

Out of Order? Factors Influencing the Sequence of Marriage and Childbirth Among Disadvantaged Americans

By Paula Roberts

Introduction

Across all income levels—but especially among the disadvantaged—marriage and parenting have become de-linked. High separation and divorce rates and the increasing percentage of births outside marriage mean that more children are living in single-parent families than ever before. Non-marital birth rates are especially high in African-American and (more recently) Latino communities. The declining connection between marriage and parenting is one of the major factors in the growing inequality in America.¹

There are no simple explanations for the de-coupling of marriage and parenting. It is not the case that people—disadvantaged or otherwise—no longer value or aspire to marriage. However, there are cultural forces at work that affect individuals' attitudes toward marrying at a particular point in time. Is marriage an institution the pri-

mary purpose of which is adult happiness? Or is the purpose of marriage to provide the best context for raising children? Is marriage an institution that helps its members achieve economic goals (e.g., owning a home or having a savings account) or an institution to be entered only after these goals are met?

For the disadvantaged, there are also other factors that come into play. Appropriate partners may not be available at all, due to death or incarceration. Even if partners are available, their attachment to the above-ground labor force may be so tenuous that they do not appear to be good marriage prospects. This is a particular problem in inner cities in which jobs have disappeared and the lure of the underground economy is strong. Alcoholism, drug addiction, and mental health issues also play a role: A lack of publicly funded programs to help people overcome these problems means that many potential partners are not well enough to be good mates. Experiences with domestic violence are a factor as well. While a current partner may not be violent,

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This is the ninth publication in CLASP's Couples and Marriage policy brief series. It explores the attitudinal, experiential, economic, and social contexts in which disadvantaged parents have children and decide to marry or not marry. It also discusses the public policy implications of research on this topic.

Like others in the series, this brief is informed by a "Marriage Plus" perspective, which has two main goals, both centered on the well-being of children: 1) to help more children grow up in healthy, married families, and 2) when this isn't possible, to help parents—whether unmarried, separated, divorced, or remarried—better cooperate in raising their children.

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past experiences with violence in a relationship may affect a person's ability to form lasting attachments, making marriage difficult to contemplate.

If the goal of public policy is to encourage more disadvantaged parents to consider marriage because of its potential benefits to children, these issues will all have to be addressed. There are no simple solutions. If they are to succeed

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in any way, newly funded efforts to encourage marriage before parenting will have to acknowledge both the range of services needed and the unique issues for disadvantaged populations.

The Changing Culture of Marriage

Marriage is a simple institution. It provides an organizing principle for adult life and contributes to adult well being.² It also protects children, providing them with a recognized mother and father to support them financially and emotionally.³ Because it serves these useful purposes, most Americans—of all races and classes—do marry at some point in their lives. Ninety-three percent of both men and women born between 1945 and 1949 had married by age 50.⁴ More recent cohorts still highly value marriage: Roughly 90 percent get married. However, there is substantial variation by race. For example, only 67 percent of African-American women are expected to marry at least once in their lifetime.⁵

Marriage is also a complex institution affected by social, religious, cultural, and political forces. Adult views of marriage are very much influenced by the mix of these forces in the cultural milieu, and this milieu has changed dramatically in the last five decades. Demographic, social, and legal changes have occurred, leading people to marry later in life (if at all), to divorce more frequently, and to bear children outside of marriage—sometimes in cohabit-

ing relationships that function like marriage and sometimes not.

The traditional order of things—two people meeting, falling in love, marrying, and having children—is no longer blindly accepted. One can see this from the demographic data: In 2005, 36 percent of all babies were born to unmarried parents. However, there is substantial variation by race: 24.5 percent of births to white mothers, 46.4 percent of births to Hispanic mothers, and 69.3 percent of births to black mothers took place outside marriage.⁶ Divorce rates remain high, and more than half of all young adults live with a partner before marrying.⁷ Some people argue that a new order—in which a couple may live together or live apart, have children, and marry or go on to a new relationship—is just as good as the old order. Others strongly disagree.⁸

Underlying this disagreement is a debate about the nature and purpose of marriage in the 21st century. Some view the primary goal of marriage to be finding a soul mate. In this view, the primary questions are about whether a potential partner has the economic, social, educational, and emotional skills necessary to be a good spouse. According to this perspective, if the marriage is good, any children born to the marriage will be happy, while if the marriage is not good, the children will suffer and will benefit if the parents separate.

