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Abbreviations

AAMC  American Association of Marriage Counselors
AAMFC American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors
AAMFT American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy
AASECT American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists
AFTA American Family Therapy Association
AIFR American Institute of Family Relations
AMA American Medical Association
ASMS American-Soviet Medical Society
AVS Association for Voluntary Sterilizations
CAMFC California Association of Marriage and Family Counselors
CAW Congress of American Women
CFM Christian Family Movement
CHAMPUS Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services
CPUSA Communist Party of the United States of America
CWHCF Coalition for the White House Conference on Families
DSM American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (editions designated by roman numerals—e.g., DSM-IV)
ERA Equal Rights Amendment
HEW U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare
HMO health maintenance organization
HUAC House Un-American Activities Committee
JCMIH Joint Commission on Mental Illness and Health
MCP Marriage Council of Philadelphia
ME marriage enrichment
MFL Marriage and Family Living
MSSH Massachusetts Society for Social Hygiene
NAFL National Alliance for Family Life
NCASF National Council of American-Soviet Friendship
NCFR National Council on Family Relations
NCMH National Committee on Maternal Health
NIMH National Institute of Mental Health
NMHA National Mental Health Act (1946)
NOW National Organization for Women
NYSCMF New York State Conference on Marriage and the Family
RBRF Reproductive Biology Research Foundation
REBT rational emotive behavior therapy
SIECUS Sex Information and Education Council of the United States
VOKS All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (USSR)
WAC Women’s Army Corps
WAVES Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service
WHCF White House Conference on Families
WIDF Women’s International Democratic Federation
YMCA Young Men’s Christian Association
YWCA Young Women’s Christian Association
Introduction

On June 1, 2010, political circles in Washington were stunned when former vice president Al Gore and his wife Tipper announced they were separating after forty years of marriage. Much of the shock stemmed from the perception that the Gores’ marriage was more solid than that of former president Bill Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton. The Gores had carved out their own careers: Tipper as an activist and photographer, and Al as a Nobel Prize–winning environmentalist. In the 1990s the Gores carefully crafted an image of happily married high school sweethearts, highlighted by their passionate onstage kiss at the 2000 Democratic convention when Al was nominated as his party’s presidential candidate. Al even claimed that their romance had been the model for Erich Segal’s best-selling 1970 novel Love Story.¹

Before their split, the Gores appeared to be “the baby boomer couple who could,” in the words of University of Minnesota family therapist William J. Doherty.² The Gores looked to be a classic example of how love had conquered marriage in the twentieth century, how matrimony had made the transition from an institution based on patriarchy, deferment of gratification, division of labor, and the selfless raising of children to one based on partnership, mutual affection, and personal fulfillment. The collapse of the Gores’ marriage, however, suggests that this triumphalist interpretation of matrimony in twentieth-century America might be inaccurate.³

The Gores’ marriage is a reminder of both the state of marriage and the reigning viewpoint about the institution in twenty-first-century America. In 2010, as the U.S. population continued to age, about one in two marriages was destined to fail, the percentage of unmarrieds was climbing, and out-of-wedlock births were hitting record highs. The Gores claimed that their own split was “a mutual and mutually support-
ive decision,” but experts preferred to dig more deeply. “The biggest issue,” a retired Baltimore divorce attorney observed in 2010, “is that we’re living longer, we’re healthier, and couples are bored with each other.” When married Americans like the Gores reach their sixties, a Mobile, Alabama, clinical social worker concluded, “there’s a feeling. If I don’t go now, I’m never going to go.” A Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania, psychotherapist claimed to be “hearing over and over again . . . this malaise, this sense of, ‘I’m not satisfied with what I’ve got.’” Therapists advise Americans “to set aside time to check in with each other, to see if our marriages are on track, and if our needs are being met,” in the words of the *Wall Street Journal.* The bottom line is that twenty-first-century Americans crave happiness and self-expression in marriage—a desire that would have mystified their ancestors. As a 2010 *New York Times* headline put it, “The Happy Marriage Is the ‘Me’ Marriage.”

The message that marriage exists for Americans’ personal growth, happiness, and overall needs and that it requires plenty of expert opinion and self-examination may strike some people as eminently sensible, but from a historical perspective, this marks a pivotal development in the evolution of matrimony. The “me marriage,” as this book documents, is the intended consequence of a century-old struggle on the part of a highly motivated group of reform-minded Americans to transform marriage and family counseling into a bona fide profession with its own clinics, training programs, licensing standards, bodies of expert knowledge, and cultural power. The rise of marriage and family counseling was one of the great professional success stories in twentieth-century America. For centuries, people had been consulting their clergymen, healers, relatives, and neighbors about their family problems, but only in the twentieth century did a profession emerge whose primary purpose was to offer expert advice about family matters, especially relations between spouses. As William C. Nichols, a prominent leader of the field, put it in 1992: after World War I, “the old order in which the family and community were looked to for guidance gave way in favor of seeking help from strangers, whom one paid.” The “old order” did not vanish overnight. As late as World War II, there were barely 500 marriage and family counselors in all of the United States, and as late as 1960, Americans with marital problems consulted their clergymen more than they consulted licensed practitioners. In its early stages, wrote two coun-
selors in 1967, marriage and family counseling was often “treated as a ribald joke.”

Yet by the early twenty-first century there were roughly 50,000 marriage and family counselors across the country, part of a much larger “caring industry” consisting of 77,000 clinical psychologists, 192,000 clinical social workers, 105,000 mental health counselors, 17,000 nurse psychotherapists, and 30,000 life coaches, to say nothing of the tens of thousands of nonclinical social workers and substance abuse counselors. In the early twenty-first century, while many Americans still sought advice from clergy, 860,000 couples flocked to counselors’ offices every year, and over 40 percent of engaged couples underwent some form of premarital counseling or education. These data suggest that in their efforts to fix marital and family problems, therapists have deeply affected the lives of millions of American men, women, and children.

The American search for marital and family bliss through counseling has been a key part of a major revolution in the way Americans think about their inner selves and their relations with friends, family members, neighbors, and coworkers. The outcome of this revolution is a therapeutic viewpoint about marriage and the family shared by countless Americans in the early twenty-first century. “We live in an age consumed by worship of the psyche,” wrote historian Eva Moskowitz in 2001, “a belief that feelings are sacred and salvation lies in self-esteem, that happiness is the ultimate goal and psychological healing the means.” This therapeutic sensibility—shared by rich and poor, black and white, straight and gay—depicts marriage and the family less as social institutions than as relationships in which individuals first and foremost deserve to achieve emotional self-fulfillment. If they do not, the therapeutic ethos says, the psychological sciences and their adherents can empower individuals to find such fulfillment through counseling by trained professionals—“a new priestly class,” in sociologist James L. Nolan Jr.’s words. Thanks to the inroads of “therapism,” sex, marriage, and family life—once believed to be private matters—have been redefined as grave matters of public mental health.

The “therapeutic gospel” is heavily indebted to the theories of psychologists such as Carl Rogers, who taught that individuals will never find emotional and mental satisfaction by simply adapting to society and its institutions—notably, marriage and family life.
preaches that when the positive aspects of human nature clash with traditional values and customs, the self must be emancipated from social inhibitions and restraints, such as those of the married state or the family itself. “Where once the self was to be surrendered, denied, sacrificed, and died to, now the self is to esteemed, actualized, affirmed, and unfettered,” Nolan writes.15 As this book contends, it was therapism, not love, that conquered marriage in the twentieth century.16

Yet the value ideals of therapism have not led to greater individual freedom overall. The history of marriage counseling reveals that since its origins, its teachings have often contained paternalistic, normative statements buried beneath frequent invocations of nonjudgmentalism and “value-free” science. The counseling profession has succeeded in convincing millions of Americans that their only hope for happiness and personal autonomy is to resort to counseling, enabling the state—in the form of the “priestly class” of experts—to expand “into the private lives of its citizens.”17 As historian Kristin Celello has written, the perception at the turn of the twenty-first century is that “couples with failing relationships who do not seek help were not as committed to marriage as those who did.”18 “Therapy’s stress on personal autonomy,” argue the authors of Habits of the Heart, paradoxically “presupposes institutional conformity” because the workplace and other public settings increasingly require individuals to acknowledge that therapy is the key to teamwork in bureaucratic life, whether in the private sector or the public sector.19 Submitting to counseling to save one’s marriage has become more of a civic duty than a free choice.

How did the values of therapism conquer marriage and the family? First of all, history tells us that no nationality thinks more highly of marriage, nor worries about it more, than Americans do. As French journalist Raoul de Roussey de Sales observed as long ago as 1938, Americans are torn, believing that love and marriage are either “a superhuman ecstasy” or “a psychopathic condition to be treated by specialists.” Perplexed when love and marriage fail to live up to their expectations, Americans spend hours and fortunes “trying to make love work.” “Husbands and wives and lovers have no patience with their troubles. They want to be cured,” as de Sales put it.20

Yet this popular predisposition to view matrimony as either an idyllic state or a correctable problem in human relations is not enough to ex-
plain Americans’ therapeutic perspective in the new millennium. Americans may be the most marrying (and divorcing) people in the world, but their perceptions of marriage have surely been shaped to a profound degree by the enormous volume of expert advice produced by marriage and family counselors over the last hundred years and disseminated through their books, clinical practices, the media, government programs, and the nation’s schools. During the second half of the twentieth century, therapism as “a general outlook on life” spread “from a relatively small, educated elite to the middle-class mainstream of American life.” Much of this advice can be distilled down to the teaching that marriage and family relations are too important to be left to ordinary Americans. Marriage and family counselors have preached that most Americans cannot find love and marital happiness without the right scientific knowledge, but they have also reinforced the evolving conviction that personal fulfillment and emotional gratification in marriage are not only possibilities but also entitlements. As best-selling author John Gray told his readers in *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1992), with his help, “you will learn how to create the love you deserve.” It is not surprising, then, that countless people in committed relationships believe that if they are not “moving forward” as individuals, there must be something wrong with their unions. Taught to perceive every difficulty in marriage as a remedial problem, twenty-first-century Americans are more inclined to flee the marital state than their ancestors were when their expectations fail to match reality.

