

HOW RESEARCH ON FAMILY STRUCTURE AND CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT CAN INFORM HEALTHY MARRIAGE PRACTITIONERS IN THE FIELD

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Is children's development, and children's cognitive development in particular, affected by the marital status of their parents? On the face of it, this seems to be a simple question to which there is an intuitively simple answer—yes. Yet the answer to this question is anything but simple. The complexity of this question, the policy context that has helped shape a growing body of related research, and the implications of findings for policy and practice are discussed below. The following discussion is based on my remarks during the plenary session of Connecting Marriage Research to Practice, a conference sponsored by The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative.¹

While we can readily observe that children in married-parent families tend to be significantly better off than children raised by single or cohabiting parents, it is more difficult to discern how much better off children without married parents would be if their parents were to marry. An extensive body of research on this topic suggests that marriage would confer benefits on these children, even those within disadvantaged families. The research further suggests that the conduits for these benefits tend to be attributes commonly associated with marriage, such as improved economics and stronger family processes, more so than the marital choice itself. These findings help us understand why marriage matters and provide valuable insights for policy and practice within the Healthy Marriage Initiative.²

SHAPING THE AGENDA

For over a decade there has been extensive debate as to whether parents' marital status affects children's well-being and development, how large the effects are, and why those effects might occur. Starting with a basic observation that children raised by married biological parents fair better on average than other children, the research has grown to include increasingly complex modeling that attempts to parse out how much of the disparity is due to marital status itself, how much is due to attributes the parents possessed prior to their union, and how much is due to attributes the family acquired after their union.

One might question the value of this extensive literature since the research sometimes leads to seemingly inconsistent conclusions, requires complex statistical methods to overcome data limitations, and leaves some important questions unanswered. One might also ask why such complex models are needed to tease out the benefits of marriage. Isn't it enough to know that children within married-parent families are observably better off? However, a careful review of this literature shows that it has a great deal of insight to offer both policy and practice, particularly if viewed within the policy context that helped shape the research and, in turn, has been shaped by it, as discussed further below.

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The importance of parents' marital status has been the center of an emotionally charged debate beginning in the mid 1960s and gaining prominence in the 1990s.³ From one perspective, there is the concern that the tradition of raising children within married-parent families has been so greatly eroded in America as to undermine the foundation of our society and put our children in serious jeopardy, particularly children in disadvantaged communities. This concern arises from studies showing, for example, that the proportion of children born to unmarried mothers has risen to nearly 37 percent overall and to nearly 70 percent among African-American women, that an estimated 20 percent of child poverty is due to this increase, and that children with only one parent are at significantly higher risk for any number of adverse outcomes. Despite the fact that the majority of findings listed in support of the 1996 legislation authorizing the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program focused on family formation—as did three of the four specified goals of the program itself—the importance of marriage failed to gain traction in the years immediately following the program's implementation. This served to intensify efforts to focus more attention on the importance of family structure and marriage.

From another perspective, however, there is the concern that focusing on the benefits of marriage for children could undermine society's acceptance of or support for other types of family structure. Furthermore, there is the worry that if policymakers wrongly attribute to marriage the benefits of personal attributes or social opportunities that preceded the marriage, this could obscure the root causes of adverse outcomes among children as well as the fact that some will children remain vulnerable even after their parents marry.

Shaped in part by this debate, the research on how family structure influences the welfare of children has been invaluable in guiding national policy with respect to healthy-marriage promotion. We have seen that there is almost undoubtedly a causal link between parental marriage and child outcomes. However, translating this understanding into efforts to improve the well-being of children has proven to be a complex undertaking. The research has made clear that tangled in the seemingly simple question of whether parental marital structure matters are complex questions concerning the role of marital aspirations versus marital opportunities, the importance of fathers versus mothers, family structure versus family economics, marital status

versus parents' residence or biological connection to children, any marriage versus healthy marriage, and parental presence versus parental practices.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Disentangling these factors is difficult because they have both direct and indirect influences on child well-being, many are highly correlated, family structures have become increasingly diverse, and families have many characteristics that cannot easily be measured by standard data. Thus, no single study is likely to provide a precise recipe for family well-being, or ironclad proof that marriage itself is responsible for many of the benefits we see accruing to children of married parents. However, researchers have made significant progress in tackling the questions posed above, and we can gain useful insights by looking at studies across several disciplines.

Does marriage matter? As noted above, the literature linking parents' marital status to child wellbeing and developmental outcomes is extensive. A recent review found over 150 articles since the mid 1990s published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* alone. In trying to isolate the influence of marriage, the field has become increasingly complex in its methodologies and the factors it controls for, particularly regarding efforts to net out selectivity—that is, the influence of factors that may lead individuals with brighter futures to marry in the first place.

As a result of this large body of research, there is near-consensus that marriage does benefit children. The estimated association of parental marriage and child well-being tends to persist even after netting out the role of parents' premarital demographics and human capital, and controlling for other unobserved factors that may influence both marital outcomes and child well-being (i.e., selectivity). Variables that proxy for parental premarital attributes include the mother's (and sometimes the father's) education, aptitude scores, age at the birth of the first child, current age and ethnicity, and prior marital history. Statistical methods used to control for selectivity have included the use of longitudinal comparisons (following the same individuals before and after family formation), instrumental variables (using a measure that is correlated with family structure but that is exogenous to the other factors being studied), switching models (incorporating as an empirical step in the model the marital decision), and matching methods (estimating marriage effects based on a

hypothetical matching of individuals with similar characteristics).

