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What Do Policy Makers Need to Know from Research?**

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**Marriage on the Public Policy Agenda:  
What Do Policy Makers Need to Know from Research?\***

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## **Abstract**

For the last 30 years, encouraging employment has been the primary focus of U.S. anti-poverty policies. More recently, however, promoting the formation and maintenance of “healthy marriages” has emerged as a central feature of domestic social policy in the United States, with proposals pending that would allocate up to \$1.5 billion to undertake and evaluate marriage promotion efforts. The central goal of this paper is to elaborate the implications of social science research for such efforts. We proceed as follows. After reviewing trends in family structure and theories and empirical evidence that attempt to account for these trends, we discuss various proposed marriage promotion policies and activities. Next, we identify potential challenges to designing, evaluating, and learning from these initiatives. We conclude with recommendations for research needed in order to move policy forward.

## **I. Introduction**

Family structure has long been central to discussions about the causes and consequences of poverty. Poverty rates among female-headed households are much higher than those of married couple families. Although record low poverty rates of about one-third of female-headed households were recorded in the early part of the 2000s, the comparable poverty rate for married couple households was around five percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003a). Additionally, children are increasingly spending time in single-parent, predominantly mother-only, households. In 1972, 12.8 percent of children resided in single-mother households; by 2002, that figure was 22.8 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003b). This trend in children’s familial context has aroused substantial scholarly interest and public concern because the consensus in the research literature is that children fare better when they live with both biological parents and that single parenthood exposes children to increased risks for a variety of poor educational, behavioral and other outcomes (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Seltzer, 1994).

For the last 30 years, encouraging employment has been the primary focus of U.S. welfare reform policies. More recently, however, policy makers have begun debating the merits and feasibility of trying to improve well-being through policies that would directly affect family

structure. The 1996 welfare reform law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), includes explicit goals of reducing non-marital childbearing and promoting the formation of two-parent families. Additionally, states are allowed to use funds from the welfare program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), to implement policies and programs to achieve these goals. Under the Bush Administration, promoting the formation and maintenance of “healthy marriages,” particularly among the low-income population, has emerged as a central feature of social policy, with proposals pending that would allocate up to \$1.5 billion to undertake and evaluate marriage promotion efforts.

The central goal of this paper is to elaborate the implications of social science research for marriage promotion efforts. We proceed as follows. We first briefly review trends in family structure, theories and empirical evidence that attempt to account for these trends, and the implications of these trends for child well-being. Next, we discuss various proposed marriage promotion policies and activities, identifying potential challenges to designing, evaluating, and learning from these initiatives. We conclude with recommendations for research needed in order to move policy forward.

## **II. Changes in Family Structure**

Over the last several decades, the U.S. has witnessed great changes in family behavior, with increases in divorce, non-marital childbearing, and cohabitation. The divorce rate rose from approximately 2.5 per 1000 residents in the mid-1950s to 4.2 per 1000 in 1998 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1995 and 1999). Also, the average age at marriage has increased, from about 20 years old for women in the early 1960s to just over 25 in 2002; the analogous rise for men is from 23 to 27 years old (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). Correspondingly, the prevalence of marriage has declined. In 1950, approximately two-thirds of all 15 to 44 year olds

were married, while by 2002 this percentage dropped to 54 percent for women and 57 percent for men. These aggregate trends, though, mask important racial and ethnic differences. In 1950, among all 15 to 44 year olds, about 68 percent of Whites and 64 percent of African Americans were married. In 2002, there was a substantial gap, with 59 percent of 15 to 44 year old Whites currently married, compared to 44 percent of African Americans (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003c). Although similar historical data are not available for Hispanics, data from the Current Population Survey indicates that the percentage of married Hispanics is similar to that of African Americans (47 percent in 2002) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003c).

A related trend has been the substantial increase in non-marital childbearing. While birthrates for married women have steadily declined from a high of 156.6 births per 1000 women in 1960 to 86.5 in 1999, the birthrate of unmarried women grew during the last several decades, from 21.6 births per 1000 unmarried women in 1960, peaking in the mid-1990s at 46.9 births per 1000 unmarried women (Ventura and Bachrach, 2000). Currently, about one in three children is born outside of marriage.

Unmarried cohabitation has also become quite prevalent, not only among childless adults but also for those with children (see Manning [2002], Seltzer [2000], and Smock [2000] for reviews). In fact, cohabitation appears to account for roughly 40 percent of births outside of marriage (Bumpass and Lu, 2000); thus, a substantial proportion of nonmarital births occur to couples who are living together. While some cohabiting couples eventually marry, marriages preceded by cohabitation appear to have higher disruption rates than other marriages (e.g., Axinn and Thornton, 1992; Bennett et al., 1988; Booth and Johnson, 1988; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993; DeMaris and Rao, 1992; Lillard et al., 1995; Rao and Trussell, 1989; Schoeni, 1992; Teachman, 2003; Teachman and Polonko, 1990; Teachman et al., 1991; Thomson and Colella,

1992), and children born to cohabiting couples are more likely to see their parents separate (Manning, Smock, and Majumdar, 2003; Wu and Musick, 2002). Over 50 percent of cohabiting unions in the U.S., whether or not they are eventually legalized by marriage, end by separation within five years compared to roughly 20 percent for marriages (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Bumpass and Sweet, 1989).

There are also economic differentials in these trends, with the least advantaged being most affected (Ellwood and Jencks, 2001). Using educational attainment as a rough proxy for economic status, roughly 60 percent of marriages among women without high school degrees will end in separation or divorce, compared to one third for college graduates (Raley and Bumpass 2003). Similar differentials are apparent for the likelihood of having children outside of marriage. Racial and ethnic variation exists in these patterns. For example, African Americans' marriages are more likely to end, either through divorce or separation, than are marriages of Whites (Bramlett and Mosher, 2002). Racial and ethnic variation exists, at least in part, because of the correlation between economic well-being and race and ethnicity in the United States. Non-Hispanic Whites enjoy, on average, the highest incomes and lowest levels of poverty. For example, the poverty rate for married-couple families is 14 percent among Hispanics, eight percent among Blacks, but only three percent among non-Hispanic Whites (Proctor and Dalaker, 2001).

