

Welfare Reform and Abstinence-Only Sex Education:  
The Discursive Production of American Ideal Citizenship

Thesis Submission

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## **I. Introduction**

*“What does it mean to be an American?”* This query speaks to the heart of American identity: who belongs, and how do we know if they do not? Who matters? This paper is an inquiry into the mechanisms by which contemporary ideals of Americanism are constructed. My concern is with domestic policy measures in the United States and their role in producing ideologies of citizenship. Through an interrogation of welfare reform policies and abstinence-only sex education programs, I explore the narratives which produce and inform understandings of citizenship through the discursive characters of the Welfare Queen, Deadbeat Dad, and Promiscuous Teen. These characters enable my analysis of the operations of power which underlie politicized public discourse. In addition, they allow me to destabilize the notions of law and history that serve to mark some Americans as deviant while reifying the normalization of others.

### **Some Words on Citizenship**

An examination of the relevant scholarship is necessary to give context to my claims about citizenship in this paper. Citizenship has been articulated in a multiplicity of ways throughout the history of political thought. Most relevant to this discussion is an overview of citizenship as it connects to the modern Western nation-state. Prominent sociologist T.H. Marshall defined citizenship as having three elements: civil, political, and

social.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Marshall's conception of the social, what he defines as ranging "from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society,"<sup>2</sup> strongly informs my analysis of socio-legal programs and national belonging in this project.

Recognition that the social heritage and standards of a society, here American society, are necessarily exclusionary underlies my analysis of American citizenship as a set of ideals. It is by articulating and examining this exclusion that I hope to broaden understandings of the operations of social citizenship and the implications of these power dynamics for Americans who are not included in the frameworks of normalcy operating in the United States. Through an analysis of specific socio-legal programs, I demonstrate how operations of power construct notions of citizenship within the context of recent American history as well as the current socio-political climate.

Maurice Roche elaborates on Marshall's articulation of social citizenship by asserting the importance of examining the contemporary social and political significance of citizenship. While Roche mentions that the complexity and context in citizenship is necessary when examining

<sup>1</sup> Marshall, T. H., "Citizenship and Social Class," *T.H. Marshall: Citizenship and Social Class*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall, 11.

specific issues such as feminism, environmentalism, and globalization,<sup>3</sup> I expand this framework of analysis to the examination of domestic policy in the United States, a project which is deeply connected to aspects of cultural citizenship, as referenced by Roche. By way of my analysis, I intend to answer Roche's call to explore the complexity, context, and implications of American citizenship as situated in the specific historical and socio-political context of late 20<sup>th</sup> century United States.

Cultural citizenship is a relatively recent development even within the still-emerging field of citizenship studies,<sup>4</sup> and is one way of interrogating culture as a means by which citizenship is defined. A lack of analysis of the cultural dimension of citizenship in mainstream analyses is a gap that makes it difficult to truly grasp the increasing complexity and implications of national citizenship.<sup>5</sup> This makes my goal of examining aspects of cultural citizenship at work in the United States a timely contribution to the field. Understood as cultural citizenship, citizenship entails not only "thin" aspects, the political rights and obligations which come with attachment to the state, but also "thick," or complex, aspects, such as sense of belonging and the notion of being a valued participant in a national community.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there are constructed legal and rhetorical

<sup>3</sup> Roche, Maurice, "Social Citizenship: Grounds of Social Change," *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner, eds., (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 71.

<sup>4</sup> Isin, Engin F. and Bryan S. Turner, "Citizenship Studies: An Introduction," *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner, eds., (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Roche, 73.

<sup>6</sup> Isin and Turner, 8.

forces which inform how Americans view themselves and others in the context of an American nation-state.

While Roche asserts that such cultural analyses have been utilized across the political spectrum and references the New Right as only one example of many,<sup>7</sup> the socio-political climate of contemporary America warrants a thorough analysis of the ways in which conservative ideologies in particular have shaped the terrain of American citizenship. The New Right, or Christian Right as I refer to it in this paper, has specifically engaged concepts such as citizens' responsibilities which are grounded in cultural citizenship. The Christian Rights' commitment to national versions of work ethic and family ethic, both of which Roche claims are common conservative interpretations of the citizens' responsibility concept, has been, as I will show, instrumental in articulating contemporary ideals of Americanism.

Furthermore, as Toby Miller describes it, cultural policy is central to understandings of cultural citizenship. Through cultural policy, populations are managed through suggested behavior, a normalizing power which sets an unattainable ideal for subjects to strive for: a sort of ideal citizenship which fosters a sense of belonging.<sup>8</sup> If welfare reform policies and abstinence-only sex education programs are forms of cultural policies, it follows that elements of those policies foster a notion of

<sup>7</sup> Roche, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, Toby, "Cultural Citizenship," *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*, Engin F. Isin and Bryan S. Turner, eds., (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 238.

citizenship which operates to determine who belongs in American society by establishing which people are behaving in ways that are desirable. Because ideology about norms, deviance, and citizenship operates in both the social and the legal realms, those who are excluded face not only social alienation and discrimination, but also institutional barriers which have the potential to interfere with their ways of life. It is thus important to expose the social, legal, and political discourses which construct citizenship, and to interrogate the source and logic of citizenship ideologies.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My work is indebted to several theorists. Samuel R. Delany's notion of discourse as plural, material, and political, is crucial to my argument that citizenship is constructed through various discourses.<sup>9</sup> The plurality of discourse, including its forms in legislation, rhetoric, practice, and ideology, among other things, is central to my analysis in the following pages. Michel Foucault's conception of discourse, on the other hand, is grounded in an articulation of discourse as a form of modern power. According to Foucault, discourse is productive, dispersed, and coercive.<sup>10</sup> Because discourse is one way in which power is manifested, it is a necessary tool through which to examine the operations of power which construct the society we live in.

<sup>9</sup> See: Delany, Samuel R., *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts & the Power of the Paraliterary*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> For a more in-depth examination, see: Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish*, (New York: Random House Inc., 1995), Trans. Alan Sheridan, 1977.

Foucault also theorizes specific ways in which discourse operates, some of which are applicable to this project. His notion of “population” is intricately connected to the operations of power inherent in discourse. The population is governed through productive, coercive, and decentralized forms of power, often prompted by “problematization,” or the decision that something is an issue to be discussed by the state.<sup>11</sup> As issues are identified, Foucault’s concept of “governmentality” works to ensure the perpetual cycle of problem-solving which ultimately results in the governance and discipline of the population.<sup>12</sup>

Governing technologies, the complex programs, calculations, techniques, and apparatuses through which authorities embody and give effect to governmental ambitions, thus serve to manage the population in a variety of ways according to Foucault.<sup>13</sup> Just as power, knowledge, and institutional authority are key aspects of discourse and governance for Foucault, Louis Althusser also theorizes the way knowledge and power operate through institutional means. His notion of the Ideological State Apparatus is especially useful in considering questions of education as a means by which to instill notions of citizenship, as I will discuss in more depth later in this paper.

The multiple, productive, and coercive forms of power described by Foucault and Delany are exemplified by the discourses contextualizing

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality Vol. II: The Use of Pleasure*, ( New York: Random House Inc., 1985), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Rose, Nikolas and Peter Miller, “Political Power Beyond the State: Problematics of Government,” *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jun. 1992), 175.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



welfare reform policies and abstinence-only sex education programs, the two areas of American domestic policy on which this project focuses. The scholars I enlist to document the discursive elements of both policies are in fact noting elements of the production of American citizenship, regardless of whether this was their intent. I introduce the notion of discourse as generative of citizenship to the work of authors such as Diamond and Reese, who are concerned with the history of the Christian Right and its influence on shaping popular perceptions of the family, in order to illustrate the ways in which their work lends itself to my project. Likewise, Abramovitz,<sup>14</sup> Schram,<sup>15</sup> Douglas and Michaels<sup>16</sup> and Fujiwara,<sup>17</sup> all of whom discuss the gendered and racialized assumptions that come from and inform public policy, specifically welfare policy, or Smith<sup>18</sup> and Mink,<sup>19</sup> who examine the regulation of sexuality as a means of governance, similarly identify narratives and discourses that, when viewed through

<sup>14</sup> Abramovitz, Mimi, "Neither Accidental, Nor Simple Mean-Spirited: The Context for Welfare Reform," *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Schram, Sanford F., "That Old Black Magic? Welfare Reform and the New Politics of Racial Implication," *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal, eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Douglas, Susan and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*, (New York: Free Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Fujiwara, Lynn, "The Politics of Citizenship and Entitlement: Immigrants, Welfare, and the Persistence of Poverty," *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal, eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Smith, Anna Marie, *Welfare Reform and Sexual Regulation*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Mink, Gwendolyn, "Ending Single Motherhood," *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Politics of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006).

the lens of Delany and Foucault, implicitly articulate ideals of American citizenship.

In this paper I admittedly privilege an analysis of the legislative realm and federal legislation in particular at the expense of a closer examination of social movements which also deploy citizenship and personal responsibility claims as a method of arguing for inclusion rather than the exclusion I identify through my analysis of conservative discourses. Legislation is unique in that it entails an element of standardizing and universalizing; as a society, Americans accept and look to the law as guiding, making it an important influence on both material and ideological notions of citizenship. Because conservative values and conceptions of Americanism are hegemonic in the legislative realm and government as associated with the nation-state in the past few decades, they have become normalized through years of publicly visible representation and reiteration.

My treatment of this project recognizes that American government has been dominated by conservative usage of these concepts and an acknowledgment of the unwillingness of liberals to meaningfully challenge these values institutionally. In my analysis I hope to destabilize those notions of citizenship by examining not only the ways in which they are constructed, but also the value of exposing them and the social and political stakes of their deconstruction. Thus, this project identifies the

legislative realm as a means by which to articulate the discursive power it generates and the implications of those operations of power for Americans.

While discourse in many forms—including legislation, rhetoric, practice, and ideology—contributes to the construction of the discursive characters I examine in this paper, each of the characters is articulated by his or her unique relationship to legislation and institutionalized programs. The Welfare Queen is a byproduct of welfare policies in the United States, more specifically contentious debates about the value of the program and its recipients throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Likewise, the Deadbeat Dad is a product of acts such as the Deadbeat Parent Punishment Act of 1988, while the Promiscuous Teen can be associated with abstinence sex education programs. Although their discursive construction transcends the legislative realm, involving politicized rhetoric, mass media, and cultural narratives, they nonetheless remain tied to the legislation which precipitated their construction and situated them within other webs of discourse.

### **Components of My Argument**

I begin by discussing the rising prominence of conservative groups in both American social and political life during the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. The result of the conservative movement's growth was a proliferation of conservative discourses framing the married heterosexual nuclear family as the traditional American family. Race, class, gender, and sexuality underlie the construct of what the Christian Right framed as the

traditional family and the normalizing discourses which situate it as desirable and grounded in morality. The Christian Right's view that the institution of the family underpins the very fabric of U.S. society makes the family an important institution to interrogate in the context of a discussion about citizenship. With this in mind, in what ways is the institution of the family used to map concerns about citizenship through a social and legal inclusion in the nation-state?

Extending my analysis, I examine the institution of the family as the site of intervention in the domain of welfare policies, specifically, how concerns about welfare families have been articulated along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. My analysis is driven by two prominent "characters" which are constructed through popular social and political discourse: the "Welfare Queen" and the "Deadbeat Dad." These characters both reflect and reinforce social and political attitudes about normative and deviant behaviors among American citizens. For example, what role do these discursive entities play in constructing the meaning of American citizenship? How have discursive shifts in the welfare reform debates influenced public perception of welfare recipients and the problematization of welfare programs?

