Marriage as a Public Issue

Steven L. Nock

Summary

Over the past fifty years, powerful cultural and social forces have made marriage less central to Americans' family lives. In reaction, the United States is now engaged in a wide-ranging debate about the place of marriage in contemporary society.

In this article, Steven Nock examines the national marriage debate. He begins by reviewing the social and demographic trends that have changed the role of marriage and the family: the weakening link between marriage and parenthood caused by the contraceptive revolution, the declining significance of marriage as an organizing principle of adult life, and the increasingly accepted view that marriage and parenthood are private matters, relevant only to the individuals directly involved. He then considers the abundant scientific evidence on the positive consequences of marriage for both the economic well-being and the health of American adults. He notes that based partly on the evidence that marriage is good for adults and children, numerous public and private groups, including religious activists, therapeutic professionals, family practitioners, educators, and federal and state government officials, have initiated programs to strengthen marriage, lower divorce rates, reduce out-of-wedlock births, and encourage responsible fatherhood. He then reviews some of those programs.

Nock observes that although large cultural and social forces are driving the decline in marriage, most of the new programs attempting to restore or strengthen marriage in the United States focus on changing individuals, not their culture or society. He argues that the problem cannot be addressed solely at the individual level and cautions that given how little researchers and professionals know about how to help couples get or stay married, expectations of policies in these areas should be modest. But despite the shortage of effective strategies to promote marriage, he notes, a political, cultural, and scientific consensus appears to be emerging that the best arrangement for children is to live in a family with two loving parents. He believes that the contemporary marriage debate is an acknowledgment of the cultural nature of the problem, and views it as a crucial national conversation among Americans struggling to interpret and make sense of the place of marriage and family in today's society.

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Following several decades of sweeping demographic, social, and legal changes that have minimized the importance of marriage in U.S. society, a wide-ranging assortment of Americans—religious activists, family practitioners, therapeutic professionals, educators, and state and federal officials—is now conspicuously promoting marriage. Public discussions of family formation often support the goal of having all children raised in healthy, married families. Social science research offers evidence that marriage, unlike other family structures, confers special benefits on both adults and children. Public policymakers promote stable marriages and discourage unmarried births. Congress has declared out-of-wedlock births, reliance on welfare assistance for raising children, and single-mother families contrary to the national interest. This article reviews this renewed national interest in marriage, focusing first on the demographic trends behind the debate and then on the scientific evidence about the consequences of marriage for the economic well-being and health of Americans. It next identifies the primary actors and activities involved in the marriage-promotion effort, and concludes by considering the significance of this renewed national focus on marriage.

Marriage as a Public Issue

Marriage is no stranger to national debate in the United States. It has been at the center of a variety of American social, religious, and political movements over the nation's history. Past political activists, most at the state level, have worked to deny access to marriage to certain groups—slaves, people of certain races, certain categories of immigrants, or homosexuals—or to grant married women greater legal rights or to liberalize divorce laws.[1] Social and religious activists have typically focused on such matters as reducing divorce. What is new—and remarkable—about the current marriage movement is that its purpose is to promote matrimony.

In certain respects, today's marriage movement may seem surprising. After all, most Americans value marriage highly, and the overwhelming majority marry at some point in their lives.[2] Indeed, by international standards they marry at high rates and divorce at lower rates than they did two decades ago. But the institution of marriage has recently undergone dramatic transformation. Rapid demographic and social changes in the United States over the past four or five decades have fundamentally disrupted traditional marriage and family patterns. What once forcefully organized American life no longer does so. In many respects, the current debate about marriage represents the nation's attempt to interpret and make sense of these wrenching social changes.

Demographic Trends

The chief demographic and cultural trends driving the marriage debate have been the weakening link between marriage and parenthood, the declining significance of marriage as an organizing principle of adult life, and the increasingly accepted view that marriage and parenthood are private matters, relevant only to the individuals directly involved.

In his article in this volume, Andrew Cherlin provides a full discussion of the demographic shifts over the past half-century in the way Americans organize their households and families. The most significant for my discussion are the following. First, people now postpone marriage to later ages. They often live in their parents' homes, with friends, or with unmarried partners, thus increasing the time adults spend unmarried. Second, more cou-

ples now live together without getting married, either as a precursor or an alternative to marriage or as an alternative to living alone. The availability of such alternatives naturally makes marriage less central to domestic life. Third, high divorce rates and births to unmarried mothers leave more households headed by single parents, increasing the time both adults and children spend outside married-couple families. Fourth, because more women, especially more married women, are in the labor force, the prevalence of one-wage-earner, two-parent families—what has been called the "traditional" family—has declined. Finally, delayed and declining fertility and increasing longevity result in fewer children, smaller families, and longer lives, adding to the time parents spend "post-children" and to the number of married couples without children.[3]

These five demographic trends reflect other important social and economic changes, including increasing equality between the sexes, the legalization of abortion, increasing tolerance for diverse lifestyles, and liberalized laws governing divorce. Perhaps the most important change, however, has been the development of effective birth control.

