Why Marriage Matters: A View from the Social Sciences

W. Bradford Wilcox
Department of Sociology
University of Virginia
&
James Madison Society
Princeton University
The Global Retreat from Marriage

- Throughout the developed world, marriage is in retreat
  - Increases in divorce
  - Increases in illegitimacy
  - Increases in cohabitation
Divorce on the Rise

Divorces per 1,000 citizens

Sources: UN Yearbook, Goode
Divorce on the Rise

Divorces per 1,000 citizens

The Americas

- Canada
- Chile
- US
- Uruguay

Year

1970 2000

Sources: UN Yearbook, Goode
Illegitimacy on the Rise

% children born outside of marriage

Europe
- France
- UK
- Spain

Year

Sources: UN, Moynihan et al. 2004
Illegitimacy on the Rise

% of children born outside of marriage

Year

1970 2000

The Americas
Canada
Chile
US
Uruguay

Sources: UN, Moynihan et al. 2004

Note: Based on 1997 data
The Impact on Children

- One consequence of the retreat from marriage is that children are more likely to end up in a single parent family.
Single Parenthood on the Rise

% Families led by single parent

Year

Sources: UN, Eurostat, Univ. of Montevideo
Single Parenthood on the Rise

% Families led by single parent

Year

1980  2000

The Americas
- Canada
- US
- Uruguay

Sources: UN, Eurostat, Univ. of Montevideo
Why Should We Care?

Why should we care about the global retreat from marriage?
- Children are spending more time in single-parent families
- In the U.S., 50% of children will spend some time in a single-parent family

Why should we care that more children are spending time in single-parent homes?
Two Married Parents are Better than One: Outcomes

Children reared in single-parent homes are two to three times more likely to experience serious negative outcomes

- About 10% of children in biological married-parent homes experience such outcomes
- About 25% of children in biological single-parent homes experience such outcomes
The consequences of single parenthood for children:

- Psychological:
  - Suicide, drug abuse, & depression

- Social:
  - Delinquency, crime, teenage pregnancy, & educational failure

- Economic:
  - Poverty, & material hardship
% Young men in prison

Source: Harper and McLanahan 2004
% Teenage girl pregnancy

Family Status

Status of Father

The United States

Dad
Stayed

Dad left
6-18

Dad left
before
six

Source: Ellis et al., 2003
Dropping Out of High School

% Teens dropping out of high school

Source: McLanahan and Sandefur 1994
Findings around the Globe

Similar findings even in countries with generous welfare states

- Psychological
  - Children in single-parent homes twice as likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs, or be depressed (Sweden)

- Social
  - Children from unmarried homes more likely to suffer from educational failure (Uruguay)
Swedish Children at Risk

Source: Weitoft et al. 2003
Atraso escolar de los hijos según estado conyugal de las madres

varones entre 8 y 14 años

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estado conyugal</th>
<th>Sin atraso escolar</th>
<th>Con atraso escolar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casadas</td>
<td>67.2%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidas</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep/div/viu</td>
<td>59.2%</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solteras</td>
<td>59.3%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Effects on Adults

- United States:
  - Health
    - Married men live 10 years longer than unmarried peers
    - Marriage as powerful for men’s health as not smoking!
  - Economic
    - Men work harder, smarter, and earn about 20% more after marrying
    - Median net worth of U.S. adults:
      - $66,000 for married ($120,000 for couple)
      - $35,000 for divorced & never-married

- Uruguay:
  - Psychological
    - The elderly (60+) are significantly happier if they are married
Horas trabajadas según estado conyugal del hombre
hombres entre 25 y 35 años

Porcentaje de casos
- **Casados**: 70.77%
- **Unidos**: 65.78%
- **Solteros**: 53.59%

Número de horas trabajadas según estado conyugal:
- **Hasta 40 hs semanales**:
  - Casados: 29.23%
  - Unidos: 34.22%
  - Solteros: 46.41%
- **Más de 40 hs semanales**
  - Casados: 70.77%
  - Unidos: 65.78%
  - Solteros: 53.59%
Effects on Communities

- Child Poverty
  - Brookings study:
    Virtually all of the growth in child poverty in the United States since 1970 can be attributed to the retreat from marriage

- Crime
  - Harvard Sociologist Robert Sampson: “Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictors of... urban violence across cities in the United States.”
The federal government incurs a host of welfare, educational, criminal, and medical costs when families are not headed by a married couple.

