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# Unhitched: Love, Marriage, and Family Values from West Hollywood to Western China by Judith Stacey

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urban episodes of antigay violence, such as Matthew Shepard's brutal murder on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming, or Brandon Teena's similarly gruesome fate in Humboldt, Nebraska. Are such historical cases within or beyond the purview of metronormativity? And will this concept resonate for the countless LGBTQ youth who continue to be bullied and beaten today?

Herring's writing is so smart and edgy that you will want to believe him, even if he sometimes assembles interpretive skyscrapers from invalid or incomplete evidence. Thus, the value of this book lies principally in the provocative conceptual tools it offers to articulate the roadblocks and raptures of queer migrations.

*Unhitched: Love, Marriage, and Family Values from West Hollywood to Western China.* By Judith Stacey. New York: New York University Press, 2011. Pp. xii+275. \$27.95.

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Like the best sociology, Judith Stacey's *Unhitched* is part history, part cultural anthropology, part investigative journalism. Perhaps her most wide-ranging work to date, it examines a multitude of unconventional forms of family and love relationships, based on her ethnographic and interview research on kinship and intimacy patterns in the United States, South Africa, and China. More specifically, she investigates gay male intimacy and parenting in Los Angeles, polygamy and its varied forms in South Africa and the United States, and the unique family traditions of the Mosuo people in southwestern China. In each locale, Stacey undertakes what amounts to a miniethnography, conducting multiple interviews, observations, and extensive secondary research. She examines the role (or absence) of marriage, intimacy, and parenthood; cultural assumptions; and the historical context and public policy implications of each. In Los Angeles, she finds gay men living in a variety of both monogamous and polyamorous relationships, as well as some celibate, each negotiating his own terms in a way that suits his intimate and social needs—regardless of convention or legal status. She also finds planned gay-headed households that equally challenge what are often overly restrictive definitions of family. In making the leap from same-sex relationships to polygamy, Stacey bravely takes on the rhetorical elephant in the room of the modern marriage equality movement. Drawing on comparative data from polygamous pockets of the United States and from South Africa, where certain forms of polygamy (in addition to same-sex marriage) are legal, she dispels many myths about polygamy and offers a compelling and unexpected analysis of the “slippery slope” argument posited by same-sex marriage opponents (and denied by its advocates)—that

legalizing same-sex marriage will lead to legalized polygamy. Finally, the author retreats to Lugo Lake in southwest China to examine the Mosuo practice of *tisese*, in which neither marriage, monogamy, cohabitation, nor patriarchy is or has historically been the norm.

In each locale, Stacey finds evidence of creative social arrangements that are sometimes legal and sometimes not, sometimes permanent and sometimes ephemeral, but almost universally contrary to the traditional western “norm.” Her interviews and family histories confirm the “families of choice” phenomenon documented in gay and lesbian communities by prior scholarship (see Kath Weston’s *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* [Columbia University Press, 1991]), but also reveal great diversity in her gay male subjects—inviting us to reconceptualize not only “family” but “fidelity.” Despite the current relevance of this issue in the United States, however, I found her subsequent chapters on marriage (or its absence) in South Africa and China to be the most fascinating. In one of the more ironic findings based on her analysis of polygamy, her feminist commitment to expanding the palette of legal and social options for families and romantic ties leads the author to critique the monolithic marriage equality movement while at the same time offering qualified support for what she terms “principled polygamy,” which may in some cases benefit the women involved. Stacey’s final empirical chapter on the Mosuo of China—where the absence of marriage and nuclear parenting have had apparently zero negative effects—offers the coup de grâce to the assumption of monogamous marriage’s universality.

What seems initially an impossible task of offering a coherent analysis of these varying social practices across the globe is accomplished by the author’s weaving together these disparate strands into a compelling case for what she (and many feminist contemporaries) have been advocating for years—a far more nuanced attention to, and institutionalized support for, the diversity of the family form. Stacey states early on that she aims to debunk three particularly ubiquitous, and potentially harmful, assumptions: first, that marriage is both universal and necessary; second, that the nuclear heterosexual married family is optimal; and finally, that children’s development is dependent on both a mother and a father. Some of these assumptions have already been well debunked in the social science literature; for example, Stacey’s own prior work (Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz, “[How] Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?” *American Sociological Review* 66 [2001]: 159–83) has been useful in shredding the myth that children are harmed by not having parents of both genders.

The first assumption, however, seems particularly intractable—perhaps because it is currently the dominant discourse on both the right *and* the left. Containing both a normative and an empirical question, it is easy for the former to eclipse the latter, given the intensity of debate and recent use of same-sex marriage as a political wedge issue. Stacey does not shy from the normative argument, but also deftly uncovers and deploys empirical evidence that refutes both the ubiquity and the universal necessity

of marriage, in particular heterosexual monogamous marriage. Chosen gay families in Los Angeles, matrilineal nonmarital families in China, and polygamous marriages in South Africa (as well as unofficially polygamous or polyamorous families in the United States) refute, by not only their existence but by their *persistence*, the conventional marital wisdom. In fact, in almost a ready-made postscript, a recent article in the *Economist* documents the increasing trend in modernizing Asian countries of women either postponing or altogether eschewing marriage ("The Decline of Asian Marriage: Asia's Lonely Hearts," *Economist* [August 20, 2011]: 21–24). Even if the phenomenon has not yet spread to mainland China, where Stacey's research took place, it seems to vindicate her argument in the book.

One of the book's greatest strengths is Stacey's witty and immensely readable writing style—she artfully mixes humor, empirical observation, and political commentary in a way that makes the book not only appealing to scholars of family, gender, sexuality, and globalization, but also to undergraduates, graduate students, and the interested lay reader. The author unapologetically inserts her own political and personal assessments and diagnoses, claiming her own intellectual ground while still following the researcher's mandate of respecting and reporting the findings. The richness of data, the detective-like quality of the prose, and its social and political relevance are sure to make *Unhitched* a provocative and invaluable contribution to the study of family and intimacy.

*When Your Children Marry: How Marriage Changes Relationships with Sons and Daughters.* By Deborah M. Merrill. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011. Pp. x+171. \$29.95.

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An interesting question—How do relationships with mothers change for men and women when they marry?—is explored in *When Your Children Marry*. Deborah Merrill's primary focus is on gender differences in mother-child relationships after children marry, and a good review of the literature on this topic is provided. The original contribution that this study seeks to make is based on interviews with 25 women over age 50 who have at least one son and one daughter who have been married, and 25 adult children (eight men and 17 women) ages 20–59 who have been married.

The basic findings will not surprise anyone familiar with research on intergenerational relationships over the life course. Mother-daughter relationships tend to be stronger and less negatively affected by marriage than mother-son relationships. Couples tend to have more contact and interaction with the wife's family than with the husband's family. Most,