Taken together, these trends mean that more children -- particularly less advantaged children -- live in single parent families and experience parental relationship transitions. To illustrate, Figure 1 shows the changes in the percent of children living with two parents between 1970 and 2002. In 1970, African American children were least likely to reside with two married parents, with 58 percent of African American, 89 percent of White, and 78 percent of Latino

children living with two parents. By 2002, those proportions declined to 38.5, 74, and 65 percent among African American, White, and Hispanic children, respectively.

[Figure 1 about here.]

### Explaining the Decline in Marriage

A number of explanations, outlined below, have been put forth to explain what has often been termed the “decline” or “retreat” from marriage. The first four relate to overall declines, while the last two have focused primarily on low-income and/or African American populations.

- 1) **Women’s increasing economic independence.** Becker (1991) posited that both men and women can maximize their utility through marriage, with one partner, typically the man, specializing in production within the formal labor market and the other (the woman) specializing in household labor. As opportunities for women within the labor market have grown, the advantages of this specialization diminished, potentially leading to declines in marriage and delayed childbearing within marriage;
- 2) **Changing social norms.** Cultural changes have made it more acceptable to have sex outside of marriage, cohabit without marriage, divorce, and have children outside of marriage (see Thornton and Young –DeMarco, 2001);
- 3) **Advances in contraception.** Women now have more control over their sexual activity and fertility, with the result being a separation between sex, childbearing, and marriage;
- 4) **Changing expectations of what marriage should offer to couples.** This theory is related to the three above. A number of scholars (e.g., Furstenberg, 1996; Popenoe and Dafoe Whitehead, 2003) have argued that the meaning of marriage has changed, in part because as women participate in the labor market and have increased sexual freedom, the primary purpose of marriage is no longer economic security and procreation (Popenoe and Dafoe Whitehead, 2003). Rather, expectations for marriage may be more tied to compatibility and relationship satisfaction, which may prolong the search for a mate or make couples less willing to stay in a marriage that is not fulfilling;
- 5) **A “lack of marriageable men,” particularly within the African American community.** Wilson and Neckerman (1987) speculated that the erosion of earnings of low-income black men has made them less attractive marriage partners. Coupled with disproportionately high incarceration rates, declining male earnings may have led African American women to opt out of marriage. This argument has also been applied to the less educated and low-income couples more broadly, as the earnings power of high school educated men has declined by 17 percent from the mid-1970s to mid-1990s, with more educated men faring better (Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey, 2003; Oppenheimer 2000);

- 6) **Availability of welfare and other benefits to support single parenthood** In some respects, this is a corollary of the economic independence argument. Several commentators (e.g., Murray, 1984; Rector and Fagen, 1996) have posited that welfare benefits provide an alternative to marriage for single women who become pregnant. Rather than marrying the father of the child, the woman can apply for welfare and be supported by the federal government. Similarly, once a woman is on welfare, the prospect of losing eligibility may discourage her from marrying.

Some of these theories have been subject to more extensive empirical testing than others. A number of recent studies suggest that women's economic independence, proxied by women's earnings or other indicators of labor market strength, either do not have a negative impact on the likelihood of marriage or sometimes have a positive one (e.g., Lichter et al. 1992; Oppenheimer 1994; Smock and Manning, 1997; Sweeney 2002; Xie et al. 2003). Weak male economic performance seems to have a dampening effect on marriage, but the effect is not great enough to account for the substantial changes in marriage patterns that have been observed (Ellwood and Jencks, 2001). Attempts to test changes in social norms, changes in marital expectations, and advances in birth control technology (explanations 2, 3, and 4) are sparse due to data limitations; indeed, Ellwood and Jencks (2001) characterize the link between advances in contraceptive technology and marriage pattern changes as "circumstantial" (p. 5). More generally, their comprehensive review of the empirical evidence available on all of these explanations concludes that no one explanation can fully account for changes in family structure (Ellwood and Jencks, 2001).

Because the last theory -- welfare as an alternative or substitute for marriage -- is one that is more likely to affect low-income couples and is directly related to government policy, we discuss the empirical evidence in more detail below.



## Welfare and Family Structure

Policy makers and researchers have been concerned about the link between welfare and family structure, whether because welfare benefits provide an alternative form of economic support to marriage, or because of the disincentives to marriage that might arise, for example, because of eligibility rules that favor single parent families over two parent families. The large empirical research on this topic has primarily focused on the effect of welfare benefit payment levels on non-marital childbearing (see Moffitt, 1998 for a review). If welfare benefits provide an alternative to marriage as a way to support children, then one might expect to see higher rates of non-marital childbearing in states with higher welfare benefit payments.<sup>1</sup>

The research has produced mixed results. Several studies have found no link between welfare benefit generosity and non-marital childbearing (for example, An, Haveman, and Wolfe, 1993; Acs, 1996). Others find some positive relationship, but not for all ages or races, and the results appear sensitive to model specification (e.g., Duncan and Hoffman, 1990; Plotnick, 1990; Lundberg and Plotnick, 1995; Lichter, McLaughlin, and Ribar, 1997). Moffitt's (1998) review of this literature concludes that while most studies find a significant relationship between welfare benefit levels and female headship, the magnitude of such effects is small or uncertain.