Finally, I use social theorists Foucault and Althusser to examine questions of power in the social and legislative responses to the problematization of welfare programs. To what extent do abstinence programs serve as a Foucauldian technique of governance? How does

Althusser's notion of the Ideological State Apparatus apply in this context?

Lastly, how can this analysis illuminate the power dynamics inherent in the production of knowledge regarding American citizenship more generally?

## II. The Family and American Cultural Citizenship: Historical Legacies and Modern Manifestations

Because of its ideological weight and primacy in the social and hierarchical organization of the United States, the institution of the family offers a unique opportunity to understand the concept of citizenship in American society. The family serves as the primary object of inquiry in my examination of the discursive construction of American citizenship because it subtly constructs, upholds, and embodies categories the categories of gender, race, and nation.<sup>20</sup> The family is a site of socialization which socializes Americans into the social hierarchies of wider society, a phenomenon which is naturalized through the perception of family as grounded in nature.<sup>21</sup> The importance of the traditional family extends past families themselves; family values are often perceived by lawmakers, prominent conservative socio-political forces, and individual Americans as crucial to sustaining national well-being.<sup>22</sup> According to this logic, the family acts as the primary organizing unit of society, and its breakdown thus symbolizes the breakdown of society itself.

Social norms are a primary vehicle through which contemporary understandings of cultural citizenship are manifested at the site of the family. Such norms are instrumental in establishing multiple types of

<sup>20</sup> Collins, Patricia Hill. "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation," *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*, Uma Nayan and Sandra Harding, eds., (Bloomington, IN:Hypatia Inc., 2000), 157, 158.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, 156.

citizens through their level of conformity to established standards of behavior in the community, including, among others, those polarized as virtuous or deviant. For example, in contemporary America there is a widespread romanticism of the heterosexual nuclear family consisting of a homemaker maternal figure, breadwinning patriarch, and their biological children. In opposition to this wholesome and virtuous, "All American" family is a single-parent family in which the mother is the primary breadwinner rather than remaining in the home to nurture and care for her children. Single mothers in our society are often marked as deviant and irresponsible according to contemporary discourses generated through legislation and politicized public rhetoric.

The concern about the level of adherence to social norms and morality of citizen-subjects is central to the construction of contemporary United States citizenship. The focus on social norms and behaviors makes it important to locate any discussion about citizenship within a historical socio-political context. Accordingly, this project focuses primarily on the rise of the Christian Right in the United States throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the continuing effects of the conservative movement on American social and political life. This period is particularly interesting because it contextualizes present American socio-political life and recognizes the role of the Christian Right and other conservatives in shaping the United States as we know it today. However, historical understandings of the family as a site of cultural as well as political

citizenship bolster my use of the family as an appropriate site through which to interrogate conceptions of citizenship.

### **The Christian Right: Family as a Battleground for Cultural Citizenship**

The Christian Right, a heterogeneous network of actors and discourses with both grassroots religious social movements and political elements such as governmental lobbying, rose to prominence in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s. Christian Right leaders have adopted rhetoric framing the institution of the traditional family as underpinning the morality of American society, and have made the heterosexual nuclear family central to their policy positions and concerns. Some contested socio-political issues during this period were women's equality, reproductive choice, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) civil rights, all of which rallied evangelicals who worried about threats to their ability to promote the supremacy of the traditionally heterosexual nuclear family.

The constitutive relationship between American socio-political and legal realms is especially evident in the case of the Christian Right. Political conservatism reflects and codifies conservative ideals in the political sphere, reproducing and recycling those ideals back to the social sphere in processes which ultimately blur the boundaries between the two. An examination of social discourse about families during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as governmental initiatives such as welfare reform



legislation and the establishment of publically funded abstinence-only sex education programs clearly illustrate the constitutive relationship between America's legal and social realms. This relationship has a profound influence on the socially discursive and legislative construction of normalized versus deviant subject-citizens. The ideological perpetuation of Christian Right-sponsored conservative platforms is firmly embedded in legislation, the public education system, and public consciousness. Through these means, conservative social norms surrounding the family are legally codified and simultaneously promoted in the public sphere in media and education, among other venues.

The Christian Right's notion of the "traditional family," the heterosexual nuclear family, is constructed through a combination of Biblical teachings and nostalgic historical invocations. Socially conservative think tanks and grassroots Christian Right groups have been described as anti-modernists wanting to return to a romanticized nineteenth-century past in which women sought protection, sustenance, and moral guidance from male household heads and church leaders.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, the Christian Right is concerned with a return to the Victorian values of self-reliance, chastity, and familial obligations.<sup>24</sup>

The composition of and dynamics within the "traditional family" are also embedded in conservative interpretations of the Bible. Christian

<sup>23</sup> Reese, Ellen, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 187.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

Right leaders and organizations point to passages of the Bible dealing with family relationships in order to justify their claims to truth on the matter. One oft-quoted passage from Ephesians 5:21-33 states, “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.”<sup>25</sup> When interpreted literally, the emphasis on the submissive nature of women to men, as well as her position as the “weaker vessel,”<sup>26</sup> necessitates a family structure in which the man is dominant and the woman plays a passive role.

The fixation of the Christian Right movement on policy matters concerning the institution of the family and treatment of the family as a social institution connected to the function of government further demonstrates the constitutive relationship between the social and legal realms. Concerns about the behaviors and morality of citizen-subjects are at the center of conversations about “family values” which draw on the traditional family ideal of the heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear family with children. The issues that most interested evangelicals made use of the Christian Right’s strengths by appealing to religiously-motivated voters on the grassroots level and channeling a conservative socio-religious agenda through the Republican Party.<sup>27</sup> The result has been an increased

<sup>25</sup> Eph. 5:21-33.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Peter 3:1-7.

<sup>27</sup> Diamond, Sarah, *Roads to Dominion: Right Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995), 161.

focus on the state's role in regulating society, and especially on "state enforcement of 'traditional' or 'moral' gender relations and personal behavior."<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, legislation proposed by politicians such as Ronald Reagan or conservative thinktanks such as the Heritage Foundation during the 1980s and 1990s sought to police the organization of families. For example, the preservation or implementation of welfare policies mandating or encouraging women on welfare to adhere to perceived moral standards of marriage and sexual activity.

The relationship between social and governmental conceptions of family has played a major role in shaping normative ideals of the family from the 1970s to the present. Some of the key Christian Right organizations in the late 1970s and '80s were the Family Research Council (FRC) and Focus on the Family (FoF), both of which remain extremely prominent. The FRC was founded in 1983 by James Dobson. Still active today, the FRC currently describes itself as "an organization dedicated to the promotion of marriage and family and the sanctity of human life in national policy."<sup>29</sup> FoF was founded in 1977, also by James Dobson. FoF was and is one of the most visible Christian Right interest groups in national politics, pledging to "spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ through a

<sup>28</sup> Diamond, 167.

<sup>29</sup> "About FRC," Family Research Council, <http://www.frc.org/about-frc>, Accessed 10 Oct. 2008.

practical outreach to homes” and asserting “firm beliefs about both the Christian faith and the importance of the family.”<sup>30</sup>

Both FRC and FoF are exemplary of the way that Christian Right organizations operate by simultaneously influencing both the legislative realm and the politicized social culture of America. Both groups use social grassroots movements, often organized through faith-based groups, as well as political organizing and legislative lobbying to raise support for conservative policy goals. Although there is a host of similarly-focused organizations across the United States, FRC and FoF’s continued influence in both the social and the political sphere and their preoccupation with the family structure are useful to illustrate the preoccupation of Christian Right organizations with narrow definitions concerning the institution of the family. FRC and FoF leaders use this double-pronged strategy consciously, and it is considered a way in which the organizations have made tangible progress toward incorporating their conservative socio-religious ideologies into official state policy.<sup>31</sup>

Rhetorically, the “traditional family” for the Christian Right is centrally located in evangelical discourse as symbolic of the moral order

<sup>30</sup> “About Focus on the Family: Guiding Principles,” Focus on the Family, [http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about\\_us.aspx](http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us.aspx), Accessed 10 Oct. 2008.

<sup>31</sup> “Because FRC and Focus on the Family are both 501(c)(3) research and education organizations, we are limited in our legal ability to lobby. That is why FRC Action and Focus on the Family Action are needed. Both are 501(c)(4), education and lobbying organizations ... FRC and FRC Action have a constant presence in Washington, D.C. Our staff includes a Government Affairs department that lobbies Congress and is in continual contact with the White House ... FRC Action and Focus on the Family Action are working together to defend marriage, life, and other family values.” “FAQs: Government Affairs and Media,” Family Research Council, <http://www.frc.org/faqs>, Accessed 12 Oct. 2008.

and strong values touted by Christian Right organizations. These organizations expressly identify their ideological commitments to promoting family structures that align with their moral framework, usually including upholding strictly defined, patriarchal gender roles, participation in sexual intercourse only within marriage, and compliance with the only relationship structure that makes adherence to those principles possible: monogamous heterosexual coupling with biological or legally adopted offspring and recognized through a marriage contract.

According to FRC,

[p]roperly understood, 'families' are formed only by ties of blood, marriage, or adoption, and 'marriage' is a union of one man and one woman. We believe that the law should recognize only these traditional definitions of marriage and family and that public policy should encourage formation of such families and discourage alternative 'family' forms.<sup>32</sup>

As illustrated above, equally important to the project of preserving "traditional" families are the political steps that Christian Right organizations must take to codify the heterosexual nuclear family in American social discourse.

The Christian Right is not the first to present a set of discursive strategies for reifying a particular notion of the heterosexual nuclear family. Other movements, such as proponents of slavery in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, white supremacists in the 1950s and 1960s, and the anti-LGBTQ movement of the present, have sought and continue to seek to define the

<sup>32</sup> "Marriage and Family," Family Research Council, <http://www.frc.org/marriage-family#structure>, Accessed 10 Oct. 2008.

institution of the family according to their own ideologies. Conceptions of the family as an institution have thus had far-reaching effects on the lives of Americans throughout the centuries, particularly as normative family structures relate to social, legal, and political inclusion. These exclusionary movements exist to the ideological detriment of those Americans who do not conform to dominant norms. Although conservative discourses are not wholly determinative of family structures, the discursive violence done to those marked deviant by these discourses is very real. The patriarchal, heterosexual model of the nuclear family asserted by the Christian Right does not negate the existence of family structures which do not adhere to it, but instead marks them as deviant and dysfunctional, both in legislation, and in politicized public rhetoric about public policy and American society more generally.

### **The Heterosexual Nuclear Family: A Historical Analysis**

Because the Christian Right's claims of authority on the issue of family structure stem from its assertion that America is a religious nation and that Americans have always organized themselves based on Biblical principles (interpreted in the most conservative manner possible), it is important to ask: have families traditionally been ordered this way? The answer is no. Historically, the heterosexual nuclear family has not always predominated, for a number of reasons, especially across racial and class demographics. For example, in recent decades, a growing body of research concerning the familial experiences of African Americans has

pointed to the ways in which African American family structures depart from the Euro-American nuclear family, which itself contains incredible variety. Some scholars argue that the extended family networks formed during American slavery were based on the institutional heritage of family structures on the African continent and brought by slaves to the American continent. These family structures then adapted to the political and economic conditions under slavery. The inability of slaves to marry one another or members of any other racial group further compounded the need to organize family structures in ways that differ from groups which could legally marry by necessitating extended family childrearing and living situations.<sup>33</sup>

However, it was not only the family structures themselves that differed from the Christian Right's perception of the heterosexual nuclear family unit. Intra-racial relationships between Black men and women have historically been characterized by more egalitarian roles and economic parity than relationships between white men and women. Unlike the historical patriarchal legacy of the white male head of household, Black families were historically shaped by the oppressive system of slavery which did not allow for Black men's dominance over women and children in the family.