Gaining Control of Fertility

The centrality of marriage in American culture and law during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be understood, in part, as a consequence of poorly controlled fertility.[4] As long as sexual intercourse naturally resulted in births, marriage (or engagement) was the only permissible venue for sex. Marriage was an institutional and societal arrangement that allocated responsibility for children. No alternative civil or religious arrangement could accomplish that task, except in extraordinary circumstances. By restricting sex to marriage, communities were able to reduce births of children for whom no male kin were obviously and legitimately responsible.

Children born outside marriage were denied certain legal rights, such as inheritance and claims on paternal assets. These children—and their mothers—were also stigmatized in the eyes of the community. By such means, communities effectively limited the number of births outside marriage. But once effective contraception uncoupled sex from fertility, this social justification for marriage became irrelevant. The convention of "shotgun" weddings, for example, gradually disappeared.[5] Before the advent of effective contraception and legal abortion, a wedding to avoid the stigma of an illegitimate birth typically followed a premarital pregnancy. That it no longer does so illustrates the changing understanding of the importance of marriage for births.

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The birth control pill was introduced in 1960. Within a decade, more than a third of all married women in America were using oral contraception. There was also a noteworthy increase in voluntary sterilization among women older than age thirty. Indeed, by 1970, six in ten American married women were using medical, effective, non-coitus-

related methods of birth control. Ten years earlier, wives had extremely limited access to contraception, and much of what existed was ineffective.[6] These technological innovations in birth control have been described as a "contraceptive revolution" or a "reproductive technology shock" because of their profound implications for social customs and norms.

Sex Becomes a Private Matter

The contraceptive revolution made sex a private matter legally and essentially removed it from state control. A series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions during the 1960s had major implications for the legal and cultural meaning of sex and childbearing. In the most important case, *Griswold* v. *Connecticut* (1965), the Court declared unconstitutional a state law forbidding the use of contraceptive devices, even by married couples. Writing for the Court majority, Justice William O. Douglas explained that various guarantees of the Bill of Rights "create zones of privacy," making "the very idea of prohibiting the practice of birth control . . . repulsive to the notions of privacy surrounding the marriage relationship." *Griswold* and subsequent Court decisions established a constitutional right to privacy in matters of sexual behavior among consenting adults, married or single, and, most recently, heterosexual or homosexual. [7]

Before *Griswold*, sexual matters had never been completely private because of their potential public consequences. Communities prohibited sexual freedoms because adultery and illegitimacy disrupted family lines, sometimes creating collective obligations for the care of offspring. Premarital and extramarital sexual intercourse were illegal. The ability to separate intercourse from reproduction removed the rationale for such regulations.

Sexual intercourse was long the legal symbolic core of marriage; consummation defined its de facto creation. Sexual exclusivity was the basis for a range of legal restrictions surrounding marriage. Adultery, for example, provided grounds for lawsuits by the aggrieved spouse. A married person's *consortium,* the legally protected emotional stakes a spouse has in his or her marriage, was protected in family law. Those who damaged a marriage by adultery or by luring a married partner into an extramarital relationship (enticement) were subject to tortuous legal actions for damages to consortium.

Such "heart balm" claims are now more a curiosity than a conspicuous feature of domestic relations law, except when physical injury is involved. Most jurisdictions have abolished or limited such suits. That such actions are now pursued so infrequently (in the few remaining states where they are still permitted) attests to the declining legal significance of sexual exclusivity in marriage.[8] Similarly, the rapid spread of no-fault divorce laws since 1970 has effectively eliminated adultery as a condition for divorce. Culturally, once sexual relations came to be viewed as private decisions unrelated to marriage, so did reproduction choices. In other words, once sex and procreation could be separated, so could sex and marriage. But so, too, of course, could reproduction and marriage, as they increasingly have been.

Both the social stigma and the legal consequences of having an "illegitimate" child have virtually vanished in recent years. In a series of decisions between 1968 and 1978, the U.S. Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the legal distinctions associated with the marital status of a child's parents.[9] In this as in most areas of domestic relations, American family law has shifted its primary focus from the

married couple to the individual.[10] The marital status of parents is legally irrelevant from the perspective of either generation.

