

The Future of Marriage

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Abstract

After briefly examining the history of marriage and the development of modern marriage, this essay describes major themes in the study of marriage, including research on the rise of alternatives to marriage, the “deinstitutionalization” of marriage, and the consequences of these changes. It next considers current demographic trends, recent advances in research, and likely future directions of research. In particular, the imminence of same-sex marriage and the increasing importance of the internet in partner selection are likely to be important areas of research and social change. The conclusion considers the implications of these trends for marriage’s future and for future research on marriage.

INTRODUCTION

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, defining marriage as the union of one man and one woman. His successor, President George W. Bush, launched a national Healthy Marriage Initiative to promote marriage, especially among the poor. At the same time, much popular and academic attention has focused on the plight of marriage. But is marriage truly in need of defense or promotion? Indeed, marriage rates have fallen dramatically throughout developed nations. Divorce rates are relatively high, as are rates of nonmarital childbearing and cohabitation. Yet, most Americans hope to marry someday, and the popularity of celebrity weddings and reality television shows such as *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* attest to marriage’s enduring appeal.

This essay considers the future of marriage and the future of research about marriage. It begins by briefly examining marriage’s past. This insight into the realities of “traditional” marriage provides context for understanding current demographic trends and directions of research. It next describes foundational research on modern marriage, including research on the rise of alternatives to marriage, the “deinstitutionalization” of marriage, and the consequences of these changes. Following this overview, it examines recent advances in

research and probable directions for future research. The conclusion considers the implications of these trends for marriage's future and for future research on marriage.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MARRIAGE

To many Americans, the phrase “traditional marriage” conjures an image of a 1950s family—a male breadwinner, his homemaker wife, and their children. Yet, as marriage historian Stephanie Coontz documents in her books *Marriage, a History* (2006) and *The Way We Never Were* (2000), this type of marriage was actually a historical anomaly. In fact, two-provider families were normative throughout most of history. Divorce, single parenting, cohabitation, and even same-sex marriage are not new phenomena—all have existed in the past in some time and place. It is true that marriage has changed and that traditional marriage is all but gone in developed nations, but this revolutionary change in marriage had solidified by the close of the eighteenth century.

Throughout most of history, marriage was a social institution designed to benefit extended families and the larger community—not a means of achieving personal happiness or fulfillment (Coontz, 2004). Marriage was the primary means of consolidating and transferring wealth, forming political alliances, and establishing the mutual claims of parents and children. Given marriage's institutional importance, love was not deemed a rational or sufficient motivation for marriage. Moreover, the choice of partner was not left to the individual—her or his family exercised substantial control in arranging marriages. However, economic and cultural changes beginning in the seventeenth century increased individual autonomy and eroded parental and community control over marital matches. The idea of marrying for love gained popularity and love matches quickly became normative. Thus, as industrialization and urbanization undermined the institutional basis for marriage, marriage began a transition from a public institution to a private choice.

Still, marriage did not immediately lose its monopoly over the regulation of sexuality, inheritance, and childrearing, nor did the rise of love-based marriages alleviate gender inequality within marriage. However, the valuation of marriage primarily as a source of emotional fulfillment represented a revolutionary change from traditional, pragmatic marriage. The consequences of this shift are evident today. Perhaps most importantly, basing marriage on love made marriage both less stable and more desirable. The absence of love in a marriage gradually came to be seen as a cause for divorce, greatly

undermining the norm of stable, lifelong marriage. At the same time, the promise of emotional fulfillment made marriage a desirable state, sought after even by couples who would not benefit from its institutional functions (like having biologic children). In fact, demands for the liberalization of divorce laws and the extension of marriage rights to homosexual couples began as early as the eighteenth century.