Other welfare policies might also potentially influence decisions about non-marital childbearing, particularly in the post-PRWORA era. For example, family cap policies are explicitly designed to discourage further childbearing by welfare recipients by disallowing benefit increases to families when another child is born.<sup>2</sup> Work requirements and time limits

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<sup>1</sup> Under the AFDC and more recently the TANF program, states have the authority to set levels of welfare payments. In the mid-1980s, maximum monthly benefits for a single mother with two children ranged from a high of \$719 in Alaska to \$96 in Mississippi; in 2001 monthly TANF benefit payments for the same family ranged from \$923 in Alaska to \$164 in Alabama. Benefit levels are typically not adjusted for inflation, meaning that over time, they did not keep pace with inflation, remaining flat in most states during the late 1970s into the early 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> Under AFDC, and continuing in many states in TANF programs, welfare benefits increase for each additional child in the family.

could also influence women on welfare to delay or forgo further childbearing; receipt of TANF benefits is contingent on employment and limited to five years (or less at state option), eliminating the option that women can rely on welfare indefinitely to support their families. One might also expect increased marriage among low-income women if welfare is no longer available. Marriage might also increase if, by becoming employed, former recipients are more attractive marriage partners.

Summaries of the few available studies on the effects of newer welfare policies on family structure find little or no evidence of a relationship between living arrangements and policies such as time limits, work requirements, or family caps (Peters, Plotnick, and Jeong, 2001; Grogger, Karoly, Klerman, RAND, 2002). At the same time, one compelling finding related to family structure has emerged from an evaluation of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). Among other policy changes, MFIP required participation in work activities from long-term recipients and provided financial incentives to encourage work. It also eliminated some of the restrictions placed on welfare eligibility of two parent families.<sup>3</sup> The evaluation found decreased rates of divorce among MFIP two-parent families and increased likelihood of marriage among cohabiting couples, seven years after program entry (Gennetian, 2003). Why this occurred is less clear, but the evaluators speculated that increased income from earnings and welfare, along with reduced work hour requirements for two-parent families, decreased both financial and marital stress (Gennetian, Knox, and Miller, 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the policies included in MFIP, which was launched prior to passage of PRWORA (in 1994), are similar to those adopted by many other states, particular the financial incentive policy that allows families to keep more of their welfare benefit once they begin working. Under AFDC, after the first several months of employment, recipients faced a nearly dollar-for-dollar reduction in welfare benefits for each dollar earned from work. The two parent rule changes, also adopted by many states, included elimination of the “100-hour rule” for two parent families, in which a family would lose eligibility if the primary earner worked more than 100 hours in a month.

Overall, research has found little to no effect of welfare policies on family formation decisions. At the same time, there may be no reason to expect such a relationship. While increasing marriage and decreasing non-marital childbearing were specific goals of welfare reform, most policy changes implemented after 1996 were designed to encourage work and not to promote marriage. Indeed, many policy makers have argued that, particularly in the early years of PRWORA implementation, states did little in the way of promoting marriage. While 34 states used some TANF money by 2000 to fund teen pregnancy prevention/family planning initiatives, only Oklahoma had launched a marriage promotion program (Greenberg et. al, 2000).<sup>4</sup>

#### Family Structure and Child Well-Being

A large research literature has emerged over the last two decades that investigates the consequences of various family structures and changes in family structure, for child well-being. These include studies of the consequences of divorce for children in terms of an array of behavioral, emotional, and achievement outcomes (e.g. McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Seltzer, 1994). With the emergence of more detailed data on family structure and dynamics (trying to keep pace with a changing social reality), researchers have recently investigated the consequences of numerous family structures -- single mother, cohabiting families, stepfamilies (both cohabiting and married) -- and transitions on child well-being.

The upshot of this research is that, on average, children fare better when living with their married, biological parents, provided the marriage is a low-conflict one (see, e.g., Amato, 2000; Parke 2003; Seltzer 1994). Children who grow up in other contexts face somewhat increased odds of experiencing negative outcomes such as lower school achievement, behavioral and emotional problems (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Seltzer 1994).

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<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, state activity around marriage promotion has intensified. See Gardiner et. al, 2002 for a review.

Three findings from this literature have important implications for whether and how marriage strengthening efforts will improve child well-being. First, studies suggest that income accounts for a good deal of the lower well-being of children raised in other family structures – perhaps as much as one-half (Manning and Lamb, 2003; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).<sup>5</sup> That is, married families tend to enjoy substantially higher incomes than single mother or cohabiting families (e.g., Manning and Lichter 1996). This suggests that marriage in and of itself, without reasonably good economic circumstances supporting the marriage, may not yield substantially improved levels of child well-being.

Second, family structure changes, in and of themselves, may affect children negatively, suggesting that it is vital that marriages formed by marriage strengthening efforts be lasting ones (Deliere and Kalil, 2002; Hao and Xie, 2002; Wu and Martinson, 1993; Wu, 1996). For example, Wu and Thomson (2001) find that, among White children, experiences of family instability accelerates premarital initiation of sexuality before marriage, even controlling for a host of other factors. The divorce literature also contains compelling findings that changes in family structure have deleterious effects on children whose parents separate or divorce (McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Seltzer 1994).

Third, research suggests that stepfamilies have some negative effects on children. As we discuss below, multiple partner fertility is quite common; a mother's marriage to one child's parent means a stepparent for her other children. Focusing on 6-11 year olds, Acs and Nelson (2003) find that children in married stepparent families fare about as well as children in cohabiting households (in which there are no common children), with roughly 10 percent of

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<sup>5</sup> Other factors include the stress due to family structure instability, residential instability, weakened relations with the noncustodial parent as well as with other adults and resources in the community (see Parke [2003] for a summary). A more general point should be made here; in some studies of the consequences of marriage, there is sometimes a remaining portion (a positive marriage effect) that cannot be fully explained by variables available in most surveys (see e.g., Lerman 2002; Waite 2000; Waite and Gallagher 2000).

children in each having behavioral problems compared with 4.7 percent of children living with their own two married parents (see also Hofferth, 2003).<sup>6</sup>

In sum, social science research is clear that children growing up with their two married biological parents, within a low conflict marriage, are better off, on average, than those growing up in other family structures. Motivated in part by the recognition that the least advantaged children are the ones most likely to be growing up without both married, biological parents, by states' difficulty in developing explicit and sustained policies to address PRWORA's marriage and fertility-related goals, and in part by other political issues,<sup>7</sup> the Bush Administration has made promoting family formation, and particularly marriage, a key focus of its domestic policy agenda, unveiling the "Healthy Marriages" initiative.