New Georgia State University study estimates that the U.S. federal government spends an extra $150 billion every year because of the retreat from marriage.

So, the state becomes:
- The “provider” for women and children in single-parent families.
- The “protector” of the society against boys reared by single mothers.
Answering Common Objections

- Other social factors (e.g., poverty) explain the association between marriage and child outcomes
  - These studies control for a range of indicators, including income and education
- Other factors (e.g., poverty) are more important than family structure
  - True for some outcomes (e.g., education) but not for other outcomes (e.g., psychological)
- Unmeasured biological factors (e.g., genes) account for the effects of family structure
  - New twin studies that account for biological factors show that most outcomes remain even after controlling for underlying genetic risk factors
Four Conclusions

- Marriage matters for the welfare of
  - Children
  - Adults
  - Communities
  - Government
Explaining the Marriage Advantage

- Family structure influences quality of parenting
  - Two sets of family and friends
  - Spouses provide mutual support and monitoring of one another
  - Parents experience less economic stress
  - Marital commitment ensures stability of emotional ties with and economic investments in children
- All these factors associated with ➔
  - More affection, consistent discipline, and monitoring
  - Children report higher quality relationships with father and mother
Marriage & Quality of Parenting

% with Bad Parental Relationship

The United States

Source: Zill et al. 1993
Mothers’ Talents

- Breastfeeding
- Understanding children
- Communicating with children
- Nurturing children

Moms’ strengths are linked to
- Nurture - Cultural factors (e.g., socialization)
- Nature - Biological factors (e.g., oxytocin)
Fathers’ Talents

- Providing
- Discipline
- Play
- Challenging children
- Loving Mom
Providership

- Fathers excel in providing
  - Only 1 stay-at-home dads for 100 stay-at-home mothers
  - After kids arrive, dads work more hours, wives work less
  - More than 2/3rds of family income typically comes from Dad

- Biological basis?
  - Men have markedly higher levels of testosterone
  - Testosterone is associated with more aggression, dominance ➔ strong work orientation
Discipline

- Fathers excel in disciplining children
  - Strength, size, voice telegraph toughness
  - More assertive, less willing to bend rules than mothers
  - Especially effective with teenage boys
- Biological basis?
  - Testosterone associated with male size, strength, voice, & dominance
Fathers excel in physical play
- More inclined to engage in rough play
- More likely to surprise or excite children
- Children more likely to be stimulated by father & to learn how to deal with aggression from father

Biological basis?
- Testosterone is associated with energy level, strength, physical activity
Challenging their Kids

- Fathers excel in pushing their children to embrace challenges, difficulties, outside world
  - Encourage kids to engage in novel activities & be independent
  - More likely to introduce children to worlds of work, sports, civil society/politics
  - Boys & girls who have active, engaged dads attain more, more self-confident

- Biological basis?
  - Testosterone is associated with a singular focus, goal orientation
Loving Mom

- One of most important influences Dad can have on kids is indirect
  - Loving Mom

- Moms who are happily married are
  - More involved, nurturing, better at monitoring

- Dads who treat mom with respect & affection
  - More likely to teach boys to deal with girls/women in a respectful manner
  - More likely to teach girls to expect to be treated well by boys/men in their life
What about Cohabitation?

- Throughout the developed world cohabiting families are becoming more common
- Are children doing ok in cohabiting households?
Are Two Unmarried Parents Better than One?