In short, now that fertility can be controlled, parenthood and marriage are less institutionalized and much less predictably connected. A once near-universal insistence on an adult social script governing marriage has given way to an expanding range of acceptable, though less traditional, life course options, such as cohabitation. Living together in a sexual relationship, once taboo, is now so acceptable that a majority of Americans cohabit before they marry.[11] And yet the practice is still so novel that it lacks a vernacular name. Nor, importantly, is it yet governed by norms or explicit laws. Like many social changes fostered by sexual freedom, cohabitation is not yet institutionalized, not yet integrated fully into the nation's culture or law.[12]

The old rules have changed, but new standards have yet to emerge. The new living arrangements are often incompatible with old customs and conventions. Even more vexing, the new arrangements offer fewer traditional solutions when problems arise, because many of the problems themselves are the result of nontraditional arrangements. Cohabiting couples, for example, have little tradition to follow when dealing with the informal equivalent of their "in-laws." Relations with the older generation are strained as a result.[13]

Predictably, when a stable system of social conventions is so quickly altered, some will react by seeking to restore it.[14] Today's marriage movement is one such reaction.

Scientific Evidence about the Consequences of Marriage

Participants in the marriage movement draw heavily on the research findings of social scientists. One key line of research, which finds consistent correlation between various health and economic outcomes and marriage (or divorce), suggests that children and adults benefit from satisfying and stable marriages. Another line of research, especially the province of psychologists, has spurred the development of strategies to improve problematic relationships through marriage or family therapy and, more recently, to prevent such problems through marriage or couples education. Robin Dion reviews the latter strategy in her article in this volume. Here, I consider the research on health and economic outcomes, focusing on how marriage affects adults. The articles by Paul Amato and by Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill in this volume survey the effects of marriage and divorce on children.

The Consequences of Marriage

For well over a century, researchers have known that married people are generally better off than their unmarried counterparts. As early as 1897, sociologist Emile Durkheim was theorizing about why married adults have lower suicide rates than unmarried adults. In a recent survey David Ribar notes that links between marriage and better health in children and adults "have been documented in hundreds of quantitative studies covering different time periods and different countries."[15]

The accumulated research shows that married people are typically healthier, live longer, earn more, have better mental health, have better sex lives, and are happier than their unmarried counterparts. They have lower rates of suicide, fatal accidents, acute and chronic illness, alcoholism, and depression. In 1995 Linda Waite reviewed and highlighted the entire range of such benefits in her presidential address to the Population Association of

America, "Does Marriage Matter?" And she, together with coauthor Maggie Gallagher, answered her own question emphatically in their subsequent book, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*.[16]

Despite abundant evidence documenting such correlation, however, a question recurs: is marriage the cause of the health and happiness enjoyed by married people, or are healthier and happier people the ones most likely to marry? If people who are less healthy, happy, or successful are also less attractive as potential spouses, then they will be less likely to be selected into marriage. The ranks of the unmarried will thus contain a disproportionate number of such people. On the other hand, if marriage actually causes people to have better health, happiness, or success, then the unmarried would, again, be less happy, healthy, or successful. Because both the "selection" and the "causal" arguments lead to the same empirical results, debate has continued for many years.

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It is impossible to settle the issue definitively through a rigorous scientific experiment: people cannot be randomly assigned to marry or remain single, divorce or remain together. Before the 1970s, researchers relied on cross-sectional data (either a single survey or one point in a long-term data series) that simply compared the married with the unmarried on various outcomes.[17] But cross-sectional associations do not make a convincing case that marriage has beneficial effects. They may be confounded by omitted variables that influence both the likelihood of being married and of enjoying better outcomes, or by reverse causation (for example, better health leading to marriage rather than vice versa).

Since the 1970s marriage researchers have been using long-term data that follow the same group of people as they move into and out of marriage. If changes in marital status (marrying, divorcing, remarrying) are consistently correlated with comparable changes in health or economic well-being, this is strong evidence for the plausibility of a causal connection. Such a long-term data design is as close to a true experiment as researchers can hope to get. These studies have provided evidence for both causal and selection arguments, with the causal argument sometimes seeming stronger and sometimes weaker in its effects.[18]

Theoretical Underpinnings

Before I review the research findings, it is worth considering why married adults might differ (especially in beneficial ways) from their unmarried counterparts. What theory would predict or explain such differences? A variety of such explanations exist and can be grouped under three broad themes: marriage as a social institution, specialization, and the domesticating role of marriage.

The institutional perspective argues that marriage changes individuals in positive ways, both to the extent that others treat them differently and to the extent that they come to view themselves differently.[19] The

marital relationship carries with it legal, moral, and conventional assumptions about what is right and proper. It is, in other words, institutionalized and defined by social norms. It is culturally patterned and integrated into other basic social institutions like education, the economy, and politics. In this sense, married individuals have a tradition of solutions to rely on when they confront problems. For many matters in domestic life, marriage supplies a template.