That is not to say that all of the initially observed difference in outcomes between children of married parents and unmarried parents is due to family structure. While the significance of family structure persists, controlling for these other factors tends to reduce the magnitude of its effect by 50 percent or more. One recent study found that while cognitive outcomes were roughly 10 percent stronger among children in married-parent families compared to those in cohabiting and single-parent families, maternal attributes preceding the marriage accounted for 25 to 30 percent of the gap with respect to children of cohabiting parents and up to two-thirds of the gap with respect to children of single parents. Another study of children's cognitive outcomes revealed gaps of greater than 20 percent between children living with married versus single parents, but it also found that between one-third and two-thirds of this gap was attributable to the mothers' premarital attributes.

Both studies also include models that control for the influence of attributes following marriage as well, such as the parent's mental health, economic status or income, home environment, and parental involvement. The effect of such postmarital attributes varies somewhat across measures and model specification, but consistent with the broader literature on family structure, their inclusion, in addition to controls for premarital attributes, tends to reduce the remaining effect attributed to marriage to zero.

This should not be interpreted to mean that marriage does not matter for children. Taken together these studies indicate that even employing rigorous methods in an attempt to control for selection into marriage, benefits for children remain, and variables controlling for postmarital attributes provide important clues as to why it matters.

How does marriage matter? Once characteristics subsequent to marriage are controlled for, the effects attributed to marriage often become insignificant. This suggests that while protective factors like economic resources, family stability, quality relationships, improved mental health, and stronger parental involvement may matter more than the marital choice per se, marriage tends to foster these attributes more than other parental structures.

Although the literature on factors that mediate the influence of family structure is too vast to summarize here, there are several common themes that may be of particular interest to practitioners. First, economic status does heavily influence child well-being, and it appears that improved financial status tended to account for about 50 percent of marriage-related benefits experienced by children. Second, the role of fathers is a very important conduit for the benefits of marriage, but father presence in and of itself seems insufficient; rather it is father involvement that matters, and the impact of father involvement on child well-being appears to be greater within married-parent families. (Not surprisingly, better parenting on the part of both mothers and fathers tends to account for a significant portion of the benefits associated with marriage.) Third, the mental health of both fathers and mothers has been found to be an important factor in the role of family structure; that is, marriage can improve the mental health of both parents and this in turn improves their ability to parent effectively. Finally, conflict within the parental relationship has a significant negative effect on children, and serious levels of conflict can negate the benefits of marriage.

Although estimates vary widely, the benefits for children living in married-parent families appear to accrue to a lesser degree for African-American families. While it is widely understood that some of this gap may be due to differences in economic and social opportunities among African-American adults, especially men, some findings suggest that a portion of the gap may also be due to lower levels of parental involvement and weaker parent/child relationships. On the positive side, the research also suggests that interventions to strengthen parental involvement could have an equal or even stronger impact on these families as compared to non-African-American families and could close a significant portion of the achievement gap between African-American and white children.

HOW RESEARCH CAN BENEFIT PRACTICE

Because studies examining the role of family structure are so varied in the outcomes they examine and the influences they consider, one cannot say definitively which influences matter most for ensuring that the benefits of marriage accrue to children through healthy-marriage interventions. However, current findings suggest that several factors are worth considering in policy and practice:

- Fathers matter, beyond a paycheck and beyond just showing up. This message could be an important part of strategies to better recruit and retain fathers in healthy-marriage interventions, particularly given that their participation thus far has been somewhat difficult to attain.
- Improved economic status is one of the primary ways that marriage confers benefits on children in the general population. To the extent that such economic benefits may not be fully available to some families participating in healthy-marriage interventions, such families could remain fragile even after they enter into healthy marriages and might need some additional supports to realize the full benefits of marriage for their children.
- Mental health and the effects of depression, especially among fathers, is not always a focus of healthy-marriage workshops, yet it has been shown to be an important mediator of the benefits children realize from their parents' marriage.
- The strength of the parent/child relationship is another important avenue through which marriage confers benefits on children, and this will likely be a topic of increasing importance as healthy-marriage interventions reach beyond parents of newborns to include those with older children and stepchildren. Related research suggests that focusing on parenting skills in healthy-marriage interventions could improve child development and help close the gap in healthy development between minority and nonminority children.
- African-American families are unique in ways that are not fully captured by the existing research, and findings from the field will be critical to a better understanding of why the relationship between family structure and child well-being differs for these families, and how to better tailor interventions to their needs.
- The term "healthy" in the Healthy Marriage Initiative is more than positive rhetoric. Research findings offer solid evidence that low levels of conflict within families and strong parental and parent/child relationships are key if marriage is to benefit children. Healthy-marriage interventions are making important strides in putting these lessons into practice and hopefully will continue to advance our understanding of what makes for a healthy marriage and how to translate this into benefits for children.

ENDNOTES

¹ This conference was held October 2006, at the University of North Carolina, the Jordan Institute for Families.

² The Healthy Marriage Initiative is a policy platform developed by the White House in 2003 "to help couples, who have chosen marriage for themselves, gain greater access to marriage education services, on a voluntary basis, where they can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage." The initiative focuses primarily on providing relationship skills education to unmarried couples who have just had a child or are about to have a child, particularly among at-risk groups such as low-income or minority couples. Within the overall effort are targeted health marriage initiatives for the African American, Hispanic and Native American communities. For further information see <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html#ms>

³ Many would assert that the starting point for this debate was Senator Moynihan's 1965 report, "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action." Then, during efforts to overhaul the nation's welfare system in the 1990s, concerns regarding family structure were debated with respect to the population more generally.

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