programs sought to provide formal teachings on relationship best practices. At the evangelical congregation, in particular, the leaders’ professional background as therapists often produced talks that can only be described as a lecture. For example, to explain the purpose of the dating class to all the couples on their first night Michael, one of the marriage counselors that led the class, described the “Johari Window.”

It emerged from a doctoral dissertation in psychology that sought to understand how people operate with other people. As indicated in the diagram, the goal in this process is to establish intimacy and trust. This also represents the process that the class will ideally follow – engaging in a process of discovery that starts first with the self, then one’s family and, finally, the couple. We will start first with the “open” category, move towards the “blind” areas, and then move onward towards the “hidden” with the goal of hoping to smooth out and shrink the “unknown” areas. However, this is not a process that can occur instantaneously but takes time. Over the course of the class there may be many topics that you have already talked about in the past but the goal is that at least one of these conversations will be deeper and push the intimacy further. This illustrates the broader process of figuring out what you need to learn about yourselves and what you need to tell your partner. Importantly, however, it is a process and not meant to be done in one session of ripping off the Band-Aid.⁴



The sessions in the dating and engagement classes at the evangelical congregation were often more thorough and in-depth than the other programs led by laity and clergy without

⁴ The quote and diagram both come from my field notes. I copied down the diagram that the leaders had drawn on the whiteboard during class.

any clinical backgrounds but they were not the only premarital counselors to draw on relationship science in their talks.

A night on “communication” at the non-urban Catholic parish, for example, included a presentation on John Gottman’s research on conflict styles.⁵ After reviewing the “Fighting Fair” page in their workbook, Marcy and Darryl provided all the engaged couples with a handout on John Gottman’s “Seven Principles of a Strong Marriage.” Before they reviewed it, however, they made a point to note that while Gottman is not Catholic he still offers some useful insights. As they explained, “Based on his research in his Love Labs at the UW, he has been fairly successful at estimating when couples get divorced. And, he has come up with some key factors that healthy relationships, where couples fight fairly, tend to share.” They highlight two key points from this work: 1) “Be willing to edit yourself. You don’t need to tell ALL. It is okay to let stuff go and not to say every thought that has bubbled into your head. Don’t dump every thought on the other person.” 2) “If you seek to first understand then a lot of issues won’t be there.”

Admittedly, the veracity, reliability, and newness of the research varied by premarital counselors and was shaped by professional background. The therapists that led the classes at the congregation could more easily draw on professional encounters with clients and lessons from their graduate work. Even at the other sites, which were all led by individuals without this formal educational background in relationship science, the leadership teams made a point of conducting their own “research” into what to present to couples. Most often this involved reading self-help books, such as John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, Gary Chapman’s *The Five Love Languages*, or John

⁵ Almost all of the programs at some time mentioned insights from John Gottman. In addition, to national level fame he is also a local celebrity connected to a university in Western Washington. Multiple premarital counselors mentioned having gone to hear talks at the Gottman Institute.

Gottman and Nate Silver's *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. Despite variation in the depth and type of their research, the married couples on all the leadership teams wove it into their personal narratives to guide premarital couples in the best practices and relationship skills for their upcoming nuptials.

Individualized Premarital Counseling

I also conducted interviews with people that offered individualized premarital counseling to couples.⁶ I did 15 interviews with people that performed individualized premarital counseling in congregational contexts (6 Catholic and 9 evangelical Protestant), as well as 11 interviews with people associated with an evangelical graduate therapy program that included an emphasis on premarital counseling.⁷ Of the pastoral premarital counselors, all 6 of the Catholic individuals were laity for whom marriage preparation entailed one of their obligations as parish staff (most often serving in positions such as religious director or director of faith formations).⁸ In contrast, the sample of evangelical premarital counselors included pastors (some of whom also had professional backgrounds in counseling) and lay couples that volunteered as marriage mentors.

By virtue of not being a face in a crowd, individualized premarital counseling offers the opportunity for more personalized feedback and guidance. Within this context,

⁶ For ethical reasons, I did not observe these individualized premarital counseling sessions. As a result, I have to rely on the interviews with premarital counselors and couples that participated to know how they were conducted and the type of content they covered.

⁷ Some of the evangelical pastoral interviews were conducted with lay couples that served as mentors at a large, non-urban megachurch. Of the 11 clinical interviews, 7 were done with students of the graduate program, 2 were done with people associated with the university's counseling programs (one of whom was also an alum) and then two additional alumni.

⁸ Of the Catholic laity that coordinated marriage preparation for their parishes, 2 of them had professional training in counseling.

the process shifts away from education towards a *facilitation* approach that seeks to ensure couples actually have the type of self-reflective conversations about examining their pasts to prepare for their futures. In a collective class setting, much of the premarital work was incumbent upon couples to complete. While couples were always provided with some break-out time to talk to each other, these were often brief 10 to 15 minute segments within the 1½ to 2 hour class. An exception to this is the evangelical weekend retreat, which always included time for first self-reflection and then couple time to discuss these insights. However, in all the programs couple time was unsupervised and never monitored. As a result, couples could participate in these programs without engaging the goals or tools that the leadership sought to provide. Based upon interviews with the couples, I know participants ranged in how much they completed the workbook activities, answered the assigned discussion questions, or finished the readings. While all educational contexts contain people of varying levels of commitment and interest to the subject matter, the individualized structure can guard somewhat against this tendency. Whereas a couple may opt to not discuss or not recognize an area of tension in their relationship when they talk by themselves, the individualized settings may bring these issues to light with a premarital counselor intentionally assessing these points in a relationship.

However, premarital counselors faced the challenge of how to best and most efficiently offer personal and insightful feedback to each premarital couple they counseled. Occasionally, pastoral staff could rely on preexisting knowledge of the couple (or at least one person in it) to help guide this process. However, heightened mobility means people are less likely to marry someone from the community they grew up in

(Amato et al. 2007; Ansari 2015) and the age group most likely to marry is also the age group least likely to be actively involved in church life.⁹ Most premarital counselors I spoke with, therefore, could not rely on preexisting information and even in relevant cases it would often be incomplete. Two strategies consistently emerged as useful in helping to learn enough about a couple to offer tailored feedback to their particular needs, strengths, and situations: conducting multiple sessions and assessment.

As one therapist explained “I don't do premarital [in] any less than 8 sessions.” While others reported being more flexible in working with a couple to determine how many sessions they would require, I often heard people discuss a 4-8 session model. The particular focus of the sessions varied by counselor and, as they reported, by the couple. Some described dedicating a session or two simply to learning about the couple to “get their story,” allowing important issues to organically emerge in this process. Most had topics that they always sought to address and used initial meetings to determine the significance or relevance of each issue for any particular couple. Even with a general check-list of topics and casual conversations, most relied on as assessment tool to guide their approach with each couple. A therapy student, interning in an evangelical college's counseling center that offered premarital counseling, explained, “I think that it would be difficult to not have a tool like [Prepare and Enrich].” After all, as one pastor noted, “at best I have 20 hours with people [and] that's not covering a lot.” In the face of these time constraints almost all of the premarital counselors appreciated the structure that

⁹ Studies of religion and the life course has consistently found that involvement in churches declines during the young adult years (Barry and Nelson 2005; Pearce and Lundquist Denton 2011; Smith and Snell 2009) with marriage or childbearing sometimes linked to increased attendance (Edgell 2006). While evangelicals are among those more likely to marry at a younger age (Uecker and Stokes 2008), the average age of marriage has continued to raise over the past couple decades (Amato et al. 2007). A report by Pew in 2011 estimates that men and women are both increasingly waiting until their late-20s to get married for the first time (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/marriage-rate-declines-and-marriage-age-rises/>).

assessment tools could provide them in helping to identify areas to encourage “growth” and potential points of tension to warn couples about. Citing social desirability, especially with a pastor, some premarital counselors believed the information they obtained from the tool was more reliable and authentic than what could be gained from only talking with a couple.

Every evangelical premarital counselor I spoke with discussed using the Prepare and Enrich program, whereas Catholics were more likely to discuss FOCCUS (Facilitate Open, Caring Communication, Understanding and Study). Both programs were created over twenty years ago by relationship science experts – such as sociologists and marriage and family therapists.¹⁰ Both curricula offer certification for any interested individual to become an approved “facilitator” and to have access to the materials. The FOCCUS website carefully denotes the difference between a “facilitator” and a (licensed) therapist.

Unlike a therapist, a facilitator is not expected to fix problems nor offer advice; he or she is a resource to support the relationship and promote healthy communication. Pre-marriage sessions offer a unique opportunity to celebrate a couple's strengths, practice positive communication skills, and explore important areas that may present problems later.¹¹

Likewise, the website for Prepare and Enrich notes that “the inventory has been utilized by over 100,000 trained clergy members, professional counselors, mentors, and marriage educators throughout the U.S.”¹²

¹⁰ Prepare and Enrich was developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s by sociologist David Olson (Davis 2010), whereas FOCCUS was created in 1985 by marriage and family therapists (<http://www.foccusinc.com/about-us-history.aspx>).

¹¹ FOCCUS. “Why FOCCUS?” <http://www.foccusinc.com/about-us-why-foccus.aspx>

¹² Prepare and Enrich. “About the Assessment.” https://www.prepare-enrich.com/webapp/pe/faq/template/DisplaySecureContent.vm;pc=1464398576596?id=pe*faq*overview.html&emb_org_id=0&emb_sch_id=0&emb_lng_code=ENGLISH

Despite, or perhaps because, both software packages market themselves as accessible tools for anyone to use, they framed their instruments in scientific authority. Relying on “inventories” and “scales,” FOCCUS and Prepare and Enrich stress the quantifiable research behind their measures. For instance, FOCCUS notes “The 156-item, research-based inventory assesses couples' agreement, disagreement, or indecision about statements related to important issues.”¹³ Likewise, Prepare and Enrich offers a facilitator access to 55 scales including those that target key dimensions of relationships – “communication, conflict resolution, roles, sexuality, finances, and spiritual beliefs” – as well as includes options to customize the scales.¹⁴ While historically some religious leaders expressed reservations about these forms of assessment (Davis 2010), most of the ones I spoke with enthusiastically discussed their usefulness in premarital counseling and indicated a significant reliance on them.

All of the students and alumni of the evangelical graduate therapy program had received an introductory training to Prepare and Enrich during their coursework and many of them had opted to pursue a more complete training to become certified. The assessment was equally as popular with evangelical premarital counselors working in a pastoral setting, however, with everyone reporting having used it. Especially for pastors, who may not have much background or experience in counseling, an assessment tool such as Prepare and Enrich appears to help them organize their approach and focus in individualized sessions with couples. For example, a couple of the pastors I interviewed who had only done this work a few times reported fully relying on the assessment tool

¹³ FOCCUS. “Why FOCCUS?” <http://www.foccusinc.com/about-us-why-foccus.aspx>

¹⁴ Prepare and Enrich. “About the Assessment.” https://www.prepare-enrich.com/webapp/pe/faq/template/DisplaySecureContent.vm;pc=1464398576596?id=pe*faq*overview.html&emb_org_id=0&emb_sch_id=0&emb_lng_code=ENGLISH

and accompanying materials to guide them through the process. In addition to completing an online survey (that provides the facilitator more detailed feedback than it provides the couples themselves), there is also an accompanying workbook that facilitators can offer to the couples to help them work through the key areas of the survey. On topics such as Communication it includes descriptions and examples of active listening, for Financial Management it includes a meaning of money quiz, and for Leisure Activities it includes an exercise on dating. Additionally, throughout it recommends a variety of relationship books for future reference on these topics.

In only one case did I hear anyone express any ambivalence about relying on an assessment tool, an evangelical man who worked both as a therapist and a pastor believed there were probably more useful activities to do in premarital counseling. While not denying the usefulness of Prepare and Enrich specifically, he explained “It can be a good talking point, [but] my experience is that most of the time the couples sort of know that stuff already.” Whereas everyone else I spoke with appreciated being able to hand couples a visual representation of their (in)compatibility, he estimated that he had used this assessment nearly 100 times and it seemed that the information was not new or novel for couples. Instead, he preferred to encourage couples to work through a book together, such as Les and Leslie Parrott’s *Saving Your Marriage Before it Starts*.

If you can actually sit down on the loveseat, or a couch, and read it out loud together maybe every night ‘til you’re done – or maybe three nights a week or even one night a week or whatever – knock off half a chapter read it out loud [and] sort of reflect, listen to each other, sit close enough [that] you can feel the vibrations of you, know, the process. To do that together is really good and I think I see that [as] being a greater asset and a great[er] resource than scoring Prepare Enrich.

In general, he was also less optimistic about the prospects of premarital counseling than most of the participants in the study. He admitted that in his more cynical moments, he often thinks to himself “this is a waste of time... because they’re just not ready to listen.” But, by all accounts he continues to do premarital work and noted that it can be “fun” because “you’re meeting with usually some very nice people who are excited to be together.” This diminished sense of efficacy, however, had led him to decrease the number of sessions he required with couples (down to 4 from 8). Highlighting the overall tension within premarital counseling, he explained that he can point out likely points of future conflict and remind couples that these will only become more intense in marriage but commented that in the end “I don’t expect them to hear that and then make the choice not to get married.” As a result, he adjusted his goal, “I just want to put it out there for them to think more deeply and ask questions that otherwise they may not have asked.”

In another case, a pastor learned that the assessment may not work for all populations when he counseled an engaged couple that included an illiterate man. While this experience did not diminish his support for assessment it does point to a classed dimension of premarital counseling. In comparison to the group setting, the individualized format has the potential to identify and meet couples’ needs but the reliance on assessment tools may help to normalize a classed view on marriage grounded in the therapeutic ethos. In both styles of programming, educational skill such as being able to take exams, write coherently, or to express one’s views in an articulate manner are privileged as examples of “preparedness.”

Despite these similarities across the individualized premarital counseling strategy, it is important to note the approach varies based on who facilitates it. Based upon the full

sample of interviews, I heard stories from couples that ranged from absentee pastors barely addressing issues to confrontational encounters with pastors questioning the legitimacy of a potential marriage. For those working in (especially the evangelical) pastoral setting, some ministers reported wrestling over whether they should marry a couple and if it they were offering their tacit approval to the relationship. For nearly all people offering individualized marriage preparation within the context of a church – lay staff, parish priests, evangelical pastors, and marriage mentors – premarital counseling is an unpaid service to their community. Even for clergy and religious directors for whom it may be part of their job description, it always represented a small component. At 4-8 sessions per couple (plus the associated preparation), dedicating considerable time or energy may come at a cost to other duties. It is this time-resource management issue that resulted in many of the larger congregations developing programs that outsourced this labor to volunteers, such as the collective programs noted in the previous section, and the use of marriage mentors.

The division of labor approach appeared most consistently in the Catholic parishes. I only ended up interviewing 2 parish priests during the course of this research because when I contacted parishes asking to speak with whoever was in charge of marriage preparation I was always forwarded to laity (either a lay staff member or a lay volunteer couple). The limited role of Catholic priests makes sense given demands upon their time and their single status. Yet, it is important to note that they do continue to play a limited role in this process. Both priests I spoke with had at various points during their career been more actively involved in marriage preparation than the one session they oversaw in the collective program at that time. It appears that given the size and demands

of each congregation, their current role was limited to a few meetings with the couple most often focusing on wedding details, such as selecting liturgy and discussing the logistics of the service. According to one priest, however, these meetings offered a time for proselytization and redemption. He explained, “I enjoy wedding prep not because it is easy but because it is a chance to speak about the gospel.” In particular, for couples who are not active in their faith he sees this as an important time to reeducate them about the actual teachings of the church because “most people if they don’t like the Catholic Church it is not because they know what the Catholic Church teaches. It is because they know what they think the Catholic Church teaches. And there’s often quite a gap.” This belief appears to be also fairly consistent among the lay staff that facilitated marriage preparation as well. I more often heard religious education featured in their accounts than among evangelicals. For example, when I asked about the purpose of marriage preparation, a number of Catholic lay staff members started by first explaining the significance of the sacrament of marriage and the need to (re)educate couples about its importance. As one lay man explained, “Certainly there’s practical application but there is also some other theology and catechesis to back up the application.”

Between the status of marriage as a sacrament and the tendency for marriage preparation to fall under the auspices of religious education, the greater emphasis on ensuring couples understand the Catholic Church’s understanding of marriage makes sense. Furthermore, the prevalence of convalidations (religious sanction to civil marriages) meant that Catholic premarital counselors were not always preparing couples for marriage itself, but for a *Catholic* marriage. In other words, questions about the expectations of marriage made less sense for civilly married couples. Catholic couples

were also significantly more likely within my study to marry non-Catholics which meant religious education could involve educating people that may never have been introduced to a sacramental marriage.

One large evangelical Protestant congregation in a small city with an ample young adult population had developed a similar system of outsourcing most of the premarital preparation to laity. Much as with the Catholic system, the clergy member that would marry the couple still required a couple meetings but most of the premarital work occurred under the supervision of a volunteer marriage mentor couple. Rather than create large classes of engaged couples, however, they had a list of potential volunteers that could be matched to an engaged couple depending on their background. Ideally, each mentor couple would work with one or two engaged couples that complemented their strengths or reflected their life situation in some manner. For example, in the case of remarriages they selected an older couple from the church for whom their current marriage was both their second marriage and had faced the challenge of blending families. To provide some structure to these mentorship relationships and ensure the general goals of premarital counseling were met, the mentor couples worked through *Preparing for Marriage: Discover God's Plan for a Lifetime of Love* with each couple. Similar to the workbook supplied by Prepare and Enrich, it includes brief lessons and a variety of questionnaires and exercises for the couples to work through.

Conclusion

Premarital counseling exists as a flexible organizational practice that a wide-range of groups and individuals can mobilize to fulfill different pragmatic goals: religious education, community building, and cultivation of relationship skills. As such, this

ministry helps many religious communities to fulfill one of the “core” activities of a congregation – the expression and transmission of meaning through religious education (Ammerman 1997; Chaves 2004; Warner 1994). Depending on the needs and available resources, congregations offered collective programming and/or individualized counseling options to engaged couples. Premarital counseling as a religious practice, however, is not bound within congregations. Christian universities, therapists of faith, and para-ministry organizations also all engage in preparing couples for marriage. The combination of educational and confessional approach in the collective form provided couples an opportunity to obtain insights into the intimate and private dimensions of marriage. In contrast, the individualized form sought to provide couples with greater insights into themselves – their relationship, their background, and the potential dynamics in their future. In spite of some differences in religious tradition, congregational culture, or leadership personalities, the organizational forms of marriage preparation tended to share these similar styles.

Despite a deeply held belief that marriage was an important institution that was vital for individual and communities, these premarital counselors did not believe it could offer a solution to the problems for either. While leaders would often note how they were “passionate” or “enthusiastic” about marriage, their discussions actually frequently pointed to the stressful and emotional drain that the institution may produce in people’s lives. As such, premarital counselors were generally more motivated by concerns about divorce in the construction and development of their programs. Towards this end, they envisioned their efforts as an attempt to deter the poorly matched and provide relationship skills and a marital work ethic to the rest of the couples. In fact, many of the

people I spoke with seemed unaware that across the country others engage in similar relationship education practices to promote marriage as a solution to social problems. As a result, Christian premarital counseling programs I encountered were removed organizationally from the broader marriage movement in the United States (Avishai, Heath and Randles 2012; Hays 2003; Heath 2012; Randles 2016).

To explore these premarital counselors' motivations, I turn in Chapter 4 to what the leaders taught in the collective marriage preparation programs. In particular, I provide a more in-depth discussion on how concerns about divorce motivated both the construction of a *Christian* marriage and recommendations for a *healthy* marriage. In sacralizing therapeutic principles, the leaders link together these two goals into a covenant rhetoric which they distinguish from a secular marriage that they contend helps to explain the prevalence of divorce.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONSTRUCTING A GOOD AND GODLY MARRIAGE

Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value, and I slowly began to understand that the real purpose of marriage may not be happiness as much as it is holiness.

Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*¹

In asking people to seriously consider whether *this* relationship can survive getting married, premarital counseling programs engaged questions about: what does a successful marriage look like? Why do some marriages last and others end in divorce? What responsibility and obligation does each person have to ensure a marriage flourishes? In answering these often implicit questions, premarital counselors construct visions of marriage, faith, secular culture, and the individual self that has to navigate these different terrains.

As Penny Edgell (2011:636) notes, “Religious institutions are social locations for the production and transmission of religious familism, or ideology about what constitutes a family and what a good family should be.” As representatives of their religious communities, Christian premarital counselors presented a *covenant marriage* rhetoric that blended theological and therapeutic insights to explain to couples how to have a relationship that would be pleasing not only to them but to God. To accomplish this goal couples were taught to resist what they considered the self-centered *contract marriage*

¹ Thomas, Gary. 2000. *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More than to Make Us Happy?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

idea provided by secular culture by engaging in constant *marriage work* and by cultivating a *therapeutic self*.

Making a Covenant amongst Contracts

With the primary motivating logic of premarital counseling focusing on helping to equip couples with necessary skills to have a happy and lasting marriage, theology often could be sidelined by lessons on conflict styles, personality types, or love languages. While the skills themselves may be easily removed from the religious context, the construction of marriage was undergirded by religious discussions of God's plan for humanity. Within their broader moral cosmology, premarital counselors simultaneously naturalized a Christian view on marriage and presented it as unique.

Both the Catholic and evangelical Protestant programs shared the rhetorical practice of describing a Christian marriage as a "covenant" and distinguishing it from what they presented as the secular model of a "contract."² As one Catholic priest described this distinction to the engaged couples at the urban parish,

Covenant is the word used for God's relationship with the chosen people. Something more characterizes a covenant in comparison to a contract because a covenant is built on relationships. It's built on love and trust. It is characterized by the giving of gifts as opposed to an attitude of "I do this for you so that you do this for me." It's a gift of self to the other person and asking for a gift of self in return. At its core, a covenant is an exercise in our humanity...As opposed to a contract which is for a limited time, a covenant is not temporary. It has no end date. It is based on love.

Likewise, the leadership team of the dating class at the evangelical congregation dedicated an entire session to exploring this distinction. Asking couples to volunteer

² The usage of "covenant" empirically emerges from how the religious groups utilized the term to identify theologically their belief that God calls all people (but especially Christians) to form marriages. It is not connected to the legal option of "covenant marriage" that a number of Southern states passed starting in 1997 (Nock, Sanchez and Wright 2004). Likewise, they did not use the term "contract" and "covenant" according to its more historical or political connotations (Williams 1994).

phrases they associated with the terms they compiled two lists. Contract inspired ideas such as: “legally binding,” “conditional,” “obligation,” and, more humorously, “cellphones.” Whereas itemized under covenant was: “commitment,” “devotion,” “Jesus,” “sacrifice,” and “mutuality.” Upon examining the list, Michael, one of the husbands that led the class, commented,

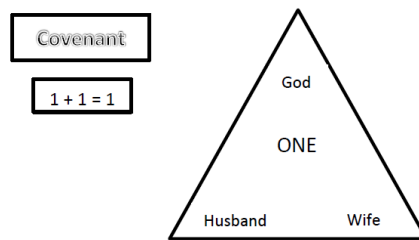
Contract doesn't seem very relational. In fact, it's legally void of emotion and not a relational endeavor at all. In society, we make contracts a lot but not with personal thoughts or feelings tied into it because these represent legally binding agreements that we make due to a lack of trust and a concern about consequences. Fundamentally, we operate contractually in our culture with a quid pro quo approach. Yet, relationships don't function well in the long-term with this model. If I had this approach in my marriage then I wouldn't still be married and here today talking about my marriage because it wouldn't have lasted. Rather, in a marriage from a covenant perspective, the focus is on the promise of mutuality between partners.