Marriage and family counselors are not solely responsible for the rise of therapism—the aging of society, the ascendancy of a consumerist culture, the proliferation of media (notably television), and the widening scope of bureaucracy in everyday life have had significant effects—but they have certainly been among the loudest cheerleaders of the trend. Counselors and therapists have insisted all along that they are merely meeting the demands of ordinary Americans, but history shows that they have often been out in front of public opinion. Americans have eagerly consulted advisers about marriage and family matters, but their viewpoints on these topics owe much to the teachings of professionals. Early counselors did their best to stimulate demand by building therapeutic constituencies, first on college campuses and then in the nation’s suburbs, churches, workplaces, and entertainment industries. This
agenda would never have triumphed if practitioners had not succeeded in popularizing a therapeutic language, a “common moral vocabulary” used by men and women to describe their lives and understand their connections to others, a “mode of moral discourse” that privileges “radical individualism” and devalues obligation, self-sacrifice, and the constraints of social roles. This book’s findings confirm what historian Alan Petigny calls “the critical role mental health experts played in persuading Americans to relinquish a more rigid and traditional worldview” in the post–World War II era. Put another way, twentieth-century Americans may have had the therapy urge, but they learned therapism’s creed from experts in the field. Marriage and family counselors do not deserve all the credit for the triumph of therapism, but they were certainly in its vanguard.

The rise of marriage and family counseling during the twentieth century may have been a stunning success story, but its triumph was not inevitable; nor was its victory uncontested. Over the years, scholars such as Robert Nisbet, Philip Rieff, and Christopher Lasch have warned that therapism causes Americans to focus on their inner feelings rather than exploring political or social answers to the problems afflicting the country. The field has often been racked by controversy. From time to time there have been serious disagreements over theory and practice among counselors, and the profession has rarely been free of dissent. Yet by the late twentieth century, these conflicts had largely been subsumed under the consensus of therapism, which by then reigned supreme as a “taken-for-granted part of everyday life,” in the words of Nolan. Therapism’s reach stretches from the “boardroom to the bedroom and back again.”

Chapter 1, “A Nucleus of Persons,” reveals how a small but cohesive group of self-proclaimed experts connected to the eugenics and birth control movements of the twentieth century laid the foundation for the new profession in the 1930s. In the words of one therapist in 1996, the history of marriage and family counseling shows “how a small group of mavericks from the traditional mental health professions, working in different parts of the United States, independently came to develop a revolutionary paradigm about intimate relationships, emotional disor-
ders, and treatment.” The links between the eugenics and the marriage and family counseling movements provide an early example of the field’s didactic and paternalistic goals, belying its self-professed “value neutrality” and its claim to be disinterested social science. The initial marriage counseling clinics in the United States tended to copy the private and public marriage advice centers that sprang up in Germany after World War I. They functioned as a public health service designed to improve birthrates among the elite classes and lower the fertility of those deemed hereditarily unfit. In a day and age when the boundaries between eugenics and birth control were consistently blurred, numerous activists believed that the key to the health and happiness of the family was “planned parenthood,” or the ability to limit family size by spacing pregnancies—“smaller families of a higher quality,” as an official at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare put it in 1968. One birth control advocate went so far as to remark in 1968 that marriage counseling was nothing more than “window dressing . . . to make planned parenthood more respectable and acceptable.” The message that contraception was the royal road to sexual gratification and personal growth—especially for women—was linked to the notion that people needed to liberate themselves from taboos or impersonal criteria that allegedly stifled biological needs and emotional fulfillment.

Chapter 1 also shows that the establishment of marriage and family counseling as a service-oriented profession addressing the “problems of living” owed a great deal to the efforts of university-based social scientists such as Ernest and Gladys Groves, Ernest Burgess, and Lewis Terman, as well as community-based social workers such as Rabbi Sidney Goldstein and Lester Dearborn. Social scientists created the first undergraduate and graduate courses on marriage, making the college campus the first real power base of the movement. By the late 1940s, colleges were offering hundreds of marriage and family courses. Groves and Burgess also had a hand in launching the National Conference of Family Relations in 1938, renamed the National Council on Family Relations in 1947 and still in existence today. Members of the NCFR, the first such organization in U.S. history, included the leading marriage and family researchers, educators, and practitioners in twentieth-century America. The common belief of these social scientists was that marriage and the home were undergoing fundamental changes and that
Americans needed more research and guidance as they sought to marry and raise families. Echoing the eugenicists, Groves declared that the time for a “laissez-faire” attitude toward parenthood and marriage was over. Parenthood was “the last stand of the amateur,” argued NCFR stalwart Evelyn Duvall.

Chapter 2, “The Kinsey Connection,” documents how World War II galvanized trailblazing marriage counselors, thrusting the budding field into the national limelight in the 1940s. With millions of men and women mobilized to serve in the armed forces and in wartime industries, experts questioned the accepted status of women as wives, mothers, and citizens. A spate of wartime marriages triggered a national debate over the future of marriage and the family, coinciding with the founding of the American Association of Marriage Counselors in 1942. The AAMC (which changed its name to the American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors in 1970 and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy in 1978) quickly emerged as a tightly knit, politically progressive organization that forged close ties to Indiana University sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey. Leading AAMC members admired Kinsey’s research because they—like him—believed that his findings compelled Americans to overthrow their moral conventions regarding sexual norms.

In addition to the AAMC’s sympathy with Kinsey’s countercultural sexual ethics, a handful of members expressed a fervent admiration for Stalin’s Russia—notably, Soviet policies regarding marriage and the family. This is the topic of chapter 3, “Medical Mission to Moscow.” In 1946 AAMC pioneer Emily Mudd, representing the American-Soviet Medical Society, visited schools, orphanages, nurseries, and research laboratories in the Soviet Union, and upon her return to the United States, she effusively extolled official Soviet attitudes toward marriage, the family, and the status of women. Long before Betty Friedan claimed to have discovered “the problem that knows no name” in her 1963 best seller *The Feminine Mystique*, Mudd—largely based on her impressions of Soviet society—argued that the key to women’s happiness was their ability to work outside the home. Mudd’s pro-Soviet opinions, along with the AAMC’s close links to Kinsey, underscored the field’s eagerness to challenge long-standing values about sexuality and reproduction. This helped pave the way for what Petigny calls the “permissive
Chapter 4, “Saving People, Not Marriages,” describes the turmoil in the field of marriage and family counseling in the 1950s, belying Stephanie Coontz’s thesis that counselors exhibited a “myopic” confidence in the stability of marriage and gender roles. On the one hand, the decade was the heyday of Paul Popenoe’s Los Angeles–based American Institute of Family Relations, one of the country’s few marriage counseling clinics. Popenoe’s frequent presence on television, on the radio, and in print signaled the burgeoning postwar media’s influence on everyday attitudes and behavior, especially consumerism. On the other hand, after a brief collaboration, the AAMC and NCFR went their separate ways in 1954, chiefly due to different interpretations of sexual norms. Counselors accused the AAMC of being an “elitist” organization that unfairly restricted membership and attendance at its meetings. Other disagreements—sometimes bitter—erupted over the future direction of the field. Practitioners debated whether they actually performed counseling or therapy; whether the field was autonomous, a branch of Freudian psychoanalysis, or a medical specialty; whether counseling should be done with individual clients or “conjointly”; whether clergy needed special training to perform pastoral counseling; whether sex was the most common cause of marital trouble; and whether it was possible for healthy partners to have a sick marriage. Contrary to Celello’s thesis that counselors typically viewed divorce as a failure of individuals rather than of the institution of marriage itself, as early as the 1950s, it was evident that many leaders in the field opposed the “let’s-keep-people-married bias.” Even popular magazines such as *Cosmopolitan, McCall’s,* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* contributed to a “discourse of discontent”; although they encouraged women to accept their domestic roles as housewives and mothers, they also espoused the notion that women had a right to self-fulfillment. As the second half of the twentieth century unfolded, therapism’s emphasis on enhancing personal well-being at the expense of preserving marriages spread, but the origins of this trend can be traced back to the ferment within the profession during the supposedly conservative 1950s.

As chapter 4 also documents, therapism conquered pastoral counseling, and religion itself became redefined as “personal therapy” in post-
World War II America. The pervasive religiosity of American family life during the early Cold War made it impossible for therapists to oust clergymen from their roles as counselors to their flocks; however, counselors were highly successful in convincing many clergymen that they needed “the insights of science” to fulfill their pastoral duties. Whereas numerous priests, ministers, and rabbis initially resisted the argument that they lacked the skills to perform their pastoral functions, others welcomed closer ties to secular disciplines. Marriage and family counseling’s inroads into pastoral counseling constituted a major victory for the therapeutic ethos in a sphere of human activity that had long been free of formal psychological training and practice.