In the twentieth century, the emphasis on emotional satisfaction and love in marriage increased further. Marriage was nearly mandatory and spouses were expected to find happiness by fulfilling their gender-appropriate roles as breadwinner, homemaker, and parent. By the 1950s, marriage was almost universal, with about 95% of the population marrying, often at young ages. However, beginning in the 1960s, this was followed by a rise in expressive individualism, the belief that individuals must discover, develop, and express their unique inner self. Women entered the labor force, and marriage lost its monopoly over the regulation of adulthood, sexuality, and childbearing. In the words of family sociologist Andrew Cherlin, marriage became “deinstitutionalized” (2004) meaning that there was less legal and normative pressure to marry, to enact traditional roles within marriage, and to stay married for life. Marriages were formed and maintained to achieve individualistic goals—self-fulfillment, self-development, and emotional satisfaction. In response to this cultural change, laws regulating marriage were liberalized. In 1967, the Supreme Court ruled that anti-miscegenation laws forbidding interracial marriage violated the Fourteenth Amendment. This was followed in the 1970s by the introduction of no-fault divorce. Today, in a debate that strongly parallels the earlier battle over interracial marriage, gay rights advocates are demanding marriage equality for same-sex couples. Not unsurprisingly, these changes have been controversial.

This distinction between marriage’s institutional and individualistic functions helps clarify the ongoing controversy over its current health and future trajectory. Politicians, religious leaders, and laypersons concerned with the *institutional* aspects of marriage are right to worry—marriage has indeed retreated in importance as a social institution. It is less mandatory, less stable, less connected to family and community, and less regulated by other social institutions. For better or worse, couples are relatively isolated from the interference and support once provided by extended families, communities, the church, and the government. However, from the perspective of observers who value its *individualistic* rewards, marriage is faring much better. Young adults express a strong desire to marry and most Americans eventually do marry. Now that unhappy couples are easily freed from marital commitments, the remaining marriages are happier and more fulfilling. No longer heavily stigmatized, divorcees have a second chance at happiness with another partner. In this individualistic sense, marriage is thriving.

CONSEQUENCES OF MARRIAGE'S DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION

As marriage loses ground as an institution, fewer individuals marry, those who marry do so at older ages, and more divorce. Accompanying this change in marriage is a change in fertility. Childbearing has been decoupled from marriage, resulting in a rise of births to single mothers and cohabiting couples. The age at first birth has risen, women are having fewer children, and many women are forgoing children altogether. Much recent sociological research has addressed the causes and consequences of these changes, seeking to understand partnering trajectories and to evaluate the implications of these trajectories for child well-being.

The retreat from marriage has not been uniform. Marriage rates remain high among middle-class Americans but have fallen dramatically among poor Americans and especially among African-Americans. While many politicians have assumed that the poor do not value marriage (as demonstrated by the Healthy Marriage Initiative), qualitative research by Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas refutes this (2005). In fact, they find that poor unmarried mothers *revere* marriage. It is this reverence that makes them reluctant to rush into a marriage that would likely end in divorce. For such women, economic stability, a satisfactory relationship, and money for a wedding are prerequisites for marriage; the marriage itself is a symbol of this success and a crowning accomplishment. Given their limited economic prospects and the chronic infidelity and criminality of the men in their lives, they may never achieve the stability they require for marriage.

Another important area of recent research compares cohabiting and marital unions and investigates the transition from cohabitation to marriage. Research comparing marriage and cohabitation generally finds higher relationship quality and greater stability among married couples, and greater diversity among cohabiting couples. However, those cohabiting couples who marry may more closely resemble married couples in terms of relationship satisfaction. While both types of relationships are characterized by strong homogamy (similarity in demographic and social characteristics), cohabiting couples are less likely to match each other on characteristics such as race, religion, and education. Understanding cohabitation is increasingly important to understanding marriage not only because cohabitation is a primary alternative to marriage but also because most marriages today are preceded by cohabitation.

Interestingly, the fact that marriage is generally preceded by cohabitation may have implications for marital quality and divorce (Amato, 2010). Contrary to popular beliefs that cohabitation provides a "test run" to ensure marital compatibility, prior cohabitation is associated with worse marital

outcomes. There is an ongoing debate over what extent of this relationship is due to selection (couples with high-risk traits may be more likely to cohabit), the experience of cohabitation (as a more individualistic and independent partnership, cohabitation may instill behaviors or attitudes that destabilize marriage), and to inertia (couples who would not otherwise marry—and are not really a good match—might marry because the inertia of cohabitation makes it difficult to break up). There is also some evidence that as prior cohabitation is becoming more normative, the relationship between cohabitation and divorce is weakening.