<sup>33</sup> Sudarkasa, Niara, "Interpreting the African Heritage in Afro-American Family Organization," *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 34-35.

In the post-slavery era, patterns of gender roles and behavior were shaped by conditions which forced Black women to enter the labor market in order to contribute to the economic well-being of the household due to wage discrimination against Black male workers. Economic independence among Black females led to attitudes of freedom and equality in Black relationships which were not known to many other women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup> These families are often overlooked in dominant discourses about a singular, historical family rooted in tradition, such as that perpetuated by the Christian Right. These work patterns among African American families continue in contemporary America, and are compounded further by the role of economic-based necessitation of a dual-income household in which both parties in a relationship must work outside of the home. In fact, many have argued that one component of the discrepancy between family formations of Black and white households is income, which acts on people of color in addition to the burden stemming from institutionalized racism.<sup>35</sup>

Cross-racially, the issue of class remains a factor in determining gendered employment within the family. Among low income, dual-parent white families, a singly employed, breadwinning patriarch is unlikely to bring in sufficient economic resources to support his family, making it necessary for low-income women to work outside of the home. This

<sup>34</sup> Staples, Robert, "An Overview of Race and Marital Status," *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 187.

<sup>35</sup> McAdoo, Harriette Pipes, "Preface to the First Edition," *Black Families*, ed. Harriette Pipes McAdoo, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988), 9.



further the impracticality of the Christian Right's heterosexual nuclear family structure, with its strictly divided, Biblically-inspired gender roles, for the lower classes. Economic realities persist no matter the nature of one's religious beliefs, making it difficult if not impossible for low-income Americans to survive in a single-income household even for the most devout.

### **The Institution of Marriage: Social and Legal Conceptions of American Citizenship**

The institution of marriage, also, is central to the Christian Right's rhetoric about acceptable family formations, and is linked to the concept of family in American society because of its role as the means by which government recognizes and legitimates family structures. Like the family, marriage has historically been complicated by issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The way these variables intersect with marriage has long been reflective of a historical period's social culture, a fact very relevant to a discussion about the marginalizing nature of the Christian Right's concept of the family as defined by sex, gender roles, and a legally sanctioned bond through the marriage contract. Further, marriage and citizenship are intertwined in that the legal institution of marriage has historically indicated a sense of acceptance and belonging, both socially and legally, in American society. It is therefore important to recognize the place of marriage in reflecting and defining ideals of American citizenship.

The relationship between marriage and race has been historically rocky and sweeping changes affecting it have occurred over time in both

legal and social structures. During the period in which slavery was legal in the United States, slaves had no right to marry either one another or white Americans. While informal marriages between slaves were established, these unions were not recognized by law, and slave owners were not required to honor them. Because of this, slave couples were often sold away from one another, splitting up families. This lack of a legal marriage contract increased the instability of slave life in an already discriminatory period. In the antebellum period, abolitionists denounced slavery in part because of its negative impact on the marital relationship and families. Once slavery became illegal, many slaves sought out their informally recognized spouses and hurried to make their marriages legal in order to secure their families.<sup>36</sup> In this period, however, Black and white Americans were still barred from marrying, and even sex between individuals of differing races was illegal.<sup>37</sup> These miscegenation laws further prevented interracial couples from achieving the heterosexual nuclear family unit, which includes not only a marriage contract, but often children as well.

In 1967, bans on interracial marriage in the United States were overturned by *Loving v. Virginia*, in which the Supreme Court declared that marriage was a basic civil right “fundamental to our very existence and survival,” and that bans on interracial marriage were “designed to

<sup>36</sup> Chauncey, George, *Why Marriage?*, (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 62.

<sup>37</sup> Chauncey, 63.

maintain White Supremacy.”<sup>38</sup> The Court ruled that such laws were therefore unconstitutional. Importantly, though, the racial marginalization present in the heterosexual nuclear family unit persisted even with the legalization of interracial marriages, especially when it came to children, an important component of the heterosexual nuclear family unit. While miscegenation laws no longer forbid sexual relations or reproduction between people of differing races, institutional measures were still in place making it difficult for interracial couples to maintain custody of children. Some judges even removed children from the homes of divorced white mothers who had moved in with or married black men, a practice which was not ruled unconstitutional until 1984. These barriers further complicated the relationship between race and the heterosexual nuclear family unit, making this family ideal difficult to obtain.

Similar discrimination is carried out against same-sex couples with children when judges determine that lesbian or gay parents are automatically deemed unfit as a result of their sexual orientation, or who are disqualified from parenthood because they live with same-sex partners, and are thus seen as subjecting their children to the stigma of having a gay parent. While most states require an “individualized assessment” of a parent’s fitness for custody, this does not prevent judges

<sup>38</sup> *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U. S. 1 (1967).

from exercising their own bias against lesbians and gay men by arbitrarily ruling against them in child custody cases.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, same-sex couples in the United States have historically been denied the right to marriage and therefore the ability to form a legally-sanctioned family unit. Historically, no same-sex couples had the right to marry in the US, and the allocation of rights for same-sex partners were few and far between. Currently, same-sex couples have the right to marry in only three states, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Iowa. However, even when same-sex couples are given the legal right to form married families, their status as same-sex heads of household remains at odds with the conservative mandate for a heterosexual family unit and thus serves to marginalize them ideologically as well as or instead of legally. As far as children are concerned, same-sex couples are barred from adopting as couples in some states, and almost half of the states in the Union do not allow second-party adoption of children by the unmarried partner of a child's legal parent. These obstacles make the pursuit of the nuclear family unit even more difficult for same-sex couples, a situation which is further complicated by the fact that doctors in the field of assisted reproduction and related medical fields routinely discriminate against same-sex couples.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Chauncey, 106-107.

<sup>40</sup> "Adoption and Parenting: National Context," Lambda Legal, <http://www.lambdalegal.org/our-work/issues/marriage-relationships-family/parenting/>, Accessed 24 Oct. 2008.

As is the case with race, the Christian Right uses homophobic rhetoric and legislative measures to enshrine and perpetuate social and institutional discrimination against LGBTQ Americans. The institution of the family is just one site of this discrimination, but is one example in which the phenomenon can be observed. Through narratives painting LGBTQ Americans as deviant and lacking morality, and their families as unnatural and void of family values, evangelicals promote a view of same-sex couples and their families as undesirable and even un-American. This deviance is exacerbated by conservative rhetoric painting the heterosexual nuclear family as ideal and desirable.

The connection of family, marriage, and citizenship is unsurprising. In fact, marriage as an institution has historically indicated social and legal notions of citizenship, making it central to any conversation about the relationship between family structures and ideal citizenship. Americans have consistently been aware of these relationships. Marriage as legal institution, tied to rights and responsibilities at the level of the nation-state, and as a social institution, a primary building block of American society which informs the way Americans understand themselves in relation to each other, makes it an important site of cultural citizenship ideals. In addition, governance of the “population” is a central aspect of the marriage contract’s utility. Marriage, in Foucauldian terms, is used as a technique of governance to produce docile heteronormative families comprised of subject-citizens whose management is simplified through

their role in the marriage contract. Additionally, in the terms of cultural citizenship, marriage makes visible concepts of normalcy and deviance which define who is eligible to enter into the institution of marriage and to what end.

For instance, the Supreme Court decision in *Loving* codified in law what had long been recognized by some Americans—denying black people the right to marry one another during slavery was one of the most personally consequential signs of freedom.<sup>41</sup> The very opposition to legalizing marriages between slaves as well as interracial couples speaks to an intense cultural concern about what allowing access to marriage rights means. For racist Americans, recognition of these marriages would imply that black and white people were equal and deserving of the same rights, a claim they vehemently opposed.

Similarly, marriage equality activists claim that denying civil marriage rights to same-sex couples is an affront to their status as American citizens. The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, decided in 2003, referenced that very concern for the tenants of full citizenship by allowing same-sex couples to marry in order to preserve their status as full, rather than second class, citizens.<sup>42</sup> Citizenship in this context is the fundamental right to marry the person of one's choosing and thus form a family unit recognized and

<sup>41</sup> "As a member of the Colored Infantry in Virginia once asserted, 'The Marriage Covenant is at the foundation of all of our rights.'" Chauncey, 62, 63.

<sup>42</sup> *Goodridge et al. v. Department of Public Health*, SJC-08860, 4 March 2003. 3.

legitimized by the state and American society—a combination of the rights and responsibilities notion of political citizenship and the more complex view of social or cultural citizenship as belonging to a national whole, and is an interesting use of the rights and responsibilities trope of cultural citizenship as a means by which to argue for inclusive, rather than exclusive citizenship. In dialog about the legalization of same-sex marriage, opponents in the Christian Right do not address the claim that denying same-sex couples the right to marry infringes upon their citizenship by excluding them from equal legal protection and exclusion from an important social institution. According to Josephson, this may be because they purposely intend to exclude homosexual people full citizenship.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Proliferation of Family Values Discourses: Implications for American Citizenship**

The correlation between citizenship and the heterosexual nuclear family unit can be readily observed in the alarmist dialog that accompanies the Christian Right's contemporary anxieties about family structures. It is clear that these anxieties about the family as an institution are amplified by the Christian Right's understanding of the role of the family in a broader context. Because conservative Christian groups conceive of the family as the most basic, fundamental unit of a healthy

<sup>43</sup> "For members of the Christian Right, opposition to same-sex marriage is tied to their vision of the role that Christian morality should play in national identity and citizenship. Seeing the United States as a Christian nation, they believe that laws should reflect their understanding of Christianity." Josephson, Jyl. "Citizenship, Same-Sex Marriage, and Feminist Critiques of Marriage," *Perspectives on Politics*, June 2005.

society, they consider maintaining the dominance of the heterosexual nuclear family unit a matter of preserving the viability of American society. According to the FRC's mission statement, "Family Research Council champions marriage and family as the foundation of civilization, the seedbed of virtue, and the wellspring of society."<sup>44</sup> In other words, the health of a society is measured by Christian Right groups by the extent to which the families that constitute that society adhere to the heterosexual nuclear model—non-adherence to this model signifies, quite literally, the demise of society. According to this logic, the family is the primary building block through which society is ordered, and if the structure of family changes, the structure of society is necessarily altered.

It is through the socio-political and legislative discursive mechanisms of the Christian Right that any family which does not adhere to the so-called traditional, heterosexual nuclear family model comes to symbolize the decline of modern society in its departure from the stability of a form of family—the heterosexual nuclear kind—which, as we are told by the Christian Right, has withstood the test of time and historical validity. Thus, those individuals forming families along other lines, whether they are extended families, single parent families, families headed by same-sex couples, childfree couples, or any other, become responsible for the uprooting of American society as well as considered

<sup>44</sup> "Marriage and Family," Family Research Council, <http://www.frc.org/marriage-family#structure>, Accessed 10 Oct. 2008.



culpable for any damage which may be incurred by children raised in such an “experimental” way.