A major complaint of marriage and family counselors during the early Cold War was that the field lacked power and a clear professional identity based on a common body of research, theory, and clinical training. That situation began to change rapidly in the 1960s and is the topic of chapter 5, “From Counseling to Therapy.” In an attempt to align themselves more closely with medical science, many leaders of the movement favored redefining themselves as therapists rather than counselors. Spearheading this transformation were sexologists William Masters and Virginia Johnson. Most accounts of Masters and Johnson emphasize their discoveries about the anatomy and physiology of sexuality, overlooking their close connections to the marriage counseling and therapy movement. “Repairing the conjugal bedroom” was how the media celebrated their work, and Masters and Johnson made it clear that they believed sexual compatibility not only saved marriages but also improved family life. According to Masters, their focus was on the “therapy of the sexually maladjusted family-unit”—a clear signal of their intention to classify human sexuality as a source of family and marital dysfunction. At the same time, they viewed their studies as the basis for a body of empirically tested scientific knowledge that could underpin the growing field of sex therapy in particular and marriage therapy in general. Masters and Johnson’s insistence on therapeutic encounters with both marriage partners also represented a break from the early days of marriage counseling, when the wife tended to be the sole client.

Counselors’ efforts to professionalize gathered momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, years that witnessed the formal union of marriage and family counseling, as discussed in chapter 6, “A New Value in Psy-
chotherapy.” Individuals such as AAMC presidents William Nichols and Donald Williamson led the drive toward professionalization of the field, with the development of its own standards of clinical training and licensing. Over the years the AAMC substantially broadened its membership and eventually renamed itself the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). Marriage counseling became subsumed under the wider rubric of family therapy. The organization established its first professional journal in 1974 and in 1982 moved its headquarters to Washington, D.C., intent on lobbying the government in defense of its interests. The U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare recognized the AAMFT’s graduate accreditation programs in 1978, and in 1992 marriage and family therapist officially became the fifth “core” mental health profession, alongside psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and psychiatric nurses. By 1993 thirty-one states had established licensing or certifying procedures for marriage and family therapists.

Chapter 6 also reveals how, under the influence of family “systems theory,” therapists’ focus shifted in the 1970s from the individual, as in the old days of counseling, to “the enigmatic processes that lead to family distress.” The family emerged as an emotional unit and the source of pathology. As the influence of psychoanalysis waned and the community mental health movement rose, therapists trained their sights on the family unit as well as the community at large.

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, marriage counseling had broadened to encompass sex therapy and couples’ therapy, which includes “committed, non-traditional relationships” such as gay and lesbian couples. The field had overcome numerous obstacles to achieve its professionalization, but other challenges lurked on the horizon. The rise of managed care in the last two decades of the twentieth century sparked what some clinicians called “a culture clash” between health insurance companies and therapists, and marriage and family counselors worried about a possible erosion in the quality of care for couples and families, as well as a loss of income for themselves. Health insurance companies and managed care corporations cut back reimbursement for counseling services that did not conform to official diagnoses in DSM-IV. Some therapists complained that the use of DSM diagnoses would “pathologize” or medicalize common behaviors and attitudes.
The fact that the growth of marriage and family counseling coincided with the highest divorce rates in the nation’s history led many to question the field’s effectiveness. A 1995 *Consumer Reports* survey found that marriage and family therapists ranked lowest of all groups in the mental health care field in terms of competence. *USA Today* and *Time* ran stories suggesting that it was time for the profession to rethink how therapy worked. One therapist wondered in 1996: “How come Shakespeare . . . knew more about family dynamics than we family professionals?”42 “Does Couples Therapy Work?” asked the *New York Times* in 2012.43 The problem of unlicensed therapists without formal training was as formidable as it had been half a century earlier. Time and again, counselors indulged in highly public soul-searching about the future of their profession. Some alleged that counselors’ value-neutral approach was tantamount to support for marital breakup. Accusations flew that therapists had helped redefine marriage as just another “lifestyle option.”44 Those practitioners who advocated a more marriage-friendly approach to counseling were part of a backlash against therapism, which had reached a high point by the turn of the century. One of these was family therapist William Doherty (to whom this book is heavily indebted). Calling himself a “whistle-blower,” Doherty lent his passionate voice to the growing chorus of therapists who were alarmed by the long-standing problem of incompetent practitioners doing marital therapy and more recent concerns about therapists “who follow the cultural script that regards marriage as a lifestyle to be abandoned if it is not working for either of its customers.”45 Thus, while the rise of marriage and family counseling is a resounding success story from a professional standpoint, the field is once again in flux, with therapists openly clashing over different interpretations of marriage and family life. Major questions remain unanswered: What exactly does a happy and healthy marriage look like? Do women care more about their relationships than men do? If women work harder at their marriages, is it because they want to, or because they are told to? Are men really from Mars and women from Venus? The debates of the twenty-first century are a forceful reminder of similar disagreements in the 1950s, a critical turning point in U.S. history and a time when the field was just beginning to gain national notoriety. The fact that the field is no more united today than it was half a century earlier, and the fact
that pesky doubts continue to swirl around its claim to provide “hope and healing” for couples and families, suggests that Americans’ willingness to invite professionals into their private lives might be living on borrowed time.

Nonetheless, therapism shows few signs of fading any time soon. Most social scientists would agree that, for better or worse, marriage has become a consumer commodity or a lifestyle option. Others argue that twenty-first-century matrimony is merely the newest stage in an evolutionary process that has transformed marriage and the family from patriarchal, social institutions characterized by duty, obedience, and strictly defined gender roles to relationships that are “more joyful, more loving, more satisfying for many couples than ever before in history.”

By contrast, this book concludes that beneath this series of events lurk disquieting trends that challenge bedrock values. Indeed, the data indicate that these institutions’ evolution has raised the bar by which happiness is measured to unrealistic levels. The systemic failure of married and family life to meet these expectations has fostered rampant disenchchantment and anxiety among committed couples, which in turn has translated into rising breakup rates among both married and unmarried partners and emotional distress for countless children. Far from making relationships “more joyful, more loving, more satisfying,” the “marriage-go-round”—sociologist Andrew Cherlin’s phrase to describe Americans’ tendency to rush from one marriage to another—has transformed marriage and the family into a battleground of bruised feelings. What the future holds for America’s most cherished institutions is unclear. What this book demonstrates, however, is that the current turmoil surrounding marriage and the family has been a long time in the making, and it can be traced to the concerted efforts of a group of clinicians and researchers who sought to launch a social revolution that has overturned the intimate lives of millions of men, women, and children.
When Emily Hartshorne Mudd (1898–1998), arguably America’s foremost marriage counselor of the twentieth century, reminisced about growing up, one vivid memory stood out. She remembered her mother, Clementina (Rhodes) Hartshorne (1871–1970), marching in a “Votes for Women” parade down Philadelphia’s Broad Street. Ten-year-old Emily marched alongside her mother and watched as “the rough men on the sidewalk” threw tomatoes and eggs at them. “Mother was never daunted. She went on marching. And I don’t remember feeling afraid because I guess she wasn’t afraid,” Mudd recounted later in life.

In her writings Emily Mudd never said exactly why this event stood out in her memory, but it likely convinced her at an early age that reforming the conditions of life for American women was a cause worth fighting for, would be hotly contested, and would require fierce determination. These conclusions, drawn from watching the opposition her mother faced when marching to win the vote for women, deeply affected Mudd’s involvement in the burgeoning marriage counseling field and similar reform movements that altered the status of women, the nature of marriage, and family policy in twentieth-century America. For Emily Mudd, as for many early practitioners in the field, marriage counseling was chiefly a vehicle for overturning the nation’s laws against contraception, liberalizing attitudes toward sexual behavior, and convincing lawmakers to make it easier for women to work outside the home, pursue their own careers, and thus enhance their overall emotional satisfaction. The efforts of Emily Mudd and other pathfinders in the marriage and family counseling movement paved the way for the triumph of the therapeutic ethos, with its advocacy of reliance on expertise (principally in the psychological sciences) and its condemnation of traditional values, behaviors, and institutions that seemingly stymie
individual human potential and psychological self-fulfillment. Their success in establishing marriage and family counseling as a bona fide profession testified to the ability of this small phalanx of reformers—what one observer called a “nucleus of persons”—to change the course of twentieth-century history. The emotional lives of Americans have never been the same since.

To most scholars, the pivotal figure in the rise of marriage and family counseling was Paul Popenoe, head of the Los Angeles–based American Institute of Family Relations (AIFR), but not even Popenoe matched Emily Mudd’s stature and impact. According to historian James Reed, Mudd’s Marriage Council of Philadelphia, one of the first marriage counseling clinics in the nation, “played a role in the development of marriage counseling in the United States analogous to that played by [Margaret] Sanger’s Clinical Research Bureau in contraception.” Contemporary agreements. Sex researcher William Masters noted that “more than anyone else Emily Mudd encouraged and helped shape the field of marriage and family-life education, and was one of the first to address the dimension of sexuality as a vital factor in family life.” According to William C. Nichols, a later president of the AAMFT, Mudd—not Popenoe—was “the most influential and visible representative of marriage counseling in the 1950s.” In 1963 noted psychiatrist William Menninger called Mudd “the leading figure in the field of marriage counseling.” Popenoe may have been the field’s familiar public face during the 1950s, but Mudd was more instrumental in laying the groundwork for virtually every important advance made by the fledgling profession, and she was a key participant in most of the major events that marked the ascendancy of therapism in American family life up to the Watergate era.

Mudd, born in 1898 in Merion, Pennsylvania, was the daughter of Clementina Hartshorne and Edward Yarnall, a prosperous Philadelphia banker and philanthropist. Emily’s lifelong interest in women’s issues stemmed from two early influences: her mother and her Quakerism. Clementina Hartshorne was a member of the Pennsylvania League of Women Voters and the friend of several pro-suffrage activists, including Mary Winsor, who staged a celebrated hunger strike from prison in
1918. Mudd’s interest in women’s issues also derived from her Quaker ancestors on her father’s side. Historically, and in stark contrast to most Protestant churches, Quaker women spoke during worship, served as ministers, and played what one scholar has called a “disproportionate role” in feminist causes such as women’s suffrage. Mudd felt “considerable delight and satisfaction” when she learned that one of her father’s Quaker forebears “strongly supported free opportunity for women in medicine on the same basis as men.”