### **III. The "Healthy Marriages Initiative"—What Does it Entail?**

When Congress passed PRWORA in 1996, it established TANF for six years, obligating the program to be reauthorized in 2002. As part of its reauthorization proposal, the Bush Administration put forward a plan to allocate funds specifically for the purpose of promoting marriage. Overseen by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the goal of the "Healthy Marriages Initiative" is to: "help couples who choose marriage for themselves develop the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2003).

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<sup>6</sup> The Acs and Nelson study also finds that the rate of behavior problems among children living with a single mother is similar to that of children in step-parent and cohabiting families.

<sup>7</sup> Supporting marriage more broadly has received increased attention in the policy realm. For example, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, defining marriage as an institution between a man and a woman. It is also noteworthy that the government has long had a role in regulating marriage (see Ooms [2001] and Cott [2001] for more detail on government involvement in marriage).

As of this writing, states may continue to use TANF funds as well as funds from several other federal programs to undertake marriage promotion activities. Additional funding is pending Congressional approval. H.R. 4, which passed the House in February, 2003 and reflects the Administration's priorities, would provide up to \$1.5 billion over the course of five years to fund marriage promotion and related research.<sup>8</sup> States and communities interested in promoting marriage could implement a variety of policies and programs, ranging from programs that would reduce financial disincentives to marriage potentially imbedded in means-tested programs to education in secondary schools about the importance of marriage to relationship skills programs. Although not exhaustive, the list below divides approaches into three broad categories and lists specific examples of efforts already underway.<sup>9</sup>

### **1. Policy changes**

A number of policy changes might remove potential marriage disincentives for low-income couples. These range from changing eligibility rules for welfare, child support, or other benefit programs in order to equalize treatment between single and two-parent families to changing tax policy to eliminate so-called "marriage penalties." Tax policies could also be altered in a way that would reward marriage. For example, a proposal that failed to pass in New Mexico would have provided a tax credit to couples who completed a pre-marital education course (Gardiner et al, 2002). States may also use TANF funds to provide financial incentives to marriage. In West Virginia, for example, families receiving TANF get a \$100 bonus each month if the family is headed by a legally married couple.

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<sup>8</sup> At the time of this writing, the Senate has held hearings on welfare reauthorization but has not passed its own bill.

<sup>9</sup> Not all of the activities described in the following sections are eligible for federal funding as the legislation is currently written. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2003 for a full listing of allowable activities

Additionally, changes to family law might increase marriage by lowering the incidence of divorce. Court-connected divorce mediation services, the purpose of which is to reduce acrimony and litigation in the process, are fairly common, but some have argued that these efforts could seek to promote reconciliation among at least some couples (Gallagher, 2002). The majority of states have passed legislation or are considering ways to change divorce laws, particularly for couples with children. This includes re-defining circumstances under which a no-fault divorce may occur, requiring a waiting period for divorces, or mandating education on the effects of divorce on families (Gardiner et al, 2002). A few states (Arizona, Arkansas, and Louisiana) have offered couples the choice of entering into covenant marriages, which typically requires pre-marital counseling and restricts granting of no-fault divorce (Sanchez, et. al, 2003). At the same time, advocates are concerned about potential harm that might occur to women in abusive relationships if their ability to leave the relationship is constrained (Burgos DiTullio, 1997).

## **2. Programs and Interventions**

While policy changes to change incentives may increase rates of marriage, they may not necessarily promote *healthy* marriages. Efforts in this category include participation of couples or individuals in activities designed to strengthen relationships, overcome problems that might interfere with the ability to have a strong relationship, and/or, obtain skills that would make them more desirable partners.

There is growing interest in adapting and using marriage education programs. Such programs are the outgrowth of work undertaken primarily by psychologists who study factors associated with marital distress and marital failure. One program, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), has already been implemented in a number of states

and localities. A facilitated seminar, PREP leads participants through exercises to improve communication and conflict management skills, areas that research has found are linked to successful marriage (Stanley et. al, 1995; PREP, undated). With couples, it is also designed to enhance levels of commitment and develop mutual understanding of expectations for the relationship. As two of the architects of PREP note:

...many couples have styles of interaction that are inherently irritating to the partners. That is why PREP focuses so much on communication, conflict management, expectations, and commitment. Whatever the background, problems, and differences two people face, it is how they handle these issues that will be the key determining factor as to whether they grow more deeply together or further apart as they go through life. (Stanley and Markman, 1997:p. 14).

Like a number of similar interventions, PREP's effectiveness at reducing marital conflict and divorce has been evaluated in numerous studies, with most finding gains in positive communication skills for study participants, and some finding decreased divorce rates (Stanley and Markman, 1997).

Less directly linked to family formation, but perhaps improving the chances that marriages would succeed, are services such as job training, mental health, and parenting skills that might make people into more "attractive" marriage partners and alleviate some potential areas of couple conflict (Dion et al, 2002).

### **3. Community Initiatives**

Community initiatives may entail enactment of policy changes and support for marriage promotion interventions, they are distinguished by organized efforts by government or other groups to support marriage *publicly*. For example, former Utah governor Leavitt declared a "Marriage Awareness" week, and launched a commission to develop strategies to promote



marriage, noting that “Society has an undeniable stake in successful marriage” (Utah’s Governor’s Office, 1999).

“First Things First” in Chattanooga, Tennessee and “Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids” in Michigan are examples of coalitions that seek to promote marriage within their communities. Coalitions like these often partner with other organizations, including churches, to provide the community access to services that promote marriage (like those described above) and to serve as a clearinghouse of information.