Moreover, the institutional nature of marriage implies that others will treat married people differently because of the cultural assumptions made about husbands and wives. Employers may prefer married to unmarried workers, for example, or may reward married employees with greater opportunities and benefits. Insurers may discount policies for married people. And the law gives married partners legal rights vis-à-vis each other that are not granted to unmarried people.[20] Economists refer to this aspect of marriage as its "signaling" function. Economic signals are activities or attributes of a person that convey information to others. The most effective economic signals are those that involve significant cost to the sender. A classic example is a college degree, which transmits, for example to an employer, valuable information about the sender. Because marriage, like a college degree, has significant costs attached, it serves as an economic signal of those things culturally associated with marriage: commitment, stability, and maturity, among other things. Friends, relatives, and employers will be inclined to assume such things about married people. To the extent they do, married people will benefit.[21] Because cohabitation is relatively costless (in signaling theory, cohabitation is "cheap talk"), it does not convey the same positive signal marriage does. Thus, for example, it is not surprising that cohabiting men earn less than married men, even when other aspects of their relationships are similar.[22] Regardless of what marriage may mean to an individual in a relationship, it has broader implications in what it means to others. This is a core assumption of the institutional argument about marriage.

The institution of marriage also involves what Andrew Cherlin calls "enforceable trust." "Marriage still requires a public commitment to a long-term, possibly lifelong relationship. . . . Cohabitation, in contrast, requires only a private commitment which is easier to break. Therefore, marriage, more so than cohabitation, lowers the risk that one's partner will renege on agreements that have been made." Many observers now believe that this aspect of marriage has become less central as the private, individualized view of marriage has become increasingly dominant.[23]

The second theory about why married people might differ from unmarried people is specialization. When two people marry and merge households, they not only gain obvious economies of scale but also tend to develop an efficient division of labor. To the extent that spouses have different skills, preferences, or abilities, marriage allows each to concentrate on those in which he or she has a relative advantage. Such efficiencies have traditionally implied that wives would focus on nonmarket labor, such as child care and homemaking, because women's wages were so much lower than men's. But even in contemporary marriages, efficiencies from a division of labor still arise. For example, married parents with young children sometimes stagger their work hours to permit one to deliver the children to school and the other to be home when school is out. This simple strategy reduces the demand for expensive day care.[24] As couples refine their division of

tasks, the household benefits to the extent that each partner's productivity increases. Such specialization produces greater interdependencies and lowers divorce rates.[25] The interdependencies also have economic value ("marriage-specific capital") and have been protected in tort law as consortium.[26] Such specialization diminishes the wife's earning potential in the market to the extent that her skills or credentials, or both, decay. Still, even in contemporary marriages, in which the large majority of wives are employed, couples continue to divide household tasks. Cohabiting couples are less likely to do so.

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The third theory about differences between married and unmarried people involves marriage's domesticating role. Men are thought to change more when they marry than women do because unmarried men live less healthy lives than unmarried women do and therefore have more room in their lives for positive change. Specifically, once men are married, they are much less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as drinking heavily, drivingly dangerously, or using drugs. They are also more likely to work regularly, help others more, volunteer more, and attend religious services more frequently. Durkheim argued that such changes occur because marriage integrates men into social groups of like-minded others and, by doing so, establishes acceptable boundaries around their behaviors. Others have made similar arguments about how marriage "domesticates" men by fostering a sense of responsibility for their families, orienting them toward the future and making them sensitive to the long-term consequences of their actions, and providing someone to offer advice, schedule medical appointments, or encourage pro-social behaviors (the so-called nagging factor). And both partners' mental health appears to benefit from the support and understanding they share (more in marriage than in cohabiting relationships).[27]

Economic Changes Associated with Marriage

As noted, the correlation between marriage and economic outcomes involves both selection and causal factors. Men with favorable expected earnings are more likely to marry and less prone to divorce. But research has found that marriage also improves earnings, at least for men. The so-called marriage premium is the additional income that men generate once they marry. Men's earnings, not only in America but in other developed countries, increase once they marry (over and above any change associated with age or experience), and their earnings increase faster than those of comparable unmarried men. And the marriage premium is lost when men divorce. The generally accepted explanation is that men's productivity increases after marriage, largely because of specialization.[28]

After replicating, and thus validating, earlier findings of a marriage premium for men, especially in the first years of marriage, economists Sanders Korenman and David Neumark examined employment records that included performance evaluations and other

indicators of productivity. They found that married men had higher performance ratings than unmarried men and that their higher productivity was largely responsible for their higher earnings.