Finally, child well-being has always been an important theme in research on marriage, and it is only increasing in importance as marriage loses its monopoly on childrearing (Brown, 2010). Children are increasingly being born to unmarried mothers; currently, about four in ten births in the United States are to unmarried women. Over half of these births are to (unmarried) cohabiting parents. This is concerning because cohabiting relationships are less stable than marital relationships and because nonresidential fathers often provide little economic or practical support. Growing up with a single mother and experiencing multiple family transitions (due to terminated cohabitations or to divorce) are risk factors for children, although some of the association is due to selection and economic disadvantage. This has spawned a growing literature on understanding how family structure in itself impacts children, net of related economic and parental characteristics. Analytic techniques for parsing apart these interrelated factors have advanced in recent years, enabling researchers to better isolate the effect of family structure, but more research is needed. Overall, although findings are somewhat mixed, there is evidence that family structure and family stability have a causal effect on child well-being—and that children in stable, two-parent homes may be best off. This is certainly the popular perception among politicians and the general public.

The popular consensus that children of stably married parents have the best life chances has led to research investigating why unmarried cohabiting or dating parents do not marry. Such couples often hope to marry, but do not feel ready yet—they want to be economically secure and confident about their relationship before marriage. This supports the concern that while outcomes for children raised by married parents are better, it is not clear that marrying unmarried parents would be beneficial for their children. Marriage, in itself, would not solve the economic or relational problems which both prevent many unmarried parents from marrying and are largely responsible for their romantic instability. Nevertheless, largely as a result of President Bush's Healthy Marriage Initiative, there is a growing interest on promoting marriage between such parents.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While it is not possible to discuss every exciting new trend in research on marriage, the discussion below highlights themes that have been important in recent, ground-breaking studies and which are likely to gain importance in the coming years. It also draws attention to topics that have been understudied and which are likely to receive increased attention in the future. Finally, it concludes by describing relevant methodological advances.

UNDERSTANDING MODERN MARRIAGE

As documented above, much foundational research has focused on documenting marriage's transition from a public institution to a private and individualistic relationship. Yet the meaning of modern marriage is still not well understood. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas's research among poor, unmarried mothers has done much to clarify the meaning of marriage for this population—and has overthrown prior assumptions that marriage was unimportant to such women. Similar studies are needed to understand the meaning of marriage among other populations. In particular, the gendered meaning of marriage has been under-investigated. For example, for men more than for women, marriage may imply children and an increase in gender specialization. Women may hold a more progressive and gender-egalitarian view of marriage in which children are optional and the division of labor is equitable. These understandings of marriage likely vary by class and race as well as by gender and disparities between spouses' expectations may be an important source of conflict.

In addition, understanding the meaning of marriage provides insight into marriage's future prospects by providing insight into why modern couples bother to marry at all. For example, marriage patterns in Sweden highlight the complex social motivations for modern marriage (Ohlsson-Wijl, 2011). Long viewed as a frontrunner in family change and in the deinstitutionalization of marriage, Sweden provides cohabiting couples with the same legal rights as married couples. There is little institutional or social pressure to marry, even when raising children. It is not surprising therefore that marriage rates began to fall rapidly in the 1960s—what is puzzling is why they began to rise again in the 1990s. This rise cannot be fully explained by changes in legal motivations, employment, population composition, or fertility. Marriage seems to have genuinely gained in popularity, perhaps because it is increasing in symbolic importance. Understanding why this has happened—and whether it is likely to happen in other nations—requires a better understanding of what motivates couples to marry. A better understanding of couples' motivations for marriage would provide a more informed approach for policymakers and others who wish to promote

marriage. Given that funding is available for such research, it is likely to receive continued attention.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

At the time of writing this essay, the debate over same-sex marriage is still raging. About 37 states have passed constitutional amendments (31 states) or laws (6 states) banning gay marriage. Nine states and the District of Columbia have legalized gay marriage. Despite this legislative bias, public opinion polls indicate majority support for same-sex marriage among American adults. The political and social controversy over this issue is strikingly similar to that over anti-miscegenation laws in the 1960s—when these laws were overturned in 1967, 16 states were enforcing them. In this context, the Supreme Court is preparing to hear challenges to prohibitions against gay marriage. Regardless of the outcome of the current hearings, same-sex marriage will eventually be legal throughout the United States. As it did in the case of interracial marriage, public opinion is shifting slowly but steadily to favor gay marriage. Within every cohort, attitudes are becoming more favorable over time, and younger cohorts have much more favorable attitudes than older cohorts. In light of this attitudinal change, gay marriage is a question of “when,” not “whether.”