#### **IV. Challenges to Promoting Marriage Among Low-Income Couples**

Because much of the recent discourse surrounding marriage promotion policy has centered on the use of marriage education programs with low-income individuals, we devote the remainder of this piece to describing potential challenges policy makers should consider as they attempt to implement, evaluate, and learn from these initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

##### Challenges to Designing Initiatives

It is not clear which group or groups are the most appropriate target for marriage promotion programs. When marriage promotion emerged as a policy option in the late 1990s, women receiving TANF (that is, single mothers with children) were the presumed target population, perhaps because TANF funds could be used for this purpose. However, marriage is uncommon among this group. For example, a study of New Jersey’s TANF recipients found that of women who entered welfare unmarried (95 percent of all recipients), only nine percent were married and living with their spouse four years later (Wood, Rangarajan, and Deke, 2003). A study following a cohort of welfare recipients in Michigan finds higher rates of marriage—17

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<sup>10</sup> Implementing, evaluating, and learning from policy changes and community initiatives are also challenging. For a discussion of these issues, see Hershey and Devaney, 2003.

percent—among never-married women five years after they were first observed, but not all of these marriages are stable (Jayakody et. al, forthcoming).

More recently, the focus has shifted to low-income couples, especially unmarried couples who recently had a child together. This shift reflects the results of an influential study: the Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study, which follows a birth cohort of children of 4,700 couples, most of whom were unwed at childbirth (see Reichman et. al, 2001 for more details). This study documented that at the time of their child’s birth, the majority of couples were quite optimistic about their future together as a family, leading the study’s investigators to conclude that the nonmarital birth might be a “magic moment” at which the likelihood of marriage was the highest (McLanahan et. al, 2003).

However, circumstances within the lives of low-income parents may pose special challenges to promoting marriage. For one, in more than two-fifths of couples in the Fragile Families sample, one or both partners have children from another relationship, with African Americans having even higher incidences of multiple partner fertility (Carlson and Furstenburg, 2003; Mincy, 2002; see also Manning, Stewart, and Smock [2003] on the complexity of nonresident fathers’ parenting roles). Thus, these couples are enmeshed in complex family relationships across several households. Further, for women, the presence of children from other relationships generally reduces the likelihood of marriage (Becker, Landes, and Michael, 1977; Bennett, Bloom, and Miller, 1995; Bumpass, Sweet, and Martin, 1990; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, and Waite, 1995; Peters, 1986; Smock, 1990).

A second challenge is determining just how many couples (or individuals) are interested in getting married. This has implications for the likely demand for marriage promotion activities, and also for evaluation (discussed below). Two state studies indicate that a general

interest in marriage does exist. The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, a statewide effort to reduce divorce and strengthen two parent families, undertook a survey focused on the demographics of the state and attitudes toward marriage. Among low-income people surveyed who were currently in relationships, 77 percent said they would consider participating in marriage strengthening activities (Oklahoma State University, Bureau for Social Research, 2002). A similar study in Florida finds that 77 percent of low-income individuals and 90 percent of TANF recipients surveyed think that government-sponsored marriage promotion programs are a good idea (Karney, Wilson Garvan, and Thomas, 2003).

Even with high levels of interest in marriage, the timing of the intervention as it relates to the couple's life course may be crucial; there is indirect evidence that interest in marriage to a particular partner may be short-lived. When interviewed shortly after the birth of their child, most couples in the Fragile Families Study reported that they wanted to marry each other; yet twelve months later more than two-fifths of these couples were no longer romantically involved (Fragile Families Study, 2003a). This suggests that at least some interventions should target new parents at or near the time of a birth, when their feelings toward each other are strongest.<sup>11</sup>

A third challenge for marriage promotion programs is determining the appropriate set of services to be used with low-income couples. As noted above, there is interest in adapting existing marriage education curricula such as PREP. However, these curricula have been developed for and used with middle-class couples, in particular those who are engaged or already married. It is likely that low-income couples face different or more complex issues that need to be addressed within marriage promotion programs. One founder of PREP, Scott Stanley, notes

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<sup>11</sup> The Building Strong Families (BSF) initiative, contracted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to Mathematica Policy Research, will study the effectiveness of programs targeted to unmarried new parents around the time of a birth.

that, “We need to be careful when applying strategies based on research with middle-class couples to efforts with highly disadvantaged, fragile families” (Stanley, 2001).

Marriage promotion programs serving couples with children from prior relationships should consider tailoring their curriculum to address issues that might arise in step-parent families, such as including modules on parenting non-biological children, handling conflict over children and non-custodial parents, and devising strategies to manage finances in situations where one or both parents have obligations to other families. In addition, some have suggested that marriage promotion programs should be comprehensive in their focus, providing access to job training, housing, medical, and other forms of assistance—in essence operating “marriage-plus” programs (Ooms, 2002). Others argue that “marriage-plus” programs would move money away from marriage promotion activities to ancillary activities that are already provided through other government programs (Rector, Pardue, and Noyes, 2003). However, it seems prudent for marriage promotion programs to make linkages and referrals to other support services in the community, given the many challenges facing low-income couples.

Below we enumerate four issues that we believe are important to address in adapting programs like PREP to less advantaged couples.

### **1. High levels of infidelity and distrust**

In the qualitative sample of the Fragile Families study, about 40 percent of women and 20 percent of men believe that their partner had been unfaithful (Edin, England, and Linnenberg, 2003). For some couples, this distrust may be a function of the incidence of multiple partner fertility. One woman talked about the problems with her partner in terms of relationships with a previous partner and child:

“That’s the biggest problem, his other daughter and her mother...It’s just him, like always being over there. I don’t really know what the relationship

was they had, but it's like kinda interfering with ours... he say he does not [have feelings for his daughter's mother] but yeah, I think so."