Women's earnings consistently fail to increase as a result of marriage. But they do not consistently drop, either. Rather, marriage-linked changes in women's earnings are probably due more to fertility. Both married and unmarried women who have children earn less, as a result.[29]

Research that controls for selectivity typically finds somewhat smaller marriage earnings premiums for men, but it nevertheless finds a premium. (For women, the situation is less clear.) Such findings, as well as new evidence that marriage is increasingly viewed as something to postpone until one is already financially stable (that is, reverse causality), mean that it is probably true that both causal and selection effects operate for both sexes in matters of marriage and economic well-being.[30]

Health Changes Associated with Marriage

People who are involved with others typically enjoy better health than those who are socially isolated.[31] Because marriage is a form of social integration, it is not surprising that married people are healthier. Almost without exception, long-term studies of health find that marriage (especially when it is satisfying or long term, or both) is associated with better health and increased longevity. With respect to physical health and mortality, most people adopt a healthier lifestyle once married, thereby avoiding illness or death caused by harmful behavior such as excessive drinking.[32] A spouse is likely to encourage healthier behaviors in his or her partner, such as smoking or drinking less, going to the doctor when ill, having regular checkups, and visiting the dentist. And marital interactions typically reduce stress, thereby contributing to better health.[33]

There is some, albeit limited, evidence of selectivity with respect to health. For example, good health appears to make unemployed women—but not working women—more likely to get married. Research in the Netherlands found that poor health increased the chances of divorce, though it did not affect entry into marriage. Such a line of research offers minimal support for the "selection" argument.[34]

Overall, both causal and selection arguments are probably true in matters of health. Healthier people are more likely both to marry and to avoid divorce. At the same time, marriage promotes healthier lifestyles and reduces the chances of death. Research indicates that the positive effects of marriage seem stronger for men than for women. The most likely explanation for such findings is that unmarried men lead more unhealthy lives and take greater risks than unmarried women do.

The Marriage Movement: E Pluribus Unum

Based in part on research showing that marriage is good for adults and children, strengthening marriage has become a goal of both public and private initiatives in recent years.

Proponents of strengthening marriage form a diverse group. Many are in religious communities, especially conservative Protestant denominations. Their aim is to rebuild a traditional model of lifelong monogamous marriage. Others—practitioners and professionals in various fields—are motivated by concerns about rising divorce rates or about

the welfare of couples, individual adults, and children. Many are therapy-oriented and seek to educate or counsel people about strategies and skills to build healthy relationships, whether through marriage or otherwise. Others belong to fatherhood groups concerned about absent fathers. Still others are state government officials concerned about the problems of the poor (see the article by Robin Dion in this volume). Most of these latter are affiliated with programs targeting unmarried parents, many growing out of changes in welfare law in the late 1990s.

Religious Mobilization

The dramatic transformation of American households and families from the late 1960s through the late 1980s came on the heels of one of the most homogeneous cultural periods of U.S. history in matters of marriage and living arrangements. The postwar era of the 1950s featured historically high fertility rates, low divorce rates, and youthful ages at marriage. The postwar economy and veterans' programs significantly expanded the middle class. Attendance at religious services was high. Culturally, it was the most "familistic" decade of the century: the family was understood as *the* crucial social institution, both for the individual and for society as a whole. Familism, an ideology that emerged during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, associated the prevailing family principles of marriage, childbearing, motherhood, commitment, and sacrifice for family with a sense of sacredness. It stressed sexual fidelity in marriage, chastity before marriage, intensive child-rearing, a commitment to a lifelong marriage, and high levels of expressive interaction among family members.[35]

Against this backdrop, the demographic and cultural trends of the 1960s and 1970s raised grave concern among conservative religious communities, who saw most of these trends as signs of decay. Feminism, the sexual revolution, legalized abortion, divorce, cohabitation, homosexuality, and open challenges to authority energized the rise of a religiously affiliated movement to restore the basic features of 1950s familism. The new Christian Right, which included such groups as Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America, and James Dobson's Focus on the Family (later the Family Research Council), became a powerful political force, mobilizing millions of voters and establishing lobbying groups with close ties to Republican leaders and conservative members of Congress. More generally, conservative Protestantism has been, and remains, an important force in matters of the family because its adherents are very active, devoting more time and money to their churches and affiliated organizations than any other major religious group in America.[36]

With increased sexual freedom driving many of the liberalizing trends of the later twentieth century, it is not surprising that sexual matters were the focus of much of the reaction. As Karen Armstrong notes in her historical review of conservative religious movements, the fundamentalists of the 1970s and 1980s "associated the integrity and even the survival of their society with the traditional position of women." Feminism, homosexuality, and abortion were central themes in a religious movement to restore family values.[37]

Professional Mobilization

Others involved in the marriage debate include professionals, practitioners, and social scientists with an interest in divorce and marital stability. Psychologists have analyzed interpersonal behaviors and strategies associated with various outcomes of relationships and have identified styles of conflict

resolution, coping, and communication as critical elements in marriage. Demographers and sociologists have identified background traits such as cohabitation, parental divorce, young age at marriage, and low levels of religiousness as strong predictors of divorce.