Given the inevitability of widespread access to legal marriage for same-sex couples, social scientists are likely to devote even more attention to gay and lesbian relationships and parenting. One of the challenges in comparing the relational and parenting behaviors of same-sex and other-sex couples is their different socio-legal contexts. Married couples enjoy greater social legitimacy and innumerable legal rights that are denied to cohabiting couples (whether straight or gay). Legalizing same-sex marriage would make these populations more comparable. Also, just as straight couples' relationships change during the transition from cohabitation to marriage, same-sex couples are likely to experience similar—but not identical—transitions. This will be an area of interest in coming years. Research is also likely to examine how the option to marry changes partner selection, dating, and cohabitation for homosexual individuals who are not yet ready to marry or who do not wish to marry.

In addition, extending research on marriage to same-sex couples forces researchers to acknowledge the assumptions inherent in current studies of marriage which almost invariably rely on distinctions between husbands and wives and assume a nuclear family form (two parents residing with their children) or a single parent (Goldberg, 2010). Yet, gay and lesbian families are often more complex and may involve more than two parental figures, particularly because same-sex couples often desire the involvement of both

a “father” and “mother.” For example, lesbian mothers may use a known donor because they want their child to know their biologic father; such a child would potentially have two residential mothers and a nonresidential father. Likewise, gay men may pursue open adoption so that their child will have a relationship with the biologic mother. For example, one cannot compare partnered lesbian parents with single heterosexual mothers in order to isolate the effect of “fatherlessness” (as opposed to the effect of only having one parent) because children raised by two women are not necessarily entirely fatherless. Thus, extending marriage rights to same-sex couples may require a greater flexibility in academic conceptualizations of married couple households.

Another challenge in studying gay and lesbian marriage is the lack of adequate data. Same-sex couples make up a small minority of the population; unless they are deliberately over-sampled, there are often too few same-sex couples for meaningful analysis. In addition, until recently many surveys were unequipped to ask about same-sex partners. There have been many excellent qualitative studies, but these lack generalizability. Data providing a large, nationally representative, generalizable population of same-sex couples are rare. The US Census provides a large sample of same-sex couples; however, the depth of data is limited. A recent survey conducted at Stanford University, how couples meet and stay together (HCMST) over-sampled individuals who had previously identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. It provides a moderately-sized sample of 474 same-sex couples (out of 3009 total couples) and has already provided valuable insight into patterns of partner selection among same-sex couples (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). However, the scope of the survey is relatively limited, and more datasets are needed to provide a complete understanding of committed same-sex relationships. In addition, once marriage rights are extended to same sex couples, the dynamics of their relationships may change, requiring new data collection.

Complexity and Context. While researchers have long acknowledged the increasing diversity of families and marriages, studies that truly engage with this complexity are lacking. Marriages are already more diverse in regards to race (interracial marriage has been increasing rapidly since the 1960s), prior partnering experience (many marriages involve divorcees and those with prior co-residential partners), cohabitation and fertility prior to marriage, and the presence of blended families. As noted above, marriage will soon be yet more diverse as marriage equality is extended to same-sex couples. Prior research has frequently compared different categories of married couple, attempting to isolate the effect of many of these specific characteristics (such

as prior cohabitation or spousal gender). However recently, researchers have begun to acknowledge the need for a more nuanced perspective on complexity and context (Fincham & Beach, 2010). For example, the effect of gender is unlikely to be the same for women married to men as for women married to women, nor is gender itself likely to be expressed equivalently across these different contexts. As discussed in the following sections, the social and economic context in which couples are embedded also impacts their relationship and marital trajectory.