Others see the well-being of children as the primary goal of mar-

riage. For them the primary questions are about whether a potential partner has the economic, social, educational, and emotional skills necessary to be a good *parent*. They also believe that, even if the parents are not basically happy, in the absence of violence or abuse, the couple should remain together and provide a stable home for their children.

Still others see marriage as having dual purposes; they find both adult happiness and child well-being to be important. Those who hold this view tend to take a more situational approach to whether a couple with children should or shouldn't marry or remain married.

Also important is that the evolving debate about the nature of marriage occurs in the context of highly advanced reproductive technologies. These technologies allow people an unprecedented control over their reproductive choices; they allow sex and childbearing to be separated from each other in ways heretofore unheard of. This, in turn, has ushered in an era of greater tolerance for non-marital sex and cohabitation. One need no longer marry in order to have frequent sex. Simply put, sexual intercourse has fewer reproductive consequences than at any time in history—and this affects peoples sexual and marital behavior.

Of course, not everyone is engaged in this philosophical debate. Most people do not ask themselves what they believe the primary goal of marriage is when they meet a potential partner and

have a sexual relationship with that person. Nevertheless, the results of this debate permeate the culture in which people do make this decision. To the extent that cultural messages—conveyed through music, television, movies, and celebrity behavior—reinforce the notion that marriage and parenting are separate activities, people come to believe that this is so.

Until recently, these cultural messages were largely un-criticized. In a view consistent with American values of independence and autonomy, the decision to marry before parenting was largely seen as a matter of individual choice and emphasis. However, in the last decade, an increasing body of research has demonstrated a connection between these individual choices and the well-being of children. The most obvious connection is in the poverty of children raised by single parents: Children raised by lone parents have a poverty rate more than four times that of children raised in two-parent households.⁹

Children raised in single-parent households also have poorer life prospects than those raised in two-parent families. They are more than twice as likely to be suspended or expelled from school and twice as likely to have to repeat a grade. They are significantly more likely to be incarcerated as adolescents. Teenage girls without fathers are seven times more likely to become pregnant than other adolescents. And middle-school students from single-parent families are four times more

likely to have affective disorders than their peers raised by both parents.¹⁰

At some point, these effects create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Poverty creates poor outcomes for children, and poor outcomes lead to even deeper poverty. Of course, not all children raised in single-parent households do badly; many do quite well. However, when their parents are poor to begin with, the resources that might alleviate some of the problems (better housing, good schools, quality child care) are not attainable. For these children, things can easily go from bad to worse.

Given the potential risks for their children, a logical question is why disadvantaged parents don't marry and improve their children's life chances. The cultural context discussed above is certainly one reason: If sex is freely available, and the culture questions whether marriage is the best context for raising healthy children, can we really expect low-income people to think differently from everyone else? However, recent research suggests that disadvantaged couples also face other barriers that make marriage a less appealing option. This research is discussed below.¹¹

Hopes and Expectations

Whatever their philosophical view of marriage, Americans in general value marriage and aspire to be married. Low-income men and women share these views.¹² In fact, poor women in particular seem to have a very high opinion of mar-

riage as an institution that leads to adult happiness.¹³ But like many modern Americans, disadvantaged women view marriage as an end, not the means to an end. Therefore, they view the proper time to marry as when each member of the couple has already achieved economic stability on his or her own. They generally do not view marriage as a partnership in which two people start poor and work together to achieve a better life. Instead, they believe that, before marrying, a couple should have a standard of living that allows for a down payment on a modest home, some furniture, a car, a little savings, and enough cash to finance a decent wedding.¹⁴ While these beliefs are not greatly different from those of other Americans, it is harder for those who start out poor to achieve these milestones.