After a brief stint in the U.S. Army’s nursing corps during World War I, Mudd, a graduate of Vassar, obtained an M.A. at the Louthorpe School of Landscape Architecture in Groton, Massachusetts. In 1922 she gave up any career plans and married Stuart Mudd, a promising microbiologist attending Harvard University Medical School. Shortly thereafter the Mudds moved to New York City, where Emily met and became good friends with birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger and husband-and-wife physicians Abraham and Hannah Stone, pivotal activists in the budding marriage and family counseling movement. After the birth of the Mudds’ first child (a daughter), Hannah Stone fitted Emily with a diaphragm at Margaret Sanger’s clinic in Brooklyn, New York (Emily referred to Hannah as “the Madonna of the clinic”).

In 1931 Abraham and Hannah Stone opened the Marriage Consultation Center at the New York City Labor Temple, and the next year they moved it to Margaret Sanger’s Clinical Research Bureau. The Stones emphasized education about sexuality and birth control in their dealings with clients. As they wrote in 1935: “It has been our experience that an appreciation of the sex factors in marriage and reliable contraception are essential for a well-adjusted and satisfactory marital union.” Their friendship with the Mudds underlined the common beliefs uniting many of America’s early marriage counselors, especially their faith in the liberating possibilities of birth control. As Sanger had asserted in 1922, contraception freed people from “sexual prejudice and taboo, by demanding the frankest and most unflinching re-examination of sex in its relation to human nature and the bases of human society.” In 1923 Sanger insisted that in “back of [female] frigidity is often the fear of pregnancy.” As historian Linda Gordon has argued, the Stones’ and Sanger’s focus on contraception shaped their teachings on the nature of female sexuality. They taught the superiority of the vaginal orgasm.
and essentially defined any sexual act other than intercourse as perversity. In 1974 Mudd maintained that “Drs. Abraham and Hannah Stone were the first who wrote and emphasized that mutual orgastic response was the end-all and the real way, or what-have-you for mutual sexual enjoyment.” Mudd, being of a later generation, eventually rejected this viewpoint about women’s sexuality, but she remained steadfastly loyal to the notion that contraception freed women to enjoy sex and was the key to women’s happiness in marriage. In 1974 she contended that “inevitably,” in any marital problem, “the whole question of family planning came in.”

In 1925, when Stuart got a job at the University of Pennsylvania’s Medical School, the Mudds moved to the Philadelphia area, eventually settling in the same Haverford neighborhood as Emily’s sister, Clementine Hartshorne Jenney. The sisters shared child-raising duties, an arrangement that enabled Emily to keep working as an unpaid assistant in Stuart’s bacteriology laboratory until the early 1930s. Stuart later became a world-renowned researcher hailed for his work in freeze-drying blood plasma and preventing infections in hospitalized patients. Although their career paths eventually took them in different directions, Emily and Stuart tended to agree on most social and political issues, and over the years they were widely regarded as what a later generation would call a “power couple.”

The Mudds’ mutual interest in contraception drove them to seek a scientific breakthrough in birth control technology. Together, Emily and Stuart published fourteen papers, including some on the immunological properties of spermatozoa. Their research derived from Stuart’s “continuing interest in the quality and quantity of population” and their mutual concerns about “child spacing,” in Emily’s words. All the while, Emily had in mind her maternal grandmother’s thirteen babies (only eight of whom survived). Her grandmother’s fertility inspired her, as she put it, to investigate “what could be done about helping women to have children not too close together.”

By the onset of the Great Depression, Emily and Stuart Mudd had made their names as prominent crusaders in the struggle to legalize contraception. This battle was highlighted by the 1936 appellate court decision in United States v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries, which ruled that antiobscenity laws did not prevent physicians from prescribing
contraceptives. Impressed with the example of the Sanger Clinic in New York City, and in the teeth of Roman Catholic opposition—the Church enjoyed considerable political power in the City of Brotherly Love—the Mudds led the campaign to found Pennsylvania’s first birth control clinic in West Philadelphia in 1929. It was originally called a maternal health center because, as Emily confessed, she was “afraid” to call it a
“birth control clinic. We were trying to straddle between the acceptable health care and the not yet acceptable spacing of children.” Even ten years later, as Swedish-born sociologist Gunnar Myrdal noted, “birth control” was still “taboo as a subject for public polite conversation” in the United States.

When the Philadelphia birth control clinic opened, “various women patients were lined up by the liberal social agencies or friends” in the area. Mudd had discovered that, under Pennsylvania law, a pregnant woman could not be jailed, so—pregnant with her second child—she volunteered at the clinic, taking patient histories and dispensing contraceptive information. When the clinic was raided three weeks after opening, neither Mudd nor the clinic’s physician was there, so the police only seized the center’s records. At that point, the Mudds’ social connections came to the rescue. Stuart telephoned the city health commissioner, who socialized with some of the clinic’s board members, and he decided, “Oh, well, let’s just let things ride.” The records were returned, the clinic was never raided again, and five years later, eight other birth control centers had opened in the Philadelphia area. The Mudds had won a major victory for birth control in America.

Meanwhile, Stuart Mudd’s involvement in the surging eugenics movement led him to attend the 1932 meeting of the Eugenics Society in London (founded as the Eugenics Education Society in 1908, renamed the Eugenics Society in 1926, and known in the twenty-first century as the Galton Institute), and Emily decided to join him. As a premedical student at Princeton during World War I, Stuart had been heavily influenced by the teachings of biologist Edwin Grant Conklin, an outspoken supporter of the notion that the time had come for human beings to assume control over evolution. Conklin, like many opinion makers of his time, was alarmed about the “menace” to “high civilization” posed by the “great growth of alcoholism, depravity, and insanity” among the “weak” classes of people in society. Among his recommendations was a project to breed “a better race of men,” a lesson that impressed the young Stuart Mudd. In the words of historian James Reed, “Conklin left Mudd with an enduring interest in improving human quality,” and there is abundant evidence that Emily shared her husband’s views on the topic.

Eugenics, a term coined in 1883 by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles
Darwin, refers to the study of reproductive methods to improve the evolution of the human race. Eugenics was conventionally divided into two types: positive eugenics, to encourage the healthiest people to have big families, and negative eugenics, to prevent people with bad hereditary traits from breeding. An international eugenics movement swept the world in the first half of the twentieth century, reaching from Japan to North and South America. The most notorious example of eugenics was the law enacted in 1933 by Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich, which permitted the involuntary sterilization of men and women with a wide variety of physical and mental disabilities. Other political jurisdictions, including Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, two Canadian provinces, and dozens of American states, passed similar sterilization legislation. Eugenic sterilization statutes were supported by activists, scientists, journalists, liberal clergymen, and elected officials spanning virtually the entire political spectrum. One notable exception was the Roman Catholic Church, which condemned sterilization in 1930. The Mudds were good examples of how countless activists dedicated to ending what Margaret Sanger called women’s “biological slavery” viewed eugenics and birth control as highly congruent causes.

By the 1930s the hereditarianism that had initially united the eugenics movement was fading in the face of genetic research that showed “like did not beget like.” Biologists argued that characteristics such as low intelligence were not passed down as single hereditary units from parent to offspring, casting doubt on the advisability of mass sterilization as a method of ridding society of undesirable behavioral or mental traits. As the New York Times editorialized in 1932: “The evidence is clear that normal persons also carry defective genes which may manifest themselves in an insane progeny. . . . Even if we discovered the carriers of hidden defective genes by applying the methods of the cattle breeder to humanity, the process would take about a thousand years.” In the face of these findings, eugenicists began to contend that both nature and nurture accounted for marital and family problems; one stated in 1938 that “parents produce faulty children by bad rearing as well as by bad heredity.” By World War II many of those involved in the marriage and family counseling movement had concluded that although “the aims of eugenics are essential to the realization of a better family life,” governments did not need to force eugenic policies on their citizens. In the view of
many experts, eugenics and democracy were perfectly compatible. “Freedom of parenthood enabled all parents to space births, so that children may have a greater chance for survival, for good health and for proper rearing,” one marriage counselor said. In other words, many American opinion makers thought that marriage and family counselors could teach parents how to make the right eugenic decisions.

Emily Mudd wholeheartedly agreed that there was a fundamental kinship between eugenics and marriage counseling. To her, both were examples of sound preventive medicine. After attending the London eugenics conference, she toured a number of marriage counseling centers in Germany and wrote about her travels for Sanger’s Birth Control Review. By the 1930s, in accordance with Germany’s Bevölkerungspolitik (population policy), the Weimar Republic had hundreds of marriage counseling centers (Prussia alone had 200) that offered an array of services ranging from venereal disease counseling to referrals for abortion and sterilization. To Mudd, Germany’s programs of state health insurance for “anyone belonging to trades below certain income levels” had “excellent eugenic possibilities” because they funded contraceptive services for the social groups whose fertility she and other eugenicists earnestly sought to curtail. She described her journey:

[I traveled] south through western Germany from Cologne, under the shadow of the great Catholic Cathedral and in the midst of the industrial section where economic depression had been continuous for years, where poverty glared at you from the faces of miserable parents and many children, where prostitution stalked the streets by day and night, and where there was no such thing as a birth control clinic under any auspices, to democratic Frankfurt am Main where the heritage of social progressiveness has been handed down from the Middle Ages, and where the large proportion of intelligent and successful Jews minimizes the power of reactionary groups. There I saw the most poised and adequate handling of the question of Marriage Advice, Birth Control, and Abortion which it has been my privilege to find and hear of, outside of Russia.