## **2. Domestic violence and childhood physical and sexual abuse**

Couples who are experiencing domestic violence, it is generally agreed, are not suitable participants for marriage promotion activities. However, programs will need to learn how to identify potential abuse and develop an appropriate set of services or referrals for these couples (Hershey and Devaney, 2003). The incidence of domestic violence is unknown, but may be significant. Among unmarried Fragile Families couples, about nine percent report partner violence in the prior year (Fragile Families, 2003a). Studies of single mothers who are current and former welfare recipients find higher prevalence rates, with reported annual rates around 15 percent (Danziger, et. al, 2000). Estimates from national samples find about three percent of all women report current physical abuse (Plichta, 1996; Straus and Gelles, 1990).

In addition to domestic violence, programs should pay attention to prior childhood abuse. The Three City Study, conducted in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago and San Antonio, finds evidence that women who have been sexually abused as children are more likely to be in transient, unstable unions, which may be the result of ambivalence about relationships with men (Cherlin et al., 2003).

## **3. Barriers to marriage**

"Barriers" to marriage -- characteristics that might affect the "marriageability" of partners -- are common among low-income couples. In more than one-fifth of unmarried Fragile Families couples, one or both partners may be depressed, a similar proportion have drug or alcohol problems, and in ten percent of these families the fathers have a conviction for a violent crime (Fragile Families, 2003b). Although nearly 80 percent of the unmarried fathers in the Fragile Family study were employed at the time of the child's birth (Fragile Families, 2003b), a

sample of low-income, inner city African American men reports substantially lower rates of employment (56 percent), and much higher rates of drug problems and criminal convictions (Sams-Abiodun and Sanchez, 2003).

Another set of compelling research findings is that low-income couples desire both economic and lifestyle security before marriage. As Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan (2003) note, some of this is related to a desire to have a “proper” wedding, with a reception and ceremony, and material possessions (e.g., a house with a dining room), which in themselves are not necessarily prerequisites to getting married. However, couples also voiced deeper concerns about their emotional maturity, their ability to hold down a stable job and be financially responsible, and ability to be faithful in a marriage. If marriage promotion programs do not address some of these issues, it could mean that improvements in relationship quality due to program participation could be overwhelmed by other problems facing couples.

#### **4. Racial differences**

Marriage education programs such as PREP have primarily been used and tested with White couples. Racial and ethnic disparities in rates of marriage and divorce suggest that special attention should be paid to the role that race may play in the context of relationships. For example, experiences of racism and discrimination are a major source of stress within some African American families, which could in turn affect the quality of relationships (Murry, Smith, and Hill, 2001). Family processes may differ between racial groups, yet, as Murry (2003), notes, “Whites are used as the reference group to ascertain whether African American couples are functioning optimally... [rather than] understanding what variations in relationship patterns and processes occur within each group.” [p. 224]

#### Challenges to Evaluating Initiatives

The Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has awarded contracts to conduct random assignment evaluations of healthy marriage initiatives. Random assignment is considered superior to other evaluation techniques because it accounts for possible differences between people receiving and not receiving the “treatment” (in this case, the marriage promotion intervention). Even though these initiatives will be subjected to rigorous evaluation tests, there are several important challenges which policy makers and researchers need to consider.

First, will sufficient numbers of couples participate in random assignment evaluations? Researchers from Mathematica Policy Research calculated that an ideal sample size for such an evaluation would be 2000 couples (including treatment and control group members) for any one particular intervention (Dion et al., 2002). Because existing marriage education programs have not systematically targeted the low-income population, and program evaluations have not used samples this large, enrollment at this level is a task whose difficulty is not yet known.<sup>12</sup>

Second, even if sufficient numbers of couples participate, will the numbers be large enough so that effects for different subgroups (based on couples’ race and ethnicity, age, other factors) can be examined? Attaining the desired sample size is critical if we are to learn about potential differences in program experiences or outcomes by various subgroups, particularly given variation in marriage prevalence by racial and ethnic groups. Another challenge that may be partially mitigated with larger samples is how to deal with attrition from studies. Evaluations of PREP have suffered from differential attrition, with control group members being more likely to leave the study. Therefore, interpreting long-term program effects can be difficult (Stanley, 2001).

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<sup>12</sup> For example, evaluations of PREP have typically used roughly 130 couples (Stanley et al., 1995; Gottman et al., 1998). A meta-analytic review of evaluations of marriage education programs used evaluations with sample sizes ranging from seven to 139 control/experimentals (Carroll and Doherty, 2003).

### Challenges to Learning from Initiatives

Finally, there will be challenges to achieving the desired outcomes from marriage promotion programs. For the purposes of this paper, we consider two broad outcomes—increased rates of healthy marriages and improved child well-being.

First, policy makers need to be prepared for relatively small increases in the number of couples who marry as a result of program participation. Using data from the Fragile Families Study, Table 1 shows simulations of the probability of marriage among initially unmarried couples. The baseline probability of marriage one year after a non-marital birth is 9.0 percent. Improvements to any one of four areas of couples' lives—supportiveness within the relationship, attitudes toward marriage, feelings of gender distrust, or levels of men's wages—is predicted to increase this probability by just over three percentage points. Improving all four together would increase the probability by more than ten points, up to 20.5 percent. However, these results may be upwardly biased, since they are based on observations of couples who did marry and thus may be driven by unmeasured characteristics of those couples (Carlson, McLanahan, and England, 2004). While low base rates of marriage do not necessarily mean interventions will be ineffective, it may mean that their effects could be quite modest.

[Table 1 about here.]

A second challenge, and one deserving of more attention by researchers and policy makers, is that the incidence of multiple partner fertility may create more step-parent families, and this may not substantially improve child well-being. As discussed earlier, studies suggest that, on some measures, children in married stepfamilies do not fare better than those in single parent or cohabiting households and certainly do not enjoy the well-being of children in



biological, married households (e.g., Acs and Nelson, 2003; Hofferth, 2003; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

Third, even random assignment evaluations may not yield generalizable findings. What is learned from these evaluations will be based upon couples who will have made two choices:

1. They want to get married (or, alternatively, strengthen an existing marriage); and
2. They choose to participate in an intervention that is designed to do that.

