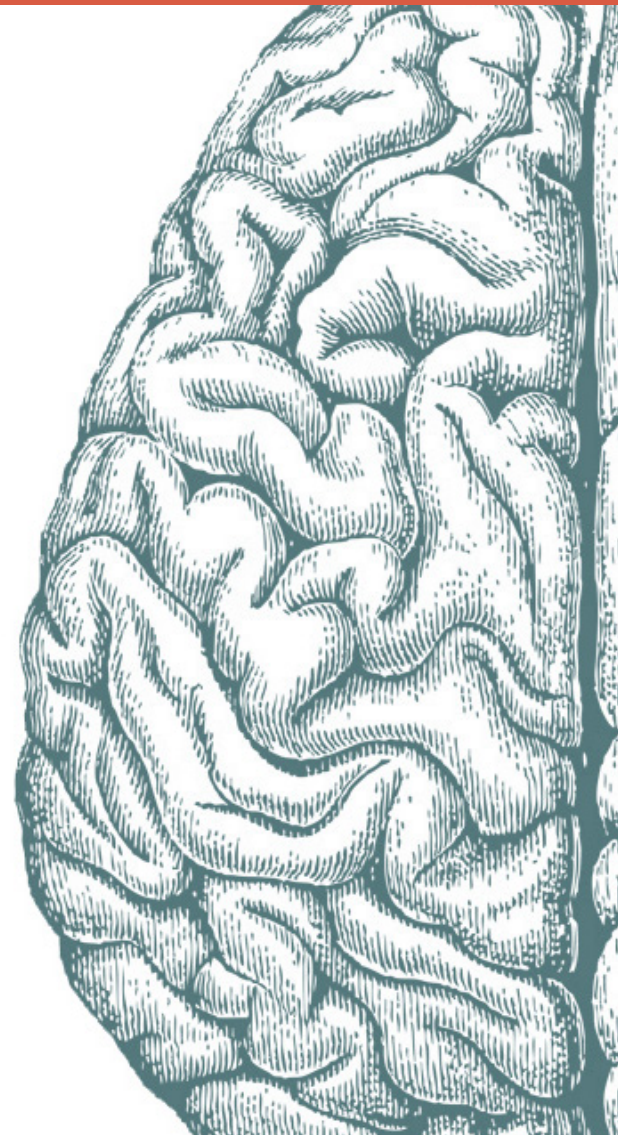


marriage counter-messaging
{ AN ACTION PLAN }

This action plan for marriage advocates and professional communicators applies findings from *You've Been Framed: A New Primer for the Marriage Debate*. Talking points and tactics presented here will sharpen your ability to strategically communicate pro-marriage arguments. This plan highlights new opportunities for persuasion informed by cognitive science and narrative theory to counter marriage revisionism.

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*This primer is the result of a collaboration between Narrator and alumni of the John Jay Institute.
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Narrator

With a background in political science and nonprofit management, Narrator principal and John Jay Institute alumnus **Brian Brown** has spent 10 years observing changes in the way people share information, approach social issues, and get involved. Brian founded Narrator in 2011 with other marketing and policy professionals to provide a communications consultancy that helps organizations take advantage of these changes. Narrator works as an extension of the client's in-house resources, using advanced social network analysis and digital media to build powerful support communities around a cause, thereby increasing exponentially the client's ability to tell its story.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

PRO-MARRIAGE COMMUNICATORS MUST APPEAL TO THE MORAL INTUITIONS OF AUDIENCES BY USING EMOTION TO INVOKE NARRATIVES AND TELL STORIES WITH NEW METAPHORS AND MEMES IN ORDER TO INFLUENCE THE EMOTIONALLY CHARGED DEBATE ABOUT REDEFINING MARRIAGE.¹

EMOTION

Marriage advocates must use emotion to switch an audience's confirmation bias in their favor because people search for reasons to believe an appealing message whereas they look for contrary evidence to dismiss what they feel opposed to.

- Marriage advocates should produce messages rooted in appeals to identity, relationships, and people's personal and social aspirations, and elevate as spokesmen gay Americans who oppose redefining marriage to counter the identity-based appeal of marriage revisionists.