The leaders in both ethnographic examples similarly share the language of “relationship” and “trust” to describe the idea of a covenant and make the case that it offers a more fertile framework from which to approach marriage. In the process, they imply an intimacy in their construction of “relational” that presumes only positive emotions and ignores the more negative elements such as guilt, shame, or, even, obligation. From this perspective, “the promise of mutuality” is elevated above an exchange to ideally represent a place to fulfill one's potential personhood. While the Catholic example provides a more explicitly religious articulation of covenant, each program tended to code the term as Christian and connected it to a vision of marriage that included God and Jesus as part of the relationship.

Using the language of “oneness” to describe a covenant marriage's unique approach, the evangelical weekend retreat presented what they called “new math.”

Projecting the below image on a PowerPoint slide, the leadership team argued that this model for a relationship could be seen in Genesis (presumably the creation narratives).

Figure 1. Covenant Image from Evangelical Weekend Retreat



Whereas a contract is predicated on an agreement between separate entities, they contended that God calls couples to unite into one with Him. Echoing the insights of the other programs, they argued that to craft this type of relationship requires a total sense of trust and a lack of focus on having one's own needs met. Arnie, the Catholic husband that led the class on sacramental marriages in the non-urban parish, argued that this type of tripartite relationship produced more stability. As he explained to one group, "It's about the three-person relationship that exists between you, your spouse, and God. Like a table it provides more stability, so that if you lose one leg you won't get into trouble in the same way."

Advice on how to have a happy and healthy marriage, therefore, centered religious imagery establishing an implicit, if not always subtle, hierarchical classification of marriages. Amongst both Catholics and evangelicals, faith was often presented as bedrock that provided couples with not only a shared worldview but also a protective quality for inevitable conflicts. Sometimes, as in the above Catholic example, this idea was predicated on the idea that a Christian marriage had another party working to sustain

and support it. In other cases this manifested in a presumption that the relational dimension of a covenant marriage provides Christians with an easier pathway to forming a deep connection. As Kelly, one of the wives on the leadership team at the evangelical weekend retreat, explained in an interview, “[Oneness] changes the focus from myself to this is a team and this is a partnership.”

In general, this rigid boundary between "covenant" and "contract" relied on abstract discussions that positioned the religious community in opposition to secular culture. When conversations drifted away from “culture,” to people’s actual marriages more allowances were provided. For example, Kelly stumbled a little as she considered her claim about whether Christian marriage uniquely positioned couples to a teamwork ethos.

I don’t know if it’s there as much-, I mean-, I suppose faith isn’t the only way to have that teamwork concept. But, just that deeper understanding of God’s doing something in our relationship, more than just what makes me happy, or just that we have a good time, or we’re compatible. You know, there’s a lot more depth to the things that we’re going after as a couple, as a family.

This type of waffling more often occurred within the interviews when I probed for details about what distinguished a Christian marriage from a non-Christian one or asked how people would explain the concept to a new believer. While many admitted that non-Christians could have a good marriage and not all Christian actually do, this rarely impinged on the conceptual discussions of Christian marriage.

A “covenant marriage,” thus, primarily operates as a religious symbol that premarital counselors, as spokespeople for their faith communities, can marshal to justify and reinforce boundaries with secular culture. Overlaying the dimension of a healthier relationship onto a covenant marriage also constructs the authority of the religious

community as a pathway to marital success. As such, the abstraction from people's lives actually better serves this end. Compared to more concrete cultural resources, Fred Kniss (1996) notes that ambiguity within abstract cultural resources makes them more easily manipulated and mobilized. A more tangible prescription for Christian marriage likely would have met with greater resistance from couples as they struggled to apply it to their own situations and would have been less likely to transcend the different denominational contexts. As a symbolic boundary "covenant marriages" becomes a tool used by the community to make claims about the definitions of reality, but as is most often the case this process is not without contestation or struggle (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

The conceptual distinction between a "covenant marriage" and a "contract marriage," constructed a clearer boundary than it provided a workable strategy for how to act on a day-to-day basis in a marriage. Pointing to this limitation, a minority voice emerged among the premarital counselors that challenged the idealism of this sharp distinction. For example, John, the other husband that led the dating class at the evangelical congregation, immediately followed up on Michael's above comment about how his marriage would not have lasted if he had approached it from a contract perspective. Tempering the severity of the distinction, John instead offered, "Often when we haven't done well in our relationship it is because it's become too contractual. At these times, conversations often turn to focus on what each of us did and whether the other person did enough to match." He cautioned, however, "It will not always be possible to have a covenant relationship but that it is a goal to strive for. Realistically, there will be times where it operates in a more contractual manner because it's unrealistic to expect that it never will be this way." As opposed to presenting *the* Christian approach

as a covenant, he admits that it is an ideal from which to view one's partner and not a constant state to occupy.

Adam, the therapist that led of the engaged class at the evangelical congregation, more explicitly challenged the tendency to define *Christian* marriages through rhetorical practices. In the first of a two-part series on "Biblical Marriage," Adam began by noting "We're going to discuss biblical marriage. And, going to see what it is. I don't think I know." Before he delved into his actually extensive view on this topic, he asked the classroom of engaged couples for their thoughts on the subject, "What do you think it is? In reality? Or, as a cliché?" Writing the answers people easily and quickly volunteered on the board, he constructed an extensive list that included ideas such as "prayer," "two flesh become one," "service," "open to growth," and, of course, "covenant." During this process, I was reminded that he spends his day counseling couples in therapy, as he would probe for more information by asking "Can you talk more about that?" Or, "What do you mean by that?" The young woman who offered "covenant" struggled to respond to these requests and eventually told him "Don't ask me to explain this." After significant effort and more direct and leading questions – such as "Anything cheesy? "How about stereotypes?" Anything you were told in church?" – Adam and Sarah succeed in filling the whiteboard with a list of thoughtful and slightly more critical ideas.

As the sample of provided phrases indicates, much of the discussion of a "biblical marriage" was not explicitly religious with couples having volunteered ideas such as "enjoying one another" and "fewer problems." Returning to his original question, he asked the couples "What makes the list a Biblical relationship and not just a good marriage?" Closely examining the constructed list he circled a few examples that made

this distinction and asked the couples if he missed any. One woman encouraged him to circle “covenant” because as she explained, “It is different. It is a Christian term and not one that my secular friends are into, because in mainstream culture marriage is more of a deal that people take part in until one of the people messes up.”

Finally ending the intellectual exercise, Adam directly challenged the classroom of engaged evangelical couples, “I’m put off by a lot stereotypes in the church that haven’t been put under a microscope. The Bible is profoundly quiet on the topic of marriage. It says a lot on loving your neighbor and that type of stuff but not a lot on what a marriage should look like.” To illustrate this point, he turned to a passage that he confesses “likely doesn’t make an appearance at many weddings” and “doesn’t inform many people’s understanding of a biblical marriage.” He read aloud from Deuteronomy 24:5,

“If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.”³

After finishing the passage, he looked up at the couples and asked “Anyone doing this?” Not surprisingly, people didn’t affirmatively respond. Filling the silence, he informed the couples “Actually in the Bible there are few places where it talks about lifestyles for the home.”

John and Adam’s criticism of the rhetoric of Christian marriage within the Church likely emerges in part from their experiences as therapists. Similar types of critiques and ambivalence over the use of “Christian” as a descriptor of marriages appeared among interviews with therapy students from an evangelical university. For example, one

³ I am not certain which translation he used in class but I have quoted the New Standard Revised Version.

woman negatively reacted to my inquiry about how she would define a Christian marriage telling me that, “I think [a] Christian marriage is just a marriage with two people that are Christians. Honestly, I don’t think a Christian marriage is really that different than any other marriage. Yeah, that’s a hard question because I don’t like that label.” Elaborating, she explained, “I think people assume it’s supposed to be better or have this value attached to it as like ‘We’re going to be fine, because we’ve got God!’”

The experiences counseling couples appear led some people to identify potential drawbacks in constructing a Christian marriage as too much of an unrealistic ideal.

Aware that faith alone does not provide an easier path to marital bliss, they worried about unrealistic expectations that this type of rhetoric could create for people. Importantly, however, this type of critical position cannot be reduced to a therapeutic background.

While I exclusively heard this criticism from those with experience counseling distressed Christian marriages, not all of the therapists I spoke with held this perspective. Many of the counselors confidently offered a definition of a Christian marriage that drew upon the covenant rhetoric with claims such as Christian couples share a common foundation which is important for a successful marriage.

The critical perspective that sought to deconstruct the rhetorical power of a "Christian marriage," however, was likely circumscribed by local dimensions of authority. Many therapists – regardless of whether they supported or critiqued concepts such as covenant marriage – reported not offering their own religious worldview during individualized premarital counseling. Viewing it as inappropriate to make personal religious commentary in counseling, they instead claimed to refrain from challenging this type of teachings in sessions with clients. Therefore, the primary access to these types of

critical views that seek to deconstruct "Christian marriage" may likely occur within congregational contexts, such as the collective pre-marriage courses. As lay volunteers, however, these therapists occupied a smaller institutional space from which to speak authoritatively on the religious dimensions of relationships. For example, at the evangelical congregation a family life pastor oversaw both the dating and engaged class. He selected the leaders, would attend portions of the class to see check-in, and supplied some materials to the participating couples. One such document explained the church's views on relationships and expectations for conduct specifically used covenant language to ask couples to remain abstinent during the weeks they attended the program. While the leaders of the dating and engaged class at the evangelical congregation often presented more nuanced views on sexuality that emphasized the importance of reducing stigma and shame, the staff of the church formally held a different position which included not marrying any couple living together. Thus, any efforts by lay volunteers to deconstruct or challenge what they saw as "typical" and problematic Christian views could be undercut by a person with greater religious authority offering a different perspective.

Additionally, these types of deconstructive lessons were rarely uniformly presented to the couples. For example, Michael and John did not present a consistent view on how the covenant model impacted couples' actual marriages. Michael had positioned his relationship in opposition to the contract model with his claim that *if* he had approached the marriage from that orientation it would not have survived. In contrast, John's follow-up about how in their marriage they occasionally interacted from a contract perspective. While John sought to make the covenant rhetoric more interactive and less static, his efforts were hampered by the more dominant presentation style of

Michael. With his background as a college professor, Michael tended to direct the classroom discussion (and lectures) with John (and both of their wives) offering input less frequently. In this particular instance, John had to interject into Michael's discussion and even after he had finished with his brief point that softened the symbolic boundary, Michael reasserted his perspective. I recorded in my fieldnotes that Michael "seemed almost surprised by this insight and offers his agreement with it. *But*, he notes that one of his mentor always says, 'The temperature of a relationship is often due to choice.'" Michael, therefore, offered the final word on a covenant marriage by encouragingly everyone "Try to live in mutuality, unity and a grace-filled relationship because it will bring you richness and imitate the type of relationship God desires." This interaction between Michael and John in the dating class illuminates how a view can be presented with less rhetorical power. In this particular case, the less nuanced presentation of the covenant rhetoric carried more authority due to dynamics of the leadership.

Ultimately, despite efforts by some to at least nuance, if not challenge, covenant rhetoric, it dominated understandings of a Christian marriage. As an abstract concept, the metaphors and languages used to define this idea varied to some extent across programs. A few notions appear fairly consistently, however, such as the belief that pursuing a covenant marriage should inculcate in each spouse an outward orientation. This helped to provide a rationale for why these Christian relationships *can* be healthier, and justified the importance of the concept. As opposed to the "contract" perspective that supposedly focuses on meeting one's own needs, a covenant marriage argues that each partner first focus on meeting the needs of the other person. If each spouse approaches marriage from this perspective it would result in one's own needs being met (by the spouse). For one to

effectively do this, however, each partner must be willing and able to effectively communicate their point of view – fears, expectations, desires – to their partner. A covenant marriage, thus, sacralizes relationship skills – such as communication, conflict management, and self-reflexivity – and rhetorically intertwines a “Christian” relationship with more therapeutic principles of “healthy” and “functional.”

Christian Marriage in a Culture of Divorce

The distinction between the other-focused *covenant marriage* inspired by God and the self-focused *contract marriage* offered in secular culture allows premarital counselors to provide an explanation for the broader divorce trend in the United States. From this perspective, the ubiquity of divorce is not surprising because people are more willing to “call it quits” when they are no longer feeling fulfilled. While offering arguably too simplistic a view of the broader American cultural approach to marriage, Christian premarital counselors do implicitly identify what Karla Hackstaff (1999:2) calls a “divorce culture” – “a set of symbols, beliefs, and practices that anticipate and reinforce divorce and, in the process, redefine marriage.” She argues American culture experienced a “marital watershed” during the 1970s – a time in which divorce surpassed death as the most likely reason for a life partnership to end – resulting in the emergence of alternative meanings around relationships, and destabilizing the previously dominant “marriage culture.” As a result, today’s married couples “are increasingly talking and reproducing the terms of divorce culture” (2) which she notes includes the idea that get marrying is now an option and that marriage is contingent.

Amidst this cultural backdrop an implicit question emerged: How do you have a Christian marriage in a culture of divorce? In part this helped motivate religious

communities to offer premarital counseling, as described in the last two chapters. A general belief exists, as one therapist explained, that marriage preparation is an “intentional step to try and minimize, or at least push back against, the climbing divorce rate in our country.” This context also provides a new vantage point on the covenant rhetoric as not only a means to establish symbolic boundaries against secular culture, but also as an explanation for why Christian couples are not immune to divorce.

The leaders at the evangelical congregation, for example, directly addressed this implicit tension with teachers in both the dating and engaged classes explaining to couples (and sometimes correcting couples’ misunderstanding) that Christians divorce at rates equal to secular society. In fact, one week the two classes met together to hear a speaker from the Gottman Institute discuss their research on marital conflict. Before discussing the type of characteristics their research has found correlate with a successful marriage, the speaker opened by discussing the divorce rate amongst Christians.

Strong faith isn’t enough to ensure marital success. If we were to have a reunion of this class forty years from now, it would be likely that half of all of you wouldn’t still be together. Part of the issue is that no one really gets married expecting to be the statistic, which means that couples find themselves there.

As opposed to this direct engagement with the divorce rate among Christians, the non-therapist laity that led the programs in the Catholic parishes and evangelical weekend retreat tended to present this threat more indirectly. In addition to claims that research finds that couples that pray together are less likely to get divorced (an assertion that no one was able to support with a specific reference), couples would mention the divorces they had witnessed in their own lives (some of which were Christian couples). Thus, even these religious figures who all oppose divorce cannot teach on the topic of marriage

without addressing its prevalence. Of course, couples attending these programs usually did not need the reminder that faith would not divorce-proof their marriage. For some (especially the evangelical premarital couples), this anxiety motivated their participation, and they hoped to gain tangible skills and techniques that would better ensure future marital success.

On the one hand, the culture of divorce provides the covenant marriage with greater rhetorical power. The claims by premarital counselors about the permanence of this union only hold significance against a cultural background that recognizes that in reality today's marriages are contingent. On the other hand, this also contributes to its abstraction, because a faith in God will not ensure the permanence or happiness of any particular marriage. Thus, religious communities link teachings on how to have a *Christian* marriage with a discussion of how to have a *successful* marriage. The question, however, becomes: how does one go about creating a covenant marriage? And, how does one avoid divorce when they stumble in this process?

Making Marriage Work

Sociologists and historians alike have noted that the conception of “marriage as work” became increasingly popular and pervasive as the prevalence of divorce made marriage more contingent (Celello 2009; Farrell 1999; Hackstaff 1999). The popularity of what Karla Hackstaff (1999:21) calls a “marital work ethic” – “the belief that one must *work* on a marriage if it is to survive” – can at least partially be attributed to how it provides a seemingly universal and accessible way to address the uncertainty of contemporary relationships. Pointing to an important assumption within the covenant rhetoric, a marital work ethic implies anyone can have a successful marriage if they work hard enough. Of

course, this begs the question: *How* does one work on a marriage? This dilemma undergirded premarital counseling programs as the leaders sought to educate couples about relationship skills that they could enact, as well as provide them a standpoint from which to motivate and evaluate this work.

As part of the covenant rhetoric, premarital counselors sought to educate couples about the importance of a marital work ethic. Rather than present marriage as a choice that occurs once at the moment of the proposal, they stressed the idea that people must constantly and consistently make this choice again throughout their relationship. Offering a more rational and agentic conception of love, the Catholic priest at the urban parish explained,

Love is a choice, a daily choice. While it's rooted in emotion, it is ultimately a choice. Furthermore, if you want to excel and thrive at it then you must choose to say "I love you every day." When you wake up next to your partner and they are lying on the pillow drooling, that is a great time to look at them and say to yourself 'I choose to love this person.' Vows are a daily choice.

Presenting feelings as something that a person can choose suggests that they are also something that can be controlled. This emphasis on choice, thus, implies that people who have fallen out of love have either chosen to do so or, at the very least, have not chosen to remain in love. Extending the power of choice in relationship, some presented the quality of a relationship as a result of internal decisions within the couple and capable of offsetting any external stressors such as economic pressures or work conflicts. Returning to an above quote by Michael – “the temperature of a relationship is often due to choice” – he presents the quality and condition of a relationship as a matter of choice by those within it. The language of “choice,” therefore, normalizes and sacralizes the emotion work of “trying to feel the ‘right’ feeling” (Hochschild 1989/2003:48).

Making a choice, even a daily one, however, is not sufficient for the success of a marriage. The marital work ethic, therefore, must be accompanied by marriage work which consists of the actual ongoing practices aimed at meeting relational needs in the marriage (Hackstaff 1999). As Kathleen Jenkins (2014:11) explains, “Marriage work thus involves emotional management of the relationship through development of communication skills, creative management of romance and friendship and the sharing of religious/spiritual orientation.” Much of the programs focused on teaching couples various relationship skills they could practice to help improve communication to better avoid unnecessary fights and to manage the more serious forms of inevitable conflict.

For instance, the entire evangelical weekend retreat involved socializing couples into a particular relationship skill: writing letters to express one’s view on sensitive issues in an uninterrupted manner. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, after all of the eleven talks during the weekend, couples were provided with a series of topical questions from which to choose to write on in a letter to their fiancé. In addition to meeting a present goal of premarital counseling – helping each person articulate their point of view and allow the couple to locate potential relational flags – the leadership presented this activity as a type of relationship skill that engaged couples could take with them into their marriage and use when verbal communication broke down.

While admittedly this would likely not be a daily type of relationship skill, all of the leadership team at some point during the retreat mentioned using this tactic to help move past emotional impasses in their marriages. For example, Kelly and Paul explained that after five years of being (for the most part) happily married, they encountered a number of external stressors. Finally pregnant after years of trying and a miscarriage,

they found themselves in a financially tenuous position because Paul had lost his job. When he finally found a job it came with a number of new challenges, meanwhile Kelly at home faced her own challenge of post-partum depression. As each of them individually struggled with their specific stressors, they found it more difficult to communicate with each other about what they were feeling or how they were dealing with these transitions. Eventually remembering how useful the letter writing had been when they had participated in the weekend retreat as an engaged couple, they began to write letters to each other. As they explained, “these letters began to overcome the emotional distance and build up our relationship to be even stronger.” In ending this story, they reiterated the marital work ethic through the covenant rhetoric, saying: “This dark period allowed us to see how people get led to divorce. But because of our initial commitment to lifetime commitment, that was not an option.” While acknowledging the ability of external conditions to impact a relationship, their story focuses on the ability of couples to choose to stay married and the work that this choice requires.

Sue and Graham, the married couple that led the class on communication at the urban Catholic parish, presented another relationship skill to monitor the relationship and avoid the type of situation that the evangelical couple discussed above. Describing a similar process of relational separation that developed earlier in their marriage when they still had young children, Sue and Graham discussed how they developed a process of checking in with each other every day. At this point in their relationship, Sue stayed home with very young children and had no one to talk to while Graham worked all day in an office setting. Explaining how she found this really difficult, they established the practice of Graham calling on his way home to have a quick conversation in which they

told one another the status of their “emotional bank.” As Graham explained, “It can be at a high when you’re feeling well or low when you need to borrow from the other person.” Sue noted that they simply used “a scale of 1-10” to quickly identify their emotional state and inform the other person about what to expect. For instance, if one person was feeling substantially lower than the other person would know to put their own stuff aside and be sure to make time (and to emotionally prepare) to listen. This practice, according to Graham, “helped me learn that I need to be a listener when I get home.” Being sure to indicate the two-way street of this, Sue countered with “Or, if his number was lower then sometimes I would let him know to go play a couple rounds of golf to relieve some stress and help him unwind. Since he always had his golf clubs with him so that was an easy option.” In concluding their description of this relationship skill, Graham explained the importance of this type of intentional and reflexive practices in one’s marriage.

At this stage in your relationship, a lot of what you do together builds up your emotional bank together. But, you will need to learn how to build your own emotional bank because you will become frustrated with your spouse. Also, you will need to find ways to let the other person build up their own emotional bank. It’s important to not forget your own needs which may require waiting to have some conversations.

As opposed to the previous example of a relationship skill that was meant to address high stakes relationship turmoil and recommit a couple to their marriage, this type of more mundane example stresses the importance of regular and consistent marriage work.

On the issues of communication and conflict management, premarital counselors tended to offer these types of elaborate discussions of highly intentional practices. Stressing the learned dimension to the skills, leaders would occasionally admit that these strategies may seem silly or feel insincere at first but over time they should become habitual parts of the way couples interact with one another. Stressing the importance of

this work Darryl told the class at the non-urban parish, “Fighting is hard and it takes both of you learning how to listen and how to heal afterwards.” Likewise, Adam from the evangelical congregation warned the engagement class, “Conflicts tend to operate as ‘Flare up! Snap! Snap!’ You must have the skills to break the momentum of escalation. Escalation is your enemy.” In both cases, the ability and necessity of *learning* how to act in a relationship was stressed as a key dimension of success. As with most type of skills, premarital counselors emphasized practice as a means to help couples make them more natural and habitual parts of their routine. Towards this end, wedding planning tended to be presented as an ideal time to begin practicing relationship skills because, as leaders would explain, ultimately the stakes are lower and emotions are less intense over decisions about flowers.

While much of the discussion of relationship skills emphasized these more somber conditions, premarital counselors also encouraged couples to approach their friendship and romantic dimensions of their relationship as work. Since all of the married couples that led the programs had children (many school-age or younger), “quality time” had become an object of work for them. As mentioned above with the concept of “emotional bank,” premarital counselors tried to teach couples that eventually the ease of their friendship in the dating stage would wane and companionship will begin to require more careful cultivation. Similar to how engaged couples were expected to translate intentional conflict skills into habitual practices, they were taught a similar goal was to purposefully ensure that they continued to share time and interests as a couple.