It is likely that this subset of people will have characteristics that make them different on at least some measures than other low-income (married or unmarried) couples. This phenomenon in evaluation research is referred to as selection bias.

Random assignment evaluations can eliminate the effects of selection bias on measured program impacts. In the context of marriage promotion programs, this would be done by randomly sorting volunteer participants into treatment and control groups. The treatment group would participate in the intervention, and the control group would not. The impact (effect) of program participation is the difference in outcomes (for example, the probability of marriage) between participants in the treatment and control groups.

However, random assignment evaluations with voluntary groups cannot eliminate selection problems associated with *entry* into the program. If couples who are recruited into marriage promotion evaluation differ significantly from unmarried couples more generally, then we will be limited in our ability to extrapolate from evaluation findings.

One possibility is that couples who choose to participate may be those who would have gotten married in the absence of an intervention. Alternatively, couples who choose to participate may be those at greatest risk for union dissolution and are seeking the intervention as “last resort” for helping their relationship, although evidence from existing marital counseling

programs indicates that couples who participate in these types of interventions are those with relatively low levels of risk factors for break-up (Stanley and Markman, 1997). Under any of these scenarios, the extent to which couples interested in marriage programs differ from other low-income couples will affect the generalizability of findings from marriage promotion evaluations.

## **V. What Research is Needed to Move Policy Forward?**

One could argue that research on and evaluation of marriage promotion programs could draw from the experiences of more than a decade of research on the effects of welfare reform. Indeed, similarities exist. For example, many barriers to marriage among the low-income, such as low education, domestic violence, and substance abuse, are the same as barriers to employment found to exist among welfare recipients (e.g., Danziger et al., 2000). Researchers have made great progress in understanding how to measure these.

However, we believe the challenges enumerated above distinguish research on marriage promotion efforts from research on welfare programs. Welfare reform evaluations, for the most part, were based on a large population of recipients who were mandated to participate in activities designed to change their own behavior (e.g., moving from non-work to work). By contrast, marriage promotion evaluations will have to recruit volunteers, in an effort to change the behavior of both partners (e.g., from non-marriage to marriage or from a marriage headed to dissolution to a stable, healthy marriage).

Given these challenges, we highlight several areas of research which we believe would move family policy forward. Some of this research relates directly to evaluations of marriage

promotion programs and some to understanding dynamics among low-income families more broadly. There are also issues about both *what* to measure and *how* to measure it.<sup>13</sup>

First, assuming positive impacts are found, we need to understand the characteristics of those who choose to participate, and perhaps more importantly, those who married and experienced improved relationships. If marriage promotion programs are deemed “successful” and are disseminated more broadly, it seems prudent to know more about the types of couples who derive the most benefit, so that future interventions can be targeted to couples with similar characteristics. Additionally, information about the local contexts in which these interventions were implemented may be helpful for understanding where programs might have more or less success in the future. Research should be conducted to answer questions such as: are couples in communities with more traditional social values, better labor markets, etc., more likely to participate in these programs, and get and stay married?

Second, we need to evaluate whether these interventions have improved child well-being through their effects on healthy marriage, because improving child well-being, and doing so through marriage, is the central rationale for this initiative. To do so, studies will need to follow children and couples over the long-term, both to track marital stability and the well-being of children in that union.

Studies following couples in marriage promotion programs will need to collect a substantial amount of information. Not only do various measures of child well-being need to be collected, but also measures that tap whether a marriage is “healthy.” The latter requires asking different questions and possibly using different techniques of data collection than have been conventional in program evaluations (e.g., surveys and administrative data). For example,

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<sup>13</sup> For a very comprehensive overview of this topic, see Jekielek et. al, 2004.

according to Lewis and Gossett (1999) there are eight essential characteristics of healthy marriages:

- Both partners participate in the definition of the relationship
- There is a strong marital bond characterized by levels of both closeness and autonomy
- The spouses are interested in each other's thoughts and feelings
- The expression of feelings is encouraged
- The inevitable conflicts that do occur do not escalate or lead to despair
- Problem-solving skills are well developed
- Most basic values are shared
- The ability to deal with change and stress is well developed.

If researchers measure a marriage's health on these dimensions, then observational data and measures traditionally used by psychologists might be required. Stanley (2001) finds that "only studies using objective coding of video-taped interaction show differences in positive and negative [marital] interaction" (p. 277). A review of existing marriage education research (Carroll and Doherty, 2003) notes, "comprehensive evaluation of a program's effectiveness requires that both participants' and outside raters' perceptions of effectiveness be considered" (p. 115). Evaluations of programs such as PREP and other marriage education programs provide us with a foundation upon which to build in terms of validated instruments to measure concepts such as "healthy" marriages. However, adaptation will likely be required to tap into dimensions such as co-parenting and resource sharing in step-parent families or conflict around money in families where financial resources are limited.

Understanding potential program impacts from participation in marriage promotion programs is important; also important is research that uncovers mechanisms or processes through which improved relationship quality, child well-being, or other outcomes occur. For example, researchers have not untangled the mechanisms by which living in a biological two-parent family leads to increased well-being for children, e.g., how much is due to increased income, how much to dual-parent supervision, how much to better parenting? In the proposed random assignment

evaluations, researchers can add to this knowledge if they are able to, for example, design qualitative components that observe family interactions or question parents in-depth about child-rearing practices, communication skills, or other aspects of couples' lives that an intervention is supposed to address.

This type of research may be very helpful in then understanding the correct mix of activities and services needed in a marriage promotion intervention targeted to low-income couples. No experimental studies have directly compared the effectiveness of one type of marriage education curricular approach to another (Carroll and Doherty, 2003), although a consistent finding seems to be the importance of including conflict resolution and communication building skills (Stanley, Blumberg, and Markman, 1999; Carroll and Doherty, 2003).