NARRATIVE

Pro-marriage messaging must address personal and social narratives by which people reckon with their identity in the world.

- Marriage advocates must invoke redemptive narratives that highlight how moms and dads together uniquely provide the mothering and fathering relationships for children that deliver them to healthy adulthood.

STORY

Marriage advocates should tell stories that include both sides of the debate in ways that position moms and dads as heroes who cannot be replaced in the lives of children.

- Pro-marriage messengers should tell their own personal stories highlighting how they as children

had problems only their moms and dads together could solve, thereby creating emotional meaning unique to conjugal marriage.

METAPHOR

Marriage advocates must argue their positions using fresh metaphors to highlight the social importance of marriage because successful metaphors transform perspectives (e.g., "America is a Shining City on a Hill").

- Advocates should use the metaphor "Marriage is a Public Structure" to transfer positive associations about public goods such as infrastructure to the dimensions of marriage that contribute to the common good.

MEME

The brain encodes ideas and beliefs into its neural structure as memes. Marriage advocates must produce messages consistent with the Six Elements of Sticky Memes: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, stories.

- Marriage revisionists are shaping the debate with a powerful meme, "Marriage Equality." Pro-marriage messaging should subvert it with other memes, such as: "Changing Marriage Creates Inequality," "Traditional Marriage is More Diverse," and "Restoring Marriage Champions Children."

EMOTION

HOW TO USE EMOTION IN YOUR MESSAGING

People's moral intuitions precede their reasoning in emotionally charged political debates: psychologists identify this as *confirmation bias*. An objective of marriage advocates must be to switch an audience's confirmation bias in their favor.

- When people *want* to believe something, they ask themselves, “*Can I believe this?*” and then look for supporting evidence until they find something that is *permission to believe* and justifies their preferred result.
- In contrast, when people *don't* want to believe something, they ask “*Must I believe this?*” and then search for contrary evidence until they find a single reason to doubt the claim and dismiss it.²

Interacting with others influences people's intuitions. If people on one side of a debate are hostile, an audience leans away and is more likely to accept reasons to reject the perceived hostile side.³

- When a person has conflicting moral intuitions, he may flip his judgments alternately depending on which victim, which argument, or which friend he is thinking about at a given moment.⁴

In emotionally charged contexts, successful persuasion happens in this order: *See-Feel-Change*. People need to see evidence that makes them feel something, such as a disturbing look at a problem, a hopeful glimpse of a solution, or a sobering assessment of current conditions.⁵

- The most powerful messages appeal to an identity shared between messenger and audience. Audiences ask themselves three questions when processing a message: (1) *Who am I?* (2) *What kind of situation is this?* (3) *What would someone like me do in this situation?* So pro-marriage messages

should be framed to audiences as “*People like you do/don't do this.*”⁶

USE EMOTIONAL MESSAGES IN THE MARRIAGE DEBATE

Both sides' motivations in the marriage debate are emotional issues of identity, personal relationships, and social aspirations, conditions that almost certainly limit the effectiveness of rational appeals to audiences that care about the issue.

- Insofar as marriage advocates attempt to counter the emotional arguments of marriage revisionists with rational appeals, their success is likely to be limited in connecting to the intuitions of an audience.

Pro-marriage messaging to skeptical audiences should seek to switch their confirmation bias from “*Must I believe this?*” to “*Can I believe this?*” with messaging rooted in appeals to identity, relationships, and people's personal and social aspirations.

- Marriage advocates should elevate as spokesmen **gay Americans who oppose redefining marriage** and promote their voices and viewpoints to counter the identity-based appeal of marriage revisionists.
- Marriage advocates should highlight in vivid terms the place they want to move the country with their advocacy, suggesting that their opposition to redefining marriage is in service to a **larger positive vision that includes all, including gay, Americans.**
- Marriage advocates could amplify how their goals promote and achieve the common goals of all Americans of goodwill—providing all children the equal chance to have both a mom and a dad—by couching their marriage advocacy in terms of “**People like you want this.**”

NARRATIVE

HOW TO INVOKE NARRATIVES IN YOUR MESSAGING

Trying to persuade someone to change a political position or adopt a new behavior without addressing personal and social narratives will almost certainly fail. Identity is at stake. The unstated issue for audiences is whether you are invoking or countering a narrative that gives them meaning, so treat political debates in terms of *invoking or subverting narratives*.