Reflectively, Darryl shared with the class at the non-urban Catholic parish,

From what I’ve seen the people who do better in their marriages are those that carve out time as a couple. For some, this has meant setting some time

in stone. Our neighbors, for instance, go to breakfast together alone on a regular basis and have it done it through all four of their children. However, even if you don't set something in stone, you can have other things that take its place. We used to go on walks together.

Laughing, he follows up his point by admitting "It might have been better if we set things in stone though." Unlike the relationship skills associated with communication and conflict management which more clearly delineated states of learned and unlearned, monitoring and maintaining romance and friendship in relationships was less circumscribed by specific strategies. Instead, lay couples across the different programs often commented on the type of activities that they enjoy as a couple and the ways they try to carve out space for each other. Recognizing that each couple will have to find the type of activities that actually work to help them feel connected, this topic produced less concrete advice to couples.

Professionalizing the presentation of this approach, Adam, the therapist that led the engagement class at the evangelical congregation, presented a concept he admitted to heavily using in his private practice. Describing what he called a "sound relationship house," he explained that successful marriages are characterized by a foundation of a solid friendship that includes, among other things, establishing a shared sense of meaning. To help couples cultivate a shared sense of meaning, one homework assignment entailed beginning to think about "their thing" by brainstorming relationship rituals they could start to put into practice. Drawing from their own marriage, he informed them that these rituals may need to change over time but that this practice of searching for ways to define themselves as a couple should not. Marriage work, therefore, represents a lifelong project that one will never perfect.

Despite the support for marriage work, its efficacy was sometimes challenged in these programs. Likely because of the greater reliance on therapeutic expertise among the evangelical programs, these sites also urged couples to be aware of early signs that may require more professional help. For example, Kelly and Paul, the leadership couple at the evangelical weekend retreat that used the letters to reconnect in their marriage, followed up their claim about surviving their problems because divorce was not an option with another example of an even darker time in their marriage. The following year, they reached an even lower point that involved days that they “simply didn’t like each other.” Eventually, they realized they could not address these problems on their own and sought professional help from a marriage counselor. Likewise, the family life pastor in the evangelical congregation was fond of saying that couples tend to wait 7 years before they obtain professional help. From his perspective, these ministries could help to destigmatize marriage counseling and perhaps even connect them to potential therapists to visit in the future for a “tune up.” In each case, leadership sought to normalize therapy by presenting it as another useful resource to work on one’s marriage. Additionally, however, it simultaneously points to the limited scope of marriage work as an individualized strategy for success and the necessity of never relaxing the practices.

Cultivating a Therapeutic Self

A central tenant within the covenant rhetoric is that it is less self-centered than a contract marriage because it requires couples to work on their marriages by being other-focused. To successfully accomplish this work, however, requires each partner engage in a deep, self-reflexive process to be able to identify and communicate one’s needs. Thus, regardless of their call to move from an “I” to a “We,” premarital counselors predicate

this process on an interrogation of the “Me.” Despite positioning itself against secular culture, marriage preparation actually embraces broader cultural trends that understand the self as a “reflexive project...a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future” (Giddens 1994:30) and as “something we can work to cultivate and improve” (Aubry and Travis 2015:5). In nurturing this “therapeutic self,” premarital counseling taught people “to identify pathological thoughts and behaviors, to locate the hidden source of these pathologies within one’s family past...and to triumph over one’s past by reconstructing an emancipated and independent self” (Silva 2012:507).

At a basic level, all of the exercises assigned in premarital counseling programs designed to get to know one’s partner first require learning to understand oneself more deeply and fully. For example, the non-urban Catholic parish began by having engaged couples complete a worksheet entitled “Discovering Each Other.” Next to a series of prompts – such as “My strongest quality,” “My usual means of dealing with conflict,” and “The biggest adjustment I’ll have to make in our first year of marriage” – there were two columns that instructed each individual to first identify their own feelings (Column A) and then to imagine what the other person wrote down (Column B).⁴ Likewise, in a session entitled “Encounter with Self” at the evangelical weekend retreat, everyone was provided a list of questions to prompt their personal journaling session that included: “How do I see myself?” “How does my description of myself make me feel about myself?” “What masks do I need to remove to reveal more of the real me to you?” All these questions direct the internal reflection process towards articulating the more

⁴ *Perspectives in Marriage*. 2012/1998. Chicago IL: Acta Publications. Pgs. 29-32.

intangible elements of oneself, especially focusing on the domain of feelings and emotions.

While the exercises often posit this process as merely exploratory about one's inner world, the context of the marriage preparation classes provide people with a sense of what type of self is acceptable, healthy, and moral. For instance, amidst these types of activities the priest from the urban Catholic parish commented, "It's important to avoid withdrawing and keeping secrets. When you don't want to communicate, then you should ask why?" Likewise, the guest speaker from the Gottman Institute that spoke to the combined classes at the evangelical congregation, identified what they call the "Four Horsemen": Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling.⁵ Thus, realizations that occurred within these classes were not without a context or explanatory frame. If, for example, someone realized that they preferred to deal with conflict by going to work out at the gym and never sharing their feeling with their partner, they may learn to interpret this as an example of withdrawal or stonewalling.

To understand fully one's innermost self – reactions, emotions, preferences – requires an interrogation of one's family of origin. As Mary, the religious director at the urban parish, explained, "When you form a family you draw on your own family of origin and their views." The dating class at the evangelical class dedicated an entire session to this topic. Complete with an assigned reading from *Family Ties that Bind* that explains how one's particular personality developed in relation and response to the other personalities in the family, as well as how family norms create a series of both spoken

⁵ These ideas are explored in more detailed in John Gottman and Nan Silver's (1999) *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*.

and unspoken norms about how to approach all aspects of life.⁶ Using the insights hopefully gained from this reading, couples were assigned to reflect individually and then discuss: “What is it about my family of origin that helps or challenges me in my pursuit of intimacy with my partner?” Sharing their insights from this homework assignment in a small group, a man volunteered that his girlfriend’s family “wasn’t super close and she’s really not used to open communication.” To explain, she offered, “I really resonated with the part of the reading where it discussed what was off-limits in our families. In general, I felt like emotions were off-limits, especially excitement and anger.” Exercises such as these taught individuals to identify, as well as look for, differences in their relationship that family backgrounds produced.

Indicating the necessity of completing this type of self-work, especially in the engagement stage, premarital counselors implied that differences in family backgrounds may operate as a “ticking time bomb.” As Karen, one of the wives at the urban Catholic parish warned,

The better you know the other person’s family of origin the easier it is to be more proactive and less reactive in your relationship. The problem is sometimes people suppress or deny qualities that emerge from their backgrounds because they don’t realize what they’re doing. It can sometimes take forever for people to recognize this as problematic.

To illustrate this point, she tells a story of a friend that married a man who failed to acknowledge or address issues from his family background. Starting off innocently enough, she noted “Our friend and her husband ended up developing a close relationship with another couple in their church.” As time went on, however, the husband apparently became closer to this other wife and even “gave her emotional intimacy.” When their

⁶ Richardson, Ronald. *Family Ties that Bind: A Self-Help Guide to Change through Family of Origin Therapy*. Bellingham, WA: Self-Counsel Press.

unhappy friend objected to the situation, the husband accused her of being “controlling” like his mother. She eventually found out that the husband’s father had also cheated on his wife. Locating the problem in a lack of self-work, Karen explained “Because of these family of origin issues, he had trouble with intimacy but he didn’t see it.” From this perspective, a failure to interrogate one’s past runs the risk of threatening one’s future. By framing this self-work as a necessity it also positions it as a sign of maturity (Furedi 2004). In this case, Karen presented the husband’s unwillingness to engage as a personal flaw that even led to a moral failing.

While sharing a call for all individuals to engage in this process of self-discovery, the nature of selfhood in this “therapeutic self” tended to differ between the two religious traditions. Evangelicals more often characterized this process as an attempt to discover one’s true and immutable self. For example, in presenting Gary Chapman’s *The Five Love Languages*, the leadership team at the weekend retreat warned, “Love languages fall under an individuals’ personality type. You will face colossal failure if you try to change your spouses’ personality.” In both of the evangelical programs, premarital counselors privileged psychological concepts, such as personality, to frame the self as something bounded and discoverable. Or, to use the language from Michael's lecture on the Johari Window for the dating class (discussed in the last chapter), the goal is to ask enough questions to discover the “blind” and “unknown” dimensions of one’s self. In contrast, Catholic premarital counselors more often highlighted how people will change over time offering a less settled conception of “self.” As Marcy, one of the Catholic wives at the non-urban parish, told couples,

It’s possible you will continue to have the same conversation over and over again in your marriage but that’s okay because you change as people

in the marriage and so you're never the same people. It's important to look at yourself and to describe your views to the other person to check in to see when a change has occurred.

Offering a more variable conception of the self, Catholic programs focused less on exposing the depths of a person and more on reminding couples that views and feelings on issues may change over time. While Catholic programs also discussed personality types and love languages, leaders tended to present them as fun and casual exercises to start conversations or to continue learning about know one's partner. For both religious traditions, however, the self remained a project to constantly explore and share. Focusing on the self and working to get to know oneself, thus, represented the pathway to intimacy and commitment.

The therapeutic expectation of self-realization and self-improvement (Furedi 2004; Illouz 2007; Jenkins 2014) becomes sacralized with the therapeutic principles of working on oneself converging with a Christian understanding of sanctification as a process. According to many of the premarital counselors, this work, if done with God in mind, has the potential to deepen one's spirituality. As the leadership team at the evangelical weekend retreat explained, "We are only as sick as our secrets...[but that] God has a plan for everyone and this plan entails the construction of our unique personhood, even the trauma that we experience importantly shapes our heart." Likewise, one Catholic wife challenged a group of engaged couples to stop the next time they have an argument and reflect on what it looks like from God's perspective. Specifically, she instructed them to "think about whether you're using the tools he's provided" and to see this "fight as a type of test" and consider how "this helps connect you more to your self and to God." Human imperfection, as discovered through the therapeutic self, becomes a

pathway to cultivate deeper intimacy with God and a reminder to trust Him over one's fallible self.

Conclusion

Faced with the challenge of guiding premarital couples towards their goal of marital bliss, religious communities struggle to explain why some marriages succeed and others fail, especially within the church. In response, premarital counselors constructed a clear boundary between a *covenant marriage* as a union fulfilling God's intentions and better positioned for success and a *contract marriage* as a less committed relationship that dominates secular culture. In the process, they reinterpret the historical understanding of a *covenant* from a call for God's chosen people (Williams 1994) to a more universal invitation to anyone interested and willing to commit themselves to following God's path to happiness. Unlike the postwar era which called engaged couples to conform to particular marital forms to please God and themselves, the contemporary premarital counselors offered an abstract vision of God's wishes. As such, they avoided any specific articulations of how a covenant marriage must look or what people must do within it. Instead, covenant rhetoric served as a means to present an idealized interaction for couples to *work* towards by better articulating themselves to their partner.

As opposed to many scholars of therapeutic culture that contend the preoccupation with the psyche comes at the cost of a concern for the soul (Aubry and Travis 2015; Furedi 2004; Lasch 1979; Moskowitz 2001; Rieff 1979), Christian premarital counseling reimagines this relationship. Embracing and re-envisioning the insights of therapeutic culture – marriage work and self as a project – religious communities have transformed them into tools of religious belonging. In particular,

covenant rhetoric ties together happiness and sanctification through claims that by living up to the challenge of God's vision for marriage will combat the more selfish tendencies of human nature and produce a more rewarding experience.

While the covenant rhetoric offers a gender neutral vision and a set of tasks for both men and women in relationships to enact, historically the discourses around fulfilment, construction of self, and commitment in marriage have often been predicated on gendered assumptions (Coontz 1992; Hackstaff 1999; Wright 2008). In particular, calls for people to work on their relationships or claims about how self-development occur have long been predicated on gender essentialist beliefs that imagine men and women as having different needs, as well as distinct styles of communication. In Chapter 5, I turn to explore these issues by investigating the various ways that gender emerged as salient in the advice offered by premarital counselors to couples about how to accomplish a good and Godly marriage.

CHAPTER FIVE

TEACHING GENDER (AND) DIFFERENCES IN MARRIAGE

*Women absolutely need love. Men absolutely need respect. It's as simple
and as complicated as that...*

Emerson Eggerichs, Love and Respect for a Lifetime¹

The covenant rhetoric sacralizes secular marital advice to “create shared meaning” (Gottman and Silver 1999) by calling couples to join with God. It suggests that, in addition to the external challenges posed by secular culture pushing an “I” orientation in relationships, couples face an internal challenge of negotiating and overcoming their differences to reach this state of oneness. As such the work of premarital counseling challenges each couple to ask themselves: Who am I? Who are you? How are we different? And, how do we become a “we” despite these differences? Since any marriage inevitably requires two individuals craft a shared life together, premarital counselors work to guide couples in recognizing important points of difference in a manner that forges a unitive relationship. As a result, acknowledging, working with, and overcoming difference featured prominently in the various programs.

Marriage as a social institution, however, is predicated on naturalizing and maintaining certain social differences in society (Cott 2000; Heath 2012; Ingraham 2008; Risman 1998). As Nancy Cott (2000:3) explains “Turning men and women into husbands and wives, marriage has designated the ways both sexes act in the world and the reciprocal relation between them.” This chapter explores when and how gender emerged

¹ Eggerichs, Emerson. 2010. *Love and Respect for a Lifetime*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.

as part of the discussion on differences that couples must negotiate in their pursuit of a good and Godly marriage.² Through their commitment to gender complementarianism, both Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders have tended to sacralize marriage as an institution based on gender difference while also maintaining its heterosexual privilege (Irby 2014b). As examples of what Kelsy Burke (2012:122) calls “gender-traditional religion,” both Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism “tend to emphasize ontological differences between men and women noting that men are predisposed to leadership, activity, and a strong work ethic, while women are naturally nurturing, passive, and receptive.” As such, this provides an example of what Chrys Ingraham (2002:26) calls the “heterosexual imaginary,” that consists of the way “of thinking that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being and oneness.” In this chapter, I first examine the shared significance premarital counselors ascribed to understanding *difference* in relationships. Next, I analyze two cases in which gender emerged as part of the explanation of difference and two cases where it did not. *Gender difference* programs follow the customary practice of sacralizing marriage as a union based on complementary differences between men and women but, as I show, this view did not dominate their advice. In contrast, *gender blind* programs relied on more multi-dimensional discussions of difference that privileged psychological insights about family of origin and personality type.

² As part of the shift to theorizing about how gender operates as a social institution, feminist scholars have critiqued the tendency to conceptualize it along lines of difference (Connell 2009; Lorber 1994; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Risman 1998). While I have written elsewhere about the importance and necessity of sociologists of religion to embrace this theoretical shift (Irby 2014a, 2014b), the emphasis on difference in this chapter emerged empirically. Thus, I use the topic of “gender difference” to critically illuminate how local religious groups’ production of gender ideals emerges within a broader cultural assumption about this belief in difference.

Recognizing and Embracing Difference in Marriage

A central programmatic goal in marriage preparation is to help premarital couples explore how differences between partners impact their relationship. Much of the discussions and activities began from the assumption that couples must explore internal differences within their relationship. For example, on the topic of forgiveness one of the Catholic parishes gave couples a handout that asked them to evaluate how each partner handles feeling hurt, being wrong, and how they behave when they have hurt someone else. Or, more explicitly, in a section entitled “Different by Design” at the evangelical weekend retreat, couples were asked to reflect on: “What are some of our biggest differences? How might those differences help us complement and complete each other?” Exploring points of individual difference was predicated on the idea that it could help assess the viability of the relationship (whether they should get married) and mitigate assumptions each person had about the other (reduce tendency to project the self onto partner). After they had established this landscape of relational difference, premarital counselors sought to equip couples with a variety of relationship skills aimed at reducing interactional differences and replacing it with more common ground. The “emotional bank” practice discussed in the last chapter, for example, requires that each individual identify how they feel, share it in the form of a number, and then compare the difference with their spouse. Additionally, many programs tried to facilitate “active listening” skills by encouraging each person to try and restate the view of their partner before proceeding to explicate their own position.

Working to identify and soften differences, however, was framed by an explicit discussion that differences are natural and often God-given. For example, the leadership

team at the evangelical weekend retreat told everyone the first night, “The goal in marriage is oneness and unity with someone who is different than oneself... Marriage is a place to learn about loving God because the oneness in marriage deepens our understanding of God.” Likewise, Michael cautioned the dating couples in the evangelical congregational class,

The goal isn't to be the same or to try and change the other person to suit one's needs. Rather, the goal is to celebrate the differences between oneself and one's partner. According to longitudinal studies, satisfaction is highest when couples celebrate differences and similarities. In this way, relationships make us better versions of ourselves. By not just accepting the “warts” but by celebrating them as the unique design of God, couples are happier and more satisfied.

Reflecting their tendency to operate from a more immutable sense of self than the Catholic programs, these discussions conceptualize difference as something that couples must accept about the other person. In each case, difference became part of a way to witness God's vision and to reflect His intentional design. Trying to change one's partner, therefore, was not only presented as foolhardy but as working against God who designed this person to be a particular way.

Similar to their evangelical counterparts, the Catholic parishes also made sure to inform premarital couples about the inevitability of difference, but they less often presented it as a tool of sanctification. For example, during a session on communication and conflict one Catholic wife explained,

As part of getting to know each other before you get married it's important to recognize the big differences because getting married is a big step. But it's also important to remember that even as well as you know your partner that you don't know everything and that they will not stay the same. It's important to respect that we all change over time and that there are multiple perceptions.

While difference remained a real and important part of a relationship from this perspective, it was not as severe. As one priest explained, “it’s important to recognize that the qualities that you love about your spouse, those aren’t going to go away, but they will deepen and change.” From their framework of a variable self, Catholic parishes depicted difference as a constant in, but not necessarily as always the same across, a marriage. They stressed the idea that interests, opinions, hobbies, jobs, and even abilities may change over time. Difference, thus, operated less as an avenue into God’s intentions but it did require intentional monitoring and regularly renewing one’s commitment to the relationship. Or, as the priest explained, “We discover ourselves in the other. The importance is saying, ‘I’ll stay here.’”

The divergent conceptualization of the nature of the self likely helps explain the differential attention to the issue of difference I observed between the Catholic and evangelical programs. While both operated from the assumption that marriage preparation must involve exploring individual level differences among the couples, evangelicals tended to focus almost exclusively on exploring these (presumably) discrete internal worlds. With their greater emphasis on marriage preparation also serving as a form of religious education, Catholic programs tended to veer more broadly from this topic. All the same, every program operated from the perspective that differences must be recognized and addressed in marriage. To address this issue, however, required premarital counselors identify what they saw as the most salient examples of difference in couples’ education. Despite the dominant trend in scholarship on gender regimes in conservative religious that have emphasized the salience of complementarianism within

these faiths (see Burke 2012; Bulanda 2011; Irby 2014), I found that gender difference rhetoric emerged inconsistently and infrequently across the various programs.

Explanations of (Gender) Difference

While marriage preparation programs shared a similar goal of helping couples explore deeper and potentially hidden elements of difference in their relationships, their presentations varied in the explanations and implications of differences. Two programs emphasized gender difference as a critical dimension that couples must recognize and work through in marriage. The other two programs, however, remained fairly silent on gender as a source of difference and instead privileged psychological explanations for behaviors that their counterparts tended to code as masculine or feminine. These patterns occurred within both religious traditions with one Catholic and one evangelical Protestant group belonging to each category.

Table 5. Explanations on Gender and Difference in Premarital Education

	Gender as One Source of Difference Programs	Explaining Relational Difference through Psychology
View on Gender	Gender Essentialism	Gender Blind
Perspective on Difference	Difference is Necessary	Difference Must be Managed for Marital Success
Scriptural Model for Marriage	Genesis Stories	Jesus's Love for His Disciples
Marriage Preparation Programs	Evangelical Weekend Retreat and Urban Catholic Parish	Evangelical Congregation and Non-Urban Catholic Parish

Gender as One Source of Difference

Learning the Differences between Men's Brains and Women's Brains at the Evangelical Weekend Retreat

The evangelical retreat emerged as the only marriage preparation program to espouse what many consider to be the standard rhetoric by conservative religious groups on gender and relationships (Bartkowski 2001; Beaman 2001; Burke 2012; Brasher 1998; Gallagher 2003; Griffith 1997). As John Bartkowski (2001:41) found in his review of evangelical advice manuals, many of the bestselling ones posit “men and women are different in a range of psychological and social capacities,” a view the authors believe emerges from God’s divine plan. An entire session – Different by Design – at the retreat was dedicated to presenting this perspective.

The session started with engaged couples taking a brief “Difference Questionnaire” which asked general questions about one’s partner, such as: “Are you usually the listener in conversations?” “Does your fiancé’s voice irritate you?” “Are his/her feelings and attitudes a riddle to you?” Unlike the questionnaire’s more general inquiry geared to uncovering red flags in the relationship, the accompanying conversation significantly featured gender as an axis of difference. The leaders explained that “the differences between partners are rooted in the creation story in Genesis that describes the creation of men and women.” While God meant for these differences to be “advantages to us,” the Fall has corrupted them into “a source of constant struggle.” To illustrate this perspective, they drew on the book *Men are Like Waffles, Women are Like Spaghetti* by Bill and Pam Farrel. Describing the central argument of the book to a room full of people

like myself who may not have had any experience with it, Paul and Kelly, the most senior couple, explained

Men think in terms of boxes. When they are in one box they focus on that but don't think about any other boxes, some boxes are even men's space to not think at all but escape and recharge. In contrast, women are like spaghetti because they approach life in an intricate and interconnected way that involves seeing the connections between things, as opposed to viewing them separately. Due to women's spaghetti brain, they are better at multi-tasking and processing the connections between things. Men's box thinking, however, makes them better [and] natural problem-solvers.

These differences, they clarified, "can lead to difficulties in men and women's communication with each other." To illustrate the concept in action, they drew on examples from their own marriage of when Kelly would sometimes approach Paul to talk, not realizing that he was in "his empty box." While she interpreted his sitting on the couch as him "not doing anything," as Kelly explained, she had failed to realize that he was actually "recharging." Despite gender differences presenting a challenge in marriage, they stressed the importance of learning these communication patterns for one's overall level of marital happiness. Joking that "a happier woman means a happier man," Kelly offered insights into how men could help women work through their communication style. Commenting on her own experience she noted, "Sometimes I get so hung up in seeing all the intricate connections that I need someone to sort my spaghetti and put it in boxes. In these situations, his box thinking can sort my spaghetti."