The effect is twofold: legislatively, it becomes the interest of the state to maintain the heterosexual nuclear family for the strength of society. Ideologically, they must be marginalized to the extent that they are denied acceptance into society. Even independently of the political or legal rights of citizenship, non-conforming families fail to meet the requirements for acceptance into the structures of cultural citizenship. A binarized construction of ideologically opposed human subjects—those who are virtuous and traditional versus those who are corrupt and deviant—are created through socio-legal marginalization. By marking the families these subjects create as traditional or deviant, the Christian Right uses the institution of the family to solidify a binary which naturalizes and normalizes certain lifestyles and behaviors. This binary simultaneously “others,” marks as “deviant,” and pathologizes those subjects whose lifestyles and behaviors do not align with conservative ideologies. However, the family values discourses which have multiplied in the wake of the strengthening Christian Right represent not only the composition or behaviors of families and individuals as such, but rather families and individuals as units fundamentally necessary for a thriving society with the right type of citizens comprising a national body.

The Christian Right’s preoccupation with the virtue and morality of the married patriarchal heterosexual nuclear family is important not only

for those within the conservative movement, but also for American society more generally. The pervasive family values rhetoric of the past several decades has had an intense effect on American understandings of the meaning of citizenship, especially as articulated through families and morality. This effect is illustrated through an analysis of legislative discourse and political rhetoric about governmental programs having to do with welfare reform and abstinence-only sex education. The legislative purpose of both programs is shaped by the legacy of Christian Right thinking about morality and family structures, with the narratives of public discussions regarding these programs reflecting a similar influence.

### III. Welfare Reform and the Discursive Production of Ideal Citizenship

If discourse can be understood in Delany's terms as plural and Foucault's terms as a form of modern power, it is necessary to ask two questions: what is the discourse *saying*, and what does the discourse *produce*? In the case of welfare reform, we must look to the texts and stipulations of legislation dealing with questions of public assistance in the United States, as well as to the social, political, and rhetorical narratives which accompany that legislation. There has been an abundance of discussions about American welfare policy in recent decades.

The proliferation of discussions about the merits of welfare reform initiatives has mirrored the proliferation of discourses about the primacy of the heterosexual nuclear family; both discourses arose from conservative social and political gains during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Because of this, public discussions about welfare reform have been structured around conservative ideals of family and morality. The Christian Right's conception of the morality of the heterosexual family unit as expressed through socio-religious grassroots movements and conservative activity in American government is crucial in understanding the terrain of welfare policy in the contemporary United States. Ultimately, conservative notions of family have influenced the establishment of cultural citizenship in America.

The discursive entities central to welfare reform debates are twofold. First, discursive “characters” such as the Welfare Queen and the Deadbeat Dad have been used to illustrate myths about the abuse of public assistance programs. These deviant characters are the subjects ostensibly governed by the regulations of welfare reform programs and are emblematic of the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Secondly, the Welfare Family, which includes the Welfare Queen, the Deadbeat Dad, and their children, is portrayed as a monolithic prototype and serves as a battleground for ideologies of family and morality within welfare policies. The Welfare Family is the target of conservative rhetoric about the familial deviance of welfare recipients as evidenced by their dependency on the system.

### **Talking the Talk: What Welfare Discourses Say**

In the 1980s, the Welfare Queen emerged at the front and center of political theater, providing a convenient scapegoat for the Reagan administration’s project of drumming up support for cost-cutting and morality-boosting public policy. The icon of the Welfare Queen rendered unsympathetic the recipients of governmental public assistance funds. Reagan and other conservative politicians latched on to media profiles of welfare mothers in their campaign rhetoric, further painting these women as “queens” living a cushy life eating steak, residing in mansions, and driving fancy Cadillacs. During his initial 1976 bid for President, Reagan used one such story to justify his calls for welfare reform. “She has eighty

names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards, and is collecting veterans' benefits on four deceased husbands ... Her tax-free cash alone is over \$150,000," Reagan proclaimed on the campaign trail, referring to one highly-publicized (and grossly misreported) case of welfare fraud.<sup>45</sup>

Through the media and political rhetoric, these women combined in public perception to form the character of the Welfare Queen.

The Welfare Queen is illustrative of the ways in which conservative concerns about families on welfare animated calls for welfare reform in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>46</sup> The Welfare Queen is a *character*, an icon illustrated by narratives, rather than a simple political talking point. She should be viewed as a construct created through legislative discourses and political rhetoric surrounding welfare policies and reform initiatives. Within the Welfare Queen discourse are narratives about the role of race, class, gender, and sexuality in American society, each establishing paradigms of normalcy and deviance that both reflect and manufacture ideologies of Americanism.

<sup>45</sup> Douglas, Susan and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women*, (New York: Free Press, 2004), 185.

<sup>46</sup> As Reese points out, politicians' emphasis on traditional family values during this time was linked to the rise of the Christian Right, an occurrence which revitalized the Republican party and shifted it rightward on social issues. Politicization and conservative alignment of evangelicals underway in the 1970s escalated after 1983 as dominion theology urged evangelicals to be more political. Evangelicals therefore sought to return America to its biblical principles, including traditional family values. Additionally, the Christian Coalition was the largest group to call for welfare reform measures, joined by conservative groups such as Concerned Women for America, Traditional Values Coalition, and Focus on the Family. See: Reese, Ellen, *The Backlash Against Welfare Mothers: Past and Present*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 144-145, 188.

Racialized narratives are at the heart of the Welfare Queen discourse primarily because conservatives have long manufactured support for anti-welfare policies by appealing to racist sentiments.<sup>47</sup> Attacks on unwed and teen mothers were racially coded in the media through visual representation linking race and poverty, and resonated widely because they correlated with broader national concerns about inner-city poverty, welfare dependency, and shifts in family structures and sexual mores.<sup>48</sup> Resentment toward those receiving public assistance has also been increased by racial tensions, often fueled by conservative politicians and the Christian Right, both seeking to gain the political support of racist Americans through the demonization of black Americans. Once welfare was painted as a “black program,” no claim about the abuses of the system was too outrageous to be believed in a society plagued by racial issues.<sup>49</sup> By the early 1990s, “welfare” had become a code word for race.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> During 1972-1973, seventy five percent of magazine pictures about welfare were illustrated using African Americans, even though they represented only forty three percent of the welfare rolls during that time. See: Douglas and Michaels, 183. ; Racialized images of poverty jumped in the 1960s, from 27% in 1964 to 72% in 1967, an overrepresentation due to an increased coverage of civil unrest and urban riots as well as critical coverage of the War on Poverty. The resulting associations between poverty, welfare, and blacks increased skepticism about the worthiness of welfare spending. See: Reese, 25, 117.

<sup>48</sup> Reese, 144-45.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph, Alfred L. Jr., “Welfare Reform: Forward to the Past,” *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006), 46.

<sup>50</sup> “By 1992 “welfare” had become a code word for race, and Bill Clinton promised to ‘end welfare as we know it.’” Abramovitz, Mimi, “Neither Accidental, Nor Simple Mean-Spirited: The Context for Welfare Reform,” *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric*

An influx of Hispanic and Latino immigrants in recent decades has altered national demographics and complicated conceptions of race in the United States. Hispanic and Latino immigration, combined with anti-immigrant rhetoric and imagery, has certainly impacted the terrain of race-based welfare discourses.<sup>51</sup> In the 1990s, the anti-immigration movement converged with the welfare reform debate, and the already-existing Welfare Queen discourse was altered by the popular image of the undeserving immigrant, thus injecting more racial distortions into the conversation in the form of stereotypes of Latina and sometimes Asian migrants coming to the US to reproduce US citizen children.<sup>52</sup> In part because conservative scholars lent professional legitimacy to this propaganda, immigrant women were increasingly associated with welfare.<sup>53</sup> This association is fueled by conservative politicians decrying the national “problem” of immigration in the United States, attacks directed primarily toward Latino immigrants, both legal and illegal. Race is therefore has been and remains an important component of the construction of the Welfare Queen, and one primary way in which concerns about family structures and moral values are manifested.

*and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006), 33.

<sup>51</sup> Schram, Sanford F., “That Old Black Magic? Welfare Reform and the New Politics of Racial Implication,” *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal, eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006), 226.

<sup>52</sup> Fujiwara, Lynn, “The Politics of Citizenship and Entitlement: Immigrants, Welfare, and the Persistence of Poverty,” *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal, eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006), 238.

<sup>53</sup> Reese, 184

Gender, too, is central narrative of welfare discourse, and is so closely knit with race in this context that the two are difficult to separate. Sensationalist reporting by media outlets on a handful of high-profile cases of welfare system abuse underscores the intersection of race, gender, and welfare. In these profiles, reporters observing the lives of mothers, the most common custodial caretakers of poor children as living on welfare benefits, used the media as a medium through which to demonize poor women and their parenting skills.<sup>54</sup>

Additionally, sexuality proved to be an important dimension to the complex character of the Welfare Queen, and a site of gendered welfare-related governmental regulation. The focus on her sexuality, presumably deviant, is one aspect of this regulation. The Welfare Queen is single, presumably either never married, or the product of a divorce, both options which are both considered morally corrupt by the conservative Christian Right. That she is single and has children further marks her sexuality as deviant, as she bore children out of wedlock, or failed to secure for her children an appropriate paternal influence. Sexuality is also linked to the long-standing perception that women on welfare reproduce solely to collect increased welfare benefits. This perception is perpetuated by gross exaggerations in media coverage of welfare fraud as well as

<sup>54</sup> In some cases reporters attacked their parenting abilities, motivation levels, and morality. In others the focus was mainly on the gross fraud and manipulation of the system perpetuated by welfare mothers. Some of these mothers were bad mothers, lazily living in filth and not simply unable to take care of their children, but *unwilling* to shoulder that responsibility. Other mothers were shown enjoying the riches brought in by claiming benefits under multiple identities. For a more in-depth discussion, see: Douglas and Michaels, 173-74, 185.



anecdotal accounts from a small number of welfare recipients over the years.

These perceptions of the sexual activity of welfare mothers have contributed to the social construction of the Welfare Queen as not only sexually promiscuous, but also conniving and calculating. Whether the Welfare Queen is a black woman scheming to birth more children in order to increase her government check or a Latina immigrant planning to give birth to US citizen children as a means of qualifying for public assistance at the taxpayers' expense, her motives are impure.<sup>55</sup> These stereotypes have become common public knowledge through decades of repetition and are held up as proof that mothers on welfare are not concerned with the well-being of their children but are instead blinded by the promise of increased cash at the taxpayers' expense.<sup>56</sup>

Further evidence of attitudes toward gendered notions of sexuality and the family is found in the legislative stipulations of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) broadening the scope of governmental intervention to include sexual regulation and the promotion of ideology framing the married heterosexual nuclear family model as ideal. The PRWORA amended the Social Security Act by defining the purpose of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to include promoting marriage, reducing the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and encouraging

<sup>55</sup> Abramovitz, 33; Douglas and Michaels, 192.

<sup>56</sup> Douglas and Michaels, 178.

the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.<sup>57</sup> Stipulations such as these promote the view that governmental intervention into the intimate lives of poor individuals and families constitutes legitimate governmental activity.<sup>58</sup> That the government seeks to intervene in these matters at all speaks to a concern about the morality and sexual deviance of welfare mothers and their male partners and defines as deviant and morally corrupt living arrangements and lifestyles not adhering to a heterosexual nuclear family model. These concerns are part of the discursive construction of the Welfare Queen as a deviant character void of moral values and needing to be reigned in and reformed through governmental action.