About twenty-five years ago, a field now known as couples education or marriage education began integrating such research into therapeutic approaches to helping couples prepare for or prevent problems in relationships. Couples education, offered in class-like settings, teaches both individuals and couples strategies to avoid the known risks to marriage.

Yet another group of professionals launched programs to promote and help fathers. Fatherhood programs, many in state government, focus on pregnancy prevention (most target young men), child support enforcement and the establishment of paternity, visitation issues, and services for poor fathers, especially those unable to comply with child support orders. Many national organizations support fatherhood. The National Fatherhood Initiative, founded in 1994, seeks to increase the involvement of fathers with their children through a range of educational and training programs. The National Center for Fathering, founded in 1990, sponsors seminars for corporations and schools to encourage greater family involvement by fathers. The Families and Work Institute's Fatherhood Project works with corporations, government agencies, and local fatherhood groups to develop father-friendly programs and policies, such as paternity leave. Other groups supporting fatherhood include the National Partnership for Community Leadership and the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families.

Several independent professionals, national professional organizations, and educational and research institutions have also launched efforts on behalf of marriage. Diane Solee, a marriage and family therapist who coined the term "marriage education," founded the Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education in 1995. She sponsors a national clearinghouse for marriage information, organizes an annual national conference called "Smart Marriages," and maintains web sites and listservs to provide additional information. The Center for Law and Social Policy, which maintains a section on families and couples, publishes policy-related materials and maintains a web site with links to such information. The Institute for American Values maintains a Council on Families that sponsors conferences, publishes original research, and reviews public policy relating to marriage. Academic centers at universities and at well-respected think tanks such as the Brookings Institution, the Urban Institute, and the Heritage Foundation produce analyses of and take positions on issues related to marriage.[38] And marriage therapists, religious leaders, and think tank intellectuals have launched community marriage initiatives, typically in couple-to-couple formats that target entire communities. In the mid-1980s, journalist Michael McManus began promoting a faith-based project called "Marriage Savers" that involved couple-to-couple mentoring organized through religious congregations.

Political Mobilization

Policy analyst Theodora Ooms and her colleagues trace the origins of public policy efforts to promote marriage to the late 1980s, as evidence accumulated to document the adverse effects on children of growing up in a single-parent home. State efforts focused initially on making divorce more difficult, through means such as covenant marriage,

Federal and State Marriage Programs

With the election of President George W. Bush in 2000, federal funding to support marriage-promotion programs grew. The Healthy Marriage Initiative within the Administration for Children and Families supports many such projects.[1] (See the article by Robin Dion in this volume for more details on these projects.) One project develops ways to approach unwed parents to emphasize the importance of healthy marriages for their children, as well as to promote the establishment of paternity and strengthen marital and co-parenting relationships with nonresident fathers. Another develops and tests curriculums and training to help welfare staff address issues of marriage and family formation. Large research and evaluation grants are helping develop coalitions and strategies to promote healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood in communities. Building Strong Families is a nine-year random-assignment experiment to assess programs to strengthen relationships and support the marital aspirations of unmarried couples around the time of the birth of a child. Supporting Healthy Marriages, likewise, is a random-assignment experimental evaluation of interventions to support marriage among low-income couples in their child-rearing years. Community Healthy Marriage Initiatives: An Evaluation will assess communitywide initiatives to promote and support marriages. Awards for these and similar programs have significantly increased federal support for research and programs targeting marriage.

The major source of marriage activities in states is federal welfare grants. As detailed by Theodora Ooms, Stacey Bouchet, and Mary Parke in *Beyond Marriage Licenses*, the range of state marriage efforts is impressive by any standard.[2] Every state has done something to try to promote marriage, reduce divorce, or strengthen two-parent families. The origins of these efforts are diverse. Some began as grassroots community programs, some were organized through religious congregations, and some were borrowed from other states. All are relatively new, dating back no more than ten years or so. So far, importantly, few of the efforts have been scientifically evaluated for safety or effectiveness, though, as noted, the Administration for Children and Families is now supporting such evaluations.

In the past decade ten states have undertaken policy initiatives such as high-level commissions, media campaigns, proclamations, or conferences, or implemented laws and policies to establish and fund programs to promote marriage and reduce divorce.

Many states have also made changes in their marriage and divorce laws, including incentives for couples to prepare for marriage with counseling or education. Five states offer reduced fees for marriage licenses to couples who receive such services. Three states have enacted covenant marriage laws, and another twenty state legislatures have debated such legislation. In Louisiana, Arkansas, and Arizona, couples voluntarily select between the existing marriage laws or a covenant marriage regime, which includes premarital education or counseling, a legally binding affidavit accepting the terms of the covenant marriage, and required counseling before divorce. Divorce is granted only for the traditional faults (adultery, abuse, abandonment) or after a two-year waiting period. Couples who are already married may convert their marriages to covenant marriages.