From this perspective, men and women's distinct ways of processing their social worlds need not necessarily produce conflict and it only tends to do so because people deny this reality. Implicating the covenant rhetoric's "other-orientation," they challenged couples to approach their partner from the communication style that fits the other person's needs and not their own. In practice, they counseled, couples should ask

themselves: “Whose needs does this conversation satisfy?” If the man needs the conversation, then the focus will need to be “only on the one box.” For women to help this will require that they “refrain from trying to jump between boxes and focusing on interconnections.” In contrast, in conversations for the woman they advised them, “It may be helpful to begin processing your thoughts before the conversation by praying or journaling because this will help you think about what you want to talk about.”

While presented as a type of mutuality in the marriage, these examples actually normalize an understanding of masculinity as taciturn and imply a greater level of relational work for wives. From their personal story, Kelly presented herself as more responsible for monitoring Paul’s moods. Likewise, their ending advice offered two examples of work for women that operate against her supposed natural state: women must refrain from thinking about the interconnections in men’s conversations *and* must think on their own before bringing their topic to their husbands. This type of discussion, of course, is not unique to evangelical Protestants. A significant amount of secular self-help articulates a similar view, with John Gray’s (1992) *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* as a classic example. More recently, Jennifer Randles (2016:250) found in her review of curricula used in the Healthy Marriage Initiative programs that many, including the most popular one, “emphasized that men and women have distinct gendered communication styles that thwart interpersonal marital happiness.”

The essentialist and complementarian view on gender, however, largely operated as a background framework to the weekend. Explicit examples such as the above discussion on gendered communication actually emerged infrequently. Most lessons and exercises involved unpacking for the premarital couples the type of challenges they

would collectively face in marriage. In fact, the rest of the “Different by Design” session focused on other topics that could produce dissimilar expectations for the home, such as finances and family of origin. Based upon previous research that had highlighted the primacy of gender complementarity and essentialism among evangelicals, I anticipated that marriage preparation would spend considerable time articulating visions of the “good wife” in opposition to the “good husband.” Instead, most of the content aimed at educating *both* men and women towards the non-gendered goal of how to be a “good spouse.” Offering more universalistic advice, for example, the ending discussion in the difference session used language of “spouse,” indicating the importance of the message for both men and women.

To not fall victim to man’s view, it’s important to learn to not be dissatisfied with differences. Too often we try to change our partner to be more like us, we think that our way is the best way to deal with a problem or solve a dilemma. But trying to change a person doesn’t allow them to be the person God created them to be. God knows that a person needs their spouse’s differences to be a whole person. God created these differences with the goal of the spouses completing each other and to process parts of their self.

With the exception of the still popular convention of describing “humans” as “men,” gender did not emerge explicitly as part of the discussion. On the one hand, having been part of a session that presented distinct patterns of communication for men and women it is possible to interpret this advice as implicitly gendered. On the other hand, the quote more immediately followed a discussion about families of origin’s produce different ideas of “normal.”

Despite explicit claims about how men and women communicate differently, the weekend structured communication between the couples in the same manner. Men and women were provided the same list of questions on which to journal individually. During

the couple time, both were instructed to read the information twice to fully process the material. To help “deepen and enhance dialogue,” the leaders also provided them a list of suggested prompts to use to elicit greater detail about how the other person feels. In fact, the welcome discussion that introduced couples to the structure of the weekend never mentioned the idea that men and women do and must communicate differently. The session described above on difference did not occur until the following day. Thus, the leadership at the weekend retreat did clearly and explicitly construct gender along lines of difference to the engaged couples, but this was not a central or consistent part of the weekend.

In talking more intentionally with two couples from the leadership team, I heard slight variations on how to interpret the “original” source of gendered tension in marriage as outlined in the Genesis story of The Fall. In an interview with Paul and Kelly, he described a sermon that had “most significant” on his understanding of marriage – their pastor’s discussion on “the roles of marriage” as found in Ephesians 5 (the passage that states “wives submit to your husbands and husbands love your wives”). Complicating what he described as the “general sort of Christian understanding of the guy is supposed to somehow be the head and the wife is supposed to somehow submit,” Paul explained what he learned to be the deeper message.

Going back to Genesis – with Adam and Eve, when God came in and said “Okay, you’re going to do this, and you’re going to do this” – what was God trying to do there? A lot of church history, a lot of cultural history, ends up somehow, saying because of what God did there that the woman is somehow a lesser role. Like, she sinned a greater sin than Adam. And, you just sort of see that in church hierarchy, and in teaching, and in cultural kind of things. Our opinion would be that this couldn’t be further from the truth. God created man and woman equally. He loves them equally. He just assigned [them] – because of the Fall and what happened in that Fall – different roles. Not as punishment, but he assigned them

roles that made them more dependent on God to be able to fulfill that role. Roles that were almost opposite of what their personality and their abilities were, so it made them function in a way that makes them rely on God more.

This presentation of Genesis differs from both camps of formal discourses that Jonh Bartkowski (2001) identified in his review of popular conservative Protestant advice manuals on gender and family discourse. In stressing the importance of different roles for men and women this view aligns with the essentialist perspective. Yet, as opposed to men and women having been created differently by God, Paul casts the scripturally sanctioned gender roles as only having emerged *after* the Fall and, specifically, stressed the original equality of God's design. To clarify the intentions of these assigned roles, he went on to say

So there's a deeper thing going on there in God assigning roles. In God saying, wives submit to your husbands, and husbands love your wives and be a leader. Those weren't like punishing her and rewarding him. They're putting us in positions that are difficult to walk out [on]. And, therefore we need to rely on God in order to work on them. Whereas Adam and Eve didn't rely on God, Eve led without relying on God. Adam followed without relying on God. So God said "Okay, Adam, you're going to have to lead. Eve you're going to have to follow." And to do that, it's really going to take God for you to work [it] out.

Elaborating on this discussion, Kelly noted, "He gave us different types of personalities because that's another place that we can do this deeper transformational thing in our hearts and learn to depend on God for something that isn't natural."

Their understanding blends the different views of gender as natural and as a social construct, as well as essentialist and sameness rhetoric. Men and women are presented as naturally different – they have different communication styles and personality styles – but this is not presented as the foundation of gender roles. From the perspective of the covenant rhetoric, gender differences represent a barrier to unity with God calling

couples to resolve it by being other-centric (adopting traits that are not easy or natural but focus on the other person) and, importantly, to accomplish this couples must submit to God (as represented in the triangle diagram, last chapter). Paul and Kelly believe attempting to explain the rationale behind the Ephesians 5 scripture will help men and women be transformed by this challenge. Additionally, they contend it would help people realize, “There’s something He’s wanting to do in women that’s deeper than ‘Eve screwed up so I’m going to punish all women for the rest of eternity.’ Because, as the husband explained, “God didn’t create women to be doormats.”

Virginie, one of the other wives on the leadership team, worried that an off-the-cuff discussion of this view in a Q&A session one time may have been interpreted as Paul saying “Eve’s sin was that she took leadership over her husband.” To help ensure that the full team theologically understood the Fall, she sent everyone a selection from *Equal to the Task: Men and Women in Partnership*. As she explained the sin in the Fall to me during our interview, “Eve didn’t consult with Adam and get his opinion and support and Adam didn’t stand up and help Eve. They just didn’t cooperate with one another.” In fact, to avoid this type of misinterpretations the leadership teams prepared their talks in advance and workshopped them before presenting them to an audience of engaged couples.

In sum, the weekend retreat’s position on gender complementarianism, submission, and essentialism reveals the instability and flexibility of salient and sacred beliefs within conservative religious groups. Consistent with other research on evangelicals, the leadership drew on social and scriptural logics to assert the validity and importance of gender as system of difference that can produce a multitude of problems in

relationships. Yet, over twenty-five years have passed since the polarized debates on mutual submission and male headship during the 1960s to mid-1990s that Bartkewski (2001) studied. The present views of the evangelical weekend retreat reveal insights into how this intellectual and theological legacy has been renegotiated and reinterpreted. The inconsistent emergence of gender difference rhetoric points to concerns about alienating the engaged couples and a sense that it is not the primary purpose of their premarital counseling. As much as they believed in the transformative value of this teaching on God's vision of gender, they did not want it to get in the way of the overall weekend which they envisioned as helping couples assess and prepare their relationship for marriage. Most of the other sites did not even emphasize gender as much as this in their programming.

Learning the Cultural Differences of Gender at the Urban Catholic Parish

As opposed to the evangelical weekend retreat, the one Catholic parish that explicitly included gender as an axis of difference was less articulate about or committed to the idea. With the rotation of married couples (and one evening with the religious director and priest), parish marriage preparation programs spent considerably more class time on "get to know you activities" which created less overall time for new content.

Additionally, Catholic programs dedicated more time to explaining a sacramental marriage (especially to the high number of non-Catholic partners in the room) which also contributed to shifting the attention away from explanations and pursuits of individual-level differences. The urban Catholic parish, however, did spend a very brief amount of time on "gender differences."

The first class at this parish entailed a middle-aged couple covering a wide array of topics, each with limited depth, to explore the issue of “expectations on marriage.” In addition to an introduction and ice-breaker that involved everyone listing characteristics of their “ideal marriage,” Karen and Dennis provided brief discussions on: four different types of love (*storge*, *eros*, *philia*, and divine); family of origin; cultural differences; their experiences with natural family planning; gender differences; personality differences; love languages; and thoughts on what marriage will be like. As with the evangelical retreat they explicitly addressed “gender differences,” as they referred to the topic, but it proportionally accounted for less time on exploring relational differences. Additionally, this one evening covered a number of topics that the evangelical retreat divided across multiple sessions which meant examples and descriptions were less detailed.

To start off the discussion on “gender differences,” Karen and Dennis provided a little personal background on gender roles in their homes growing up. Dennis explained that his dad worked fulltime and his mom just worked part time. Before, he could get any further, Karen interjected to note “She had the hardest job of all – raising four kids.” Acquiescing, he continued by noting that since his dad worked graveyard shift it was difficult for him to get rest in the house with all four kids running around. Without too much detail on Karen’s family background (her father had died young), Dennis shifted to comment opaquely that “the drive for equality has created new stereotypes and even created reactionary stereotypes.” Warningly, he told the couples “Do not equate equality with sameness. The differences in male and female are part of the intent of creation.”

Stepping in to provide a personal example, Karen clarified that she really needs a “compassionate listener” and he has a tendency to offer advice which is “okay about half

of the time.” Turning to look at her husband as she said this next part, Karen reassuringly reminded him that he does not really do this anymore, “But in the past, Dennis tended to say things like ‘it’s no big deal,’ which was bad. This is a classic gender difference. In general, women want to talk out issues and men want to act on them. Of course, this is just a generality.” Reaching out to the coffee table that the chairs circled, she picked up a copy of John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. As she did this, Karen explained how they read this book as part of a couples group they belonged to in the parish and they found it “really helpful.” Again, undercutting their gendered statements, she added the caveat “But we don’t fit into the gender differences in places. He isn’t very into sports. He *may* know what they are.” Dennis jokingly responded that since he had recently taken to wearing a jacket that apparently has a logo of a sports team on it he has had to learn a little bit because people are always asking him about how the team is doing. Karen continued on, indicating their non-normative interests by announcing how she enjoys classic cars. Looking intently at his wife, Dennis affectionately commented, “It’s pretty cool when she throws out stuff like info on cubic inch displacement when we go to car fairs.” As Karen shrugged nonchalantly Dennis repeated “pretty cool.”

With that brief and largely personal introduction to the idea that men and women differ because of their gender, the discussion ended. Next, the couples had a ten minute break-out session in which they completed a worksheet titled “Family of Origin Roles and Styles of Relating.” As opposed to picking up too significantly on the theme of gender, however, it mostly asked couples to reflect on their families: “What do you find attractive about your family?” “How has your family dealt with pain and crisis?” “In what ways has your family been generous?” Once they finished (quickly) answering

these questions and talking through their responses, Karen regained the couples' attention by explaining "Let's keep moving forward."

Similar to the evangelical weekend retreat, the leadership presented gender as a source of difference that manifests in varied styles of communications, needs, and interests. To support these assertions, both leadership teams turned to an example of a popular self-help book to bolster personal claims about how they differ as men and women in their own marriages. Karen and Dennis, however, appeared less committed to or invested in the idea of gender difference. Unlike the detailed discussion of *how* men and women process their social worlds differently, which results in distinct patterns of communication, they simply asserted that differences exist without providing a clear or detailed account of how the differences manifest or the scope of them. Rather than an argument about clear and essential gender differences, as presented in the evangelical retreat, it is unclear why universal or consistent differences exist in men and women. Additionally, throughout their presentation they offered caveats to undercut the significance of gender in determining communication styles or interests.

A story Karen shared in our interview indicated that they viewed gender differences as mostly a cultural product and not a sign of innate differences. In explaining their goal for the class they led, Dennis commented "You have to sort of examine the stuff you've been used to doing all your life that you kind of take for granted as being accepted and normal." Providing an example of how people can have "knee-jerk" reactions to what appears different from their normal, Karen offered the example of her brother who married a Middle Eastern woman and lived abroad at the time of the interview:

[My brother and sister-in-law] have some huge cultural differences, especially in terms of gender roles. Like, a quick example is my brother is, you know, he had 4 sisters. He was saying that he just does not relate to most of the men in that culture. It's so much more...the social structure is more male-dominated. And he just makes friends more easily with women. Well, his wife got all upset. And it's like her dad never had female friends, you know? Didn't talk with them. I think he was maybe just texting one of his co-workers, or, you know. It was all very innocent. I know my brother. But she took it as this threat. I mean it was kind of a big crisis in their marriage. And it was just this huge cultural difference.

While ostensibly discussing gender roles in this example, she mostly uses it as an entry point into discussing the significance of how cultural backgrounds shape individual's expectations of what is normal or appropriate ways to interact with other people. Rather than indicate a complementarian view on gender, these examples largely focused on gender as one type of difference that couples will have to negotiate in their marriage. While gender consists of some "generalities," discussions of it were not accorded as significant a level of determinism as other dimensions of difference, such as family of origin or cultural backgrounds.

Only the class on Sacramental Marriage at the urban Catholic parish produced a case of explicitly discussing gender complementarianism as a part of God's creation.

Drawing a yin-yang on the whiteboard, Mary, the religious director, explained

I'm going to use a non-Christian symbol to think about fruitfulness and completeness with God. We as humans aren't complete and we only represent part of the species. If you were to gather all the women together, that'd be great but it wouldn't be a representation of the fullness of humanity. Father Tony one time explained in a homily how all the systems of the body are essentially the same in men and women. The one system where they are unique is a great sign of need for men and women to be together. It's a sign of physical complementarity, a sign of unity, and how we are made in this world. It shows us how we are to experience ourselves as oriented towards another: Man to Woman and Woman to Man.

This discussion reflected official teachings and announcements by the Catholic Church that have regularly stressed the importance of gender as a source of divinely intended difference. Specifically, her perspective reflected insights from Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body, which asserted "The body, which expresses femininity 'for' masculinity and, vice versa, masculinity 'for' femininity, manifests the reciprocity and the communion of persons."³ Likewise, more recently Pope Francis has reaffirmed this type of view,

[V]aluing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.⁴

As with the formal Catholic teachings on gender complementarianism, however, Mary reduced gender to sex. In other words, this is not a discussion of how gender produces different styles of communication or needs between men and women but focuses on the biology of bodies. The emphasis on embodiment may explain why gender did not emerge significantly in discussions about how to negotiate differences in marriage.

As with the evangelical retreat, however, this rhetoric about gender difference represented a minimal amount of the overall content. Much of the programming focused on instructing both men and women how to become good spouses and to create a meaningful partnership. For example, in a discussion on "Moral Decisions in Marriage"

³United State Council of Catholic Bishops. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/marriage/promotion-and-defense-of-marriage/upload/Gender-Ideology-Select-Teaching-Resources.pdf>

⁴United State Council of Catholic Bishops. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Mary and one of the parish priests presented on how insights from the Ten Commandments can be applied to thinking about marital life. For the seventh commandment (Thou shall not steal), they noted that this obviously indicates that you should not steal another person's spouse but that a more positive interpretation would be to think about stewardship. As Mary explained, "We are called to be good stewards of our home." Encouraging them to be intentional about their home life, she cautioned them against allowing other things to "steal time away from them as a couple." Without singling out either men or women, she informed everyone that "How much time one commits to their job is a moral decision." Additionally, the night on finances involved a variety of activities to help each person articulate their financial assumptions and values that could serve as the basis of conversations about how they would budget their money together. To help identify the difference between "needs" and "wants," each partner completed a worksheet labelled "NUDEL" that had couples identify whether the 29 listed items were: Necessary, Useful, Desirable, or an Extra Luxury. Ranging in topic from pets to second car, to data plans for cell phones to air conditioning, to kids, to two incomes, the topics were presented without any explicit reference to gender. The lay man who led this class by himself specifically drew attention to the "two incomes," commenting "It is an important one to think about, especially when it comes to having kids because it can impact insurance and you need to consider what will happen if something happens to the other person's job." While at least one of the wives that presented had been a stay-at-home mom, there did not appear to be an assumption in this parish that the stay-at-home parent would automatically be the woman. In addition to this gender neutral example of staying home with children, in another class Mary offhandedly mentioned both stay-at-

home moms and dads. While gender differences emerged on occasion within this program, they were not given significant consideration as an important dimension of difference to emphasize or explain to the engaged couples as they prepared for marriage.

Explaining Relational Differences through Psychology

Learning about the Spiritual Significance of Therapeutic Advice at the Non-Urban Catholic Parish

Gender complementarianism was absent at the non-urban Catholic parish. Following a similar organizational structure, married couples rotated each week to talk on different topics including finances, communication, conflict, wedding liturgy, and a sacramental marriage.⁵ This program actually dedicated little time to explicitly exploring topics of interpersonal differences, such as personality, love languages, family of origin, or gender. However, for each topic the married couple (and the priest who spoke on wedding liturgy) wove in relevant insights about personal differences that they believed emerge in response to people's family backgrounds. At times this approach resulted in a subtle critique of the perception that Catholic marriages involve gendered hierarchies.

The first evening of class served as an introductory session with all the couples – leadership and participant – going around in a circle to share their reflections about the adults in their lives that they have looked up to as role models for marriage. Sharing after the two other married couples on the leadership team, Marcy, the woman who serves as the primary lay coordinator for the program and her husband, Darryl, shared how they had to learn “what the church and a community of faith can provide” by looking at

⁵ Due to scheduling conflicts, I was unable to view the class on finances. It's possible that gender difference rhetoric may have emerged in that context. However, the most likely topics of communication and sacramental marriage did not include this type of rhetoric and, as I will discuss, these sessions to some extent worked against this logic.

relationships other than their parents' marriages. As Darryl explained, "Both of our parents are still married but their marriages weren't necessarily the model that we hoped for in our own relationship." To elaborate, Marcy described how she had to relearn the concept of a Catholic marriage because of how her parents had modeled one.

My parents were loving but more traditional with my mom serving my dad. Growing up I associated a Catholic marriage with this more hierarchical model and had to learn how to see a Catholic marriage in a more egalitarian manner. I had to grow to understand that mutual serving is the basis of a Catholic marriage and it's not about a subservient expectation where one person gives up themselves for the other person and is in a state of inequality. It took me awhile to see this other model and I found it in watching how the marriages around me functioned in a way that the couples served each other in a lot of ways.

Setting the tone for the class she offered a soft criticism of headship rhetoric that has dominated many Christian ideals of marriage (Bartkowski 2001; Burke 2012; Irby 2014; Konieczny 2013). Marcy's personalized discussion of this issue helped ensure it was not a critique of the Catholic Church and implied these types of hierarchical marriages are more akin to personal choices than religiously sanctioned.

The remainder of their introduction continued with this redemptive story by detailing how returning to the church as adults helped them to find role models for happy and spiritual marriages. Following this night, subsequent classes operated from a subtle and implicit gender egalitarian framework that remained silent on the existence of innate and complementarian gender differences that the broader Church espouses. While silence can sometimes be more difficult to empirically locate than vocal rhetoric on gender difference, I focus my analysis here on the topics that produced gendered discourse in the other programs.

Both Catholic parishes dedicated an evening to refreshing (or more often teaching) couples about the significance and value of a sacramental marriage. Following writings from the Vatican, Mary at the urban parish made a point of discussing God's vision of gender complementarianism during the creation of humankind. In contrast, the married couple that led the sacramental class at this parish, Arnie and Leslie, never explicitly mentioned gender differences as part of God's vision. In fact, the creation stories of Genesis did not appear in their overall discussion. Instead, their talk focused on elevating the relationship between Jesus and his disciples as the model of marriage. After an awkward silence produced by Arnie asking all the couples to define a sacrament, they spent some time describing sacraments broadly and detailing all seven of them. Putting it plainly, Arnie offered, "A sacrament, then, is about asking Jesus Christ to walk with you and become present in your life. So, what does this mean in marriage?" After allowing everyone about five minutes to discuss the type of things that they can "do to bring Jesus into their relationship," people regrouped and provided answers such as "coming to church together," "a family altar," and "prayer." Turning their attention to the actual actions of Jesus in the New Testament, Arnie reminded them,

There are some basic things that Jesus did to bring himself into this world, such as washing feet and cooking for his disciples. These are good reminders. Doing the dishes and laundry are ways to express your love for your partner. Because doing everyday things brings Christ's love into the world.

"Selflessly," interjected Mary, "Marriage is supposed to be similar in how it's a selfless act. Everyone wins when we do it selflessly. But, when you keep score about what you do for each other, then you will lose."

Using covenant rhetoric to distinguish a sacramental marriage as other-focused, the leadership couple emphasized small acts of service in marriage as both healthy and spiritual. Importantly, however, this sacralization of household chores did not implicate a model of household labor where the husband “helps” the wife. The gender difference programs rarely explicitly instructed women to do more of the housework or childcare, but their stories often indicated an inequity in these issues. From Paul, the evangelical husband who needed to be allowed to sit on the couch to do nothing as he recharged in an empty box, or Sue, who encouraged her husband to go and play a round of golf when his emotional bank was low instead of coming home to help her out, conceptions of household labor in these cases subtly demonstrated their beliefs in gender roles.

In sacralizing household chores as a way to embody Jesus Christ, Arnie offered an imperceptible challenge to modes of masculinity in the home. This shift away from Genesis towards Jesus also importantly established a different foundation from which to craft a Christian view on relationships. Rather than an abstract presentation of an “other-orientation” that relied on a gendered metaphor of sexed bodies, Arnie and Mary emphasized an active model based on serving others through tangible actions. Without circumscribing a Christian marriage into a defined set of tasks, however, they constructed a more attainable model of marriage.

Likewise, the topic of communication also provided another example of an alternative model to gender differences. During the night on communication and conflict, Marcy and Darryl predominately focused on therapeutic principles that they contended could produce improved ways to express oneself and provide healthier ways to fight. As with other marriage preparation programs, the leadership at this parish referenced a

popular book that had helped them in their own marriages. Unlike the two gender difference programs, however, this parish did not rely on a self-help book about gender dynamics (such as *Men are Like Waffles, Women are like Spaghetti* or *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*). Instead, all the engaged couples were provided a handout summarizing key insights from John Gottman and Nate Silver's *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*. All of the listed information emphasized tasks and approaches for each person to cultivate in their marriage to be a good "partner." Advice to nurture fondness, to turn towards each other, and to create shared meaning all represent non-gendered calls for how to think and act that do not presuppose that men and women communicate differently.