As an institution, marriage has been especially important in defining deviance and normalcy for conservatives. Because welfare policies were seen as creating poverty and immorality, it was assumed that hard work and morality could be achieved through a reverse in policy initiatives, and that welfare reform must adopt initiatives encouraging morality.<sup>59</sup> The promotion of marriage was carried through in the TANF program, which included programs to increase marriage rates as a means of reducing poverty.<sup>60</sup> One marriage-based requirement

<sup>57</sup> Smith, Anna Marie, *Welfare Reform and Sexual Regulation*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 89.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, 90.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, 115.

<sup>60</sup> Little evidence supports the claim that getting married will facilitate economic stability, although marriage correlates with positive outcomes for families overall. Other factors and not the finite act of marriage are likely to cause this difference. PRWORA

of TANF is that it seeks to prevent out-of-wedlock births. In 2002 the Bush administration earmarked \$300 million in TANF allocations to states to fund marriage promotion programs such as premarital counseling, divorce-avoidance counseling, and publicity campaigns extolling the virtues of marriage.<sup>61</sup>

These marriage campaigns indicate that there is a particular family formation considered desirable enough to warrant governmental intervention and promotion of what is best for families. Married fatherhood has been proposed by conservatives as an alternative to the female-headed households they claim are responsible for so many social ills. The United States Department of Health and Human Services even developed programs to promote the formation of patriarchal family structures with biological fathers at the helm.<sup>62</sup> George W. Bush's administration developed a particular interest this promotion of marriage. By their logic, marriage and fatherhood are thus inextricably linked—marriage is a means by which to secure married fatherhood, and fatherhood promotion is a means by which to promote patriarchal family

overemphasizes moral behavioral goals in relation to concrete goals such as economic stability. See: Peck, Laura R. and Sarah Allen Gershon, "Welfare Reform and the American Dream," *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Politics of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A. Segal eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006), 101-102.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, 173-174.

<sup>62</sup> This is done by diverting funds from income assistance to mothers and children to social services in efforts to enhance the role of non-custodial fathers through parenting skills training, premarital and marriage counseling, activities to promote parental access and visitation, job placement and training, and initiatives to promote responsible fatherhood as well as to increase the capacity of fathers to provide emotional and financial support for their children. See: Mink, 159.

formations according to heterosexual nuclear family ideals.<sup>63</sup> Both are a method of ensuring that parents, both fathers and mothers, are encouraged into particular roles within the family and within society. Therefore, contemporary marriage campaigns focus on a family formation which is rooted in conservative and religious ideologies of patriarchy and male-dominated breadwinning.<sup>64</sup> The heterosexual nuclear family thus becomes a requisite for normative cultural citizenship.

Similarly, the discursive character of the Deadbeat Dad is thus clearly evoked in public discussions about welfare. The Deadbeat Dad serves as a further gendered and racialized way to mark low-income individuals as multiply deviant and deserving of government surveillance and discipline. In addition to gendered and racialized narratives surrounding this character, the Deadbeat Dad is also consistent with narratives about the sexuality, marriage, and family formations of welfare recipients. The Deadbeat Dad, as counterpart to the Welfare Queen, is constructed less by public rhetoric and more through legislative discourses. Paternafare programs, especially, construct the gendered dynamics of the welfare family by perpetuating a patriarchal model of gendered dependency.<sup>65</sup> The ideological role of paternafare is to bolster the claim that the pathological and destructive behaviors of low-income families are the cause of poverty. Especially important in light of conservative views about

<sup>63</sup> Mink, 163.

<sup>64</sup> Mink, 160.

<sup>65</sup> Smith, 67.

the role of the state in social welfare, paternafare shifts the burden of caring for poor families from the state onto the private patriarchal household.<sup>66</sup>

Legislation such as the Deadbeat Parent Punishment Act of 1998 has increased systemic efforts to enforce child-support payments from non-custodial parents.<sup>67</sup> While the act is gender-neutral in its wording, its implications are highly gendered, for it seeks to regulate and reform the overwhelmingly male non-custodial biological parents of children receiving welfare benefits. These rogue and stingy absent parents are personified through the character of the Deadbeat Dad. Paternafare paints both the Welfare Queen and the Deadbeat Dad as social pariahs who drain public assistance programs through their irresponsible and deviant behaviors, both in terms of their unwillingness to find gainful employment to support their families and in terms of their rampant sexuality and inability to refrain from creating children they cannot support. In an attempt to reform and rehabilitate them, the Welfare Queen and the Deadbeat Dad are coerced by the state through paternafare to perform the gendered roles of female caretaker and male provider even though these characters do not constitute a family. Paternafare ideology promotes gendered roles, so-called traditional marital roles, as the only means through which welfare children can be properly raised: in more traditional households and family models.

<sup>66</sup> Smith, 118.

<sup>67</sup> Smith, 120.

The discursive entity of the Welfare Family is also central to discourses about welfare reform. Concerns about family structure as well as the personal and moral deviance of welfare recipients have been loudly voiced for a number of years.<sup>68</sup> “Family values” regulations have been used to define women as “deserving” or “undeserving” of state aid from the very beginning of American social welfare programs, decisions which were often made according to race, class, and marital status.<sup>69</sup> Of key concern has been the formation of families and behavioral roles within those families—women who fulfilled prescribed roles as wives and mothers were deemed deserving.<sup>70</sup>

Also primary to the Welfare Family discourse are narratives about the hereditary deviance of both welfare parents and their children, as well as what conservatives identified as the issue of chronic dependence on public assistance programs. The dependence of welfare families, primarily headed by women, on public assistance programs is due to a lack of employment. Ironically, the unemployment of welfare mothers mirrors

<sup>68</sup> For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, conservative politicians sought to limit or deny benefits to adult welfare recipients, namely women, who cohabitated out of wedlock with a man not legally responsible for her children. During this period The United States Supreme Court took up the question of whether such restrictions were constitutional, ultimately striking them down. The decisions did note, however, that state concerns about fostering immorality by mothers could be dealt with using “rehabilitation” methods to alter the behavior of adult recipients rather than punishing their blameless children. See: Weaver, R. Kent, *Ending Welfare As We Know It*, (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 2000), 18.

<sup>69</sup> “In 1935 the landmark Social Security Act excluded farm laborers and domestic workers with impunity—the two main occupations open to blacks and Latinos at the time. In the 1940s and 1950s southern welfare offices shut down during cotton and tobacco harvests to ensure a steady supply of black labor. In the early 1960s more than a few states with large black welfare caseloads threw women off welfare for having children on their own.” From: Abramovitz, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Abramovitz, 30.

the desirable position of women within the Christian Right's traditional family as unemployed outside of the home, instead fulfilling the role of homemakers and caretakers of their children. It is clear through these conflicting discourses that while maternal figures in the traditional family are bound to raise and nurture their children, the Welfare Queen is not fit or entitled to nurture her own children. The theme of hereditary deviance may be at work here: the virtuous homemaker is the perfect vehicle by which to socialize children into society as citizens, while the Welfare Queen is seen as passing her deviance to her children, keeping them from attaining American ideals of cultural citizenship.

The media obsession of the 1980s and 1990s with the state of families and motherhood in the United States contributed to the construction of the Welfare Family through public discourse. The Welfare Family became a scapegoat for wider social fears about the loss of maternal instinct as well as abandonment and neglect,<sup>71</sup> and the breakdown of the nuclear family, especially in communities of color.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Douglas and Michaels, 176.

<sup>72</sup> In 1986 Bill Moyers aired "The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America," a documentary about the decline of African American family structures. This documentary continued a legacy of cultural concerns about the state of black families during the 1960s, exemplified by Patrick Moynihan in his infamous report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. The overarching themes of these narratives were the dominance of excessively-breeding black mothers who emasculated their male partners, thus causing a collapse of nuclear families. According to Moyers, "[f]or much of black America, the traditional family has vanished." While Moyers was relatively liberal on many fronts, his discourse about "traditional" families was similar to the concerns raised by the Christian Right; what Moyers really meant by "traditional" was the heterosexual nuclear family unit, a configuration which was and continues to be held up as a bastion of morality. Although Moyers' dialog demonized low-income families of color, this set of concerns

These concerns were brought to the public's attention with the rise of the Christian Right in American socio-political life, increasing conservative dominance in the mass media, and the use of racialized rhetoric intended to instill fear into white Americans about the implications of welfare recipients' familial deviance on white communities.

Welfare families, the welfare mothers as the primary caretaker of low-income children and deadbeat dads as absent from parenting all together, became primary icons of bad parenting, immorality, and irresponsibility—in all ways the opposite of the idealized heterosexual nuclear family. The deviance of these families became known as the very *cause* of impoverishment and delinquency. For black families, especially, their deviant family structure was said to put their children at increased risk for failure in school, drug addiction, and alienation from wider society, factors which stemmed primarily from lack of father figures.<sup>73</sup>

served as a stand-in for the perhaps even more pressing issue of the potential collapse of white families. For a more in-depth discussion see: Douglas and Michaels, 193.

<sup>73</sup> High rates of delinquency, school drop-outs, and other problems among children of single mothers are due primarily to poverty rather than just the absence of fathers or lack of patriarchal household. Reese, 158. ; While unwed and teen welfare mothers, disproportionately black and Latina, are portrayed as welfare queens passing on their deviance to their children through incompetent childrearing, research suggests that many of the effects attributed to "father absence" are rightfully due to the effects of poverty rather than family structure, per se. Reese, Ellen, "Wedlock, Worship, and Welfare: The Influence of Right-Wing Think Tanks and the Christian Right on Welfare Reform," *The Promise of Welfare Reform: Political Rhetoric and the Reality of Poverty in the Twenty-First Century*, Keith M. Kilty and Elizabeth A Segal, eds., (New York: The Haworth Press, 2006), 172.; In 1996, Congress managed to heap the blame for many US social ills on nonmarital childbearing and single motherhood, claiming that children born out of wedlock are more likely to be suspended from school, and that areas with a higher percentage of single-parent households have an increased rate of violent crime. Reese, 156.



Households headed by Welfare Queens failed to cultivate work ethic and morality, leading to increased extramarital sexual relations as well as adolescent pregnancy and criminal behaviors.<sup>74</sup> While these claims were initially leveled at American Americans, shifting demographics have led to increasing criticisms of Latino families and other families of color. Furthermore, welfare programs themselves were a cause of deviance and pathology. Claims that the pathological behavior of welfare recipients was the cause of poverty among African American families rhetorically erased the reality of racism, lack of education, a shortage of jobs, and the unavailability of birth control.<sup>75</sup> They were, however, socially successful in defining families of color—and thus, implicitly, the Welfare Family—as deviating from white norms in terms of their family structures as well as their sexual practices.

Chronic dependence narratives are another element of the effort to paint welfare recipients as intrinsically deviant. At the level of the family, this deviance applied not just adult recipients, but also their children, who were portrayed as inevitably likely to end up on welfare. The trend toward discussing welfare policies in terms of the dependence of its recipients was promoted by conservative voices who argued that safety nets for the poor did not ensure adequate income for poor children, but instead caused additional, often morality-based, problems, such as encouraging out-of-wedlock pregnancy, discouraging work and marriage,

<sup>74</sup> Smith, 106.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, 193.

and created an underclass that perpetuated poverty from generation to generation.<sup>76</sup> The increase in pathologizing not only welfare parents but also their children, especially teenage girls at risk for needing welfare support, has succeeded in casting whole families as deviant in the eyes of public perception as well as in the treatment of welfare families in relevant legislation.