Many states offer fatherhood promotion and marriage education programs. Some encourage an unmarried father to marry the mother of his child. At least eleven states now fund fatherhood pro-

grams that promote co-parenting. The programs stress greater involvement by nonresident fathers, offer mediation services and co-parenting classes to help estranged parents resolve problems, and encourage marriage.[3] Not all fatherhood programs, however, promote marriage. Indeed, leading analysts suggest that the question of whether to emphasize marriage is contentious and may threaten the entire fatherhood effort.[4]

The most conspicuous state marriage-related programs are those called couples and marriage education. Thirty-two states have at least one such program, as do all branches of the U.S. military. Many cooperative extension county educators (once known as county extension agents) are trained family life educators. Six states have launched new marriage-related activities that are being conducted by these agents through land grant universities. Public schools also offer marriage education. Six states offer such programs through high schools as electives. Many more individual school districts do so as well. Florida requires four hours of relationship and marriage education for high school graduation.

Multisector programs, often begun by religious leaders, unite public officials, community leaders, clergy, and interested citizens. Chattanooga's First Things First began in 1997; Families Northwest started in 1996 as a statewide project in Washington state and since has been extended to Oregon; Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids began in 1997. These and similar programs sponsor marriage and couples education, support like-minded grassroots efforts by others, offer mentoring programs to couples, and generally raise awareness about the importance of marriage. All include informal agreements signed by local clergy and other officials who agree to abide by locally developed minimum guidelines, such as requiring premarital counseling and relying on premarital inventories to identify strengths and weaknesses, to prepare couples planning to marry.[5]

States have also made big changes in their welfare regulations. The 1996 welfare reform law gave states considerable latitude in establishing such rules. In response, states reduced disincentives that discouraged couples from remaining together in households that receive welfare grants. Under the old AFDC rules, welfare was generally available only to single-parent families, with limited funds for two-parent families; since 2002, thirty-six states have eliminated two-parent family eligibility requirements, and another eleven have partially eliminated them. As of 2002, twenty-two states operated separate programs for two-parent families and funded them solely with state dollars. Families served are exempt from federal participation and work requirements. Nine states offer welfare recipients financial incentives, including a $100 monthly bonus, to marry. Other incentives are excluding a spouse's earnings in determining financial eligibility or grant amounts and forgiving child support arrearages owed by a noncustodial parent to the state if the parents marry or reunite.

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage (accessed February 2005).

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and subsequently on marriage and couples education programs.[39] (See box for more details about state and federal marriage programs.)

The economic implications of single-parenthood have featured conspicuously in state debates about family policy. In 1999, for example, Oklahoma governor Frank Keating launched the nation's largest marriage initiative, supported with $10 million of federal welfare funds, to cut the state's high divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates. Keating's move came on the heels of a 1998 report showing that his state's economy was flagging partly because high rates of family breakdown were driving many Oklahomans into poverty. Likewise, Louisiana first authorized covenant marriage (see box) in 1997, following legislative debate highlighting the costs of poverty resulting from divorce.[40]

At the federal level, concern about marriage was driven primarily by increasing rates of births to unmarried women and corresponding claims on public assistance.

At the federal level, concern about marriage was driven primarily by increasing rates of births to unmarried women and corresponding claims on public assistance. Activists who had already been working to promote marriage understandably welcomed this novel role for the federal government. But both liberals and conservatives expressed reservations. Among conservatives, the debate was over whether federal efforts should be focused on reducing illegitimacy or mandating work for welfare recipients. Those endorsing the latter view argued that there was little evidence to support the claim that efforts to reduce out-of-wedlock births could work.[41] Liberal concern was similar. The National Organization for Women, for example, has objected that marriage-promotion efforts divert welfare funds from basic economic supports for mother-headed families, intrude on private decisions, place some women at greater risk of domestic violence by coercing them to stay in bad or dangerous marriages, waste public funds on ineffective policies, limit state flexibility by earmarking welfare funds for specified programs, and generally lack public support.[42] These and similar concerns continue to be expressed. But leading policy analysts Will Marshall and Isabel Sawhill see a political consensus emerging over the complex challenges facing American families—single, teen, and unwed parenting; economic insecurity; health care; and balancing home and work. They call for a comprehensive family policy to address all such issues.[43]

Much of the contemporary federal concern about marriage and unmarried fertility is based on arguments similar to those first advanced in 1965 by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor for President Johnson.[44] Moynihan claimed that female-headed households were a primary cause of poverty and welfare dependency among black Americans. In 1984, in *Losing Ground: American Social Policy: 1950–1980*, welfare critic Charles Murray elaborated on that theme, arguing that welfare encouraged dependency by making it economically rational for a poor mother to remain single and unemployed rather than marry. The problem of welfare dependency became a central issue in the welfare reform debate that led to a major overhaul of federal legislation in 1996.