This may be why low-income individuals, while valuing marriage, do not necessarily *expect* to marry. Here, the research suggests that women from disadvantaged family backgrounds, those with little education, and mothers who have received public assistance have lower expectations that they will marry than do their middle- and upper-class counterparts.¹⁵ A number of factors may play into these lower expectations—including demographics, education, and employment.

Demographics. People generally marry individuals who are similar to themselves in age, background, race, religion, income, and education. If a community has roughly

equal numbers of available men and women with similar characteristics, then there is a good chance that those seeking to marry will find a spouse. If the numbers are skewed, then the likelihood of finding a partner diminishes.

Even if birth cohorts are roughly equal, events may disproportionately remove some individuals from the community for a time. Marriage rates declined during World War II, as most men of marriageable age had been drafted into the military. In some low-income communities, violence—particularly deadly gang violence—has greatly and permanently reduced the number of potential male partners. Incarceration rates have also had a disproportionate impact on certain populations. On an average day in 1999, 1 percent of white males and nearly 8 percent of black males between the ages of 18 and 65 were in prison. In the population of young (22–30) high school dropouts (a rough proxy for poverty), 7 percent of white males and 32 percent of black males were incarcerated.¹⁶

In other words, in communities where many men are dead or in prison, a woman might realistically believe that her chances of marrying are slim, since there are few available candidates. And men who are greatly outnumbered by available females might *avoid* marriage, since they can freely “play the field.”

Education. Educational achievement can affect the marital decision in two ways. First, if one sees

marriage to be about finding a soul mate, it is logical to seek a partner who shares interests, values, hobbies, etc. It is more likely, though not always the case, that those with similar educational backgrounds will also have similar interests; and their marriage will be more of a partnership of shared goals and values. Second, given the economic expectations about marriage discussed above, a potential partner needs to hold a job that pays living wages. Increasingly, such jobs are available only to those with a decent education. To the extent that young women stay in school—and even go on to training or college—and young men drop out, the available men may not be desirable partners or breadwinners.

Employment. Declines in men’s employment and earnings have long been identified as a factor in declining marriage rates in the low-income community.¹⁷ While there is debate over just how significant a factor this is, most believe that it plays a somewhat important role.¹⁸

Increases in women’s employment may also be a factor. As women enter and remain in the paid labor force, they are able to rely on their own earnings for support. Some are even able to obtain those goods identified with marriage (e.g., a modest home or a car) on their own, obviating the need to marry.¹⁹

However, from a male point of view, access to wages also makes women more desirable partners and thus may contribute to an increase in marriage. Moreover,

many disadvantaged women will not marry if the result is that they will have to depend on a man’s earnings. They believe that their ability to bring an income to the marriage will make it more of a partnership of equals. They also view their income as important in case of divorce.²⁰ Thus, women’s earnings could have a positive effect on the decision to marry.

Personal Experience and Characteristics

Individuals also bring their own experience into the marital decision. Especially critical here are experiences with alcohol and substance abuse, mental health issues, divorce, and domestic violence.²¹

Alcohol and substance abuse.

Problems with drugs and alcohol are not unique to low-income men and women. However, when low-income people try to address these issues, they have a much harder time than their more affluent peers in finding good treatment options. Absent treatment, an alcoholic or addict is simply not a good marital prospect. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study indicates that drug and alcohol problems are an identified barrier to marriage in a significant minority of disadvantaged couples (about 21 percent) with young children.²² Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas also identify this issue in their seminal work *Promises I Can Keep*.