The ideologies underpinning solutions to the “welfare problem” are also linked to a preoccupation with the heterosexual nuclear family model. Conservative think tanks and Republican politicians facilitated a shift toward punishing welfare parents and away from statements that evoked pity on behalf of poor children.<sup>77</sup> A deterrence-based approach, often referred to as the “strict father” model of morality, advocated for state paternalism, strict rules, and sanctions for welfare recipients as a means of promoting personal responsibility. “Strict father” morality encourages a conception of the poor as needing protection from external threats as well as punishments to reinforce self-reliance and self-discipline.<sup>78</sup> It is thus rooted in the supremacy of the patriarchal, Christian Right-based heterosexual nuclear family, and draws on a metaphor of the nation as a family in order to justify a hierarchical social organization.

<sup>76</sup> Douglas and Michaels, 104.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Rector, a welfare policy analyst for the conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation, was instrumental in advocating the deterrence-based policies that would eventually become a staple of approaches to welfare policy throughout the 1990s and to the present. Rector shifted public dialog about welfare by altering the language used to discuss it. He was “an effective advocate for the position that deterrence-oriented solutions in fact constituted the moral high ground in the welfare debate.” Rector’s argument that “‘spiritual poverty’ is more important than material poverty in determining children’s achievement” became widely accepted. See: Weaver, 213-214.

<sup>78</sup> Reese, 137-238.

It was not simply the deviance of welfare families themselves that was of concern. The more sinister implication for the collapse of black families was its projected potential to destroy white families as well. Politicians and the media discussed this “crisis” as if the phenomenon were contagious. “We will have white urban neighborhoods that look and feel pretty much like the black urban neighborhoods do now. And that is a disaster for everyone,” the CBS network broadcast in 1994.<sup>79</sup> Pathological welfare families, therefore, did not self-destruct in a bubble, but could be linked to a whole host of other issues plaguing American society. Welfare specifically eroded the institution of marriage and gender roles, considered especially by conservatives to represent the very bedrock of society.<sup>80</sup> The Christian Right also used the institution of the family in a broader sense, claiming that the pathologies of welfare families, especially illegitimacy, “exact a price from society as well as from the individuals themselves.”<sup>81</sup> Fears in white Americans, cultivated by the Christian Right, were one driving force behind public acceptance of the demonization of welfare families.

### **Walking the Walk: What Welfare Discourses Produce**

As a part of the webs of power operating to shape our society, welfare discourses should be viewed as *productive*. Through this

<sup>79</sup> Smith, 194.

<sup>80</sup> Smith, 113.

<sup>81</sup> Additionally, on a global level the question of families was even direr; during Cold War era, the supremacy of the US was seen as intrinsically linked to the patriarchal and marital heterosexual family, the family which the Christian Right had falsely painted as “traditional.” See: Smith, 110.

framework it is possible to analyze the discursive entities constructed through welfare narratives in light of what they produce—American citizenship ideals. Because successful discourses are powerful, productive, and material, it is important to analyze the concrete effects that they have on the lives of American citizens, both in terms of their socio-legal implications, as well as in terms of their ideological weight. Furthermore, welfare discourses are a form of Foucauldian governance, serving to manage the population through the cyclical problematization of and expert-based solutions to the many problems identified at the level of welfare policy, as well as at the level of individual recipients.

Discursively, the character of the Welfare Queen is a *myth*, an icon built up through imagery and discourse, but instrumental nonetheless in shaping public discussions about American social policy and legal programs. As a discursive construction serving specific political purposes, the character of the Welfare Queen is not only important for what she represents, but also for what she does *not* represent. A paradigmatic analysis of the Welfare Queen can be conducted by considering the oppositions generated by her presence in the public sphere. The oppositions are implicit in public dialog, but necessary in order to make the character intelligible to a large audience of Americans.

The implicit racial foundation upon which the Welfare Queen is constructed is of particular importance, especially as it intersects with gendered connotations. If welfare mothers are *explicitly* bad mothers, but

*implicitly* both poor and black, the character of the Welfare Queen has a largely unarticulated counterpart in the female domestic figure of the heterosexual nuclear family, that is, a sort of ideal mother. This idealized maternal figure is *implicitly* what the Welfare Queen is not— hard-working, and self-sufficient, white, maternal, virtuous, and sexually restrained. In fact, without the specter of so-called “traditional” maternity lurking in public consciousness, the character of the Welfare Queen and corresponding narratives about her personal and family life would not make sense. To construct a deviant figure, a normative character is necessarily constructed as its implicit counterpart. The construction of the traditional maternal figure has implications far beyond concerns about motherhood. Her role in the idealized heterosexual nuclear family structure symbolizes a model of feminized ideal citizenship.

Similarly, the paradigmatic opposite of the Deadbeat Dad is the married father, who serves as a construction symbolizing a model of masculinist patriarchal citizenship. While the Deadbeat Dad is *explicitly* absent and irresponsible, and *implicitly* black, the married father is *implicitly* everything that the Deadbeat Dad is not: white, a successful, hard-working provider for both his female partner and his children, and an upstanding father-figure. Again, the construction of the Deadbeat Dad through legislation, public images and discourse is made possible by the largely unarticulated cultural perception of an ideal model of fatherhood exemplified by the concept of married fatherhood. The place of the

Christian Right's traditional male figure at the head of his normative heterosexual nuclear family unit defines him as the *ultimate* American citizen, surpassing the status of the traditional mother, who, while exemplary, remains subjugated by the patriarchal family model. Furthermore, the emphasis on institution of the family and citizenship indicates that forming family units is an integral part of Americanism.

To a large extent, welfare policy has been transparent in asserting a philosophy of ideal family structures, roles and relationships through the model of the heterosexual nuclear family comprised of both a father and mother.<sup>82</sup> What is less transparent is the role of citizenship in these initiatives. There is a reason why the push for adherence to the married fatherhood model and increased marriage rates enjoys bi-partisan popular support: the model of the heterosexual nuclear family governed by parents performing gender-specific roles is representative of cultural norms already in operation in the United States.

Reflecting the family values agenda of the Christian Right, one task of welfare programs in recent decades has been to restore the traditionally male-earner, female-homemaker heterosexual family unit.<sup>83</sup> The Christian Right has a stake in this project because gendered familial roles are at the

<sup>82</sup> The "findings" section of the PRWORA contains direct statements about the appropriate role of marriage in the US, asserting that it is "the foundation of a successful society ... marriage is an essential institution in a successful society which promotes the interest of children."; Smith 178, Additionally, funding for "Fatherhood Promotion" initiatives in TANF shows a legislatively-based movement toward encouraging Deadbeat Dads to be more involved with their children, financially support their children and female partners, and to ultimately marry and form a state-sanctioned family unit. For more, see: Smith, 70.

<sup>83</sup> Abramovitz, 29.

heart of their moral code, often religiously informed, as well as their conceptions of how American society should be ordered. The ideological implications of the demise of the heterosexual nuclear family expose the ability of our society to nonetheless continue without adherence to the conservative moral code. Accordingly, the Christian Right does all it can to preserve the legislative dominance of the heterosexual nuclear family. However, while these norms are most widely promoted and strictly adhered to by conservatives such as those in the Christian Right, they are at least loosely accepted by both liberals and conservatives as normative family structures. As Bill Clinton's statements to "end welfare as we know it" through the PRWORA made clear, part of the virtue of welfare reform is that it seeks to instill in recipients the basic values of work, responsibility, and family, values which ultimately represent socially-sanctioned views of US citizenship—on this, liberals and conservatives agree.

Narratives about the chronic dependence of the Welfare Family also perform important ideological work within the discursive structures of welfare reform debates and initiatives. Drawing on the Foucauldian concept of *problematization*, the decision that something is an issue to be discussed by the state,<sup>84</sup> welfare reform discourses can be viewed as a method by which American welfare policies are problematized and brought forth into public discussion. Following Foucault, "welfare"

<sup>84</sup> Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality Vol. II: The Use of Pleasure*, (New York: Random House Inc., 1985), 11.

becomes a governable entity because it is simplified as a set of processes and relations amenable to management that can then be addressed by further operations of governance and power, and perpetuated through the self-identification of its recipients.<sup>85</sup> Through chronic dependence narratives, the Welfare Queen, the Deadbeat Dad, and the Welfare Family become the subjects of welfare programs, welfare reform ideologies, and welfare-related legislation. The operations of power governing these characters operate along the intersecting lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality, as well as around concepts of family formation and individual morality and deviance.

It is at the site of the Welfare Family in which the government is directly involved, as I have described in depth here. The power relations between the United States government and welfare recipients are overt—welfare recipients must adhere to state-proscribed roles and behaviors in order to qualify for public assistance. Relations of power between the government and Americans more generally are far more dispersed—the family structures and roles of most Americans are not directly impacted by welfare policy.

Still, Americans perform the discursive work of maintaining the power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality as articulated through public discourses such as those surrounding the Welfare Queen, Deadbeat Dad, and Welfare Family. Our knowledge about our society and our place

<sup>85</sup> Rose, Nikolas and Peter Miller, "Political Power Beyond the State: Problematics of Government," *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jun. 1992), 188.



within it are shaped by our understanding of these prominent discourses. A sense of belonging, of cultural citizenship, is fostered by the extent to which each of us adheres to normalcy as articulated by the prominent discourses of our society. Some of the most prominent in ours are strongly shaped by the legacy of the Christian Right in American socio-political life, such as the welfare discourses which permeate our existence.

**IV.  
Abstinence-Only Sex Education as a Site of Governance:  
The Institutionalization of American Citizenship**

Discourses problematizing the welfare system and calling for its reform evolved significantly during the 1990s. Shifting discourse about welfare in the 1980s and 1990s specifically in politicized public rhetoric and media, as well as the mid-1980s dialog about the “epidemic” of teenage pregnancy collided with the dialog about welfare reform. Most notable was the rise in concern about the chronic dependency of welfare families and “culture of poverty” arguments linking poverty with lack of strong work ethic and family values. As narratives about teen pregnancy proliferated, the Welfare Queen discourse shifted to a conception of the Welfare Queen as a teenage mother.<sup>86</sup> In these discourses I identify a new character, one which I call the Promiscuous Teen.<sup>87</sup>

The similarities between the construction of the Welfare Queen and that of the Promiscuous Teen are striking. In fact, I establish a relationship between the two. The character of the Promiscuous Teen is constructed in several ways. Firstly, she arises from a shift in media coverage of the Welfare Queen. In effect, the Promiscuous Teen who succumbs to her desire for heterosexual sex and subsequently becomes pregnant is

<sup>86</sup> Reese, 153.

<sup>87</sup> The Promiscuous Teen is a character I have coined for the purpose of this paper. I feel it adequately addresses the discursive utility of the narratives at hand by illustrating the gendered, racialized, and sexualized logic which underlies the production and institutionalization of cultural citizenship through abstinence-only sex education programs as well as the relationship of those notions of cultural citizenship to those produced through Welfare Queen discourses.

transformed into the Welfare Queen when she must seek public assistance to support her family. The Promiscuous Teen is also central to abstinence-only sex education narratives, through which she is more elaborately constructed and through which her link to the Welfare Queen is made more obvious.