Towards the end of the night, Darryl also implicitly challenged some beliefs about men's style of communication with the one example from fieldwork at this parish that involved directly calling attention to generalizations associated with gender. Before ending the night, he read a list of his observations after twenty years of marriage which included the advice to "turn the TV off." Darryl followed up this general statement by specifically holding men accountable, "This is an important one for the men to listen to. And, now, I actually need to extend this advice to turn *things* off, such as smart phones." While this advice in some ways follows the other programs' commentaries about how men tend to be poorer communicators, it differs from the evangelical discussion which naturalized this tendency. Instead, Darryl challenged men (along with their wives) to work together to create a shared communication style that works for both partners, but not through complementarity. From their own marriage, they explained that they realized that serious conversations needed to occur in the mornings because at night Marcy would

lose focus and often the focus of the argument would drift which would be exacerbated by Darryl's difficulty to let go of a conversation once an issue had been brought up. Therefore, one of the next items on his list was to encourage couples to "find the best time to talk." In constructing this advice more broadly, it differed from the evangelical retreat which argued that conversations can either meet the needs of the woman or the needs of the man and subsequently offered guidance that placed greater relational work on the wife. In contrast, this recommendation calls couples to share in the marriage work to create conditions that produce the greatest collective good for the relationship without assuming that a conversation can only serve one partner.

As opposed to a gender complementarian framework, the leadership team that led this program tended to operate from a spiritualized-therapeutic perspective. Insights from the Gottman Institute even permeated the class on sacramental marriages, with Arnie referencing research from their "Love Labs" to support the construction of an egalitarian, sacramental marriage. After restating the institute's claim to be able to tell within 15 minutes whether a marriage will last, he explained that "The number one thing they know that doesn't work is contempt." Due to the high number of Latino couples in this class, a brief discussion ensued about the definition of "contempt" since at least two people spoke English as a second language and did not recognize the word. To clarify, he offered, "To define contempt, it's a lack of respect and not real equality. It isn't the same thing as a sacramental marriage. Basically, if you think of your partner as unworthy then the relationship is not going to work." Infusing a therapeutic discourse with religious meaning, the leadership at this parish consistently articulated a vision of faithful marriages as an egalitarian partnership in which both spouses strive to meet the needs of

the other. Yet, they made a point of cautioning couples to be self-reflexive and aware in their attempts to live selflessly for their partner. Before ending this evening, they stopped to clarify “Selfless sacrifice doesn’t include letting people abuse you.”

Learning to Use Psychological Concepts to Explain Different Viewpoints at the Evangelical Congregation

The two premarital classes at the evangelical congregation professionalized a similar spiritualized-therapeutic framework that focused predominately on the psychological differences within a couple. As opposed to a lay interpretation of therapeutic principles, however, this program relied on the expertise of trained and practicing therapists to offer their academic and practical insights from working with couples, many of whom are in the stage of crisis that the premarital couples hoped to avoid. As with their evangelical counterpart, the curricula explicitly explored differences between the partners but in these cases gender did not emerge as a relevant dimension to dissect. Instead, counselors guided couples through exercises that taught them to see their differences as a result of their personality, background, and goals. Through psychological teachings and self-reflexive exercise the leadership provided couples with ways to explain their differences that did not rely on gender.

For much of the dating class the leadership presented and explored a variety of dimensions that emerge as salient types of difference within a couple. The first evening focused “personality types” and included a brief lecture on how to understand couples’ results from personality tests, as well as structured discussion questions to help everyone understand how these traits may become salient in their relationship. The second week involved couples identifying and exploring differences produced by family of origin,

since as Michael explained, “Generally, there are more differences between families than there are similarities.” To help explore these differences and provide a concrete tool in the discussions, couples were assigned a homework activity to create a “family genome” (or a type of family tree). During the third week, couples were provided a sheet of paper and instructed to fill in each of its four quadrants – Values, Goals, Dreams, and Assumptions – to aim them in identifying different priorities. Exploring differences, thus, centered prominently, but at no point did these discussions include a section on “gender differences.”

In addition to not labeling any characteristic as masculine or feminine in this multi-faceted deconstruction of difference, the leadership of these classes also avoided some of the key conditions associated with gender difference rhetoric in other programs. Following a broader cultural trend that posits gendered forms of communication, the two gender difference programs each highlighted the topic of communication. The classes at the evangelical congregation, however, opted to more narrowly focus on communication strategies during conflict. Both classes, therefore, included an opportunity to listen to a spokesperson from the Gottman Institute who presented their empirical findings on marital conflict. He briefly noted in his description of the “Four Horsemen” – Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling – that they found a gendered pattern with the final one more common among men. Unlike the explanations of gendered communication strategies in the other programs that would present it as a trait *of* men and women, however, he offered an *interactional* explanation for this pattern.

Unlike some of the other tactics, there tends to be a common gendered pattern for stonewallers – they are more likely to be men. Of course, women are more likely to bring up issues to discuss, which means that stonewalling is part of a pattern of interaction within couples. Specifically,

women are 80% more likely to bring up an issue. Therefore, women should work on gentle start-ups to discussions of issues and men should work on not stonewalling when an issue is being discussed.

Using psychological principles that framed this tendency as emergent, the guest speaker slightly reoriented the discussion on gendered patterns of communication. In other words, men do not “stonewall” because they are men with waffle brains but instead he presented it as something that men often exhibit as a result of cumulative styles of relating to one another in a relationship. Likewise, his recommendations did not disproportionately place the relational work upon women to address these types of interactional dynamics. In the rest of his discussion, he did not implicate gender differences but, instead, offered non-gendered advice for both men and women to practice, such as being aware of one’s heart rate during an argument.

In addition to this lecture, the engagement class included a follow-up session dedicated to conflict. After briefly offering a “theoretical” discussion on how conflicts tend to occur, Adam conducted a public counseling session with a volunteer couple that had had an argument in the last week. He walked them each through a five-step process – 1) I felt; 2) What happened; 3) Triggers; 4) Responsibility – I’m sorry; 5) I will/I want. These phrases were intended to cultivate a “radical subjectivity” in each person where they talked exclusively about what they personally felt and thought during the conflict. The volunteer couple recounted a story that could have been interpreted through the gendered communication lens because it consisted of a reticent man and a woman wanting him to share his feelings. Instead, Adam relied on therapeutic concepts such as “stonewalling” (a partner not appearing to be checked in emotionally or mentally) and

“flooding” (a heightened state of physiological arousal that makes it difficult to process another person’s point of view).

Both classes also differed in their approach to how they presented “Christian marriage.” In neither case did the leadership turn to the creation stories in Genesis to provide a template for God’s view on relationships. In fact, they often sought to deconstruct premarital couples’ assumptions about Biblical marriage rather than present theological elucidations. Offering a similar activity as the non-urban Catholic parish, Adam and Sarah encouraged couples to study Jesus’ actions as an example for how to love. To justify this perspective on biblical marriages, Adam read the contentious passage from Ephesians that “everyone reads at weddings.”

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.”⁶

When he finished reading, he looked up at the couples and sarcastically asked them, “Right. That’s clear. Women, you should submit?” Meeting his tone, one guy jokingly responded, “Cool. She’s not here. She’s at work.” Ignoring the comment, Adam offered matter-of-factly, “I think that it’s clear that it’s mutual submission but tucked in love. We are called to love as Christ loved the Church. How did he do that?” To begin this conversation, he erased the previous list on the whiteboard that consisted of clichés and

⁶ I believe he started with Ephesians 5:21 and ended around 5:30. I don’t know which translation he read from but I have quoted the New Revised Standard Version.

abstractions that couples had offered to define a Biblical Marriage (see previous chapter). With a fresh whiteboard, everyone began to volunteer examples of Jesus's actions including: "becoming one flesh," "washing feet," "he got mad," "prayed," and "fed them."

Rather than use this passage to support gender difference or distinct roles for men and women, Adam explicitly interpreted it for the couples as being a statement on mutual submission. Honing in on the discussion of *how* Jesus himself loved, Adam turned this passage into an activity about tangible actions that can (and implicitly should) define a Christian marriage. As such, a Biblical marriage is not defined as a gendered pursuit or occupying a gendered state, but instead it consists of the other-orientated actions associated with the covenant marriage.

The dating class, however, did not even present a scriptural or theological discussion to discuss a Christian marriage. Adopting a similar approach as the engaged class, the leadership led a group discussion about what makes a "Christian" marriage, as opposed to "just a really good marriage." After consistently pushing back on couples by asking them to explain and support how their ideas are distinctively Christian, Michael concluded with a warning about assuming faith will protect their relationships. "Personally, I believe that faith serves as a source of strength in my marriage but much of the challenge in marriage and family life is beyond me, so where to go?" "The Holy Spirit," he replied to his own question,

Relying on the fruits of the spirit is important because otherwise I would have thrown in the towel. When we go back to God, He provides more than we can do on our own. It's important to recognize that we will face challenges. The problem I have seen in some of my Christian friends is that they think they won't have challenges and then when they do they try to resolve them on their own.

With that final thought, he stopped discussing Christian marriage and opened up a general Q&A session for final thoughts on relationships. The entire class session lacked any commentary about how God intended relationships to look or men and women's roles within them.

Relying on psychological concepts to explain social life, these premarital counselors deemphasized gender as a form of difference and instead explained away much of what the other programs identified as gendered. From the perspective that each person represents an amalgam of personality and family norms, differences were presented as too multi-faceted to be reduced into a binary classification. In other words, women and men in relationships are different because they are different *people*. While the professionalized therapeutic perspective inhibited a rhetorical emphasis on gender difference, it importantly enabled the cultivation of a gendered space in other ways that differed from the other programs. Likely emerging from the husbands' work counseling individuals independently, this was the only program that divided up the couples to provide them time to discuss their relationships without their partner present. In creating distinct women's space and men's space – on relational flags in the dating class and sex in the engagement class – the leadership normalized the idea that men and women have different points of views and concerns. Additionally, their reliance on formal expertise produced a context in which men held more authority (because in all the couples the therapist was the husband). In fact, it was because of the men's professional expertise and background that each "couple" was recruited to lead the classes. Their wives, on the other hand, were mostly along for the ride. While all of them had professional careers of their own, they were in unrelated fields and, unlike their husbands, their work was not

discussed. In practice, this dynamic produced an unequal access to the type of relationship information and strategies they sought to transmit to premarital couples. The husbands, therefore, consistently took the lead and spent considerably more time talking than their wives. Thus, while the teachings may have worked against the assumptions of gendered points of view common among evangelicals the manner in which they presented to information conformed to this belief.

Conclusion

Religious institutions serve as a key site for the production of gender ideologies (Edgell 2011). For Catholic and evangelical Protestant communities this has often resulted specifically in the promotion of marriage as an institution predicated on distinct gender roles (Bulanda 2011; Burke 2012; Irby 2014b). Yet, as I listened to religious leaders offer counsel to premarital couples, rhetoric of gender differences emerged infrequently and inconsistently. With limited time to prepare people for married life, premarital counselors must make decisions about the most significant and salient topics that will help improve their impending marital life. In two programs, gender made the list but was not accorded as much attention as other issues. In the other two programs, however, leaders appeared gender blind with a reliance on therapeutic principles. In either case, however, these discussions never really amounted to distinct presentations about how to be a “good wife” versus a “good husband.” All the programs placed greater emphasis on strategies of action that enable partnership and reflect the intentional blending of needs that emerge from each partner’s background. However, if becoming a husband or becoming a wife does not necessitate separate guidance, why do some programs continue to teach a sacralized vision of gender differences?

At least part of the answer lies in the power of gender to naturalize and institutionalize a system of heterosexuality (Ingraham 2008; Jackson 2005). The two gender difference programs relied on claims about God's intentions – often articulated in Genesis creation stories – to support and assert the importance of a union occurring only between men and women. Despite these presentations producing few actionable details for a Christian marriage, it rhetorically positions a religious community within broader debates about who can get married and what marriage should look like. The relative silence on gender difference and the subtle criticisms of hierarchical views on Christian marriage within the other programs could be interpreted as tacit approval of more progressive views on marriage. Across all four programs, the leadership teams made it clear that the goal was not to prescribe their views on relationships but to help cultivate skills within couples. More interested in helping couples with interpersonal skills than in making political statements, most of the leadership avoided or tiptoed around issues that could be interpreted as making contentious statements on gender and sexuality.

The political sensitivity, coupled with the psychological frameworks that emerge from the therapeutic culture, likely contributes to the general absence of gender, as well as the exclusive focus on how it operates at a micro, interactional level when it did emerge. As Jennifer Randles (2016:255) commented in her research on the construction of gender within the Healthy Marriage Initiatives,

Alas, the curricula's focus on developing relationship skills to address gendered power within marriage was largely decontextualized from the institutionalized gender inequalities that often prevent couples from realizing the egalitarian ideas emphasized in the programs.

Given the political connotations of "egalitarian," these programs rarely used that term although they would use the corollary term "partnership." By reducing gender difference

to the internal worlds of men and women, or even by simply not engaging with it, the programs likely do not prepare couples for the structural impact that gender regimes will have as they individually and collectively pursue familial and occupational goals.

Whether as a result of psychology, or in the rare instances of gender complementarianism, discussions of “difference” tended to be predicated on an implicit view that people are equally positioned within relationships.

For example, discussions on how people have distinct desires and aspirations that emerge from their families of origin does not acknowledge the available power of any individual to enact these goals. As men and women form families and pursue careers they will encounter structural expectations for how women/men, wives/husbands, and, perhaps eventually mothers/fathers, should act. A focus on desires and choices does not engage or prepare couples for a system of expectations or obligations. In other words, everything from announcing last names at the altar to who will pick up a sick child from school represent “choices” that will be interpreted differently for men and women in marriage because of structural expectations. Furthermore, the discussions and exercises designed to help couples reflect on their family of origins or prepare budgets for their marriages do not engage social class as a system of different resources or a *habitus* that shapes embodied ways of being a family. As a class on finance at one of the parishes revealed, the instructor’s talk on how much of one’s income to budget towards different expenses did not meet the material reality of many of the debt-burdened young adults. Echoing my own sense of helplessness during the discussion, one man facetiously joked about the difficulty to budget because of his lack of real income as a medical resident. While these programs may prepare couples for how to reflect on and talk about issues of gender, they

do so by flattening social institutions to a level playing ground of differences in personality and interests.

Of course, an important question about how couples feel about these issues still exists. Do they feel that these classes help them reflect on their relationships? Do they agree with premarital counselors' presentations on faith, relationship, and gender? In Chapter 6, I turn to consider the motivations and reactions of premarital couples that participated in these collective marriage preparation programs.

CHAPTER SIX

COUPLES' PERSPECTIVE ON THE PROCESS OF MARRIAGE PREPARATION

The questions are not: 'Do we want to have sex? or 'Would we enjoy the excitement of getting engaged and planning a wedding?' or 'Do all our friends and family expect us to get married?' The real questions are: 'Are we ready to care for, sacrifice for, and love each other through good times and bad?' and 'Do we believe that we would glorify God more as a couple than as individuals?' and 'Are we ready for forever?'
Joshua Harris, Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship¹

Pastors and lay volunteers regularly dedicate substantial time and energy to counseling premarital couples contemplating a major transition in their lives. They believe that by providing couples with an intentional and structured time to reflect on their relationships, to evaluate their pasts, and to consider their futures, that they may better prepare people for the type of marital problems that lead to divorce. But, what do couples take away from this process? Why do they participate? What messages do they hear about faith and relationships? To fully understand premarital counseling it is necessary to examine the practice from the perspective of the couples that it is meant to impact.

In this chapter, I consider three primary questions: Who participates in marriage preparation? Why do they enroll in these programs? And, what impact does the experience have on them? Compared with the premarital counselors that led the courses, the couples that I encountered in the classes came from a wider range of backgrounds and experiences. While each couple approached the curriculum with a unique history, their motivations and experiences were patterned by their religious communities. Despite some

¹ Harris, Joshua. 2000. *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers.

basic shared characteristics across the evangelical and Catholic couples, they participated in the programming with different expectations. As a form of counseling, evangelical couples conceptualized this practice as a *resource* they could obtain from their communities when necessary. In contrast, as a type of religious education preparing couples for a sacramental marriage Catholic couples conceptualized this practice as a *requirement*. This variation in how couples understood the practice impacted both why and when they participated in the programs. Despite their different motivations, both evangelical and Catholic couples reported gaining useful insights into their relationship from participating in the *process*, even as they largely struggled to recall particular elements from the *content*. Within a therapeutic culture that constantly inundates people with advice about how to have the best relationship, couples sift through teachings without according them greater authority in their lives. The one exception was how some evangelical couples reconsidered their sexual lives in light of the premarital counselors' teachings on the immorality of premarital sex.

Who Participates in Marriage Preparation?

I heard a wide range of relationship stories across the 31 interviews I did with couples that had participated in the collective marriage preparation programs. In fact, no consistent narrative emerged in terms of how people met, when they contemplated marriage, the length of time they had been together, how active they were in their churches, or the importance of faith in their relationship. Some couples had been in long-term relationships since high school, others had more recently met online, and, in the case of some Catholics, they had been civilly married for years. Many couples included

individuals of similar religious backgrounds but others were inter-faith relationships or included an explicitly non-religious person.

While each couple had a unique story, in looking more broadly at all the participants a picture emerges about who does and does not participate in these programs. The couples I interviewed, as well as the ones I chatted with informally during my fieldwork, shared some general characteristics. On average, they tended to be young adults in their 20s and 30s contemplating their first marriage. Not surprisingly, given evangelicals tendency to marry younger (Uecker and Stokes 2008) and participate pre-engaged, the evangelical couples tended to be younger than the Catholics. However, I did meet Catholic couples engaged in their early-20s and evangelical couples in their mid-30s. While the leadership across the various sites recalled instances of people attending their programs prior to remarrying, I did not interview anyone who had been divorced. Additionally, none of the couples I spoke with had children, although two had been pregnant when they participated in their premarital counseling. For the civilly married Catholic couple, their pregnancy did not result in any difficulties with the leadership but the unmarried evangelical couple faced significant problems each time they had sought premarital counseling. Finally, only heterosexual couples participated in these programs. Taken all together this reveals how marriage preparation is mainly populated by couples following a “traditional” life course trajectory.

Penny Edgell (2003) has argued that, despite significant changes to family life, congregations have not adapted much from the Ozzie and Harriet model in their ministries. Most offered what she calls a “standard package plus” which meant congregations had perhaps added a men’s ministry or divorce ministry to the customary

selection of religious education, youth programming, and women's ministries. In terms of premarital counseling, this manifested in programming that served young, childless couples preparing for marriage for the first time. Yet, in other ways, these couples defied some of the normative expectations of the religious leaders coordinating the programs. Many of them were cohabitating and likely even more were having premarital sex. Additionally, only a minority of Catholics indicated they planned to use the only church approved form of birth control (natural family planning). As a result, this meant the premarital couples were approaching marriage from a different position than the leadership desired even as they reflected many of the assumptions about when couples should marry.

Why do Couples Participate in Marriage Preparation?

Evangelicals – Seeking Help Early and Often

While evangelical programs often required engaged couples to participate in premarital counseling, many of them sought guidance prior to the proposal. The evangelical congregation even cultivated this practice by offering a distinct class for dating couples. Likewise, the weekend retreat encouraged attending their program prior to a formal engagement but had these couples follow the same curriculum. In some cases, these couples were truly *pre-engaged* and participated in the class as the final confirmation that they should get engaged. In a few cases, by the time I could arrange an interview with a couple they were no longer “pre-engaged” because the man had proposed. For example, after a month of failed attempts I finally sat down with one particular couple – Kevin and Erica – from the dating class I had observed at the evangelical congregation. In the interim Erica had taken a trip to France that she had been planning with some friends.

Coordinating with her friends, Kevin had flown to Paris, hid out in the backroom of a fancy restaurant where they had dinner reservations, waited until they arrived, and then surprised her with by proposing. Curious and not wanting to assume, I asked them, “So, had you been talking about it before hand?” Kevin promptly responded with, “Oh yeah, oh yeah. Immediately before taking the dating class we had been talking about it for,” pausing for a moment, he finally concluded with “many months prior.” Likely to explain his pause, Erica clarified that they had previously been friends and that when they finally started dating it was under the condition of exploring whether or not this relationship could end in marriage.

Erica: So we went into our relationship knowing that. But I had tried to get him to sign up for the dating class last spring and he wasn't ready. So when he kind of hit a rough patch and he was, you know, well not a rough patch. We just, I don't know, [had] a fight or something. [And] he suggested that we take the class. So when he suggested we take the class, or maybe I suggested it, but he was really quick to be like ‘Yeah let's do it.’ But, before that wasn't his reaction, he wasn't ready for that. I kind of knew ‘Okay just his willingness to take this class means that he is ready’-

Kevin: Yep.

Erica: -and the class just cemented that

Kevin: -cemented that absolutely-

Erica: I kind of felt like if you can get a grade in the pre-engagement class we would have gotten, maybe not an A+, but we would have gotten an A.

Later in the interview, after Kevin had appeared to become more comfortable talking with me, he told this story from his own perspective.

Kevin: Erica had been a very strong proponent of getting engaged and moving forward quickly, for many months. And, I was still hesitant. But I think it really was the class that – [pause] – It really was pushed me over the edge. It was fate. It definitely gave me the opportunity for us to be a lot more open and it created a lot of different areas of dialogue that we just hadn't been talking about. And just being really honest, having really honest conversations. And, I think through all of that I realized, ‘Yep.’ This is exactly, you know all of my worries have been, have just, I mean I have just been able to discuss this in many ways and I have been able to

bring out my concerns. Either way at this point no matter what we are going to be able to deal with them, we are going to be able to have that really open honest dialogue and be able to get through [it] no matter what. So once I fully realized that at that point, I, yeah. Hands down. Let's do this.

For Erica and Kevin, as with other evangelicals in dating relationships, marriage had always loomed in their relationship as something under-consideration and was used as a barometer to evaluate their relationship (Irby 2014a). The church's class, however, also had long figured in this process and in different ways assured each person about the other's commitment. For Erica, his agreement to participate in the class indicated that he was finally ready to move forward towards engagement. Whereas for Kevin, the class itself allowed him the opportunity to talk through lingering doubts in their relationship and that process instilled greater confidence that they had the necessary relationship skills for marital success.

For other dating couples, however, they could not envision a clear trajectory and were seeking help to discern the viability of their relationship. These couples were less in some anticipatory stage of engagement but rather reflexively questioning if/how marriage would fit into their lives. In the one example from the dating class where I interviewed a woman by herself, she described her relationship with her boyfriend as at a crossroad. She had been dating him for six years, had recently graduated from college, and was spending the year doing Americorp. After this length of time and at this stage in her life, she explained that they were trying to figure out if they should move forward to marriage or if they were not meant to get married. She envisioned the class less as a stamp of approval for their relationship and more as a divining rod. In a similar case, I interviewed Teru, a woman from the evangelical weekend retreat, without her boyfriend. Unlike the

first woman, however, she expressed more hesitancy about marriage itself than about her present relationship. After having been together for four years, she explained they were searching for answers about what comes next. Teru had never thought of herself as “pre-engaged” until she attended the weekend retreat and the leadership had used that term.