At what she called “a model clinic” in Frankfurt, she recounted how a “gaunt, hopeless looking woman, obviously pregnant” and suffering
from “deep melancholy,” with a “husband in the insane asylum, . . . two feeble-minded children and one epileptic child,” was referred to a local hospital for an abortion and sterilization. “All part of the day’s routine,” she noted admiringly. By contrast, she pointed out that Pennsylvania health authorities would do nothing of the sort for such a patient.  

Mudd’s account, besides its invidious distinctions between Catholic and Protestant Germany, reveals her fervent admiration for the way German state and city governments, women’s organizations, and Protestant churches funded birth control and marital advice bureaus. Her description of the German clinics was clearly intended to be a clarion call to reformers in the fields of contraception and marriage counseling in the United States. Enamored with Germany’s policies governing sex, marriage, and the family, Emily Mudd was highly sympathetic to the Bevölkerungspolitik notion that women owed a reproductive duty to their respective nations. This paternalist way of thinking and her eagerness to look to Germany and the fledgling Soviet Union for policy guidance remained features of her theories about sex, reproduction, and family life for years to come.

Mudd’s impressions of the German marital advice clinics confirmed what she had already concluded as a volunteer at the Philadelphia maternal health center. Most of the women who visited her clinic were in their thirties and already had several children—many “up to ten or twelve.” These poor, “very worn out” married women tended to blame their unhappiness on years of successive pregnancies, so Mudd began to conceive of a separate service that would reach “the younger couples before they got into such dire straits.” “Is Preventive Work the Next Step?” she asked rhetorically in Sanger’s Birth Control Review in 1932. If so, “marital advice bureaus” were the answer. 

To Mudd, then, one of marriage counseling’s primary purposes was to teach young couples how to practice contraception. The impetus for a marriage counseling agency came from a small, elite group of liberal Philadelphians whom Mudd helped assemble; they sought to broaden the scope of birth control services by establishing a clinic where married couples “or those contemplating marriage” could be advised on how to “avoid some of the causes of marital difficulties.” To Mudd’s pleasant surprise, this group asked her to be the director of the Marriage Council of Philadelphia (MCP) and its first counselor, and she gladly accepted,
terminating her post as Stuart’s laboratory assistant. Mudd was a canny choice for MCP director. “I came from what in establishment terms would be a reputable family, [a] community family,” Mudd admitted. Her social contacts, combined with her husband’s high standing at the university and in medical circles, improved the MCP’s chances of surviving. According to Mudd, the very name of the MCP conveyed the public image of a pro-family social service, which was a plus when trying to entice affluent Philadelphians or funding organizations to donate to the cause of birth control but not to a birth control clinic per se. As she said: “I think there were . . . perhaps some foundations that felt more free to give to a service called a Marriage Council than they did to birth control.” A marriage counseling center might also attract a younger and more educated clientele than the largely poor and older people who typically attended the birth control clinic. Last, but not least, it came in handy for local physicians. Initially, the MCP was housed in two rooms belonging to the Pennsylvania Birth Control Federation, and doctors who feared the social stigma of being associated with the birth control movement could refer patients to the MCP with the knowledge that they would receive covert contraceptive counseling there or at the adjacent birth control office.

The wider context to the founding of the MCP was the worsening economic conditions of the 1930s and their impact on the nation’s families and birthrate. The U.S. birthrate for white women fell throughout the nineteenth century, and by the early twentieth century, the average family size for urban, native-born adult women was only two children (the immigrant rate was five to six live births). However, in the 1930s, for the first time in the nation’s history, the birthrate dipped below the replacement level, reflecting the severe financial and psychological difficulties facing American couples. The unemployment rate reached 25 percent in 1933, and the incidence of desertion and divorce kept climbing. Many Americans were reluctant to bring children into a world racked by such economic uncertainty. To eugenicists and birth controllers like the Mudds, the most worrisome development of the 1930s was that the poor were continuing to have large families, while the more respectable classes were spacing their pregnancies. Other commentators argued that falling birthrates were just another symptom—alongside easier divorce, juvenile delinquency, and higher employment rates
for wives—of the American family's decline. Thus, it was difficult to
drum up wide-scale support for birth control when so many Americans
were concerned about depopulation. The American birth control move-
ment bent to prevailing attitudes in the late 1930s when it distanced it-
self from Sanger's message that large numbers of people should have
no children at all and stressed instead a "balanced" program of spacing
pregnancies that did not necessarily discourage middle-class Americans
from having children.\footnote{With the whole issue of contraception fraught
with controversy, a clinic ostensibly dedicated to counseling either cou-
ples who had already tied the knot or young people contemplating mat-
rimony was bound to seem a lot less divisive than a service devoted to
slashing birthrates on a wide scale.}

The veneer of marriage counseling may have reassured many
Philadelphians, but at the MCP, Mudd and her staff were actually en-
gaged in subversive activities. In her early writings from the 1930s,
Mudd asserted that the MCP supplied clients with information about
marriage, but four decades later she admitted that she had also arranged
abortions and sterilizations. Mudd's many sympathetic contacts in the
medical community contributed by securing hospital facilities and per-
forming the operations. For clients who encountered difficulty getting
abortions in Pennsylvania, Mudd sent them out of state to Baltimore.\footnote{Clients were normally referred to the MCP by the various social agen-
cies as well as individual physicians, ministers, teachers, and lawyers.
In the beginning, the MCP was a modest enterprise; its entire first-year
budget was only $500, almost all of it coming from local benefactors.
Over time, fees from clients and lecturing, its lending library, and in-
service training added to the MCP's budget, but the biggest change came
from the influx of government or private foundation funds, which
twenty years later made up more than 50 percent of the budget.}

The opening of the MCP did not trigger a stampede of clients to the
facility, belying the notion that there was popular demand for such a
service. In later life, Mudd stated that her objective in marriage coun-
seling had always been to put herself out of business, but a constant
theme in the MCP's post-1933 history was an expansion of its activities.
It was never clear where responding to public demand for marriage
counseling left off and stimulating such demand began. Only fifty
clients visited the MCP in its first year, so Mudd moved beyond clinical
consultative work and undertook a massive public education campaign, including lectures to community organizations (such as the Philadelphia YWCA), University of Pennsylvania medical students, and undergraduates on local college campuses such as Bryn Mawr. Thanks to her contacts in the local press, Mudd’s public education program about marriage and the family was covered by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Evening Bulletin*, as well as by popular magazines such as *Redbook*, *McCall’s*, *Modern Bride*, *Reader’s Digest*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *American Weekly*, a Sunday newspaper supplement. In her public lectures Mudd tackled a range of topics, including “the use and misuse of birth control.” Advocacy of “sex as a vitally important part of the adjustment between two persons” and the notion that married women could pursue
their own careers stimulated “tremendous bursts of emotional feeling” in her audiences, according to Mudd. Her later involvement in the debate over women’s employment outside the home, a matter of deep personal interest, was kindled by these early encounters with college students from the Philadelphia area. Her efforts paid off; by 1955 the MCP was serving a predominantly white, native-born, Protestant clientele of young married men and women; 66 percent of the men and 42 percent of the women had a year of college or more. But this success meant that during its first two decades of existence, the MCP’s clientele became increasingly homogeneous.

Emily Mudd’s theories about marriage counseling in the 1930s were striking in their anticipation of the therapeutic approaches to marital advice a generation later, but they also contained elements that were very much a product of her time and place. The ascendancy of psychoanalysis in U.S. psychiatry between the 1930s and the 1960s, plus her friendship with Kenneth Appel, who later chaired the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, predisposed Mudd to flirt with Freudian theory when interviewing clients, particularly with regard to the causes of homosexuality. In conformity with the overwhelming consensus at the time that homosexuality was psychologically unhealthy, Mudd advised parents to encourage “healthy personality development” in their sons and daughters that would steer them toward heterosexuality, although she admitted that psychiatry possessed no “cures” for homosexuality and that there were “degrees of homosexuality” in all individuals. Much later, when Freudianism was on the wane in U.S. psychiatry, Mudd stood by Freud, writing that he had “brought the concept of sex as a vital factor in human development and functioning into scientific format and cautious clinical application by 1910. This concept began to make inroads on continental middle class cultures and subsequently gradually invaded the tightness of the calvinistic, Victorian, and puritan standards which in the early 1900s shaped much of the legal, religious, and moral codes of Central and Northeast United States.”

Mudd’s open fondness for psychoanalytic ideas would fade in the Cold War years, as biological psychiatry began to enjoy a revival. Her own approach to counseling came to focus not on “the reorganization of the personality structure of the individual,” as in psychoanalysis, but
on the marital relationship itself. Yet her eclectic reliance on psychoanalysis mirrored the broad American viewpoint, up to the 1960s, that in the name of science and enlightenment, Freud had lifted the traditionalist veil covering sexuality and that men, women, and children would benefit immensely as a result. Psychoanalysis justified Americans’ sunny optimism that all problems could be licked with the right methods, and it represented a smooth, healthy break from past practices rather than an abrupt revolution in values.