Just as marriages are shaped by their social context, so is research addressing marriage. The Healthy Marriage Initiative made funding available for studies of healthy marriage and for evaluation of marriage education, especially in the context of couples at-risk for poverty, and this has influenced the direction of recent research (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Whereas prior research has tended to assume that a healthy marriage was characterized by the absence of conflict, greater attention is now being given to positive processes such as forgiveness and support. Given its goal of poverty reduction, the Healthy Marriage Initiative has also shifted focus to diversity in marriage, especially targeting economically disadvantaged populations. Importantly, less educated and racial minority couples report lower marital satisfaction and lower chances of forming a stable marriage. Poverty and race/ethnic discrimination increase stress on marriage by increasing conflict and instability and by reducing positive interactions; these processes are not captured in studies of primarily White, middle-class couples. For example, economically disadvantaged couples report higher rates of infidelity and substance abuse, factors that destabilize marriages and merit further investigation. Social context is especially salient among African-American couples who are substantially less likely to marry and more likely to divorce than White couples. Some part of this difference is due to economic factors, but the stress and social disadvantage associated with racism are also important factors in destabilizing African-American relationships. Future research is likely to continue focus on marriages' social context and the specific stressors resulting from that context.

Researchers have also begun to focus on the larger relational context in attempting to understand the impact of specific characteristics or behavioral patterns. For example, recent research has demonstrated that the effect of spousal conflict on marital satisfaction is minimized when it occurs in the context of frequent, positive interactions. Thus, conflict cannot be examined in isolation from other aspects of the spousal relationship because its effects on marital satisfaction depend on that very relationship. Likewise, the effects of chronic stress and work-to-home spillover are moderated by the quality of the relationship. Researchers interested in intimate partner violence have also

begun to focus on the relational context of the violence, finding that studying the violence itself is insufficient for explanation and prevention. Given these findings, future research is likely to focus on interactions between negative behaviors and other aspects of the couple's overall relationship that may reduce (or amplify) their effect.

TECHNOLOGY

It is becoming increasingly common for couples to meet online, yet the consequences of online partner selection are not fully understood. Most obviously, finding partners through an online database greatly increases the size of one's potential dating pool by expanding it past one's social network of acquaintances, coworkers, family, and neighbors. This facilitates both diversity and homogamy (marriage between people with similar social and demographic characteristics). Because social networks generally lack diversity in characteristics such as race and education, finding a partner through one's social network constrains choice and encourages homogamy. In this sense, selecting a partner online broadens one's options and may increase the chances of an unconventional choice (such as an interracial relationship). It may also free individuals from the constraints of family or community approval, allowing them to make less conventional choices. Indeed, couples that meet online are more likely to be interracial, interreligious, or same-sex. That said, for those seeking homogamy, the internet may also facilitate searches for partners with specific characteristics. Specialty dating websites, such as JDate.com (for Jewish singles) and singlevegetarian.com (for vegan and vegetarian singles), may make it easier for members of minority groups to find a suitable partner.

By expanding individuals' dating pool beyond their social network, the internet also results in matches that are less embedded in social networks. Insofar as a shared social network exerts pressure to maintain the relationship, this may result in less stable marriages. In addition, the ease and relative anonymity of online dating may influence subsequent attitudes about relationship dissolution and infidelity. Yet contrary to this expectation, preliminary studies have not found that couples who initially met online report lower relationship quality or greater risk of break up, compared to couples who met through more traditional means (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). It is possible that successful couples integrate their partners into their prior networks and develop a supportive, shared, social network. However, meeting one's partner online might have implications for the larger (physical) community. Couples who met online might have lower community engagement because the partners are less likely to have the same connections to local

institutions. Future academic studies are likely to investigate the long-term consequences of online partner selection for couples and communities.

Technology is also relevant in facilitating infidelity. Online infidelity is relatively common and may involve long-term online relationships or brief, anonymous encounters. In either case, spouses generally view a secret, intimate online relationship as an act of betrayal, and their discovery undermines the marriage. Online intimate relationships may also result in dysfunctional behaviors such as compulsive internet usage, withdrawal from the spouse, and failing to complete tasks at home and at work. In many instances, romances that begin online may lead to physical affairs in the “real” world. Physical infidelity is problematic both because it undermines the marriage and because of the risk of transmitting a sexually transmitted diseases to the spouse; thus, it has important societal and public health implications. Greater research is needed to understand the frequency of online infidelity, the degree of online intimacy required to constitute a betrayal, and the extent to which online infidelity predicts physical infidelity with the online partner or with another partner.