Instead, she explained,

Teru: We’re both very cautious of this thing called marriage. [His] parents are divorced. My parents haven’t had the best relationship. And, so we understand it’s a huge commitment. It’s nothing we want to rush in to. So we’re reading books, going to weekends that are recommended to us, talking to couples, doing whatever research we can on not just this thing called marriage—whatever that is—but also on ourselves and each other. And what is it that we want out of marriage and what is it we want out of life. So that is where we are.

These couples, or at least the women in them, cautiously and intentionally tried to evaluate their futures. Each woman professed to loving their boyfriend but did not consider that a sufficient condition for marriage. While neither of them left the classes with an epiphany of how to proceed, they felt it had helped structure their conversations.

In addition to turning to religious communities prior to planning a wedding, most of the engaged couples I interviewed participated in multiple premarital counseling programs. Often this would involve combining attendance at a collective program – such as the congregational class or weekend retreat – with individualized counseling with someone from their church. For example, I met Jaime and Nathan when they spoke on a newlywed panel in the engagement class at the evangelical congregation. In addition to having taken the engagement class themselves, they met with Adam, the husband that led the class, to obtain more personalized guidance. Comparing the two approaches, Jaime observed,

Jaime: I feel like with the class it was great cause it was more of an overview, they touched on each of the basic points of marriage. So, they had a week on sex, a week on conflict, they had a week on, you know, whatever. Where, then, our actual times with Adam were very focused on us and whatever we needed in the moment.

Viewing the two organizational styles as complementary, Nathan also discussed how going to class every week and hearing from other couples in a similar position had helpfully normalized relationship dynamics. The more targeted guidance of the individualized sessions, Nathan believed helped them improve an issue that had been a perpetual strain in their relationship – Jaime had a close relationship with her family who did not get along with Nathan. While the class sessions could sometimes help couples identify this type of issue and start a conversation on it, the counseling sessions could serve as a place to obtain an impartial evaluation and receive information on potential strategies to manage the issue. Nathan believed their meetings with Adam helped them better approach this issue as a team and provided them with tools to employ that have made a difference.

Nathan: He was able to help us address the family stuff a little bit. Which I thought was *really huge*. Actually, I saw *marked* improvement I think there. Wouldn't you agree?

Jaime: For who? Me?

Nathan: Us. Just like how we handled your family I just saw just general changes in how we handled your family.

Jaime: Yeah, that's probably true. And, I think I had heard that coming from my counselor but being able to go to that together and to hear the same thing makes a difference too.

The personalized sessions, therefore, helped Nathan at least feel as if they had made traction on addressing an issue that had been a consistent point of tension in their relationship.

In a large church, such as the evangelical congregation where I conducted observations, the person conducting the individualized premarital counseling sessions could often occupy the role of a neutral third-party observer to an engaged couple's relationship. For some of the couples I interviewed from the weekend retreat, however, the personalized sessions sometimes involved a conflict of interest with the counselor knowing one partner better or having some external relationship with one of them. After I finished asking Kristi and Tim about their experience at the weekend retreat, they began to tell me about the first couple sessions of the premarital counseling they had recently begun with the head pastor at Tim's church. Since he also worked at this church, that meant they were receiving premarital counseling from Tim's boss. While Tim appeared comfortable with this relationship, Kristi expressed more reservations.

Kristi: I am a little worried it might get a little awkward. I don't know what topics he's gonna cover, but if like sex comes up, I'm not sure how open and honest I wanna be about sex to my... fiancé's boss. We'll just see how that goes, I'm gonna try to be comfortable and okay with it. But we'll just see.

In one case the pastor officiating the wedding recognized the conflict of interest in counseling his own daughter and future son-in-law. He instead recommended they meet with an older couple from the church to go over a workbook. For couples such as these that belonged to smaller churches or had close relationships with the pastor overseeing their wedding, the weekend retreat offered an important opportunity to engage in the process on their own.

Evangelical couples not only felt comfortable approaching their religious communities for help in their relationships but expected them to offer this service. Believing that they had something valuable to offer in terms of discerning whether a

partner was a good fit and how to develop skills to improve a relationship, the evangelicals I spoke with voluntarily sought out this type of intervention. Following gendered norms that place greater relational burden on women, women tended to initiate this process more often and also held higher expectations for the type of insights it should elicit. Whereas women often felt the premarital education process had been useful, they more often expressed a desire for it to have covered more materials or gone deeper into the ones it did review. In contrast, men tended to participate at the request of their girlfriend or a religious leader. Yet, they generally offered more favorable evaluations of the process and credited it with helping them connect with their partner. Collectively, an anxiety about relationship success appeared to motivate both evangelical men and women to participate and seriously engage with this process.

Compared to the couples that attended the Catholic programs, an underlying tension existed about whether this relationship was the right one and if it could survive marriage. In fact, at the end of my interview questions I would always ask couples if there was anything else they wanted to add or if they had any questions. Some of the evangelical couples used this time to ask me to evaluate them against all the other couples I had interviewed and ask me whether I saw any red flags in their relationship. Others asked me about my marriage to learn about how we handled certain issues in our relationship or whether I felt the first year of marriage was a difficult transition. I also heard evangelical couples ask these types of questions to the married leadership during open question portions of the collective classes. I did not recognize the extent to which this relational anxiety permeated the evangelical programs until I began to attend the

Catholic classes and spoke with couples who participated in the process for different reasons.

Catholics – A Late and Lackluster Inquiry

At no point during my fieldwork with Catholic programs did I encounter a “pre-engaged” couple. Instead, true to their preferred terminology – marriage preparation – couples that participated in these programs were engaged and planning a wedding. The idea of turning to the church for guidance on their relationship at an earlier stage often appeared incomprehensible. When couples in the Catholic programs asked about my research I often mentioned the prevalence of pre-engaged couples in evangelical programs, each time I would be met with a shocked, and sometimes almost appalled, expressions. The concept of “pre-engagement” and the reasons why a couple would attend one of these programs without impending nuptials seemed perplexing. The reaction partially illustrates the organizational reality that Catholic programs tended to spend more time on religious education and less time on relationship skill training compared to evangelical programs. As a result, even if a Catholic couple wanted help in discerning whether a particular relationship was “the one,” these classes may not be the place to obtain that aid.

For the Catholics I encountered, marriage preparation was tightly coupled with wedding planning. When I spoke with couples that participated in these programs, they generally did not expect it to lead to epiphanies about their relationship and seemed pleasantly surprised if it did. Instead, marriage preparation appeared to be conceptualized as a requirement among Catholics instead of a resource as it was among evangelicals. While this attitude did not always produce resentment or disengagement with the process,

it did mean they approached the programs from a different vantage point. For example, Jennifer and Riley enrolled in their local parish's marriage preparation a full year in advance of their wedding date, as she explained, to "get this check marked off." Marriage preparation existed as one of the numerous items on their wedding to do list along with select flowers, find dress, and finalize guest list. In particular, it tended to be associated with the wedding venue. When I asked Sarah and Tom why they drove an hour in from the suburbs to participate in marriage preparation at the urban parish, they described why they had selected that church for the wedding.

For Catholics, however, the selection of the wedding venue held greater significance and meaning than it did among evangelicals because it shaped whether the ceremony could be sacramental. The Catholic Church has strict guidelines that must be followed about where a wedding can be held and who can officiate it. While special dispensation can be offered by a local bishop, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops contends "Without it, a wedding not held in a Catholic church is not considered valid."² For many couples, before they considered whether they would turn to their religious community for premarital education, they first had to discuss whether they planned to have a Catholic wedding. For Jennifer and Riley, this conversation occurred prior to their engagement as something that had to be negotiated because Riley was not religious and he had not realized the extent of Jennifer's personal faith.

Jennifer: I think before we were engaged, we talked about Catholic versus non-Catholic wedding. And, of course at that point of time, I wasn't going to church again. I had a year of teaching the RCIC program – the Rite for Initiation and all of that for kids. And, I had a *terrible* class. I had seven to sixteen year olds and they put them all in one class and there were like twenty of them. And, they were like 'have fun.' And, I was like 'I can't do

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "For Your Marriage: Church Teachings – Interfaith Marriages." <http://www.foryourmarriage.org/catholic-marriage/church-teachings/interfaith-marriages/>

this on my own.’ So, eventually somebody was there to help but it was just disruptive and rowdy and I couldn’t keep it under control. It was one of those times where I was like, ‘I need a break. I can’t deal with this.’ So, I wasn’t going to church much and he was like you only want to get married cause your parents are Catholic. I was like, ‘You know, that’s not really the reason. I do go to the church. I do believe in the Church. You know that’s part of my upbringing. I can still say yes to every one of my baptismal vows. Like, that’s part of who I am.’ So then I started – I still don’t go all the time – but I started volunteering again at the church. To just be like, ‘Ha, ha! I am Catholic.’ (Laughs). So, I think that’s when he was like, ‘Oh yeah, you actually do go and you do participate. You are a Sunday school teacher.’

The decision to get married in the Catholic Church – and by extension whether to participate in marriage preparation – rested mainly on Jennifer. Although loosely raised Methodist, faith held no personal significance for Riley and he described himself as “not a very religious person.” However, once he realized the significance of her faith he was willing “to get *Catholic married*” as Jennifer referred to it. From his perspective, “We’re in this together. And, obviously whether or not I have the same views, I have complete respect for her views.” Despite Riley’s apparent willingness to do this for Jennifer and her desire for a Catholic wedding, she continuously made decisions that distanced both her and her fiancé from the Catholic Church through the process. In selecting which form of marriage preparation for them to participate in, she opted for the weekly program in the parish instead of the weekend retreat offered by the diocese, because “I was thinking for him it would just be a little bit at a time. Instead of *shove you* into the Catholic Church.” Even in the shorter classes, however, she still worried about him when it became “too churchy” and indicated that it sometimes inhibited her appreciation or learning. Finally, she decided against a Mass at the wedding because she thought it would be unfair to him if she went up to do the Eucharist alone.

Compared to their evangelical counterparts, Catholic couples participated in premarital education less often and less enthusiastically. Despite efforts to make the practice useful, couples considered the practice a requirement and part of a broader package of actions that must be done prior to a wedding. Closer akin to other forms of religious education within the Catholic Church, such as the Rite of Initiation mentioned above by Jennifer, both the sacrament of marriage and its preparation are conceptualized as ostensibly a once in lifetime event. As such, the institutional logic of the Catholic Church positions couples differently to the practice which can be seen in Jennifer's more externalized motivation for participation.

Catholic couples not only do not participate in these programs prior to engagement but they sometimes do not attend before a wedding either. Since the Catholic Church continues to maintain authority over the sacrament of matrimony a couple that did not originally perform their marital vows within a Catholic approved context has to seek a convalidation in order to make their wedding "valid" within the Church. The perception that marriage preparation represents a necessary requirement and the tendency of Catholics to partner with non-Catholics also appeared to produce a unique population within these programs – civilly married couples. The presence of civilly married couples alongside the engaged couples indicates a different relationship to the practice of marriage preparation.

I interviewed three couples that had participated in marriage preparation as a civilly married couple seeking a convalidation. In each case, the couples involved a Catholic woman married to a non-Catholic partner. While their reasons for not originally trying for a Catholic wedding varied widely, each woman realized it was important to her

to have her relationship validated by her religious community and her non-religious husband participated because it was important to her. For example, Nathalia and Brian had been married for six years before they finally found time to have the church wedding that they had always intended. The couple had met and started dating while she was an exchange student from Mexico. As a result of this circumstance, he had proposed within six months and they married shortly thereafter. While they had always planned to have the big Catholic wedding in Mexico, they had prioritized buying a house and the years had slipped by. As Nathalia explains, she felt that after all these years it had finally reached a point of “now or never [because] if not, we’re not going to do it anymore.” Similar to a number of their engaged peers who had moved away from their Catholic families, they attended marriage preparation where they lived but were in the process of planning a wedding somewhere else. Nathalia and Brian planned to return to Mexico to celebrate their church wedding with her family.

Despite the different impetus for participating in marriage preparation, when Catholic couples reached out to their religious community it followed a comparable gendered pattern as the evangelical couples. Similar to Jennifer, the majority of couples I encountered in the Catholic marriage preparation consisted of a Catholic woman engaged to a non-Catholic man. In fact, of the 10 couples I interviewed across the two parish programs, 7 of them followed this pattern. Since in most of the cases the women tended to be the Catholic partner, “their” decision to participate in these programs resulted from the woman’s decision to be married in the Catholic Church. For these women, being married in the Catholic Church held personal significance for them and their family but, as with Jennifer, they did not often expect it to be meaningful to their non-Catholic

partner. Since the women more often initiated the couple's attendance, they also tended to be the one with greater expectations for it. In Jennifer's case, she combined a concern about it not being "too churchy" with a desire that it be useful (which I discuss in more detail in the next section).

The greater proportion of Catholics marrying non-Catholics may be influenced by the Pacific Northwest, where Catholics are not as common and non-religious individuals are more common. Yet even in relationships with two Catholic partners, the woman typically played the greater role in the decision about getting married within the Catholic Church. For example, in an interview with Javier and Sofia after an evening Mass one Sunday he explained that he mostly attends church because of her. While they had recently made this a regular part of their relationship, he claimed, "I wouldn't go at all at first." After establishing that in the past he didn't care about church, I asked him what had changed. In response Sofia answered,

Sofia: When he talked about getting married, sometimes he'd be like, 'We should just get together.' And, I'd be like 'Uh-uh, sorry that's just not going to happen.' Because I always envisioned myself getting married in a church and having a marriage like that. That's just how my parent's raised me (even though they didn't do that). But I felt like I wanted to do that. And then I told him and he's like (imitated his deep sigh and then she laughed). He didn't want to at first. I never talked him into it. He just talked himself into it, I think.

Javier: Yeah, I kinda put myself in her shoes. I kinda started thinking of what she's really thinking of. And, yeah, I kinda saw myself went through all of that. Good things and having something to remember. I kinda envision our pictures and our family all being there and where we're going to go on our wedding day.

As with many of the other couples, Sofia set the tone for the relationship by making it clear she would not move in with him unless they were married. In the end, he felt having the church wedding instead of "just getting together" would better ensure their

commitment. In reflecting on relationships around them, both claimed to have few role models of a healthy marriage and saw being married in the Catholic Church as a different path.

Sofia, more than any of the other Catholics I interviewed, had looked forward to taking the marriage preparation classes. Yet, despite her claim that “I thought it would be really helpful,” she would not have thought to enroll *prior* to being engaged and appeared to exhibit no anxiety about their relationship. Despite premarital counselors’ tendency to teach similar topics, couples approached these programs for different reasons. Attendance was not something to pursue when an unmarried couple needed guidance but, as a form of sacramental preparation, it connected couples to a once in a lifetime ritual in the faith community. In other words, couples did not attend for relationship advice but because they had to and in the process they may have obtained the insights into their relationship.

What Impact Does Marriage Preparation have on Couples?

While evangelicals and Catholics approached their religious communities at different points in their relationships and with distinct expectations about if/what it would offer them, their accounts of the experience were remarkably similar. In both cases, they positively recalled conversations they had together as a couple and appreciated the opportunity to spend intimate time learning more about their partner. As couples reflected on the experience, they highlighted the *process* and tended to forget the *content* of what had been told to them.

Normalizing Relationship Dynamics and New Ways to Communicate: Preparatory Conversations

While evangelical and Catholic couples enrolled in these programs for different reasons, they highlighted a similar impact on their relationships. For the most part, couples reported that they found the classes helpful and useful. While, as a researcher observing the process, I tended to primarily notice the *content* of message, most of the couples I interviewed discussed the experience and impact of the *process*. In particular, people often described how beneficial the structured conversations had been in helping them to articulate unspoken assumptions, forge a connection with their partner, and how it ameliorated anxieties by normalizing the idea that all relationships require work. For example, when I asked Shawn and Gwendolyn what they had most enjoyed during the evangelical weekend retreat, she quickly responded with “the discussion times.”

Following up, she explained,

Gwendolyn: Because that's when we came together and I feel like I was put at ease because we pretty much have it. Not that we have it all together but we pretty much have it together. I was like, ‘You know, there were no red flags.’ – ‘What'd you feel about this question?’ ‘Oh, okay I like that.’ ‘Okay, I can I can see that.’ ‘Wonderful, we're on the same page!’ – And so the discussion time just let me know that we are on the right track and that we can pretty much discuss topics and be good. And, you know, pretty much be in the same place about it.

Drawing on the premarital counseling language of “red flags,” Gwendolyn felt reassured by their conversations because no major or unexpected differences arose. While most couples had been together for long enough to have many discussions about a wide range of topics, they still often found the structured and directed conversation to be useful.

Capturing this idea Tim explained,

Tim: I think one of the things that we both really liked was the communication – the openness and the honesty that we both were able to have with each other. Cause, I mean, we were already really open and honest but the transparency through the writing was very good. And a lot of stuff that we talked about [over] that weekend we already had discussed but there were some things that came up that we both were kinda like, ‘Woah! Okay, that's something I didn't know.’ And, it opened up more discussion in other areas.

Both men and women favorably reported that discussion times helped to foster a deeper connection with their partner. The questions and activities that premarital counselors provided appear to actually aid couples’ conversations. I never heard an account of a person leaving this process feeling unheard by their partner, even when the questions resulted in surprising or difficult revelations.

A number of people explained that this process had forced them to discuss important issues that were uncomfortable and difficult to approach in everyday life. Sofia and Javier, for example, found the class to be “*super* helpful” for this reason. Sofia confessed that “there’s stuff that would come up in the class that I *really* didn’t want to talk about or that I *really* tried to avoid but we had to talk about it.” In particular, the class on communication had challenged her to open up more with Javier and not withdraw when something bothered her. In contrast, the evangelical weekend retreat had forced Will to realize an assumption about how he envisioned married life which became the start of a helpful conversation with Gretchen, his fiancée.

Will: It asked a lot of questions that were I guess kind of uncomfortable questions, you know? Things I don't want to come out and say like, ‘Do you expect her to cook for you?’ I don't want to be like ‘Gretchen, I expect you to cook for me.’ But at the same time I'm thinking, ‘Oh, I guess I kind of do.’ Like that's the picture I have in my mind is, you know, she cooks.

Will credited the process with helping him learn more about himself which in turn made it possible, if not entirely easy, to reveal more to Gretchen. Whether through pressuring

Sofia to talk or providing Will with an epiphany, many couples believed that attending marriage preparation programs had resulted in conversations that they may not have had on their own. At the very least, these conversations appeared unlikely to have occurred prior to their weddings. Furthermore, there was a sense that if these issues were to “naturally” arise it may have been under more stressful conditions, such as amidst an argument. For the most part, couples favorably remembered these discussion times with their partners as helping them learn more about the other person and understand them better.

Some people also appreciated the process because it introduced them to other couples in a similar position as them. For example, newlyweds, Jaime and Nathan, explained “engagement is a very stressful time in your life.” Remembering how they “argued a lot,” Jaime recalled Nathan worrying that “this isn’t normal” and thought that “this should be a happy time.” Attending the engagement class at the evangelical congregation helped to reassure him and normalize these relationship pressures. In particular, hearing from other couples around them that they also fought over flowers alleviated some of his concerns. While lacking this relationship anxiety common among evangelicals, Jennifer also believed the other couples made the Catholic requirement of marriage preparation a more enjoyable experience. In particular, the presence of other inter-faith couples helped to assuage Jennifer’s apprehension about making her non-religious partner attend. Finally, some enjoyed listening to peers talk about their own relationships because it helped provide helpful insights and strategies. In discussing the class on conflict, Javier recalled feeling the other couples’ contributions were “really helpful.” He enjoyed having these couples around as they learned about relationships

because when they “would share how they face the problems. You’d be like, ‘Wow, I should have done that.’”

Complementing their peer’s accounts, the married couples that comprised the leadership often provided stories that people believed helped to normalize their expectations of the future. Kristi, for example, commented “I love how open and honest each couple was in sharing.” Reflecting on the married couples that led the evangelical weekend retreat, she recalled how “each one had something different that made their marriage hard” and she found it helpful to learn “what that looks like and how they handled it.” For many evangelical couples that I spoke with, this transparency helped to establish the leaders’ credibility. Likewise, Erica similarly described the way the dating class presented information,

Erica: I don’t think I am prone to trust people and what they say about relationships. I think that [in] the class I did trust what they said. They were really honest. They were very, you know, humble in regards of what they go through. That it is not all a bed of roses and that is something that I knew anyways.

While intimately revealing examples of relationship conflict could have potentially undermined the authority of the leadership to counsel couples on marriage, most of the couples I spoke with saw it as a sign of authenticity. In other words, it was easier to trust the recommendations on relationship skills when it appeared that the leaders had to use them to work on maintaining, perhaps even repairing, their marriages. Not surprisingly, I heard these types of comments more often from evangelical premarital couples that participated in programs with leadership that offered the most personal revelations about their marriages (discussed in Chapter 3). The Catholic couples, however, usually could

identify one leadership team that they felt they connected with and that had helped to clarify some element of married life.

The couples' accounts of premarital counseling were not always glowing. Some people did comment on elements they believed had been shallow or insufficient. Often, however, when couples discussed features of the programs they did not care for or did not find useful, it revolved around wishing for more or better content on a particular topic. For example, none of the evangelical curriculum included a session on finances, which some couples told me they would have found useful. Likewise, one Catholic couple wished that more thoughtful attention had been paid to the area of interfaith couples. In the end, I heard relatively few negative comments about the programs and couples always could find some element of the process that they had enjoyed. Even if what they really relished most was spending intentional time with their partner.

Learning from the Process and Ignoring the Content: The Partial Impact of Marriage Preparation

As accounts in the previous section indicate, when couples discussed their experiences in marriage preparation they more often highlighted the process than the actual content. Occasionally, in the full interview someone would reference a concept or insight from the teaching. For example, when I asked Laetitia and Jordan for an example of useful advice they tried to integrate into their relationship, Laetitia's commented "The class is something that I would like to incorporate." Following up this endorsement, Jordan specified an insight.

Jordan: Well, one thing that sticks out from the classes that we took is that not every fight is solvable. Not every problem is fixable. And I guess the goal of the marriage and relationship is those unfixable things, can you live with them?

While Jordan cites a specific teaching from the class, references to the class were often more indirect or abstract. In fact, when we eventually turned to discussing the engagement class they had participated in at the evangelical congregation, they struggled to recall any particular details.

Laetitia: Yeah, I mean we learned a lot. But it's true that, that, I am a bit fuzzy on the details. I took away a lot of stuff but-

Jordan: - core concepts are there.

Laetitia: Right, but it's not on the details which is too bad because there were really interesting ones that would be good to still have. We can always do the engagement class again.

Jordan: We can.

Laetitia: Although we are going to be married by the time it starts next time.