No matter how much she borrowed from Freud’s theories, however, Mudd’s early utterances on marriage and family counseling revealed aspects of the therapeutic ethos that would reign supreme by the end of the twentieth century. The aim of the new field, in Mudd’s eyes, was to “combat the bogies of ignorance, superstition, and fear” with professional expertise. The “philosophy” behind her MCP, as she asserted in 1940, rested on the “definition of the happy family as one which manages to solve its problems, not one which has no problems at all.” The fluid boundaries between psychological wellness and dysfunction ensured that almost every person needed counseling. The family that imagined itself to have no problems was simply living a lie, according to Mudd; only psychological counseling of the kind supplied by the MCP could lead to true happiness. A counseling service was “educational,” but what mattered “far more” were the client’s “attitudes” and “emotions,” not “his knowledge or lack of knowledge of facts.” What clients felt was more important than what they knew. Truth in the therapeutic encounter was “grasped through sentiment or feeling, rather than through rational judgement or abstract reasoning”—a curious admission for Mudd, in light of her oft-stated intent to use scientific knowledge to repeal the “ignorance” and “superstition” of earlier historical periods. This awkward tension between science and feelings persisted in marriage counseling for years to come.

Thus, as early as World War II, Mudd was articulating two key aspects of the therapeutic ethos: “the emotivist ethic,” which stressed the primacy of feelings over knowledge, and “the pathologization of human behaviour,” which was the tendency to define a range of seemingly normal life experiences as the breeding ground for disease—in this case, the superficially happy family and its interpersonal relations. By the time Congress declared war on Japan in December 1941, Mudd had es-
established herself as a pivotal pioneer in the emerging field of marriage and family counseling. The founding of the MCP was a notable accomplishment, and she was in the midst of building a constituency of like-minded reformers who would spread the message that counseling could dramatically ease people’s adjustment to marriage. Her advocacy of marriage and family counseling as a means to improve the emotional lives of millions had received attention from various churches. Befitting their history of providing pastoral counseling, churches nationwide convened more than 100 conferences on the problem of marital discord. In addition, schools and colleges, family welfare agencies, legal aid societies, social hygiene associations, and child guidance centers—to say nothing of birth control clinics—were showing mounting interest in marriage and family counseling. According to one estimate, there were more than 150 marriage counseling centers in the United States, and another 100 that provided some kind of marital guidance in concert with other services.

Yet the fate of marriage and family counseling still hung in the balance. As late as World War II, most Americans knew nothing about the profession, had no idea a “marriage problem” existed, and thus had never visited a marriage clinic. Evidence of interest in marriage counseling as a professional service was limited to urban locations such as New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles and to a handful of college campuses, but only a tiny fraction of college students actually took courses in marriage education. In 1948 a committee of marriage counselors lamented that “the vast majority of persons are ignorant of the existence of counselling centers and of marriage counsellors.” As late as 1964, one study found that only 10 percent of all marital counseling was done by “professional marriage counselors.” A home economics teacher at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute complained in 1953 that much of what passed for marriage counseling “seem[ed] to be oriented to highly urbanized marriage situations which are not typical of the country as a whole.” Marriage counselors like Emily Mudd, she contended, based their theories on “the culture of the highly urbanized companionate group which certainly is not typical of the suburban or fringe city, or of the rural family.”

Those who were aware of the existence of marriage counseling services were often uneasy about activists like Mudd, who appeared to be
interfering in intimate family matters. As she noted a quarter century later:

I did recognize that there was a good deal of hostility and perhaps anxiety obvious in many men and women about marriage counseling. There was a certain amount of resistance to anyone, either a man or a woman—perhaps more especially to a woman—whose work would involve her or him in what was considered to be a private aspect of life and living, the relationship of married partners to each other, which obviously . . . included the sexual relationship.48

Moreover, prior to World War II, “there was no money in the practice of marriage counseling. . . . People got extraordinarily small fees and little salaries.”49

Officialdom was not sold on marriage and family counseling either. Many policy makers suspected that reformers who preached greater frankness about sexuality and birth control would undermine rather than strengthen family values. In the shadow of the Great Depression, the prevailing consensus in Washington and in state capitals was that the traditional family headed by a male breadwinner remained the focus of attempts to construct a welfare state. Government policy rested on the theory that a man’s wages should support his wife and children. Talk of making the family more egalitarian and less patriarchal struck some social leaders as subversive. Advocacy of greater freedom for married women, whether it involved employment, sexuality, or fertility, triggered conflicted responses among elected officials. If they believed that dependence on the expertise of professionals like Mudd and the Stones weakened “family responsibility,” sympathy for the fledgling profession was likely to be sparse in the corridors of power.

As Emily Mudd struggled to make marriage counseling a success in Pennsylvania, the field took impressive strides on the West Coast. Three years before the opening of the MCP, biologist Paul Popenoe founded the first marriage counseling clinic in American history, the Institute of Family Relations (later the American Institute of Family Relations [AIFR]),
located on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. Popenoe claimed that he introduced the term *marriage counseling*, borrowed from the German word *Eheberatungsstellen*. The AIFR was “the first organized attempt in the United States to bring all the resources of science to bear on the promotion of successful family life,” and it soon gained a reputation as “the Mayo Clinic of family problems.” Its early growth was astonishing. By the mid-1930s, it employed more than forty workers, at a time when Mudd’s MCP was little more than a one-person show (even in the early 1940s the MCP’s staff ordinarily consisted of only two secretaries and a single counselor). In the pre–World War II period the AIFR counseled more clients than all other U.S. marriage counseling centers combined.

By 1962, the AIFR boasted a staff of seventy and had seven branches in the Los Angeles area; it published a monthly magazine, maintained a well-stocked library, and provided degree-based training in marriage counseling. By then, roughly 100,000 people had used its services. With thousands of people visiting the center every year, attending its seminars, subscribing to its correspondence courses, and exchanging letters with its counselors, Popenoe’s AIFR was a beehive of activity.

Popenoe’s views on marriage and the family were widely disseminated on the nation’s airwaves and in its newspapers and magazines. His long-running advice column in *Ladies’ Home Journal* was titled “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” Nicknamed “Mr. Marriage,” he was a frequent guest on Art Linkletter’s popular *House Party* program for fourteen years (it aired on radio and television between 1944 and 1969). Millions of housewives watched the show, accounting for three-quarters of the audience. Popenoe also introduced computer dating, which originated in 1956 on Linkletter’s other television program, *People Are Funny*.

Popenoe exuded a sunny, friendly optimism that appealed to countless Californians. He styled himself as a “marriage repairman” and a teacher of “parentcraft.” “If your automobile broke down you knew where to go for help,” he stated, but where did you go if your marriage was failing? He claimed that the AIFR’s counselors were “able to straighten out the difficulties of the marriage” for 80 percent of the couples who sought help, often “by seeing only one partner” (most frequently the wife). The AIFR was flooded with letters from readers and viewers who either asked his advice or lavished praise on him. In 1959, for instance, a woman from Stockton, California, confessed to Popenoe,
I read your column every evening, and think what you advise people to do about their difficulties is human and very sensible.\footnote{Even by the standards of Hollywood, some of whose female stars became clients, the expansion of the AIFR was spectacular.}

Tellingly, Popenoe, like Emily Mudd, came from a background in the eugenics movement. Born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1888, Popenoe moved with his family to California in 1905. He later traveled the world collect-
ing date specimens, but in 1913, as his interests shifted from fruit to genetics, he landed the job of editor of the *Journal of Heredity*. In 1926 he became director of research for the Human Betterment Foundation in Pasadena, California, a eugenics organization that lobbied for the enactment of state laws to allow the sterilization of people with disabilities. In the late 1920s he published three books on eugenics. In 1929 he was awarded an honorary degree by Occidental College and was thereafter known as “Dr. Popenoe,” a national expert on heredity, eugenics, marriage, and the family. That same year he founded the AIFR, and he remained its director until 1976.

Like Emily Mudd, Popenoe considered marriage and family counseling an extension of eugenics. The AIFR’s funding came from E. S. Gosney, chairman of the Human Betterment Foundation, which Popenoe left in 1931. By then, Popenoe had concluded that “hard-line” schemes to undertake mass, involuntary sterilizations were going out of fashion, and adherents had to scramble to make eugenics more acceptable to the public. As Popenoe and Mudd knew only too well, based on Pope Pius XI’s 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, the Roman Catholic Church opposed eugenic sterilization, and over the next three decades it used its formidable political power to thwart the enactment of state sterilization laws. For Popenoe, the battle had already been won in California, whose 1909 law resulted in the sterilization of one-third of all Americans affected by such laws in the twentieth century. Yet sterilization laws applied only to those in institutions, so Popenoe and others in the field sought different means of bringing eugenics to the broad segments of society that needed guidance about marriage and reproduction. By the 1930s, Popenoe’s focus had shifted from negative to positive eugenics, from the fertile poor to the broad middle class, whose birthrates, he believed, had to be elevated at a time of overall depopulation. The marriage counselor, he wrote, was “in a particularly favourable position to give advice that will have eugenic value.” Americans, he insisted, had to be not “merely family-minded, but discriminatingly family-minded.”

Popenoe’s stardom within the marriage counseling movement peaked in the 1950s and faded steadily thereafter. Despite building his own formidable branch of the movement, he remained an outsider to the rest of the field, which had its power base on the East Coast. With few academic credentials other than an honorary degree (and, according
Popenoe was never admitted to the American Association of Marriage Counselors, the field’s leading professional organization. Popenoe, in Mudd’s words, was “extremely bitter” about his exclusion for the rest of his life. One of the main differences between Popenoe and the East Coast group was his attitude toward birth control and sex education. One study found that of the AIFR’s first 1,000 cases, only 7 percent were reportedly caused by “a sex problem,” in stark contrast to the judgments of many East Coast counselors. Popenoe, like eugenicists Harry Laughlin and Charles Davenport, was opposed to indiscriminate birth control and believed that marriage counseling could boost family size among the so-called fit classes of society. Popenoe urged marriage counselors to try to increase birthrates among the “best” types of people by preventing divorce, while East Coast counselors tended to be less interested in saving marriages. To Popenoe, “the public has so long refused to face the facts of divorce. It doesn’t want to think about what these broken homes really mean but insists on trying to sugarcoat the whole thing with ‘getting her [the wife’s] freedom’ and that sort of talk. . . . That is exactly what’s the matter with these people. They are meeting their matrimonial problems on a completely childish level.” Popenoe was convinced that in the vast majority of cases, divorce was a disaster for the nation and for the individuals involved.