- It is true that cohabitation outcomes for children more positive in economic domain
  - Lower levels of poverty
- But cohabitation outcomes as negative as single parent outcomes
  - Psychological problems
  - Educational failure (including Uruguay)
    - Indeed, one new study by Prof. Alejandro Cid finds that girls in cohabiting families in Uruguay are significantly more likely to have fallen behind in school than girls from married families
Cohabiting Families Worse than Single Parent Families

- On some outcomes, children in cohabiting households do worse than children in single parent homes
  - Delinquency/behavior problems
  - Sexual and physical abuse of children
British Child Abuse Rates

In Britain, a Child Whose Biological Mother Cohabits Was 33 Times More Likely to Suffer Serious Abuse Than a Child With Married Parents

Comparative Risk Ratios for Serious Abuse, 1982-1988

Preschool Children’s Odds of Dying at Hands of Adult in U.S.

Source: Schnitzer and Ewigman 2006
Why are Cohabiting Unions Risky for Kids?

- Cohabiting unions tend to have less commitment, trust, sexual fidelity, and more violence than married unions.
- They are also much less stable, even when biological kids are involved.
  - Instability is linked to numerous problems for children—from delinquency to sexual abuse—and helps to explain why cohabiting unions are arguably more risky for children than a stable, single parent home.
Stability for Children: Married vs. Cohabiting

% of families broken by age five

Source: Smock and Manning 2004
Findings from Europe

- But cohabitation is much more common & institutionalized in Europe. Might cohabitation be ok in Europe?

- No

  - University of Chicago Demographer Patrick Heuveline: “in most [European] countries children born to cohabiting families are two to four times more likely to see their parents separate than are children in married households.”
Odds of Parents Breaking Up

Odds that children see parents break up by age 15

Parents married at birth
Parents cohabited at birth

France
Spain
United States

Source: Hueveline et al. 2003
Growth of Cohabitation = Growth of Single Parenthood

- In virtually every country where cohabitation has increased so too has single parenthood
  - Heuveline: “Perhaps the only universal Western trend is that childrearing is being shifted from married parents to single mothers more than to cohabiting parents, stepfamilies, or single fathers.”
So What Can Be Done?

- Three prongs to marriage strengthening
  - Policy solutions
  - Cultural change
  - Business policies

- These policies should strengthen norms and material welfare of marriage
Public Policies

- Family law
  - In divorce cases, primary child custody should be awarded to spouse who does not want the divorce
    - Except in cases involving abuse, adultery, abandonment
  - Married couples should be given preferential status in eyes of the law
Public Policies continued

- Tax and transfer policies
  - No marriage penalty
- Public Service Announcements
  - Government should sponsor PSAs that communicate health, psychological, and social benefits of marriage to the public
- Relationship skills training
  - Teach relationship skills to low-income couples
Cultural Renewal

- Pro-family organizations should lift up a positive image of marriage and family life
- Men need to be encouraged to invest more emotionally in their marriages
- Help non-traditional families with social support and parenting advice—especially for non-residential dads
Business Policies

- Businesses should only provide spousal benefits to married employees
- Businesses should limit non-standard work hours at the job site
- Businesses should providing wedding and baby bonuses to employees
Reasons for Hope

- Coordinated governmental, civic, and cultural campaign for marriage can produce results
  - History tells us that family change need not move in one direction
  - Take Victorian England
    - Marked campaign for the renewal of the family in a range of different domains was successful
English Children Born in Marriage in the 19th Century

Illegitimacy in England

- 1845: 7%
- 1900: 4%
Conclusion

- Causes of the Global Retreat from Marriage
  - Secularization, affluence, individualism, androgynous feminism
  - Public policies that devalue marriage (no-fault divorce, legal recognition of cohabitation, welfare policies that focus on single mothers)

- Marriage is vital to the welfare of children, adults, & the communities they live in

- To serve the common good, governments, civic institutions, and businesses around the globe should support policies and cultural changes that strengthen and renew the institution of marriage
Publicación (en español):
“Familia - 26 Conclusiones de las Ciencias Sociales”

Solicitar a: wilcox@um.edu.uy
(acceso gratuito)

W. Bradford Wilcox
Social Trends Institute
New York - Barcelona