METHODOLOGICAL ADVANCES

A recent trend in social science research generally is the incorporation of genetic information (Amato, 2010). This is often done by comparing groups with known genetic (dis)similarity, including monozygotic and dizygotic twins, the children of twins, or adopted and biologic children. For example, recent research has investigated whether the intergenerational transmission of marital quality and divorce might be due in part to shared genetics; this explanation was generally rejected. Similarly, there is little support for the hypothesis that some of the negative outcomes found among children whose parents’ divorce might be due to simple genetic inheritance. However, studies that consider gene–environment interactions have been more promising. For example, family context may moderate the effect of genetic risk. Children with a genetic polymorphism associated with antisocial behavior display increased behavioral problems if they are raised by a single mother—but their behavior was no different from children without the gene if they were raised by married parents.

Another important methodological trend is toward more rigorous statistical models that are better able to isolate competing processes and test causal explanations. Methods for studying longitudinal data, such as fixed-effects models and lagged dependent variables, are especially useful when selection is of concern. For example, estimating the causal effect of divorce on children is difficult because families themselves decide whether to divorce (they are “self-selected” into divorce) and their children were often disadvantaged

before the divorce. Similarly, couples select themselves into cohabitation and differ from those who do not cohabit; this difference must be controlled to estimate the causal effect of cohabitation on subsequent marital satisfaction or divorce. There is rarely (if ever) complete information on differences that account for self-selection, but because fixed-effects models allow researchers to control for all unmeasured fixed (time-invariant) characteristics, they can largely account for self-selection. Fixed-effects models, however, are not appropriate for all situations (e.g., if a variable of interest is not time-variant) and have rather stringent data requirements. In some of these instances, alternative models that employ longitudinal data may be more appropriate, such as those using lagged dependent variables. For example, to isolate the effect of divorce on child test scores, net of unmeasured family differences, one could control for test scores before the divorce. Many other sophisticated analytic techniques, such as propensity score matching, are also applicable to both new and classic topics in the study of marriage. While space prohibits a full discussion of all relevant statistical innovations, we are likely to see many of these applied in future research on marriage.

CONCLUSION

Future research on marriage is likely to continue investigation into many of the classic research topics, including cohabitation, divorce, marital conflict, relationship quality, and partner selection. However, these analyses will have to consider a more diverse population of married couples, including same-sex spouses. Researchers are also likely to continue investigating motivations for marriage and barriers to marriage, especially for populations with low rates of marriage. There will also be continued emphasis on the importance of context—both the social context in which marriages are embedded, and also the broader relational context in which specific positive or negative spousal interactions occur. Given the increasing importance of the internet in partner selection and romantic interactions, researchers are likely to investigate the social implications of this technology on the types of partners selected and on the resulting relationship. Finally, the trend toward increasingly sophisticated statistical analyses is likely to continue.

What about the future of marriage itself? Three things are certain. First, marriage is unlikely to ever regain its monopoly as the only legitimate context for sexual activity and family formation. Second, the current controversy over same-sex marriage will fade after its legalization, and will soon seem as dated as the 1960s furor over interracial marriage. The result of these changes will be an ever more individualistic, diverse, and flexible marriage. Third, even if marriage rates continue to decline, marriage is unlikely to lose its appeal anytime soon. In fact, the very debate over same-sex marriage

demonstrates marriage's continued symbolic and cultural importance. It may become unattainable or even personally undesirable for many (perhaps most) Americans, but it will nevertheless retain a hold on our imaginations into the foreseeable future.

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Elizabeth Aura McClintock is an Assistant Professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame. McClintock's research primarily focuses on gender and inequality in the context of romantic and sexual relationships, particularly in partner selection and in negotiated outcomes within established relationships. In addition to studying inequality within romantic partnerships, her research also addresses how intimate relationships reflect, perpetuate, and potentially alter broader, societal patterns of gender, class, age, and racial inequality. She is also interested in the social, romantic, and relational consequences of employment in gender-atypical occupations. Her other research and publications focus on gender and sexual identity, and body image and

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