Like the Welfare Queen, the Promiscuous teen is grounded in cultural narratives that have become so commonplace that they are for all intents and purposes public knowledge. The increasing rate of out-of-wedlock births is one such narrative. However, these births are not due to teenage pregnancy alone, but instead a result of complicated demographic changes. In fact, births to teen mothers make up only 30% of out-of-wedlock births, while the trend toward out-of-wedlock births has grown among older women.<sup>88</sup> The construction of the Promiscuous Teen is more complex than a hyperbolic portrayal of pregnancy statistics, however. It is achieved by a combination of programs such as abstinence-only sex education, welfare reform discourse, and politicized public rhetoric and imagery.

### **The Promiscuous Teen, the Welfare Queen, and the Christian Right**

The institution of the heterosexual nuclear family was at the heart of conservative concerns about sex education as sex and sexuality became a talking point for conservatives during the 1980s and 1990s. Although the

<sup>88</sup> Smith, 167.

early movement against sex education was led by grassroots organizations, these organizations were steered by larger Christian Right organizations, specifically evangelical groups which used religion to critique sex education programs. The rhetorical success of the so-called “pro-family” movement increased interest in the sex education debate across the board, denouncing it along with other issues involving the structure of American families.<sup>89</sup>

Legislation promoting abstinence sex education policies was driven by conservatives as well. The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), one early abstinence provision, was passed in 1981 as part of Reagan’s Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. The AFLA was touted as an alternative pregnancy prevention because it focused solely on chastity and morality—not surprising given that one of its chief proponents, Senator Jeremiah Denton, had run on a “pro-tradition,” “pro-family” platform.<sup>90</sup> Thus, in the era of moral panic over the media-driven pregnancy “epidemic,” the Christian Right’s solution was not *safer* sex among teens, but simply no sex at all. Critics of the program noted that political dialog about the AFLA was steeped in religion and subjective morality discourses.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> “Pro-family” concerns included changing relationships between men and women at home and in the workplace, reproductive rights, social acceptance of lesbians and gay men, and teenage sex. All were seen as evidence of the US as a society in moral decline. See more: Irvine, Janice, *Talk About Sex: The Battles Over Sex Education*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 73.

<sup>90</sup> Irvine, 90.

<sup>91</sup> Irvine, 91.

The AFLA is not the only source of funding for abstinence-based sex education courses. More recently, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), signed by Democrat and President Bill Clinton, created a new program under Title V of the Social Security Act allotting public money only to sex education programs which “[teach] that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship is the expected standard of human sexual activity.”<sup>92</sup> This funding was renewed and expanded under President George W. Bush in June 2004. In addition, the Special Programs of Regional and National Significance—Community-based Abstinence Education (SPRANS) was established in 2001, and has since become the fastest growing source of abstinence-only sex education. This program provides federal grants to community organizations teaching youth the virtues of abstinence until marriage. The AFLA, too, remains a part of current US legislation, continuing to dispense millions of dollars in federal funding each fiscal year.<sup>93</sup>

The logic driving the Promiscuous Teen is knowledge produced and reinforced by the construction of the Welfare Queen. Legislatively-created programs such as abstinence initiatives through the AFLA, Title V of the SSA, and SPRANS construct the Promiscuous Teen as a danger by implying that she is at risk of becoming a Welfare Queen. The programs

<sup>92</sup> Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Pub. L. No. 104-193 (1996). S510(b).

<sup>93</sup> “The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs.” Minority Staff Special Investigation Division, United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform, Dec. 2004. 1-3.

simultaneously suggest that the Promiscuous Teen may be appropriately “saved” through educational means. Federally-funded abstinence-only sex education courses in high schools across the country are explicitly aimed at certain demographics of teens due to mandates that states focus a portion of their abstinence programs “on those groups which are most likely to bear children out of wedlock.”<sup>94</sup> Although out-of-wedlock pregnancies occur among women of all income levels, races, ethnicities, and backgrounds, it remains most common among African Americans and Latinas, making it likely that abstinence programs will have a heightened focus in areas with significant minority populations.<sup>95</sup> The focus on the heterosexual nuclear family unit in abstinence sex education programs is another way in which racial issues are manifested, due to a high incidence of single motherhood among low-income black women. The focus on preventing the Promiscuous Teen from becoming a Welfare Queen, another highly racialized public figure and the object of race-based public discourse about welfare programs, the Promiscuous Teen is further constructed along racial lines.

The character of the Promiscuous Teen is also shaped by gender dynamics. A focus on out-of-wedlock pregnancy as the result of taboo sexual promiscuity implicates teenage girls to a higher extent than teenage boys. Discourses about teenage sexuality often focus on the moral issue of unmarried teen parents, and because the custodial parent of children born

<sup>94</sup> Smith, 171.

<sup>95</sup> Smith, 172.

out of wedlock is more likely to be the child's mother, women are further associated with teenage promiscuity. In addition, ideologies about sex and sexual practices are gendered as well. Discursive phenomena such as "Purity Balls" have framed teen and pre-teen sexuality as something sacred that belongs not to young women, but instead to their fathers, and subsequently to their husbands.<sup>96</sup>

While messages of abstinence are broadcasted to young men as well, the approach is different. Men are framed as the guardians of women's sexuality, and teen and pre-teen boys are taught that their devotion to abstinence not only reflects moral character, but also ensures that their future wives and the future wives of other men will remain pure, in part for their husband's benefit.<sup>97</sup> These movements, notably, are prevalent among strongly religious, white, upper-middle class to upper-class families. However, the gendered double-standards about sexuality are carried through to abstinence-only sex education programs, which reach a much larger and more diverse audience in public schools. In these programs women are taught that they are the gatekeepers of sexuality, and that it is their job to maintain the goal of chastity even as young men who cannot help but crave sexual encounters approach them sexually.

<sup>96</sup> For example, see: "What is a Purity Ball?" Generations of Light, <http://generationsoflight.myicontrol.com/generationsoflight/index.cfm?ID=C7D9C98F-F39B-4721-82312665A131C364>, Accessed 12 Nov. 2008

<sup>97</sup> See: "What About Boys?" Generations of Light, <http://generationsoflight.myicontrol.com/generationsoflight/html/Boys.html>, Accessed 12 Nov. 2008. ; Ellis, Bob, "Integrity Ball Encourages Young Men to Raise the Standard," Dakota Voice, [http://www.dakotavoice.com/200701/20070115\\_1.html](http://www.dakotavoice.com/200701/20070115_1.html), Accessed 14 Nov. 2008.

These messages are not only double standards, but place the burden of abstinence on the shoulders of young women, further constructing the character of the Promiscuous Teen as a young woman who was not true enough to her own purity to reject the sexual advances of men. In this patriarchal model she has not only sullied her own sexuality, but also diminished her chances of having a healthy heterosexual family in years to come. After all, according to abstinence programs once a woman no longer has her virginity, she is “used” and should be discarded.<sup>98</sup>

The gendered logic of the Promiscuous Teen is the same as that which functions to gender the Welfare Queen. In both narratives, women are framed as submissive to patriarchal figures while men are portrayed as dominant and in control of both their wives and daughters. The cultural logic which calls for women to entrust men with their sexuality is one and the same as the rationale behind patriarchal models such as the “married fatherhood” arrangement and “pro-fatherhood” promotion

<sup>98</sup> When speaking, the Abstinence Clearinghouse sometimes gives students a mental picture about premarital sex using duct tape. We stick duct tape to someone's arm as though they were my sexual partner to represent the bonding associated with sex. The first time it sticks very well. Then, we break up. As we break up, the tape is ripped off his arm along with several arm hairs. When I find my next boyfriend and sexual partner, I can stick the duct tape to his arm, but it won't stick as tightly as the first time. The tape sticks less and less with each sexual escapade and eventually will not stick at all. The bonding can't be as special or powerful, and with each relationship you carry the garbage from the past right along with it. Would you call that a healthy, loving relationship? I most definitely would not. The deep bonding and “emotional expression” that only sexual intimacy creates must be limited to marriage. One cannot be deeply bonded with many people. That would contradict the very definition of intimacy. Do you think that prostitutes have many deeply bonded friendships just because they have had sex with so many people? It is this faulty bonding and “emotional expression” that leads to increased divorce and abandoned families. See more in: Levy, Ariel, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (New York: Free Press, 2005).



programs, in which men are to rightfully control their partners, their children, and their household.<sup>99</sup>

### **A Paradigmatic Analysis of the Promiscuous Teen: The Implications for Ideal Citizenship**

The juxtaposition of the Promiscuous Teen, the logical target of abstinence-only sex education programs, with what I will refer to as the Chaste Virgin<sup>100</sup> who has pledged her virginity until marriage to a male relative sets up yet another dichotomy. Although socially-based abstinence movements such as Purity Balls have been on the rise in recent years, these voluntarily abstinent teenagers are largely regarded as a small minority and not especially present in popular discourse. Rightly so, as the number of teens voluntarily pledging abstinence is much smaller than the number of teens engaging in pre-marital sex.<sup>101</sup> However, the Chaste Virgin is not a character fully constrained to the explicit realm of conversations focusing on the voluntary virginity movement. This character is implicitly constructed through the same public discourse and legislative and educational texts that construct the Promiscuous Teen. A paradigmatic analysis shows that the Chaste Virgin, everything the Promiscuous Teen is not, serves as the standard of sexuality to which

<sup>99</sup> Reese 2006, 159 ; Reese 2005, 154-157.

<sup>100</sup> The Chaste Virgin is a character I have coined for the purpose of this paper as a means by which to articulate binarized notions of normalcy and deviance in conjuncture with the Promiscuous Teen. I feel it adequately addresses the discursive utility of the narratives at hand by illustrating the gendered, racialized, and sexualized logic which underlies the production and institutionalization of cultural citizenship through abstinence-only sex education programs.

teens are compared and Promiscuous Teens are found lacking. If the Promiscuous Teen is black, from a low-income family, the Chaste Virgin is white and upper-middle class. Following this paradigm to its logical conclusion, if the Promiscuous Teen is at risk of becoming the Welfare Queen, what does the future hold for the Chaste Virgin? The pure teen virgins, both males and females, come to embody normative understandings of American cultural citizenship.

An analysis of the relevant legislation and educational texts of abstinence-only sex education supports this claim. The basic guidelines abstinence-only programs must adhere to in order to qualify for federal funding are especially telling. Outlined in Title V, Section 510 of the Social Security Act, amended with the passing of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, is the eight-point requirements for federal funding, several of which are especially crucial in understanding the link between ideal citizenship and abstinence sex education programs.

“A qualifying program ...

(B) teaches abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-aged children ...

(D) teaches that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity ...

(F) teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society ...

(H) teaches the importance of attaining self-sufficiency

before engaging in sexual activity.”<sup>102</sup>

The same eight-point definition is used to qualify abstinence programs for federal funding under the SSA, PRWORA, and SPRANS, all of the major legislative acts which address abstinence-only sex education.<sup>103</sup> Wording declaring a certain type of sexuality as not only correct, but also “expected” quite literally serves to endorse a state ideology of acceptable sexuality. Not only is this normative sexuality intended to apply to teenagers, but teens are also taught that the standard applies to adults as well, as point (D) explicitly states. In this case the expectation is on the part of the federal government, and the people subject to these expectations are not only minors, but all Americans. These statements address not only sexuality, but also assert monogamous marriages as the only acceptable family unit; or, at least, the only family unit an adult may form within which they are worthy of engaging in sexual acts. Abstinence programs thus present broad notions of acceptable family formations and sexual behaviors for *all* Americans. This understanding is enhanced by the use of language that does not simply target and discipline the subjects that the initiatives directly reach, public school students, but explicitly refers

<sup>102</sup> Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Pub. L. No. 104-193 (1996). S510(b).