Popenoe’s reaction to Betty Friedan’s best-selling book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) revealed the divergence between his brand of marriage counseling advice and the emerging values of the women’s movement of the 1960s. Popenoe called *The Feminine Mystique* “shrill” and claimed it provided “little supporting evidence.” He objected to Friedan’s attacks on the domestic ideal of a breadwinner father and a nurturing, homemaker mother. “It is obvious,” Popenoe wrote, “that, in general, the home must be given first place in the life of both men and women—otherwise the survival of a nation is endangered. Beyond that, it is imperative that the ablest women, who can create the best homes, also bear and rear a fair proportion of the nation’s children—otherwise leadership will gradually die out.”

Popenoe’s conviction that college-educated women like Friedan were most useful as homemakers, wives, and mothers demonstrated his faith in positive eugenics, but by the 1960s, his theory about women’s destiny
was rapidly falling out of favor in a field dominated by individuals such as Emily Mudd, who thought the institution of marriage should be reformed to enable women to achieve fulfillment outside the home. His condemnation of homosexuality as a “definite evil” differed from the comparatively less judgmental interpretations of Mudd and other counselors. Popenoe soon became a target for radicals: in 1970 a group of women staged a sit-in at the offices of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, and among their demands was that the magazine discontinue Popenoe’s column “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” As the 1970s wore on, Popenoe attacked the women’s liberation and gay rights movements for being “enemies of family life,” which he believed was the linchpin of civilization. After his death in 1979, the AIFR did not survive for long, closing in the 1980s with little fanfare.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to define Popenoe as a hidebound traditionalist. As historians Molly Ladd-Taylor and Eva Moskowitz have argued, Popenoe taught husbands to pay attention to their wives’ sexual needs. He also acknowledged “the dissatisfaction many women felt with full-time wife and motherhood [and] asserted their right (and the right of their husbands) to be happy in marriage, in the process contributing to a ‘discourse of discontent’” that bridged the gap between the Depression and the women’s movement of the 1960s. In his monthly column, Popenoe candidly addressed the troubling emotional effects of bad marriages and taught housewives how to overcome the psychological tensions they often experienced when trying to conform to the domestic ideal. His advice invariably stressed adjustment to rather than rejection of women’s marital roles, but at the same time, he insisted that counseling was intended to encourage couples to bring their dissatisfactions out into the open so that both husband and wife could confront them. Popenoe may not have encouraged married women to protest, but he recognized that they were sometimes angry, unhappy, or depressed in their roles as housewives. He certainly agreed with most others in the marriage counseling field that American couples needed advice from scientifically enlightened experts who dealt on a daily basis with the myriad pressures exerted on the mid-twentieth-century American family. In 1965 an AIFR brochure read: “How long since you checked up systematically and scientifically on your marriage? It deserves regular attention, just as much as any other aspect of your health. . . . Even a
very successful marriage needs to be reinvigorated from time to time; provided with new interests, given new directions, furnished with new techniques for meeting changed conditions and avoiding dull routine and boredom." Popenoe's advice to American couples to define their relationships as health matters that "deserve[d] regular attention" from experts could have been reprinted forty years later, and no one would have blinked an eye.

Popenoe's AIFR and Mudd's MCP proved to be footholds for marriage and family counseling in American society, but it was on college campuses where interest in marriage as a subject for study truly flourished in the 1930s. By 1937, more than 200 colleges and universities (out of a total of 672 across the country) offered courses in marriage preparation. University social scientists endeavored to convince Americans that without scientific research, their marriages would likely fail and their families would become dysfunctional, and college students appeared to be receptive to their professors' teachings. Because they tended to be "the more promising graduates of the high schools," college students were naturally more intellectually curious about new topics of study than were their peers. Young men and women, often anticipating their own marriages, flocked to these college courses looking for practical information on how to choose a compatible spouse and what to expect once they tied the knot. Having postponed marriage to pursue an education, many students sought advice on dating issues, especially the ethics of premarital sex. Since sex education was virtually nonexistent in high schools at the time, they were excited to learn about normally taboo topics. Additionally, young women were flattered when their professors described their future roles as wives and mothers as worthy of scientific study. In the words of Ernest Groves, an early advocate of college and university marriage preparation courses, "it takes intelligence to be a modern wife." Although interest among male students was robust, these courses were largely designed to encourage female students to choose marriage rather than careers after graduation. Two outspoken leaders of this current were Stanford University psychologist Lewis Terman (1877–1956) and University of Chicago sociologist Ernest Burgess (1886–1966). Both believed that the family was
undergoing a transition from what Burgess called “an institutional to a companionship form.” In the process, the family ceased to be constrained by “traditional rules and regulations, specified duties and obligations, and other social pressures” exerted by conventional “mores, public opinion, and law.” Thus, “the task of adjusting to marriage is a vastly more complicated and precarious business today than it used to be,” stated an expert in 1932. This transformation of the family had various causes, including the shift from a rural to an urban society, “from stability of residence to mobility, [and] from familism to individualism.” Affection, equality, sympathetic understanding, and comradeship were the chief characteristics of the modern family, according to Burgess. Patriarchy and its “authoritarianism” had been overthrown by “the democratic family based on equality of husband and wife, with consensus in making decisions and with increasing participation by children as they grow older.” To Burgess and others in the field, the family was morphing from an institution into a relationship.

Terman, who collaborated with Popenoe, had designed and administered intelligence tests during World War I (he introduced the idea of the intelligence quotient, or IQ), but he switched to the study of personality assessment in the 1930s. Likewise, Burgess had made his name in the study of urban ecology but changed fields in the early 1930s, when he designed his first study of marital compatibility. Believing that the social and cultural differences between the sexes could be quantified, Terman argued that individual personalities determined a marriage’s chance of success. Thus he, like Burgess, was convinced that research could predict marital happiness. In 1938 Burgess told *Time* magazine that matrimonial success “now depends more than ever before upon the findings of research in the psychological and social sciences.”

The studies of Terman and Burgess buttressed the perception that extensive research in the social sciences was necessary to save American marriages, but their findings did not always dovetail with those of Mudd and the Stones, especially with regard to sexuality. In an attempt to measure which factors showed a marked correlation with “adjustment in marriage,” Burgess found that sexual factors were outweighed by others. For example, agreement over “desiring children,” “close attachment of husband and wife to their respective parents,” happy marriages for both spouses’ parents, and similar family backgrounds,
including “nationality, religious preference, church activity,” and levels of education, were more important than sexual factors in predicting a happy marriage. Getting along with the in-laws also scored high on surveys.\(^\text{73}\)

The growing conviction among social scientists that research on marriage and the family was urgently needed paved the way for the formation of the National Conference of Family Relations in 1938 (renamed the National Council on Family Relations in 1947). From its inception, the NCFR was dedicated to family research, policy, and practice, with the goal of improving the quality of family interactions. The NCFR was a response to the mounting interest in the welfare of the family, but it was also viewed as an organization that could help reconstruct the family into a democratic institution. NCFR members came from all over the country and from a wide variety of disciplines and specialties, including psychiatry, psychology, medicine, sociology, home economics, and the churches. Prominent Americans such as anthropologist Margaret Mead and psychiatrists William Menninger and Adolf Meyer were NCFR members. Pulitzer Prize–winning author Pearl Buck was a speaker at the NCFR’s annual meeting in 1941. Emily Mudd chaired the local arrangements committee for the NCFR conference “The Role and Functions of the Family in a Democracy,” held at Philadelphia’s Sylvania
Hotel on December 26–27, 1939. Mudd also served as a conference chair when the NCFR met again in Philadelphia on April 4–6, 1946.

An early major influence on the NCFR was sociologist Ernest Groves (1877–1946). Indeed, Groves rivaled Mudd as a torchbearer for the broad acceptance of marriage counseling as more than a specialty linked to the eugenics and birth control movements. In 1940 he wrote approvingly that “the interest of college young people in preparation for marriage has removed the idea that domestic counselling is merely for the handicapped or the incapable.”

Groves’s main claim to prominence was his advocacy of marriage courses on college campuses. His research output was slim: among marriage and family counselors, Groves was known as the man who wrote the same book twelve different times.

Born in Framingham, Massachusetts, Groves became a vocal proponent of “frank education for marriage” when his first wife died during pregnancy in 1916. At Boston University he developed the first credit course in marriage and the family in 1920, and after moving to the University of North Carolina in 1927, he continued to offer credit courses in marriage preparation. In 1934 Groves launched the annual Conference on the Conservation of Marriage and the Family, begun by his second wife, Gladys, at the North Carolina College for Negroes (later North Carolina College–Durham).

Groves, known popularly as the “professor of marriage” or the “doctor of troubles,” served as the NCFR’s third president. Like Popenoe and other marriage and family counseling trailblazers, Groves struggled in the early years to position the field in the mainstream of American life, cover up its links to the eugenic sterilization movement, and expand its potential clientele to include the country’s respectable classes, not just low-income groups or people with mental and physical disabilities. “Among the thousands of fine young men and women” graduating every year from college, Groves found a huge new pool of “highly selected” clients. According to Groves, however, these college students were headed for matrimonial “lives of unhappiness,” thanks to “squeamish” educators who imposed a “prudish conspiracy of silence regarding marriage problems” and “neglect[ed] . . . the emotional life of their students.” Colleges and universities should be in the business of “mental hygiene,” he stated—that is, “preparing the student for life.” Groves assured his students that he was nonjudgmental and “cast no stones,”
but he encouraged them to keep “digging back” into their lives for the events that led to their emotional difficulties. “It will be hard. It will hurt,” he admitted, but it would ease their minds in the long run. Groves shared with Mudd and Popenoe a faith in science for dealing with problems of personality; he saw marriage and family counseling as a form of mental hygiene that enabled experts to intervene and prevent psychological disorders from occurring later in life. Groves was one of the first to promote counseling as a service and a resource on which a growing number of Americans of all walks of life would come to depend.