Mental health issues. Mental health issues—especially depres-

sion—are also not unique to low-income men and women. But again, a lack of resources to deal with their problems leaves many depressed individuals untreated, and this can affect their desirability as marriage partners. The Fragile Families data underscores this point, again finding that there is a significant amount of both depression and generalized anxiety among low-income, unmarried parents.²³

Fear of Divorce. Because they value marriage highly, low-income men and women are very averse to divorce. Thus, unless they are convinced that a marriage will last, they are reluctant to marry and thus to run the risk of divorce.²⁴

Experience with Domestic Violence. Women who have been physically or sexually abused are substantially less likely to marry than those who have not. One study of low-income women found that only 22 percent of women who had experienced abuse were married, as opposed to 42 percent of women who had not. The violence need not be with a current partner. Indeed, childhood experiences of abuse affect adult relationships: Women whose abuse began in childhood are particularly unlikely to have long-lasting adult relationships, especially if the abuse was sexual in nature. To the extent that poor girls and women experience significant amounts of violence in their lives, they may avoid marriage even to a partner who is not himself abusive.²⁵

Where Do Children Fit In?

What the above research suggests is that low-income people—like most Americans—value marriage and aspire to be married. However, the economic, social, and personal experiences they bring to the table create multiple barriers to achieving marriage. But these factors do not diminish the desire to have children. Given the reduced stigma associated with non-marital child bearing, women and men may decide that marriage is not a good option but parenthood is. A parent does not necessarily need to have the characteristics of a potential spouse, so the constraints are not as strong.²⁶

This explains the high non-marital birth rates in many communities. It also creates a phenomenon called “multiple partner fertility” (i.e., a person has children with multiple partners over time). Data from the Fragile Families study suggests that as low-income men and women age, the chances that they will have non-marital children with more than one partner increase substantially.²⁷

Some of this parenting may be the result of casual sex, some may occur in the context of a committed relationship that does not involve cohabitation, and some may occur in the context of cohabitation. Since it is usually the woman who has custody of the children, she enters any new relationship with one or more pre-existing children. The existence of these children, with their attendant financial and emotional needs, may also be a barrier

to marriage. For marriage to be possible, a potential husband has to affirmatively wish to take on such an extended family. Conversely, a man who has children from other relationships who he must support may not be a good marital prospect. His need to provide emotional and financial support to those children decreases his capacity to support and care for the woman’s pre-existing children and any children they may have together.

Conclusion

There are multiple reasons why marriage rates have declined in the population as a whole and in the disadvantaged community in particular. These same factors affect the increase in non-marital child-bearing. In designing social policy to reverse this trend, policymakers need to be aware of the multiple, interconnected reasons for these trends. Marriage education programs may help address some of the issues—particularly those around defining marriage and the importance of marriage for raising healthy children. In and of themselves, however, they will have little impact. An array of other programs (e.g., substance abuse, mental health, education, and employment) must also be available. In addition, more needs to be done to decrease violence and incarceration rates in low-income communities, so that the pool of men and women who are not scarred by violence and degradation increases. Finally, more thought needs to be given to appropriate marriage policy for those who have children with multiple partners.

These are challenging issues, and the knowledge base is still small. Those involved in the promotion of healthy marriage need to understand this and keep their expectations realistic. In the meantime, support for single-parent families needs to increase, so that the life chances of disadvantaged children can improve. While these children may have been born “out of order” in the traditional sense, they—like all children—need our care and support.