- People have overlapping identities: “I am an American, a woman, a college graduate, black, a Muslim, and a volunteer at homeless shelters.”
- A **narrative vulnerability** in an audience is an inconsistency between two or more of its overlapping identities. Effective messaging exploits inconsistencies by appealing to the most inspiring identity shared between the messenger and the target audience.

Attempt to destabilize and transform an audience’s vulnerability by invoking a *collaborative narrative*. A collaborative narrative re-describes a problem to reorient polarized parties along a system of shared values in order to deescalate their conflict.

- Communicate a collaborative narrative by (1) affirming commonalities, (2) validating some initial claims of the opposing side, and (3) acknowledging differences in the context of a more inspiring unity.
- The persuasive basis of a collaborative narrative is how it expands **both parties’ sense of self**. The particular “self” it expands is a shared identity between the messenger and a target audience, which should be the most inspiring and inclusive of both.

INVOKE NARRATIVES IN THE MARRIAGE DEBATE

Marriage revisionists have taken marriage to be a culturally dominant narrative but subverted its main themes, such as the idea of “family.”⁷ Thus, marriage revisionists affirm family (as in, “love makes a family”) but expand its traditional dimensions.

- In the subversive narrative of marriage revisionists, they are not redefining marriage but extending one of its implicit definitions: namely, that romance between two adults is what constitutes the basis of marriage.
- Marriage advocates could counter revisionists by highlighting their definition of romance as perpetuating the self-focused version of heterosexual marriage that led to its decline.

Advocates could invoke collaborative narratives by redirecting attention to identifiable shared goals to deescalate the polarized nature of the debate, specifically highlighting that *children’s rights* are a common ground.

- Marriage advocates should highlight how fathers and mothers provide the right structure for delivering children into adulthood and are best positioned to redeem orphans from suffering the loss of either a mother or a father.
- Marriage advocates could position themselves as championing forgotten principle or downtrodden victims by portraying how marriages centered on adult desires consistently victimize children, whereas marriage defined by sexual difference and oriented to family institutionalizes the inclusion of children in marriage.

STORY

HOW TO USE STORY IN YOUR MESSAGING

Audiences may need faith in you, your words, and your good intentions rather than in your information. The story of a *struggle to overcome trouble to reach a goal* produces meaning and is what earns you the right to influence an audience *in an audience's mind*.

- An audience implicitly wants to know, “Why are you here? What is driving *you* to say what you say? What is *your story* that brought you to communicate at this moment?”
- As a messenger, you must lead with a credible story that tells, “**Why I’m here.**” Sharing a risky story about “Why I’m here” anchors an audience’s trust in a visceral way—even a skeptical audience. The point is to tell how you struggled over a moral dilemma to get “here.”⁸

Audiences understand unfamiliar experiences and characters through story, so let your story structure create the context, relevance, and empathy for your message.⁹

1. Embed key values, attitudes, beliefs, and histories into your stories.
2. Include your goals, motives, and struggles.
3. Focus on the **dilemmas** you faced that pit your competing values and goals against each other.
4. Focus on stories in which the final climax and **resolution** *depend on the application of the values, attitudes, and concepts you want an audience to accept.*

USE PERSONAL STORIES IN THE MARRIAGE DEBATE

Marriage advocates could make specific mothers and fathers the heroes of their stories and identify as villains the mindsets and public policies that obstruct their path to important goals.

- Marriage advocates could recount personal stories that illustrate situations in which they as children had problems that **only their fathers and mothers together solved.**
- By telling how only conjugal marriage transforms self-centered, single adults into connected mothers and fathers who together overcome obstacles in life to build a natural family across multiple generations, marriage advocates could generate emotional meaning unique to their side.

Marriage advocates are most likely to gain credibility by telling their own “Why I’m here” stories, which should contextualize the exemplary characters (e.g., their own fathers and mothers) in story form, and then submitting their own personal experiences as the moral of the story.

The following morals of “Why I’m here” stories, or something like these, could be a way to establish emotional meaning with audiences:

- “And that is why I want to help move our country to a place where more children can experience the kind of goodness my father and mother showed me.”
- “And so it is because of the struggles my family went through, and that I carry with me, that I know how vital married moms and dads are for the health of their children, and for the adults they become.”