Some marriage promotion programs will likely use modifications of PREP or other pre-existing programs as stand-alones, others will supplement these with exercises that address issues such as multiple partner fertility or distrust within relationships, while other programs will likely offer access to support services, such as parenting classes or job training. Perhaps a more appropriate way of conceptualizing the evaluation of these marriage promotion programs is to think of them as "intervention trials" and to be systematic about collecting data on what kinds of activities and services, in what combinations, and in what formats seem to provide the best results. The PREP model, like many other marriage education and other types of prevention programs, was developed, refined, and tested in a university-based laboratory setting before being disseminated widely (Stanley et. al, 2001; Stanley and Markman, 2003).

In addition, research is needed that focuses on low-income men and their roles within families. As noted earlier, high rates of multiple partner fertility suggest that marriage promotion

efforts may create more step-parent families. Thus, of especial importance is understanding what happens to relationships between biological fathers and their children when either the mother or the father become involved in a new relationship and take on responsibilities for either new step- or biological children. While there has been some research on how fathers' economic (i.e., child support) and social involvement with biological children changes as he goes on to remarry and take on new parenting responsibilities, with a few exceptions, this research has not concentrated on the low income population (Manning and Smock, 1999, 2000; Cancian and Meyer, 2002; Pate, 2002).

Research on men could also inform service delivery and design. Traditionally, low-income men have not been the focus of social welfare policy, and some programs that have served low-income, non-custodial fathers have struggled with enrollment (Miller and Knox, 2001; Martinson, Trutko and Strong, 2000). Although there may be some circumstances under which marriage promotion programs would serve individuals (e.g., to help improve skills for mate selection or improve a future relationship), it is likely that most would be geared toward couples (Hershey and Devaney, 2003). Thus, learning how to recruit and retain men into services would be an important outgrowth of new research.

Finally, we need a greater understanding of the role race and ethnicity play in family formation. As noted earlier, marriage patterns differ by race and ethnicity, with Whites much more likely to be married than African Americans or Hispanics and more likely to remain married than African Americans. Research is needed that attempts to understand the mix of attitudinal, behavioral, and environmental factors behind these differences.

Much of the research attempting to explain declines in marriage among minorities, particularly African Americans, has focused on structural explanations, such as declines in

employment opportunities, but this only accounts for some of the difference (Harknett and McLanahan, 2002). While multiple partner fertility may play a role in race differences, there may be other sources of differential outcomes. As noted earlier, experiences of racism, and the way a couple deals with them, may affect relationships (Kelly and Floyd, 2001; Murry, et al, 2001; Murry, 2003).

Some have speculated that an important dimension to measure, particularly for African American and other couples of color, is the role of other family and network members play in their life (Jekielek et. al, 2004). A genealogy of a young African American man in a Louisiana housing project clearly illustrates how caregiving responsibilities in an extremely impoverished African American community do not just extend to children:

Mike's primary, most stable residence is with his mother. He maintains partial residence with his current girlfriend who also lives in the development...Mike has a role in her life as a stepfather to her thirteen-year-old son. He also maintains partial residence with his sister who lives around the corner from his mother. He enjoys spending time with his niece and nephew and feels a responsibility to set an example for them. Mike has fluid residency between these three households, sharing reciprocal financial and social support. (Sams-Abiodun and Sanchez, 2003, pp 18-19).

Emerging research like this and from the Fragile Families study will be critical in illuminating complexities in family life that have important implications for the success of marriage promotion efforts.

Our last observation related to race and ethnicity is that, due to data limitations, too little attention has been paid to other racial and ethnic groups who also suffer from high poverty rates and may well contend with many of the same issues (e.g., Native Americans and Puerto Ricans). Of the nearly 19 million children living with only one parent in 2002, more than five million, or one quarter, were neither White nor African American (Fields, 2003). Research on marriage promotion efforts should learn more about family structure and processes across all racial and

ethnic groups, not just Whites and African Americans. This may entail targeted recruitment efforts on the part of marriage promotion programs in communities with diverse populations or new data collections to oversample groups with relatively small numbers, which will likely be a costly task. However, if a major purpose of marriage promotion efforts is to improve child well-being, then at least some studies need to include families of all backgrounds.



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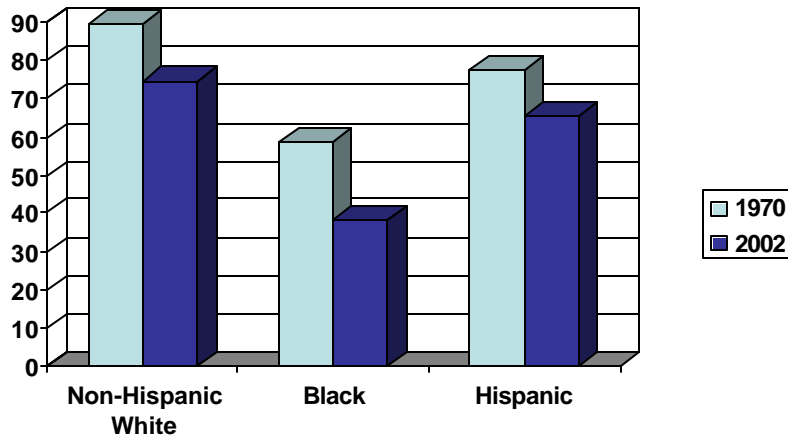
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Figure 1: Percent US Children Living with Two Parents:  
1970 and 2002



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Demographic Supplement to the March 2002 Current Population Survey, Current Population Reports, P-20-547, "Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristics" and earlier reports.

**Table 1**

**Percentage Point Change in the Likelihood of Marriage**

Improve Supportiveness in Relationship	+3.4
Increase Positive Attitudes Toward Marriage	+2.0
Decrease Gender Distrust	+2.0
Increase Male's Wages	+1.6
Increase All Four	+11.5

Source: Carlson, McLanahan, and England, 2004.

The simulation raised (or lowered, depending on which direction encouraged marriage) individual-level values on key variables by one standard deviation from the overall sample mean .