Jordan: But they don't need to know that.

While they enjoyed the class enough to joke about enrolling in it a second time, they still found it difficult to remember exactly what the leaders talked about or what they learned. In the end, I often found the portion of the interview in which we discussed premarital counseling tended to be short and often produced shallow answers. In general, couples could recall that they had mostly liked the classes and felt it had been worthwhile to attend but much of this pointed to the *process* of premarital counseling.

For the most part, it appears that the specifics of the *content* faded. Given that couples could, and did, make reference to ideas such as “red flags” or use the covenant rhetoric it may be that the information becomes part of their overall stock of knowledge on relationships and faith. For example, in thinking about how to define “Christian marriage” Will offered,

Will: I believe marriage is more than just a license that you sign. It's a covenant before God and that means that it's, you know, literally we're making a commitment to God that we're spiritually bound to him and to

each other. And, and it's not just two people living together. It's, like, two people joined together. And our spiritual journeys have become one spiritual journey together, you know. I think that marriage, Christian marriage, is literally supposed to be kind of an image of Christ's marriage to the church. So, you know, Scripture talks about husbands loving your wife as Christ loved the church.

While Will's definition of a Christian marriage iterates similar ideas as those presented by premarital counselors at the weekend retreat he attended, it is impossible to know if this points to his experience more broadly within an evangelical subculture or directly from his attendance in the program. Even when describing more specific examples that follow ideas from the classes, it is difficult to pinpoint where the information originated and whether this had been their first introduction to the material. Tim, for example, defined a "Christian marriage" with what could have been a succinct summary from the evangelical weekend retreat he attended: "God, us, the triangle model – when God's always first in our relationship. And, we should really be pushing each other closer to God rather than...pushing each other away from God." Especially for ideas such as these that appeared to resonate with peoples' backgrounds and overall worldview, the specific dimensions of what the leaders said may be lost among the other religious voices on marriage and faith in their lives.

For those ideas that did not connect with couples, their enjoyment of the process seemed to help counter any frustration or detachment. As part of the process of teaching *how* to have a healthy relationship, leadership inevitably made claims about what is good/bad, healthy/unhealthy, and moral/immoral in Christian marriage. Even though some leaders tried to be cautious in these presentations to not alienate couples, inevitably some of their advice challenged or contradicted the lives and beliefs of those participating in the programs. For example, one Catholic leader told everyone that the parish would not

marry a couple if they discovered they intended to not have children and every program I observed made a point of telling couples about the sins of living together prior to marriage. In contrast, I interviewed many couples having premarital sex, some of whom were living together, some who disagreed with male headship, and Catholics who used birth control. Whereas most of the time I interviewed couples that appeared more liberal on issues than their religious community, I also occasionally spoke with people that believed the leadership had been too lax on an issue. One evangelical man explained that, in his opinion, the leaders of the dating class had not been Biblical enough in their discussion of premarital sex. For the most part, however, these points of difference did not have much impact on their evaluation of their experience. People comfortably sifted through the information presented to them – listening to what they believed could be useful or helpful in their relationship and disregarding what they did not care for or disagreed with.

Willing to Listen: The Evangelical Exception

While both Catholic and evangelical programs made a point of telling couples that they should not live together or have sex prior to marriage, only the evangelicals I spoke with entertained the idea of changing their behavior. In most cases, it appeared evangelical leaders' discussion of the sinfulness of premarital sex was enough to get them to reevaluate their actions but not to stop them. For example, when I interviewed Malaya and Arvin they were engaged and living together. Malaya explained that she had not imagined moving in with someone before being married and, thus, initially she "kind of felt guilty." While they were happy they made this decision, both of them struggled to explain it in the interview and tried to offer justifications.

Malaya: But I think over the year [we've lived together], I felt like it brought us together and you know, that, it was, like fine to like, [be] together, because...it's not like we're living together because we liked each other. Um. It's like a different level of relationship, you know? Like for me it was fine to live together before like our marriage, you know? Yeah.

Arvin: I feel the same way. I feel like we learned um...our tendencies, like our everyday, like how we, how we get ready, how we wind down, how we um relax, how we, you know, just like live basically. And um, I think that's...that was necessary in order for us to learn um, about each other before we, you know. Before we get married. We've been together for a long time, and I felt like it was um, the right decision to move in together um...because uh it's kinda like uh, like a uh, you know...um...I don't wanna say practice, but just kinda like –

Malaya: Like preparation?

Arvin: Yeah, like preparation for how we're gonna uh be when we're married.

Despite believing it had been a good decision and had helped prepare them for marriage, both stumbled over discussing living together and indicated that it was an awkward topic. In addition, Malaya admitted she does not always tell people that they are living together for fear of being judged. In fact, attending the evangelical weekend retreat had led Malaya to briefly reevaluate her position.

Malaya: At some point I felt kind of convicted. Um but at the same time...knowing that he was my first and will always be my last, you know, um, just made it...I guess I don't know like what to say, really. Um. I guess that in the question of like why not? You know, um. So. Yeah.

It seemed unlikely that this couple would change their living arrangement, especially with the wedding around the corner. She did, however, recall feeling “convicted” during the weekend and continued to struggle with the morality of the decision.

Other couples experienced an intervention accompanied by stronger sanctions from their religious communities. One couple that had attended the same weekend as Malaya and Arvin had also been cohabiting but after hearing the leadership discuss the

virtues of “secondary virginity” this other couple changed their living situation. Unlike Malaya and Arvin, however, this other couple had a connection to the leadership of the weekend because one of them was related to the wife in one couple and the husband in another couple would be marrying them. In fact, he had only agreed to officiate their wedding if they made some changes in their life and became “right with the Lord.”³ Since evangelical couples do not have any formalized guidelines about weddings, this couple could have found someone else to marry them if they had not wanted to comply with these stipulations.

When I spoke with Laetitia and Jordan, they were similarly in the middle of an ongoing conversation about whether they should abstain from sex until the wedding. They had completed the engaged class at the evangelical congregation and were in the process of their individualized premarital counseling with one of the many pastors on staff at the church. Before we discussed either of these experiences, I started off with a few questions to get to know them better and learn their story, including when their wedding would be. Unlike other couples, however, they found this question difficult to answer because they were contemplating having a civil ceremony two months prior to their official wedding date. After I inquired about why they would do both, Jordan responded “That was actually our pastor’s idea that we do it... That’s just one way to deal with the fact that we are living together. Again, so. Well, almost. We are almost living together again.” Since Laetitia’s lease would end two months prior to their wedding, they were planning on moving in together again but this posed a problem with their officiating pastor since the church had a policy against marrying cohabiting couples.

³ I met this couple and informally talked with them at the first weekend retreat I observed. Due to scheduling conflicts, we were never able to do a formal interview. Due to their personal connections with the leadership team, I continued to hear updates about their relationship status.

Laetitia: I mean we have been discussing [premarital sex] since the first day of being engaged in class. (Laughs)

Jordan: And we really never came to a conclusion.

Laetitia: Yeah, because it doesn't seem like it applies to us that much. It just seems like that it is more faith-based and that our faith doesn't include that part. I, I don't know. We just, we just decided that,- well Pastor Susan just agreed to do our wedding and she asked us to discuss that some more. So, we are still discussing it.

Jordan: We are still discussing it but-

Laetitia: But she said it's basically up to us and as long as we are,- she said we have to decide whether or not we are fine with...(pause)...like the responsibility of our decisions for the rest of our life basically. (Laughs)

Jordan: And stand before God and explain the reasoning why [we] can continue to, uh, make sinful decisions. So.

Courtney: And do you see it as a sinful decision?

Laetitia: I don't, which is why it is just so hard to come to a conclusion. But.

Jordan: I do and I don't. I know it is a sin. Umm, it's, I dunno I just don't feel... (brief pause)...incredibly guilty about it.

Courtney: It doesn't feel like a sin, then, almost?

Jordan: No, I feel like you know, if I am staying committed to the person that I promise to marry and take care of them for the rest of my life that means I am going to have to ask for forgiveness for having sex with my wife. So.

Courtney: Had you guys considered this topic or talked about this topic before this class?

Jordan: Probably once or twice but not a lot.

Ultimately, it seemed unlikely that Laetitia and Jordan's personal views or feelings on premarital sex would change but they were willing to consider the perspective of leaders within their religious community.

While evangelical leaders and the premarital couples disagreed on a range of issues, only the topic of premarital sex motivated these types of interventions. As I previously found in my review of Christian advice books on dating and courtship, the only consistent point of agreement among evangelical elites was their belief that "sex

represented a gift from God reserved for married people” (Irby 2013:186). These evangelical couples, however, recognized that they were not “hooking up” but instead engaging in sex within a committed relationship. Positioned between their own reverence for a “Christian marriage” and a desire for physical intimacy with their partner, the engaged couples often occupied their own state of ambivalence on the issue of premarital sex. Between this and their relationship anxiety that often motivated them to participate in premarital counseling, they were poised to *listen* to their local religious leaders, although it appeared unlikely that many would choose to *act* any differently.

Conclusion

While the couples participating in marriage preparation may still hold many of the traditional markers of when and how people marry, they also reflect a newer generational ethos about marriage. Aware that successful relationships require work and inundated with advice about how to have a happy marriage, participating couples adopt a pragmatic approach to the programs. Presented with a variety of relationship skills and ideas for marital success, they reflexively sort through the information to acquire any ideas that appear useful or consistent with their own worldview and ignore much of the rest. As a result, despite what some religious leaders may desire, couples do not appear to approach the process with significant reverence. Instead, among evangelicals it represented one resource to help them make decisions about their relationships and for Catholics it signified a requirement to complete to be able to be married in the church. Importantly, while evangelicals and Catholics have different motivations to approach their faith communities, they both turn toward them as a means to denote their religious commitments.

The seemingly insignificant impact of the content of marriage preparation can likely be attributed to a number of reasons. First, within a pervasive therapeutic culture that consists of many voices espousing relationship advice, the lessons in marriage preparation may not make it above the din. From magazine covers at the grocery store to characters' interactions on television, people consistently encounter discourses about how a good and healthy relationship must look. Second, despite religious leaders' efforts to sacralize their relationship advice, much of the content does not specifically address issues of spirituality or faith. As such, it could be possible to ignore discussions about how men and women think or the best way to argue because they appear to be the personal opinions of the leaders of these programs and not issues of faith. And, finally, for more practical reasons, the leaders present couples with a wide range of extensive teachings that may simply be too overwhelming to remember. Therefore, from the perspective that each relationship is different couples looked for what could specifically help them.

If the goal of premarital counseling is to help couples prepare for marriage, they found the process of talking to each other to be more useful than passively listening to sermons or lectures. In contrast to formal talks that one may have to search for insights within, couples found the practice of following the structured conversations a useful means to learn more about themselves and their partner. As such, couples privileged knowledge that appeared to emerge from practice more than ideology. In fact, they often applied this same logic to determine the validity of the information presented by the married couples – insights that emerged from the couples' marriages often appeared to earn greater respect and acknowledgment. This also, however, furthered a broader agenda

within Christian premarital counseling by implicitly socializing couples into many of the relationship ideas that the leadership sought to transmit. The questions, following the broader talks, opted to emphasize some dimensions of relationships and deemphasize others which as a result structured couples' subsequent conversations.

On the surface, these premarital couples exemplify the recent trends of religious individualism (Ammerman 2007; Bellah et al. 1985; McGuire 2008; Roof 1999). Each religious person fit premarital counseling into their broader efforts to actively pursue a faith they find personally meaningful and were not overly concerned with the formal views of their religious traditions as represented by the leadership. Likewise, in emphasizing the process over the content of the programs these individuals elevated religious experience and practice over belief and doctrine (See also Ammerman 2014; Avishai 2008; Bender 2003; Edgell 2012; Ellingson 2001; McGuire 2008). Yet, the religious individuals within these couples also considered their faith communities significant enough to represent an important place to turn to learn about relationships and publically enact their commitment. Additionally, it is unclear whether the tendency to ignore the less useful or compelling ideas represents a rejection of religious authority. The issue is especially muddier within this context of democratized religious authority where other lay couples spoke on behalf of the faith community. In other words, when premarital couples ignore the teachings of these married couples, is it because they are rejecting religious teachings or rejecting the authority of these people to authentically represent the church? In either case, religious communities appeared to hold a meaningful place in peoples' lives even if they approached them in a largely pragmatic manner.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

For this project, I explored the practice of premarital counseling as a means to better understand how religious communities intervene in family life. Between the rise in individualized marriages (Cherlin 2004) and an increased uncertainty about how to successfully form a lasting union (Gerson 2010), I was curious about the role communities play in providing interpretative lenses to evaluate relationships, as well as under what conditions religious individuals turn to their faith communities with their relationships. Religious communities, after all, remain a way to seek guidance and a space to publically enact commitment. As a short-term ministry operating outside of the daily lives of both congregations and their members, premarital counseling necessitates that communities make decisions about *who* can best speak on matters of faith and marriage, as well as *what* are the most critical insights to share to better ensure success. Premarital counseling, thus, offered a unique opportunity to bridge studies of how marriage has changed and how people individually experience the institution with examination of its public construction by faith communities.

While any individual couple may only participate briefly in this practice, Catholics and evangelical Protestants have offered formalized premarital guidance for at least sixty years. Thus, I started my analysis in Chapter 2 by first exploring how Catholic marriage preparation and evangelical premarital counseling have changed over time and what this reveals about shifts in religious authority. Initially, religious leaders followed

other experts of the era in teaching that marital happiness could be accomplished by conforming to an external model of marriage but, over time, messages shifted to stress fulfillment as *internally* produced. Despite failing to dramatically impact the national divorce rate, these efforts to sacralize marital happiness did help to establish marriage as a communal project within these religious groups. In particular, through this process the everyday experience of ordinary married couples and the secular insights from therapeutic fields became increasingly authoritative in shaping discourses about the type of marriage that will please God and those within it. As such along with the rise of an individualization of religious authority discussed by other scholars (Ammerman 2007, 2013; Bellah et al. 1985; Bender 2003; Dillon 1999; Ellingson 2001; McGuire 2008; Miller 1997; Roof 1999; Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 2007), there has been, more precisely, a democratization of religious authority.

With these cultural transitions to marriage and religion as a backdrop, I turned to explore contemporary organizational forms and styles of premarital counseling in Chapter 3. Distinguishing the religious education conducted in churches for members of their own communities from the contemporary activist attempts to promote marriage in broader American society (Avishai, Heath, and Randles 2012; Hays 2003; Heath 2012; Randles 2016), I described the extent of their ideological similarities. Ultimately, premarital counselors I spoke with were more concerned about divorce and envisioned their work as an effort to deter the poorly matched and provide relationship skills and a marital work ethic to the rest. To accomplish this goal, I found Catholics and evangelical Protestants now both rely on the collective and individualized forms of marriage preparation.

Moving away from the organizational development and forms of premarital counseling, I turned in Chapters 4 and 5 to the content presented in the collective programming. Focusing first on the intersection of religious and therapeutic logics, I explored how leaders linked lessons on how to have a Godly marriage with advice for a happy relationship. Using the covenant rhetoric, they positioned a Christian marriage as different and more stable than contract marriages that, they purport, dominate secular society. To be able to accomplish the former type of marriage, contemporary premarital counselors continued the legacy of teaching engaged couples that marriage and love require hard work. In addition to emphasizing a marital work ethic, they detailed various relationship skills that couples could use to improve communication and resolve conflicts. Despite the criticisms of the self-focused contract marriage, however, all of this encouraged each individual to explore their subjectivity and to cultivate a therapeutic self.

Given how historically the construction of self had been expected to occur along gender lines (Coontz 1992; Gerson 2002; Hackstaff 1999) and how contemporarily marriage continues to be an institution that reifies gender differences (Cott 2000; Heath 2012; Ingraham 2008), in Chapter 5 I explored when and how gender emerged in the teachings in the premarital counseling programs. Unlike other studies that have emphasized the prevalence of gender complementarianism within Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism (Burke 2012; Irby 2014b), only two of the four programs I observed emphasized gender differences within their teachings. Across all of the programs, however, the impact of gender as a social structure that positions men and women unequally within domestic and work life remained unexplored.

While the previous chapters focused on the religious communities, in Chapter 6 I evaluated the reception of the content and impact of the process of premarital counseling on the couples for whom it was meant to be formative. Reflecting some of the differences in how Catholics and evangelical Protestants envisioned and structured these programs in their communities, couples attended at different rates and with a distinct set of expectations. Yet, despite the divergent conditions under which the couples approached their faith communities, in each case they participated in a practice that signified both their religious and relational commitment.

Between the focused approach required by religious leaders and the historical longevity of this practice, I have explored an example of religious groups' active intervention into family life. To conclude the dissertation, I return to two themes that have undergirded the analysis. First, an initial motivation in this project sought to contribute to research on the changing landscapes of religion and family. In particular, I highlight how religious groups have long been motivated to make marriage a rewarding and holy institution, as well as ways that this has helped to stabilize some of the challenges that later generations identified as problematic. Second, I turn to the topic of therapeutic culture which emerged in my analysis as I sought to understand how religious groups interpreted social changes in family life and the solutions they presented to their members.

Stasis or Social Change?: Religious and Marital Landscape over Time

While religious leaders and church members have likely long provided informal guidance to couples on the cusp of marriage, these efforts became more formalized during the postwar era when Catholics institutionalized marriage preparation within dioceses and

evangelical Protestants began to develop pastoral strategies for premarital counseling. Since this time family life has dramatically altered culminating in new cultural and structural conditions for today's generation as they try to best determine how to form families. As Kathleen Gerson (2010:4) argues, "The march of mothers into the workplace, combined with the rise of alternatives to lifelong marriage, created a patchwork of domestic arrangements that bears little resemblance to the 1950s Ozzie and Harriet world of American nostalgia." Yet, in her research on religious familism Penny Edgell (2006:119) found "The rhetoric in pastor focus groups and the fieldwork in local congregations...shows that, although many kinds of families are acceptable and even welcomed, the ideal family is still the Ozzie and Harriet family of the 1950s." The tension between how much families have changed and how little churches have adjusted their views on family life has often led to a view of religious communities as slow to respond to social change and, more specifically, that their responses tend to be reactionary or lag behind secular culture.

The present study of Christian premarital counseling over time offers a new vantage point on this tension and the broader queries into the place of religious groups in cultural changes in family life. First, it is important to recognize that while people may currently look back to the postwar era – which offered the televised ideal of Ozzie and Harriet – as an idyllic age for family and religion, those that lived through this era did not hold this view. In fact, marriage preparation developed among Catholics to explicitly address concerns about rising divorce rates and to combat the perceived threat of secularism. While less activist in their motivations, evangelical premarital counselors also imagined the practice as a way to embed young adults in the faith communities and to

avoid the problem of them leaving churches. In many ways, these views continue to motivate contemporary religious leaders to invest time, energy, and resources to teach engaged couples how to have a happy and holy marriage.

In each era religious leaders have drawn upon existing social-scientific scholarship and religious knowledge to help them locate the likely problem areas in marriages that lead to divorce and identify possible strategies for how to avoid these pitfalls. For example, following the trend among sociologists, marriage counselors, and psychologists during the mid-twentieth century religious leaders instructed couples to comply with gender roles to obtain marital happiness. They also taught them, however, that a successful marriage requires hard work and communication between spouses. While the particulars of the advice and its source may have changed over the past decades, premarital counselors today continue to draw on social-scientific insights to motivate couples to work on their marriages as part of a *covenant rhetoric*. Thus, the religious groups have not shifted from a “settled time” to an “unsettled time” (Swidler 1986) but instead have consistently imagined domestic life in a troubled state that requires active intervention. As Betty Farrell (1999:1) contends “change is normal” because “there is, in fact, no era or society in which change is not a normal permanent feature of the social landscape.” Admittedly, however, she notes “For most people in most eras, change seems anything but normal” (Farrell 1999:2).

Second, it is important to examine the intersection of both institutions in the process of social change. Rather than merely identify external catalysts that have forced religious groups to redefine their ideas about family life, it is necessary to be open analytically to how religious groups may have impacted marriage norms. During the

postwar era, Rebecca Davis (2010:137) argues that “More Americans encountered premarital testing and marriage counseling from clergy than from any other source.” Drawing upon secular experts that taught people that with enough effort any marriage could be saved (Cellello 2009), religious leaders for generations have transmitted a sacralized vision of the importance of a martial work ethic to young couples. To bolster their authority and justify compliance they leveraged the souls, psyches, and libidos of the next generation, who often felt anxiety in the face of changing norms of union formation. Through this process, religious leaders urged individuals to turn inward, to strive for their mutual fulfillment in their marriage, and work to make their lives within the institution rewarding. Thus, rather than merely react to the individualized marriage of the late twentieth century (Cherlin 2004), religious communities may have helped to stabilize this transition.

Of course, today's premarital counselors consistently offered a caricature of the individualized marriage as the selfish *contract marriage* and often interpreted these recent cultural changes in a negative light. With imperfect knowledge of the history of changes in American marriage, religion, or the ministry they took part in, the leaders rhetorically discussed what has changed and what needs to change to couples. Therefore, third, following Stephen Ellingson (2008:12), this illustrates the importance of a constructivist approach to religious change that examines "the internal processes of meaning-making that direct change down specific paths." He argues the framework must shift from looking for external causes of changes to analyzing the internal culture and organizational structures of religious groups and how it shapes what they interpret as a crisis, as well as how it provides them with particular sets of resources and constraints

that they must work with. From this perspective, "religious traditions are in a constant state of change" which means researchers "must grapple with the normalcy of change" (Ellingson 2008:23). In sum, these insights challenge scholars interested in questions of social change to both take seriously the history of what has changed *and* the perception of social groups who feel impacted by these transitions.

Religion and Therapeutic Culture

The practice of Christian premarital counseling can be conducted in churches or in therapist's offices, but in each space it combines therapeutic and religious logics to produce a practice and set of beliefs that is an amalgam of both. As part of an effort to improve marriages and reduce the frequency of divorce, premarital counselors identified what they view as the most important stressors in marriage, as well as presented relationship skills that they believed could proactively help couples. This mission existed concurrently with a belief that God intended marriage as a calling and challenge in which people must strive to become the best version of themselves. As such religion motivated this therapeutic practice and therapeutic discourses served as tools that religious communities provided individuals for their own sanctification.

Whereas I started this project intending to explore social change, therapeutic culture was an emergent theme. As I set out to examine what lessons religious communities sought to impart to their members, I quickly realized that holiness and happiness were deeply intertwined. However, when I turned to the interdisciplinary scholarship on therapeutic culture to consider this finding, I discovered that, while it helped to nuance and specify claims about rising individualism, it generally suffered from problematic assumptions about how religion operates in society. On the one hand,

therapeutic culture offered greater specification for how individualism has developed and works in peoples' lives. Whereas studies of individualism tend to be conceptually vague (O'Brien 2015), therapeutic culture theoretically helps to highlight the cultural imperative to work on oneself as part of an effort to strive for a state of fulfillment and happiness (Aubry and Travis 2015). As such this perspective also draws attention to how self-work is structured by external discourses that situate individuals within a set of cultural expectations of what happiness should mean and provides individuals with language to help them identify how close or far away they are from obtaining this goal (Aubry and Travis 2015; Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; Moskowitz 2001). While this scholarship recognizes the continued influence of external authorities in discursively and materially structuring the choices of individuals, it has tended to posit that this "triumph of the therapeutic" (Rieff 1966) has meant that religion is no longer an authoritative voice in this process.