METAPHOR

HOW TO USE METAPHOR IN YOUR MESSAGING

Metaphors that successfully frame messaging transform people's perspectives as they transfer meaning: for example, "America is a Shining City on a Hill." Marriage advocates should use metaphors to persuade and invite audiences to see their positions on fresh terms.

Marriage advocates should identify metaphors on both sides of the debate to assess their *aptness*. A metaphor's aptness depends on how well it frames its literal source concept onto its target concept.

- A metaphor may be **apt** when it plays a defining role in the experience of a concept. For example, the metaphor EMOTIONS ARE PHYSICAL FORCES—in which emotion can *overcome* someone, or in which emotions can be *jarring* or *painful*—is apt because emotional experience has a sensory dimension.¹⁰
- A metaphor is **inapt** when its literal source concept fails to frame the target concept in a significant way. For example, sailors recognize the aptness of the metaphor A SHIP IS A WOMAN because perceived features of women encompass the significant features of a ship, but nobody recognizes the metaphor A WOMAN IS A SHIP because the features of ships do not encompass significant features of women.

USE METAPHORS IN THE MARRIAGE DEBATE

Both sides in the marriage debate conceptualize love and marriage via multiple metaphors, thus creating opportunities for *framing*.¹¹

- Love is not structured in our minds by its literal terms alone. There is some inherent, literal

structure to love: a lover, a beloved, feelings of love, and a relationship, which has an onset and sometimes an end point. However, metaphors such as LOVE IS A JOURNEY, LOVE IS MAGIC, LOVE IS A CONTAINER, etc give love much more inferential structure.¹²

Marriage revisionists hinge their arguments for revising marriage on one foundational metaphor: A HOMOSEXUAL COUPLE IS A HETEROSEXUAL COUPLE.

Marriage revisionists seek to persuade audiences by transferring the inferential structure from the familiar source of heterosexual marriage to the (more) abstract target of same-sex "marriage."

- Insofar as revisionist arguments map shared, literal entailments from heterosexual marriage—emotional bonding, feelings of affection, cohabitation, financial union, etc.—metaphorically to the concept of same-sex "marriage," they gain momentum from the metaphor as long as audiences perceive the metaphor as apt.
- Marriage revisionists view marriage as an emotional bond distinguished only by its intensity—a bond that need not point beyond the partners to children—and is ultimately subject to one's own desires. In marriage, so understood, partners seek emotional fulfillment and remain as long as they find it.¹³
- Inconsistencies between the literal entailments of heterosexual unions and homosexual couples—i.e., the embodied dimensions of heterosexual versus homosexual couples—constitute the vulnerabilities advocates can exploit for alternative framing.

Driving wedges between the A HOMOSEXUAL COUPLE IS A HETEROSEXUAL COUPLE metaphor almost certainly will prompt revisionists

to respond with alternative framing that emphasizes literal entailments shared between heterosexual and homosexual couples (e.g., emotional bonds, absence of children among infertile heterosexuals).

- Advocates could suggest the inaptness of revisionists' metaphor by highlighting how literal dimensions of embodied heterosexual unions are unique to heterosexuality.

The unique feature of heterosexual unions that the A HOMOSEXUAL COUPLE IS A HETEROSEXUAL COUPLE metaphor cannot map to is the ability of husbands and wives to contribute to the common good through the creation and perpetuation of family.

- The public interest in marriage as a heterosexual institution rests on the basis that as a category, male-female unions generate children. That does not mean that every marriage must produce children to be a valid marriage. Infertile men and women do not undermine the intelligibility of the institution because their infertility is accidental to the reproductive-type act that consummates their union.
- Use this metaphor to counter revisionist arguments about infertile marriages: **AN INFERTILE MARRIAGE IS A PROFITLESS COMPANY.** US law incorporates businesses and levies particular taxes tailored to corporate profits. The rationale for this is that as a category of activity, commercial enterprise generates profits. Yet, a commercial enterprise that fails to turn a profit was still incorporated and considered a valid commercial enterprise. A profitless company still endorses the ideal of a profitable company, and an infertile couple still endorses the ideal of conjugal marriage.