Endnotes

- 1 An excellent discussion of this issue and its implications in a variety of contexts can be found in Kathryn Neckerman, ed., *Social Inequality* (Russell Sage Foundation 2004).
- 2 For more on this see Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially* (Doubleday 2000) and Steven Nock, *Marriage in Men's Lives* (Oxford University Press 1998). The research suggests that simply being married has a positive effect on men's lives, while women generally benefit but the benefit varies with the quality of their marriages.
- 3 For an excellent history of marriage in America see Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows, A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Harvard University Press 2000).
- 4 A wealth of statistics about marriage and divorce can be found at US Census Bureau, *Number, Timing and Duration of Marriages and Divorces 2001*, CPS Report P 70-97 (2005).
- 5 For more on the research in this area see David Fein and Theodora Ooms, *What Do we Know About Disadvantaged Couples and Populations? Reflections of a Researcher and a Policy Analyst* (2006), available at www.clasp.org.
- 6 B.E. Hamilton, S.J. Ventura, J.A. Martin JA and P.D. Sutton. Preliminary Births for 2004. Health E-Stats. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. Released October 28, 2005. Available at www.cdc.gov/nchs
- 7 For an excellent discussion of these demographic and behavioral changes see Andrew J. Cherlin, “American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century” 15 *The Future of Children* pp.33-55 (2005), available at www.thefutureofchildren.org.
- 8 For contrasting views on the issues see Waite and Gallagher, *supra*, and Martha Albertson Fineman *Why Marriage?* 9 *The Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law* pp. 239-272 (2001).
- 9 In 2003, the poverty rate for children living in married couple households was 8.4 percent. For children living in single parent households, the poverty rate was 38.4 percent. US Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, 2003 Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, table C (2005).
- 10 For a detailed discussion of the literature in this area see Mary Parke, *Are Married Parents Really Better for Children? What Research Says About the Effects of Family Structure on Child Well-Being* (2003), available at www.clasp.org.
- 11 It should be noted that the research is largely new and much of it is based on small samples. To truly understand what is contributing to the disconnect between marriage and childbearing, more information (particularly about the attitudes and experiences of men) is needed. Undoubtedly, new research will add even more factors that need to be addressed.
- 12 See, e.g., Scott South, “Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Desire to Marry” 55 *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 357-370 (1993); Daniel Lichter, Christine Batson, and J. Brian Brown, “Marriage Promotion: The Marital Expectations and Desires of Single and

- Cohabiting Mothers”, 78 Social Services Review pp. 2-25 (2004); Fein and Ooms, *supra*.
- 13 There has been a recent spate of research on low-income women’s attitudes toward marriage. There is considerably less information about low income men. The best available data is from the time, love, cash and care (TLC3) subset of young parents in the Fragile Families Study. This data suggests that low-income men also value marriage and share women’s view that they must achieve certain economic goals before they marry. Fragile families Research Brief 17, “The Retreat from Marriage among Low-income Families” (June 2003) available at <http://crew.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>
- 14 For a longer discussion of this point see Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage* (University of California Press 2005).
- 15 See Lichter, Batson, and Brown, *supra*.
- 16 Bruce Western, Mary Pattillo, and David Weiman, “Introduction” Table 1.1, in Patillo, Weiman, and Western, eds. *Imprisoning America* (Russell Sage Foundation 2004).
- 17 The first to write extensively on this issue was William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (University of Chicago Press 1987).
- 18 See discussion in Kathryn Edin and Joanna Reed, “Why Don’t They Just Get Married? Barriers to Marriage among the Disadvantaged” in 15 *The Future of Children*, p. 117-137 (2005). Also see the extensive review of this literature by David Ellwood and Christopher Jencks, “The uneven spread of single parent families. What do we know? Where do we look for answers?” In *Social Inequality*, edited by Kathryn Neckerman, Russell Sage Foundation, 2004.
- 19 Gary Becker, *A Treatise on the Family* (Harvard University Press 1991).
- 20 See discussion in Edin & Reed, *supra*.
- 21 Research from the Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study and the work of Edin and Kefalas also suggests that “relationship difficulties” are also a barrier. These include arguing a lot and lack of trust. Whether these issues are more prevalent in disadvantaged populations than in the population at large is not clear so they are not discussed in this paper.
- 22 Fragile Families Research Brief 16, “Barriers to Marriage Among Fragile Families” (May 2003) available at <http://crew.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.
- 23 Id.
- 24 This theme runs throughout the discussion in Edin and Kefalas, *supra*.
- 25 See Andrew Cherlin, Linda Burton, Tera Hurt, and Diane Purvin, “The Influence of Physical and Sexual Abuse on marriage and Cohabitation,” 69 *American Sociological Review* p. 768-789 (December 2004).
- 26 This issue is explored in depth in Edin and Kefalas, *supra*.
- 27 This is especially true for black women. See Fragile Families Research brief 8, “Multiple Partner Fertility”, (June 2002) available at <http://crew.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.

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ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national non-profit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal justice for all.

The Couples and Marriage Policy Brief series seeks to inform the debate about public policies to strengthen and stabilize two-parent families and marriage. The series focuses on the effects on child well-being, with a special interest in couple relationships and marriage in low-income communities.

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