Rather than imagine a zero-sum game in which religious authority and therapeutic knowledge are pitted against each other, the present study of Christian premarital counseling offers a more complicated and nuanced investigation of how religious groups operate within a therapeutic culture. In particular, churches helped to widely spread therapeutic knowledge and ways of being. As the previous section details, for prior generations churches served as many peoples' initial introduction to therapeutic practices such as marital and premarital counseling (also see Davis 2010). With the early era of evangelical hostility towards psychology notwithstanding, religious leaders have generally felt free and comfortable incorporating therapeutic insights into their worldview. In fact, in each decade they bolstered discussions on God's vision on marriage

with claims about how following these guidelines would produce happier and more stable unions. For example, postwar Catholic priests taught that God designed gender roles to bring men and women together and that conforming to them would lead to a happy and successful marriage. Likewise, at the evangelical weekend retreat where I conducted observations the leadership argued that much of the social-scientific insights on marital satisfaction reveal Biblical truths set forth by God.

As such, unlike modernist perspectives that tend to emphasize the differentiation of social spheres and locates authority as isolated within one realm, this analysis points to the permeability of social boundaries and the hybridity in knowledge production. The perspective of religion as a “loser” predominately makes sense if one assumes that the presence of other discourses or worldviews represent a takeover or weakening of religious authority (Furedi 2004; Moskowitz 2001). The predominance of ideas such as “conflict management” or “relationship skills” within a church setting and the minimal discussion of sin could then be conceptualized as the strength of secular understandings and weakening of religious ones. However, this problematically would assume that religious discourses remain static and are not capable of adapting to new circumstances or blending with other worldviews. Despite Frank Furedi's (2004) theorizing that religion may have been colonized by therapeutic culture, it would seem that religious groups co-opt therapeutic logics to motivate people to live by their moral code. From the postwar priests to the contemporary evangelicals at the weekend retreat from the above examples, religious leaders in part justify their authority and the relevance of their advice with claims about how happiness lies with God. Importantly, these lessons are not examples of what Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton (2005) have called “moralistic

therapeutic deism.” The point is not that God just wants each person to simply be happy, but that following the guidelines that the community has identified as intended by God will *result in happiness*. Thus, unlike scholars of therapeutic culture, that conceptualize the emphasis on the psyche as having replaced the soul, in these religious communities the two are interconnected and dependent.

Conclusion

In speaking with leaders and premarital couples that participate in marriage preparation I began to realize over time that this process revealed more about the communities than it ever could illuminate about the couples’ relationships or faith lives. Whereas religious communities have to distill their points of view on faith and relationships into an accessible and meaningful snapshot, the couples that approach them exist in a liminal state where they can anticipate and imagine married life but will not yet know what it means for them or their relationship. A longitudinal analysis would be required to better ascertain whether couples ever return to these relationship skills and whether they believe the structured conversations provided them with useful insights into their partners and selves. Ultimately, between the brevity of these programs and the maturity that it requires for both partners to identify traits about themselves, it may never actually be a successful strategy for divorce prevention.

As a cultural sociologist interested in exploring how religious people construct marriages they find meaningful and how this process is embedded within a network of relationships, premarital counseling provided ample insights. In particular, it has pointed to the public significance marriage continues to hold for both religious communities and individuals. While the barometers for success may have become more individualized with

each couple believing they need to discover their own happiness, Americans remain committed to the idea that this institution should be a key mechanism for fulfilment in life which means they often continue to value and seek out the guidance from those around them.

APPENDIX
DATA AND METHODS

My dissertation uses Christian premarital counseling as a window into the shifts in the meaning and authority within religion and marriage. To obtain as broad as possible an understanding of this practice, I collected a variety of different types of data including: archival, textual, ethnographic observations, and in-depth interviews. Each source of data provides me a unique vantage point into religious communities' visions for and actual practices of marriage preparation. From my perspective as a cultural sociologist, this range importantly allows me to examine the production, transmission, and reception of ideas on marriage and faith in religious communities.

While other religious groups also offer premarital counseling within their communities, I chose to focus on two Christian traditions: evangelical Protestant and Catholic. Practically, given the wide range of methods I intended to employ I opted to narrow the scope of the population of study. I decided to focus on two Christian groups that tend to require marriage preparation of their members. Importantly, this focus allows me to include a comparative dimension to my analysis while still ensuring some core ideas and discourses were shared across all the sites. As Christian traditions both Catholics and evangelical Protestants tend to emphasize the importance of scripture in daily life and interpret it as delineating clear guidelines for family life, such as the importance of marriage as a heterosexual institution based in different roles for men and women. However, they also vary substantially in the organization of their religious communities (especially authority within it); offer distinct theologies of marriage; and religious cultures within each tradition have developed into a subculture (allowing members to exist within distinct worlds of material and popular culture items which importantly includes publishing presses that produce self-help and marriage manuals).

Historical Data Collection

Despite my initial interest in tracing the development and shifts of premarital counseling over the second-half of the 20th century, limitations in the historical data collection forced me to scale back this dimension of the project. The centralizing mechanism of the Catholic hierarchy and the existence of multiple social movements that sought to promote marriage preparation within the Catholic Church likely contributed to my ability to easily locate a wealth of archival data. In contrast, the lack of a centralized organizational structure among evangelicals and the existence of fewer archives among them resulted in a dearth of archival data for this group. During this time period, however, both evangelicals and Catholics embraced self-help literature resulting in extensive relationship books published (and assumedly read by members) within these communities.

As a result of these issues in access to data, I minimized the role of the historical data collection in the overall project and reimagined its contribution to the present analysis. In the end, I opted to include one historical chapter to provide a context and background on relevant themes I pursue in the dissertation. Despite its limited role in the final product, the process of collecting it importantly oriented me to my topic and provided me a theoretical grounding for how to analyze the shifting nature of religious and therapeutic authority within Christian communities.

My historical data collection and analysis is deeply indebted to a number of social historians (Burns 1999; Davis 2010; Johnson 2001; Moskowitz 2001; Myers-Shirk 2009; Tentler 2004). Their work helped me learn about the emergence of secular premarital counseling during the Progressive Era (Davis 2010; Moskowitz 2001), a time period I did

not investigate myself. A careful examination of some of this previous scholarship also helped me to locate documents and archival collections that I later explored for my own purposes (Burns 1999; Johnson 2001; Myers-Shirk 2009). As a sociologist, and not a historian, I also relied on these types of secondary sources to help fill in the gaps in my own knowledge and data collection.

To historically study Catholic marriage preparation, I began by conducting archival research and textual analysis into two postwar Catholic family movements that helped to institutionalize the practice throughout the United States: Christian Family Movement and Cana Conference Movement. I visited four archives that contained relevant collections of key people that helped to establish the movements and set the ideological vision for them: 1) Maryville University Archives (MUA) and Midwest Jesuit Archives (MJA) both have collections of Fr. Edward Dowling who coined the term “Cana Conference Movement” and helped to spread the popularity of the movement. 2) Catholic University of America’s Archives (CUAA) has the personal collection of Dr. Alphonse H. Clemens, a Catholic researcher who studied and conducted Cana Conferences. 3) The Women and Leadership Archives (WLA) at Loyola University Chicago contain a collection on Pat and Patty Crowley, who were key leaders in the Christian Family Movement both nationally and internationally. I also visited one archive that housed organizational documents. The Archives of the University of Notre Dame (UNDA) contains organizational documents for both Cana Conference and Christian Family Movement that includes meeting minutes, newsletters, internal memos, letters, news articles, and even some audio files of Cana Conference events. Finally, I visited one archive of an archdiocese that developed significant programming. The Archdiocese of

Chicago Archives (ACA) holds collections for Cana Conference Chicago which was a diocesan office for Cana Conference. The collections in the Archdiocese of Chicago proved to be incredibly instrumental in providing a more longitudinal sense of how Catholic marriage preparation changed over time. Their collections offered the widest range (from 1940s-1990s) and included a number of internal memos and correspondences that indicated the type of concerns and debates that occurred within the leadership as they determined how to respond to changing norms within both religion and family. Furthermore, The Cana Conference of Chicago published extensive curriculum over the years that became instrumental in shaping organizational practices beyond their diocese. In fact, both the parishes I conducted observations at in Western Washington used their materials.

Without having found comparable movements or even archival collections among evangelicals, I relied on published materials and secondary sources. Books such as Wayne E. Oates' (1958) *Premarital Pastoral Care and Counseling* and H. Norman Wright's (1981) *Premarital Counseling* provided me access to different examples over time in how evangelical leaders envisioned premarital counseling for their local communities and the type of resources available to them as they developed their own programs. While these types of data do not provide the same level of richness as that collected on Catholics, it still provides insights into ideological shifts over time among evangelicals. I also draw upon social historians that have analyzed the emergence and growth of evangelicalism that occurred during this time period. While ultimately I only briefly provide insights from the historical data collection, it nonetheless significantly

influenced my analysis throughout the project by challenging me to avoid simple explanations of social change that posit a mere decline.

Contemporary Data Collection

Employing an open recruitment strategy, I contacted parishes and evangelical congregations across Western Washington to inquire about if and how they conducted marriage preparation. In the end, this strategy proved effective in introducing me to a variety of organizational forms of premarital counseling I had not initially known about or intended to study. For example, one evangelical congregation had opted to institute a system of marriage mentors to connect engaged couples with married couples within the church. Through this strategy I also obtained additional insights into the type of congregations that do and do not have collective marriage preparation practices and what they do in these cases. A number of Catholic parishes I tried to recruit informed me they rely on a weekend retreat option sponsored by the Archdiocese.¹ As a result of this open strategy, I also quickly realized the value of including interviews with representatives from congregations that only offered individualized premarital counseling. Unlike the collective programming where I conducted observations, for ethical reasons I had to rely on interviews to learn about individualized strategies of premarital counseling. Since these sessions can be highly personal because they tend to be tailored to the individual couple, I believed it would be too intrusive to be present for these interactions.

As a result of these efforts, I recruited 4 collective programs and conducted interviews with 28 people that coordinated premarital counseling in congregational settings. These counts include interviews both with the people that taught the collective

¹ Despite persistent and numerous attempts, I was unable to recruit this program to participate in the study.

programs I observed and premarital counselors from other pastoral settings. Additionally, this is a count of interviews conducted and not actual people because many of the interviews (especially with laity) involved two people (a married couple). The length of these interviews ranged widely from 60 to 180 minutes. In total, 15 religious communities are represented in this study.

The overall sample is skewed towards evangelical Protestants. While the observations of the collective programming is evenly split with 2 Catholic parishes and 2 evangelical sites, the interviews with premarital counselors is slightly imbalanced (15 evangelical premarital counselors and 13 Catholic premarital counselors). For all of these interviews, I used the same instrument that asked questions on three general topics: personal background (relationship history, how they became involved in this ministry in the church, and their own relationship background); Christian marriage (their definition, personal models of it, and about any teachings/books that have been instrumental in shaping their ideas); and premarital counseling (training and experience, description of general process, examples of when it went well/poorly, their view on its purpose and hopes for what couples get out of the process).

Building upon a pilot study where I recruited pastoral and therapeutic evangelical premarital counselors, the project also includes 11 interviews with individuals associated with an evangelical graduate therapy program. For the most part, these interviews were conducted with students or recent alumni of the program, although in a couple cases I spoke with people who taught in the program or were associated with the counseling center on campus. Overall, the interview instrument covered similar topics as the pastoral one with two exceptions. The one minor exception is in the personal background section

of these interviews I inquired more into the counselor's decision to attend an evangelical university to obtain a graduate therapy degree and a professional/personal timeline for their future. The major exception is this interview included a section exploring the training they received in their graduate program, specifically asking about their classes, their perceptions on their training (areas they felt well-prepared and those where they wish they could have received more), and their experience with the religious mission of the university. Despite the additional topics, these interviews tended to be shorter with a range from 30 to 90 minutes. In every case, the interviews occurred with only one person.

Despite my best efforts, to have Catholics and evangelicals equally represented in the project I found evangelicals easier to recruit. Overall, I conducted more interviews with evangelical premarital counselors than I did with Catholic ones. This emerged in part due to the inclusion of the interviews with evangelical therapists. Despite a number of attempts, I could not locate a comparable Catholic program. Additionally, I found Catholic pastoral programs more difficult to recruit despite Catholic parishes actually being easier to identify because Archdioceses maintain directories of all active parishes. In contrast, for evangelical congregations I had to rely on internet searches (or occasionally a referral). Yet, evangelicals tended to be more enthusiastic about my research project and often quickly agreed to participate. Catholics, however, tended to be more cautious and often required more conversations both with me and within the parish to determine if the research could be approved.

In part, my different experiences recruiting these two faiths likely emerge from organizational dimensions of how the religious communities organize authority. With the shortage of priests and the historic commitment to laity coordinating marriage

preparation within the Catholic Church, the coordinating person could be a volunteer or at least a person with circumscribed authority within the congregation. Frequently I would make contact with someone at a Catholic parish who had to ask permission from (or at least run the request by) the priest. In contrast, among evangelical congregations this type of ministry often fell under the jurisdiction of pastors who had the authority to approve the research. This was true from small churches where the head pastor conducted this work and could authorize participation to larger churches where a family life pastor oversaw the ministry and could approve the project. Finally, I occasionally encountered a hesitancy to speak on behalf of the Catholic Church among lay staff and lay volunteers that coordinated parish programs. In one extreme example, the man who served as a religious director at a parish would not allow the interview to begin until he better understood my research agenda and how I intended to represent the Church. While evangelicals would occasionally try to ascertain the purposes of my research before we began interviews, this rarely appeared to involve a fear that I would use their words to represent “the” Church.

In total, I spent approximately 70 hours observing (collective) marriage preparation programs. In most cases, I observed the full program at least once. In all but one case, which I detail below, I observed these programs by myself which generally resulted in me standing out as a researcher in a room full of couples. For some of my observations, I also stood out among a group of premarital couples because I was visibly pregnant. In particular, since I was pregnant during at least half of my data collection at both evangelical sites I often found myself compelled to explain my marital status. In some cases I suspect this actually helped elicit couples to volunteer to be interviewed

because they appeared to sympathize with me. At the very least, it often became a way to develop a rapport with the married couples that led the programs, especially the wives.

Table 6. Description of Fieldwork and Recruitment of Couples

Marriage Preparation Program	Description of Observations and Recruitment
Evangelical Weekend Retreat	I observed the full weekend twice, once by myself and once with my husband which allowed me to engage more in the process. Since most of the time in this program is spent journaling alone and then sharing these thoughts with one's partner, the second visit provided me a significantly different vantage point on the process. During my first set of observations I would generally spend the "couple time" with the leadership team which provided me the opportunity to learn more about their views and the history of the program. The second time my husband and I simulated the experience of the premarital couples by separating to journal and then discussing our reflections together. Despite already being married, I believe we simulated the experience fairly well. In particular, similar to the other couples we were also on the verge of a new transition in our relationship because I was pregnant. As a result, much of our conversation shared the tendency to both look back across our history as a couple and to project towards our uncertain future. Since we were married, however, we were allowed to room together unlike all of the premarital couples. In addition to these two lengthy sets of observations, I also returned two more times for a few hours to recruit volunteer couples. ²
Evangelical Congregation	I observed both classes – dating and engaged – in full and without interruption. I started first with observations of the dating class one spring and then the following spring I observed the engaged

² While I found the process of observing a second time with my spouse to be incredibly useful at this site, I did not repeat this practice at the other programs. Given the different organizational style in the other programs, I am less concerned that I missed an important segment of data by not doing so. At the weekend retreat, only a third of the time on a topic consisted of the leadership talking and the remaining two-thirds involved activities that I could not observe. The other sites dedicated the majority of the lesson time to teachings or group discussion with the occasional brief break-out session for couples. In most cases, when the couples returned from these there would also be a group discussion where they shared details about their conversations. As a result, I do not believe I missed substantial insight into the process in these congregational classes by observing alone.

	<p>class. I was pregnant during the observations for the dating class (leading me to particularly stand out) but not for the engaged class. As a result of this sequence, I recognized some couples in the engaged class from the dating class. This is the only site that I did not return to recruit from multiple sessions in person. However, in addition to passing out a sign-up sheet for each class I observed, I had the pastor that oversaw these programs forward a request by email to the class I was not currently observing at the time. Furthermore, since many of the couples took the class in the order of the sequence I was able to hear experiences from multiple sessions.</p>
Urban Catholic Parish	<p>Due to scheduling conflicts I had to observe this program over two different sessions. I observed the latter half of the program during one winter session and then returned in the spring to observe the first half of the program. A benefit of this strategy is it allowed me to have more opportunities to recruit couples and to observe the overall style with different sets of participating couples. I also observed part of one evening during another session to recruit couples. In all three instances, I was alone (and not pregnant).</p>
Non-Urban Catholic Parish	<p>Between the infrequency that the parish offered the program and travel commitments, I had to miss one evening during my observations at this parish. I was, however, also able to attend a guest lecture by a visiting priest on the topic of marriage. While this evening was not connected to the marriage preparation program, it was part of broader parish ministry on the topic and an event the priest hoped that their engaged couples would attend. I also conducted another recruitment visit on the final day of a different session to recruit couples. In all cases, I observed and recruited alone (and not pregnant).</p>

For each program, I took extensive notes during the lessons on the ideas presented. In addition, I made a point to pay attention to a number of issues relevant to the process of transmission and reception of these ideas: who talked (how often people spoke and their presentation style); couples' reactions (how actively people paid attention and the questions people asked to the leaders); and the physical layout of the space (how the chairs were organized, how the leadership was positioned in relation to the couples). At a

later date, I would type up these jottings taken during the classes to produce more extensive fieldnotes (over 275 pages, single-spaced).

I recruited all 31 interviews with couples (21 evangelical and 10 Catholic) from these four sites. In three cases, I interviewed only the woman because her partner was unable or unwilling to participate. In the two evangelical cases the couples were pre-engaged and in the one Catholic case the couple had been civilly married for six years. Most of the couples were engaged, both at the time of their participation in the program and when I interviewed them. Occasionally, we were unable to schedule the meeting before the wedding which meant that I interviewed some couples as newlyweds (even though they had participated in the classes as engaged couples). Likewise, in two cases I interviewed couples from the dating class they were engaged by the time we arranged a time to talk. These cases provided me the opportunity to ask about how the programs had helped them during these relationship transitions. While I mostly interviewed people within a few months of the classes, in some rare instances it took close to a year to arrange the interview. This range ensures that the feedback from couples is not only an immediate response to the classes but includes reflections on the process as people become more removed from the teachings and advice.

I used the same interview instrument for all of the participating couples, regardless of their marital status (at time of the class or time of the interview). Each interview covered four topics: relationship history (how they met, how they spend their time, conflicts they have negotiated, about their engagement, their spiritual life); views on marriage (perception on parent's marriage, aspirations for marriage, relationship timeline); views on Christian marriage (definition of Christian marriage, memorable

religious teachings on marriage, and any experience with Christian relationship books); and premarital counseling experiences (how they decided to participate in premarital counseling and selection process of program, whether it met their expectations, memorable moments, and what they liked/disliked). At the end of the interviews, I also collected brief demographic data on race/ethnicity, age, occupation, level of education, parents' highest level of education, and parents' occupation.³ For the most part, I only adjusted the section on relationship history to account for differences in relationship statuses. Interviews ranged widely in terms of the length, some lasted barely an hour and others exceeded 3 hours.

I interviewed couples together which provided me the opportunity to see how they interacted with one another. For my purposes of learning more about their perception of the marriage preparation programming, having multiple people in the interview also mimicked some of the traits of a focus group where people can build off of one another's comments, help someone recollect a view or feeling, or act as a foil to help a person to further articulate their perspective. Admittedly, this strategy of interviewing couples together meant I likely did not hear in-depth accounts of people's fears or uncertainties about marriage. While I may not have heard couples' second thoughts about the wedding, I did still learn about concerns people anticipated having to deal with in their future relationships. This included cases such as: a pregnant couple from a conservative evangelical family that had responded poorly to the announcement; an engaged couple that had to work through the woman cheating on the man at an earlier point in their relationship and the subsequent trust issues that lingered as a result; various couples

³ All of these questions were asked in an open-ended format that allowed the individuals to describe these categories with their own preferred language.

concerned about their future financial status, especially when one partner had significant debt; and tenuous relationships with future in-laws. In particular, I suspect that interviewing the couples together ensured a greater number of men participants. In the three cases where I only interviewed one person it was always because of an apparent lack of interest on the part of the man in the relationship.

The disproportionate number of interviews with evangelical couples largely reflects the different rates of participation in these programs. All of the Catholic parish programs I contacted enrolled fewer couples (2-6 couples). Although the evangelical weekend retreat recently had begun to struggle with enrollment, even at what they considered lower attendance there tended to be at least as many couples as the Catholic programs (5-8 couples). Both classes at the evangelical congregation were significantly larger (10-20 couples).⁴ For every program, I made multiple attempts to recruit couples. In the end, I interviewed multiple couples from each program: 4 couples from urban Catholic parish, 6 couples from non-urban Catholic, 12 from evangelical congregation, and 9 from evangelical weekend retreat.

Reflecting the demographics of Western Washington, and these particular programs, most of the people I interviewed were white, college-educated, and seemingly middle class. The two Catholic programs tended to be more racially-ethnically diverse than either of the evangelical programs with the urban parish having more Asian-American couples and the non-urban parish having more Latino couples. The couples participating in the evangelical congregation programs were the most likely to be white,

⁴ Attendance at the evangelical congregational classes tended to vary as a result of a general decline in numbers over each session. Unlike the Catholic couples, participation was optional and not part of the requirement to be married in the congregation. Furthermore, couples often broke up over the course of the dating class which impacted the overall attendance.

have professional careers, and graduate degrees. In comparison those couples attending the evangelical weekend retreat were more diverse in terms of both class and ethnic-racial background. It was also the only program where I observed African-American couples participating (and subsequently the only times I recruited them). In all of the programs, there were consistently a small number of interracial couples.

The couples that participated in the programs were more racially and educationally diverse than the people that led the programs. At all of the sites where I conducted observations, the leadership consisted of white couples that were at least college-educated. Many also had advanced degrees, often related to counseling or divinity. This pattern reflected the larger sample of premarital counselors where almost universally everyone I interviewed through my open recruitment strategy ended up being white and college-educated.

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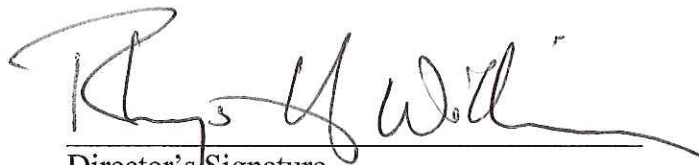
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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature that appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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