Portraying marriage's connection to the common good in terms that subvert revisionists' preferred frame most likely provides opportunities to shift the debate in favor of pro-marriage messaging.

- Highlighting the metaphor **A MARRIAGE IS A PUBLIC STRUCTURE** enables messaging to transfer positive associations about public goods,

such as the contribution infrastructure makes to the common good, to significant dimensions of marriage that also contribute to the common good.

- Marriage contributes to the common good via the intergenerational welfare of family life among parents and children in terms of wealth, mental health flourishing, stability, and children's developmental success, according to a widely accepted body of social science research.¹⁴

Marriage advocates could highlight the unique ability of husbands and wives to contribute to the common good to suggest that *heterosexual unions have unique needs*, such as appropriate social norms that pressure heterosexuals to remain married to the mothers or fathers of whatever children their union produced, and as a model and societal script for others.

MEME

HOW TO USE MEMES IN YOUR MESSAGING

Ideas and beliefs are not disembodied from people and subject to their objective, dispassionate assessment; rather, they are deeply embedded in the physical structures of people's brains as *memes*. The more deeply embedded memes are in an audience, the less likely your rational argument will dislodge them.

- Changing minds requires sustained messaging with simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, stories.
- Pro-marriage messages should **plant memes** in audiences that can develop into ways of understanding the world from the perspective of the meme. You do not need to “convince” an audience to successfully plant a meme in them.
- People will deflect messages you consider rational—which is entirely normal. When that happens, check your message against the **Six Elements of Sticky Memes**: 1) simple, 2) unexpected, 3) credible, 4) concrete, 5) emotional, 6) stories. Chances are your message is only using one or two at most.

USE MEMES IN THE MARRIAGE DEBATE

Marriage advocates must become better meme makers to upgrade their strategic communication on marriage. Specifically, the objective of advocate memetics should be to subvert the *Marriage Equality* meme.

- Advocates should reorient their messaging strategies by assessing revisionist arguments and their own responses according to the Six Elements of Sticky Memes.

- Marriage revisionists developed a powerful meme, Marriage Equality, that can be perpetuated and elaborated into simple, concrete, emotional stories. Currently, “marriage equality” is most likely governing the terms of the debate about marriage, and pressures advocates to defend themselves from implicit charges of bigotry.

Advocates should construct memetic messages that revisionists are likely to contradict and mirror image, but that an audience can elaborate into simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, stories.

- Mirror imaging constitutes a messaging vulnerability because it accepts the debate frame of whichever side issued the first claim, a technique advocate counter messaging should try to exploit.
- Marriage memes promoting themes implicit in Restoring Marriage Champions Children will frame the debate in terms revisionists are likely to contradict, suggesting that **highlighting a victim** could cause revisionists to accept the debate frame and mirror image.

Advocates must *avoid repeating the debate frames of marriage revisionists* such as the phrase “gay marriage” because it reinforces the meme associating “gay” with “marriage,” and should instead speak of “marriage revisionists.”

The following series of memes disseminated across a range of communications platforms could begin subverting the pro-revisionist meme, Marriage Equality:

- **Traditional Marriage is More Diverse.** Messages using this meme could highlight the distinct and complementary advantages of **mothering** and **fathering** that male-female unions offer children and that neither male-male nor female-female couples can provide (includes three of the Six Elements of Sticky Memes: simple, unexpected, and concrete).

- **Changing Marriage Creates Inequality.** Messages using this meme could amplify stories of inferior outcomes of children raised without a father and a mother together, and highlight how redefining marriage institutionalizes less diverse family structures (male-male or female-female rather than male-female parents), producing **unequal opportunities for children** who will be adopted and raised in less diverse households (includes four of the Six Elements of Sticky Memes: unexpected, concrete, emotional, and stories)
- **Restoring Marriage Champions Children.** Messages using this meme could amplify the positive emotional reasons advocates advocate conjugal marriage, which are most likely to stick in audiences. Audiences are positioned to unpack the implicit connection between conjugal marriage and children, which reinforces other pro-marriage memes (includes five of six Elements of Sticky Memes: simple, concrete, credible, emotional, and stories).

putting it all TOGETHER

You can apply the implications of this Action Plan to messaging efforts across a range of communication platforms, but audio-visual formats and interpersonal dialogue are probably the most effective.