Sidney E. Goldstein (1879–1955), one of the three founders of the NCFR and its fifth president (1945–1946), was another who believed that the family was at a historical crossroads. Goldstein, of mixed Jewish and Irish ancestry, was an associate rabbi under Rabbi Stephen Wise at the Free Synagogue in New York City; both were avid supporters of eugenics. Goldstein, chairman of the Jewish Institute on Marriage and Family and the New York State Conference on Marriage and the Family (NYSCMF), was arguably the most vocal U.S. clergyman in favor of a scientifically grounded approach to preparing people for marriage. By the outbreak of World War II, he was tirelessly advocating that the NYSCMF organize a program of public education and counseling services in New York City to provide information and guidance about what men and women should expect both before and after marriage. As Goldstein told the NCFR in 1938, the institution of marriage was in crisis due to “a deepening rebellion on the part of children and on the part of women and corresponding restlessness toward the routine and regimentation of married life.” Since “the home, the school and the church” had failed to solve the crisis, the time had come for “the Government of the State” to take the lead and “assist in establishing consulting centers throughout the State and across the country.” Knowledge about marriage had to be “democratize[d],” Goldstein averred; by that, he meant that “normal men and women, married or unmarried, are just as much in need” of marriage and family counseling “as abnormal groups.” “We cannot rear the right kind of family in the wrong kind of home,” he stated. “No couple should be permitted to enter the state of matrimony without instruction and guidance in at least the elementary matters of marriage and family organization.” Goldstein elevated marriage
and the family to the level of a vital national policy and declared society’s institutions—notably, the family—incapable of understanding and solving the problem. The family had to be reconstituted on the new foundations of biology, psychology, economics, and ethics. Only professional expertise, to his mind, could save the country.  

More successful—but also more controversial—than Goldstein’s efforts to launch marriage counseling in New York City were those of Lester Dearborn in Boston. Dearborn, described in 1934 by Time magazine as a “stocky, soft-spoken . . . happily married but childless” forty-year-old, was similar to Popenoe, in that he had no formal education in psychiatry, psychology, pastoral counseling, or social work. Yet his lack of credentials did not stop him from becoming one of the first in the marriage counseling field to openly argue that the gulf between the nation’s ideals about sex and marriage and the behavioral reality of Americans’ intimate lives was gaping, predating Alfred Kinsey’s similar but more ballyhooed claims by a decade. Early in his career, Dearborn worked as a high school teacher, and in the late 1920s he started lecturing on “sex hygiene” in the Boston area. In 1932, as an employee of the YMCA, he shifted into marriage counseling at the Massachusetts Society for Social Hygiene (MSSH). Since its inception in 1911, the MSSH had been advocating medical measures in the fight against venereal disease and prostitution, but in 1928 it reorganized to emphasize “family life education” as the best way to combat these social problems. By the 1930s, the MSSH had hired Dearborn to lecture on sexual topics to groups such as the Camp Fire Girls, the Harvard Church Young People’s Society, the YMCA Young Men’s Club, and Boston’s Nursery Training School. He quickly gained a reputation for his candor, and his lectures covered subjects that polite society considered “abnormalities and per-versions.” For example, nervous MSSH officials wondered why Dearborn had to spend a full thirty minutes on masturbation.

Dearborn was an early contributor to a professional discourse that helped redefine normal sexuality at a time when popular tolerance for sexual deviation in the form of homosexuality, masturbation, premarital “petting,” and oral and anal sex was almost nonexistent. Dearborn believed that many if not all homosexuals could be taught to adjust to heterosexual marriage, but his other views about homosexuality were far less conventional. He objected to “the popular clamor for drastic legis-
lation dealing with the so-called sex perverts,” referring to the drive for stiffer sentencing of homosexuals and other nonconformists. One historian has argued that the word *psychopath*, used so freely both before and after World War II by criminologists and mental health experts, “served in part as a code for homosexual.” In a day and age when many Americans did not distinguish between homosexuals and “sex offenders,” Dearborn contended that “a great many” gay men and women were “highly intellectual and very useful citizens.” Given the permissible language used to describe homosexuality in the pre–World War II United States, Dearborn’s remarks were decidedly unorthodox, and he was among the first and most authoritative commentators to argue that healthy sexuality could include nonprocreative acts outside marriage. Dearborn hardly convinced his audience to accept all his views on sexuality, but his listeners were apparently sufficiently impressed with his earnestness and forthrightness that they began to request that he provide individual counseling. According to Dearborn, he and the MSSH did “nothing more than let it be known through our lectures that such a [counseling] service existed, and this has generally been done in answering the question ‘Where can we go for help?’” By 1932, he had performed about 110 such consultations at the YMCA.

Working for the MSSH—a respectable public health organization—helped shield Dearborn from accusations of obscenity when he dispensed sexual and contraceptive advice to young clients, whether in his lectures or during private consultations. His MSSH patrons tended to dismiss moral objections to the sexual content of his teachings as the “outbursts” of “hysterical” women. Like other marriage counseling pioneers, Dearborn insisted that he was merely responding to public demands for more information about sex, but his relatively few clients, who were largely white, Protestant, heterosexual, and middle class, suggested that his impressions were based on a limited sample of American society. Other matters, including finances, child rearing, and how to get along with in-laws, also preoccupied his clients. Nonetheless, Dearborn maintained that the “chief basis of marital discontent” was “incompatibility on the subject of sex,” and in many cases, he stated, this could be remedied by premarital sex. This conviction plunged him into a nationwide controversy in 1934.

The setting for the imbroglio was a conference titled “Education for
Marriage and Family Social Relations” held at Columbia University’s Teachers College on June 3, 1934. There, a group of marriage and family experts tackled the question: “What shall we tell young people who have premarital relations?” The question was timely, given that countless young people across the country were postponing marriage due to the grim economic conditions. No transcript exists of the meeting, but according to Dearborn, who was there, the first speakers maintained that premarital sex often caused discord in marriage. Unable to remain quiet, Dearborn rose to state that a marriage counselor “would be placed in an awkward position if he believed that intercourse prior to marriage invariably led to unhappiness in marriage.” This statement was disquieting enough; what he had to say next sparked a firestorm of protest. Dearborn insisted that roughly 50 percent of his more than 300 unmarried clients had admitted to having premarital sexual relations. *Time* magazine, in its coverage of the meeting, reported that “all over the room conferees were on their feet, shaking fists, pointing fingers, shouting and shrilling Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman.” One attendee exclaimed, “Petting is cruelty to man.”

In addition to *Time*’s coverage of the incident, the *Atlanta Constitution* took issue with Dearborn’s remarks, and several southern newspapers ran the story. Dearborn tried to clarify: he had not been urging the country’s youth to have intercourse before marriage. But he quickly discovered that he had few defenders at Teachers College or among other counselors, including Paul Popenoe, who had chaired the conference. Dearborn was relieved, however, when Emily Mudd rushed up to him after the meeting to “comment favorably on my statement.” Maurice Bigelow, the main organizer of the conference at Columbia University, desperately tried to do damage control; in letters to the nation’s press, he dissociated the conference from Dearborn’s views, which, he insisted, had not been met with “general approval.” Yet Dearborn himself was convinced that Mudd was not the only one who shared his opinions about premarital sex. This would become evident twenty years later when leading members of the AAMC would challenge the condemnation of sexual relations before marriage.

The 1934 controversy over premarital sex blew over quickly enough, but its significance lay in the fact that although many Americans believed they needed more information about the nature of married life
as a way to prevent divorce, they resisted some of the teachings of early marriage counselors, notably those related to sexual issues. The nation’s heartland tended to respect science and the power of education to make life better, but there were firm moral boundaries beyond which most Americans were unwilling to go. Fearful of sending the wrong message to the nation’s young people, Americans did not want to hear that large numbers of them were engaging in sex before marriage, and they especially did not want educators like Dearborn saying that such conduct was normal and did not harm one’s prospects for a happy marriage. The 1934 controversy revealed the large cleavage between the values of most Americans and those of leading marriage counselors. Twenty years later, the press took a much gentler attitude toward Dearborn, calling him the “favorite Dutch uncle of prospective newly-weds” and saying that his advice on “the sex factor in human life” had made him “Boston’s expert repairer of shaky marriages.”

Yet in the midst of the Depression, it appeared that most Americans were not prepared to accept the therapeutic vision of the nation’s leading marriage counselors, who realized, to their chagrin, that they were out in front of public opinion. Thus, as the war clouds began to gather in the late 1930s, it was unclear exactly what the public at large thought about the status of marriage and the family in America. In contrast, there was little doubt about how the handful of individuals behind the new profession of marriage and family counseling felt. Mudd, Popenoe, Dearborn, Burgess, Goldstein, and Groves were united in thinking that the family was in the midst of a disorienting period of transition, moving from a patriarchal institution with firmly assigned gender roles to an institution that owed its members much more freedom. The coming years would test but ultimately vindicate their resolve to alter the nation’s attitudes toward matters that had once been consigned to the realm of family privacy. By then, the country would be in the midst of a revolution that would redefine Americans’ intimate relations with their spouses and their family members.