<sup>103</sup> Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Pub. L. No. 104-193 (1996). S510(b); “Understanding Title V of the Social Security Act,” Health Resources and Services Administration, <ftp://ftp.hrsa.gov/mchb/titlevtoday/UnderstandingTitleV.pdf>, Accessed 13 Dec. 2008.

beyond them. Phrases such as “expected standard of human sexual activity”<sup>104</sup> are illustrative of these sweeping statements.

Again, while specific language is used to proscribe certain behaviors and family units through these curricula, the implicit backdrop for these statements is provided by the normative standard which serves as a necessary template against which all individuals and their families may be measured: the template of ideal American citizenship. In the case of both welfare reform and abstinence sex education programs, the means by which citizenship ideals are conveyed is through a mixture of race, class, gender, sexuality.

### **Foucault, Althusser, and Abstinence Sex Education**

The use of institutional authority to promote the myths of the Welfare Queens and Promiscuous Teens as well as the implicitly-constructed Chaste Virgins and Ideal Citizens amounts to a state-proscribed version of ideal citizenship; the universalizing dialog about family and sexuality found in abstinence-only sex education courses amounts to an institutionalization of conservative citizenship ideals in public school curricula. In the case of the United States, the ideologies transmitted are determined by the interplay between the social and political realms. With the rise in conservatism over the last few decades, the conservative Christian Right has largely succeeded in monopolizing

<sup>104</sup> Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Pub. L. No. 104-193 (1996). S510(b).

legislative initiatives stipulating the content of sex education programs, and thus crafting the abstinence-only policies currently in place.

Through abstinence programs, authoritative institutional educational discourses are used to produce and reproduce the same knowledge about American citizenship that is generated and reinforced through discourses about the recipients of welfare—the primacy of the heterosexual nuclear family unit, the virtues of a male-breadwinning female-homemaking arrangement, and the socialization of children in an environment stressing the importance of hard work and self-reliance. Within Foucault’s theories, “the family becomes the instrument rather than the model: a privileged instrument for the government of the population.”<sup>105</sup> The focus on family structures, roles, and behaviors in both welfare reform and abstinence sex education discourses, then, has a purpose in its ability to exercise operations of power on the population and the individuals in it.

Because institutions such as public schools are one such method of governing the population through power/knowledge relationships,<sup>106</sup> abstinence sex education programs, the relationship between abstinence-only sex education programs and welfare reform initiatives can be theorized through Foucauldian governmentality. Drawing on Foucault, Miller and Rose suggest that problematics of government should be

<sup>105</sup> Popkewitz and Brennan, 21.

<sup>106</sup> Popkewitz, Thomas S. and Marie Brennan, “Restructuring of Social and Political Theory in Education: Foucault and a Social Epistemology of School Practices,” *Foucault’s Challenge: Discourse, Knowledge, and Power in Education*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Marie Brennan, (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 21.

analyzed both in terms of their political rationalities, the discursive fields within which the exercise of power takes place, and their governmental technologies, the complex programs, calculations, techniques, and apparatuses through which authorities embody and give effect to governmental ambitions.<sup>107</sup> Abstinence programs give rise to a set of governing technologies designed to socialize and produce an easily-managed population of normative Americans as cultural citizens adhering to the heterosexual nuclear family model.

In fact, it is theoretically useful to consider both welfare reform and abstinence sex education discourses in their various forms as technologies of governance through which American citizens are organized and disciplined. Abstinence therefore serves as a solution to popular discourses framing the welfare system as a set of processes and relations amenable to management—a governable entity. Because the welfare system is then problematized as broken and in perpetual need of fixing by a multitude of “experts,”<sup>108</sup> there is a role for the expanded operations of governance found in abstinence sex education programs. Abstinence programs are thus expanded operations of governance which are deployed as a solution to the “welfare problem.” By teaching students of abstinence programs using knowledge and logic about normative and deviant family structures, roles, and behaviors produced through welfare reform discourses, public schools become a site of governance through

<sup>107</sup> Miller and Rose, 175.

<sup>108</sup> Miller and Rose, 188.

which institutional discourses are used to produce, reinforce, and lend credibility to the knowledge of citizenship ideals.

Abstinence programs can also be analyzed using Althusser's notion of the Ideological State Apparatus.<sup>109</sup> According to this perspective, abstinence sex education programs have a purpose of indoctrinating students into seeing the world through a conservative lens and accepting particular roles within that world. Although this indoctrination is not by any means complete, uniform, or hierarchical, abstinence programs are nonetheless a means by which to transmit conservative ideologies of American citizenship.

Increasing the plausibility of this hypothesis are recent studies indicating that abstinence-only sex education programs do not decrease rates of teen sexual activity. Information, expert recommendations, and studies published in 2004,<sup>110</sup> 2005,<sup>111</sup> 2007,<sup>112</sup> 2008<sup>113</sup> and countless others provide evidence that abstinence programs are not only ineffective at preventing teen sex, but also misinform students about contraceptive use and the effects of sexual activity. Despite this widely publicized criticism

<sup>109</sup> Althusser, Louis, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation," *The Anthropology of the State*, Eds. Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

<sup>110</sup> "The Content of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only Education Programs." Minority Staff Special Investigation Division, United States House of Representatives Committee on Government Reform, Dec. 2004.

<sup>111</sup> "Doctors Slam Abstinence-Only Sex Ed," MSNBC, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8470845/>, Accessed 19 March 2009.

<sup>112</sup> Trenholm, Christopher et al, "Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs," Mathematica Policy Research Inc., <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/impactabstinence.pdf>, Accessed 10 April 2009, 30-33.

<sup>113</sup> Stain, Rob, "Premarital Abstinence Pledges Ineffective, Study Finds," Washington Post, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/28/AR2008122801588.html>, Accessed 21 Jan 2009.

of abstinence-only programs, the programs continued to receive increased funding each fiscal year throughout the 2000s. Even currently, with President Barack Obama, a supporter of comprehensive sex education,<sup>114</sup> in the White House and Congress dominated by Democrats, a party which claims to oppose a strict abstinence-only curriculum in public schools, abstinence sex education programs received \$95 million in federal funding for the fiscal year 2010.<sup>115</sup>

If the programs are not working and yet continue to receive funding, it begs the question of, as Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy asked, “why the federal government is continuing to invest in abstinence-only programs.” What a good question indeed. Democrats appear to favor cutting abstinence funding in the long haul, but it is interesting to note the narratives at the center of this pledge. Opponents of abstinence programs cite the failure rate of the programs to prevent teen sex, as well as the misinformation it provides for students about contraceptives and Sexually Transmitted Diseases.<sup>116</sup> Receiving almost no attention are ideological concerns about the value of indoctrinating young Americans through educational institutions. Completely obscured is the fact that abstinence programs

<sup>114</sup> Rohter, Larry, “Ad on Sex Ed Distorts Obama Policy,” *The New York Times*, 10 Sept. 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/11/us/politics/11checkpoint.html>, Accessed 12 April 2009.

<sup>115</sup> “Support, Funding For Abstinence-Only Education Waning Under Democratic Control,” *Medical News Today*, 5 March 2009, <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/141184.php>, Accessed 12 April 2009.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*



teach students infinitely more than hard, scientific facts about sexual activity and pregnancy (or rather, lack thereof).

Included in these programs are a myriad of normalizing discourses that serve to lend institutional authority to particular behaviors and family formations according to conservative ideologies. These discourses marginalize Americans who do not conform to the standards promoted through operations of power constructing public understandings of Americanism which are articulated through the institution of the family, and intertwined with issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, this knowledge has just as significant an impact on the lives of Americans young and old as the medical and scientific misinformation also propagated by abstinence programs.

## V. Conclusions:

The power of discursive characters such as the Welfare Queen, the Deadbeat Dad, the Welfare Family, and the Promiscuous Teen and their prominence in what can be considered public knowledge makes it important to deconstruct and examine the implications of their legacies in American politics and cultural understandings of what it means to be an American. Low-income families are at the heart of this conflict due to the heightened role of government programs, and thus indirectly government ideologies, in their personal lives. Although welfare regulations most closely affect the intimate lives of low-income women, they threaten the well-being of all women by legitimizing governmental interference in women's personal lives.<sup>117</sup> It is important to remember that every American is a job loss or financial catastrophe away from public assistance programs. It would be a gross miscalculation for Americans not currently receiving public assistance to assume that matters relating to welfare have no impact on them.

Further, the ideological weight of government regulations on poor women's family situations is dire from a perspective that transcends economic class. The policy rules that low-income families are subject to through welfare programs are crafted according to particular notions of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" family structures. While the government

<sup>117</sup> Abramovitz, 30.

may have less direct influence over families not receiving public assistance, the ideologies that determine acceptability for welfare eligibility speak to broader frameworks of normalcy and deviance in American society – frameworks in which we all exist; norms which we are all subject to.

Because of the lack of analysis of the cultural dimension of citizenship in mainstream analyses, it has thus far been difficult to truly grasp the increasing complexity and implications of national citizenship.<sup>118</sup> This makes my examination of aspects of cultural citizenship at work in this paper increasingly important. Understanding the constructed legal and rhetorical forces which inform how Americans view themselves and others in the context of an American nation-state is a necessary part of understanding the logic of discourse and power in contemporary America. Accordingly, I sought to detail and explore constructed notions of citizenship within the context of recent American history, specifically the ascent of the Christian Right in the past few decades. By situating concerns about cultural citizenship within the current socio-political climate, I hope to have adequately answered Roche's call for a richer, more complex interrogation of citizenship.

In the preceding pages I have used the discursive characters of the Welfare Queen, Deadbeat Dad, and Promiscuous Teen to illustrate my claims that American domestic policies such as welfare and abstinence sex

<sup>118</sup> Roche, 73.

education programs engage in the construction and institutionalization of cultural citizenship ideals. This construction is accomplished through webs of discourse, primarily legislative discourses, politicized public rhetoric, and the American media. By introducing scholarship on welfare and abstinence programs to theorists of discourse and institutional authority, I have tried to show that existing critiques of public policy have implications not just for individuals or demographics based on race, gender, sexuality, or family, but also for frameworks of cultural citizenship and Americanism more broadly defined.

In the future, a more detailed analysis of the varied resistance to the Christian Right's legal and discursive dominance in the United States is necessary as a means by which to more thoroughly approach the complex question of discourse and hegemony. While conservative discourse has enjoyed a place of prominence in the past few decades, it has been by no means universal or unchallenged. In fact, as I noted briefly, claims to citizenship, both legal and cultural, have been deployed as a method of seeking inclusion into American law and society by some of the groups most marginalized by the Christian Right's position in public policy, most recently advocates of LGBTQ equality. While this paper begins to tackle the question of discursive citizenship production, especially from the perspective of public law, it is not by any means exhaustive or entirely comprehensive; it merely seeks a nuanced answer to the deceptively simple question: "*What does it mean to be an American?*" Hopefully scholars in

the developing field of citizenship studies continue to pursue questions relating to cultural citizenship and national belonging.

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