- A written message such as an op-ed is one of the least conducive formats for successfully deploying the range of tools presented in this primer. However, below is an example of a fictitious op-ed illustrating how one could implement some basic techniques.

RESTORING MARRIAGE CHAMPIONS CHILDREN, OUR FUTURE

We victimize children and increase their vulnerability every time we revise marriage. Why will this time be any different?

I learned my mom and dad gave me a gift in childhood. When the parents of my best friend Palak divorced, our futures changed at age 10 as reality set us down different roads despite living across the street. My own mom and dad had the normal problems parents face of financial and relational stress, but their commitment to each other delivered me a home—a safe harbor—from which I ventured but always knew I could return. The difference for Palak was that he lost that harbor. Though he said he was relieved when his parents divorced, I saw him suffer anger, resentment, and isolation every time families were supposed to be together—Christmas, Thanksgiving, our high school graduation. While social scientists can statistically analyze how single parenting set him up for failure, Palak is the name and face I know for the problem I wrestle with: a collapsing marriage culture.

The problem of a collapsing marriage culture is how it undermines the unique needs of married men and women, such as appropriate social norms pressuring them to step into roles as moms and dads that stay

married. Showing the cultural damage of changes in marriage is like showing how the environment degrades when people pollute it. No one person has a detectable influence, but everyone can contribute to a tipping point. For the future of people like Palak, redefining marriage is a cultural tipping point.

Changing marriage hurts children because it officially denies their need to belong to both a man and a woman. Palak needed his mom and dad together: he didn't need to swap his dad for another mom. Redefining marriage into a single-sex option promotes families that would deprive children of the diversity of a man and a woman. The problem with single-sex marriage is that it creates inequality—unequal opportunities for children adopted into homes lacking mothers and fathers. Traditional marriage is more diverse.

Government has an interest in protecting marriage's unique diversity from redefinition. Marriage is a public structure. Married men and women form a social infrastructure of public life as the harbors for children. Public life needs infrastructure like harbors and highways, which is why government promotes them. Government doesn't build private driveways to our houses any more than it promotes our friendships, romances, and loves. Those relationships are private to us. But government supports married men and women as a public structure for their unique service of creating and raising children—the future public.

At this point, many marriage advocates end their discussion. But that won't do anymore. While we rightly recognize harms to children as the state of marriage degrades, we cannot forget the struggle against discrimination and the pain many gay Americans face on a daily basis. That pain has delivered a generation of activists filled with meaning and purpose. The blood shed in the Stonewall riots and later violent events in American history was not

the blood of gays; it was the blood of Americans. And as regular Americans, gay men and women share in the same dream of freedom under law and the desire for a settled life that drove all our country's social movements. But gay Americans think redefining marriage is the ticket to their dreams while millions of other Americans say that's the wrong goal. How does this story end well?

There is no ultimate winner or loser in a democracy, and as long as redefining marriage remains an unconditional political objective, the conflict will go on. But perpetuating an absolutist conflict only undermines Americans on both sides, and for what? A union divided again along state lines? Or a new legal regime foisted by the Supreme Court with the uniformity of Prohibition? Americans on both sides should recognize how either scenario is a loss for everyone. We are all in desperate need of a new conversation.

Americans are not picking up and moving to Canada or Australia anytime soon. We all are on this journey together, and will still be living as neighbors the day after the Apocalypse (however your politics define it). We might as well settle on some common goals and shared values. If a collapsing marriage culture is the real problem, we have to talk seriously about it. I am deeply committed to seeing a better generation of Americans born today, raised tomorrow, and building a future that includes us all. I submit that is the future we need most, and so I am committed to children and to married men and women.

Maybe the needs and rights of children come before our own. For their sake, we adults should take real pause to understand what is the truly common good for all rather than the partisan good for our group. Marriage advocates and gay activists should both have satisfying answers to the question: what is this thing called marriage really for, and is it something more than a political football because of a link to the common good? And before you answer those questions, remember that America's common good is something shared by those who are living with those yet to be born.

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