As political scientist R. Kent Weaver writes: Murray's "conservative diagnoses and prescriptions for welfare reform were part of a broader conservative renaissance that began in the 1970s and gained momentum with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. . . . Conservatives were far from united on their prescriptions for what to do about AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] . . . but did succeed in making the reduction of welfare dependency the focus of welfare debates in the 1990s."[45]

Tackling welfare dependency would require dealing with issues of out-of-wedlock births, moving welfare recipients into the labor force, and making fathers contribute—financially, at least—to raising their children. These issues, raised by Congress in initial deliberations about welfare reform during the 1980s and 1990s, continue to be debated today. Many states have undertaken marriage-strengthening efforts supported largely with federal welfare funds. Although such efforts may reflect a more general federal interest in marriage, the most significant initiatives target poor women and, to some extent, men.

The welfare reform bill signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996 featured four family-formation objectives. The first was to provide assistance to needy families to allow children to be cared for in their own homes or those of relatives. The second was to end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage. The third was to prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals toward that end. The final goal was to encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.[46] Congress gave states wide latitude to implement innovative strategies, such as limiting additional welfare support to households in which an additional child is born or limiting cash benefits to teenage mothers. Congress also provided funding for abstinence education.

Promoting two-parent families and discouraging out-of-wedlock births are now acknowledged federal objectives. A state's performance in meeting these statutory goals has consequences in terms of the welfare funds that flow to it from Washington. States may use block grant funds in "any manner reasonably calculated" to achieve any of the program's goals, and they have used these funds to create new fatherhood and marriage-promotion programs or enlarge existing ones.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The seemingly endless array of contemporary public and private efforts to promote marriage, reduce out-of-wedlock births, encourage responsible fatherhood, and persuade unmarried parents to marry would have made little sense to Americans living just fifty years ago. For them, marriage was the central and defining feature of adult identity; for them, such goals were elemental moral principles. Not so for today's Americans, who find themselves far removed from such a marriage-centered culture and struggling to redefine the role that marriages and families play in society.

Sociologists refer to historical moments such as our own, when technology has advanced much more rapidly than the institutions surrounding it, as periods of culture lag. The technological advance in this case was effective fertility control. When scientists discovered how to control the link between sex and reproduction, they set off prodigious changes in the institutions of marriage and the family. Many Americans are now engaged in the

contemporary marriage debate precisely because they are struggling to understand the meaning of the wrenching dislocations in American social and family life over the past half-century.

As other articles in this volume show, champions of marriage have thus far had few victories. Perhaps it is still too early. More likely, the related goals of promoting marriage and discouraging divorce or out-of-wedlock births will fare about as well as other national attempts to alter large social trends.

At the moment, most marriage-promotion efforts focus on individuals and the choices they make. It may be possible to convince poor women that it is best to get married before having children. It may be possible to convince them that marriage is better than cohabitation. It may be possible to teach couples how to resolve problems that jeopardize their relationships. Evidence suggests that most poor women already understand many of these things.[47] Given how little researchers and professionals know about helping couples get or stay married, however, our expectations of policies in these areas should be modest, at best. Despite the lack of effective strategies to accomplish these goals, there nevertheless appears to be an emerging political, cultural, and scientific consensus about the consequences of different family structures for children's well-being. Increasingly, Americans appear to understand that the best arrangement for children is with two loving parents even if we have yet to develop ways always to achieve that goal. Our current efforts reflect this uncertainty about how to strengthen families.

Attempts directed toward changing or "fixing" individuals reflect a psychological behaviorist assumption that the root "problem" lies within the person, not his or her society or environment. If one adopts this perspective, then the obvious solution is something like education or training—couples education, for example, or counseling. Again, if one adopts this perspective, then the assessment of such solutions lies in measuring individual change, as studied through such strategies as random-assignment experiments. But if the problem is viewed as larger than the individual, and if it is seen as endemic to an entire historical era, then it cannot be addressed solely at the individual level. One way to begin to address it would be to engage in a prolonged and sometimes painful national discussion. Such a discussion would take place in public among lawmakers, clergy, teachers, journalists, opinion leaders, and intellectuals—and in private between partners, between parents, and among family members. Such a national conversation would interpret and make sense of the changing roles played by marriage and families in society. This is how social change is managed and understood. And this, I believe, is how to understand today's debate over the value of marriage.

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