
Causal Role of Marriage Formation in Welfare, Poverty, and Child Well-Being

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This article examines whether “marriage formation” policy is an effective singular public policy for reducing welfare and poverty and improving child well-being in the absence of other policy reforms. The article proposes two theses regarding marriage formation policy in the United States:

1. There is no valid and reliable evidence which has determined marriage is a singular, independent variable causing improved child-well-being and reduced welfare and poverty; and
2. There is evidence of multiple resource availability and relationship stability variables as the most valid and reliable predictors of adult and child economic and social well-being.

The article examines the contrasting philosophical positions on marriage formation policy. The perspective which asserts marriage is the single causal variable is examined through recent proposals by the Bush Administration (Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2003; Administration for Children and Families, 2004) and its underlying theoretical and research justifications (Murray, 2001, 1984; Mead, 2001, 1986; Rector, 2001; Fagan, Patterson, & Rector, 2002; Whitehead, 2004). Evidence of the multiple interdependent variable approach comes from a variety of research studies detailed in the article.

Marriage Formation as the Single Cause and Solution

The recent Bush Administration proposals recommend anywhere from \$1.2-\$1.5 billion dollars over the next five years to promote marriage formation as a means to improve the well-being of welfare recipients and children. Marriage formation is the marriage initiative in the

Bush Administration's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Reauthorization proposal (Administration for Children and Families, 2004). The proposal does not propose increases job creation, child care coverage, transportation assistance, housing, health and mental health access and coverage, transitional support programs for welfare to work, or TANF-based time limits, family caps, and sanction policies .

Much of philosophical underpinning of the marriage formation policy derives from Mead (1986) and Murray (1984). Mead asserts work-based welfare reform was necessary to create a more responsible attitude among welfare recipients which would result in more stable families and personal accountability. Murray advocates eliminating welfare altogether, asserting the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) federal welfare policy encouraged single women to choose welfare instead of marriage. Rector and Fagan (1996) extended Murray's logic with Rector going so far as to assert "the sole reason that welfare exists is the collapse of marriage" (Weitzstein, 2001). Ironically, Murray (2001) argues the 1996 work-based welfare reform did not go far enough in eliminating perverse welfare incentives, asserting the reforms had virtually no impact on out-of-wedlock birth, single parenthood, child well-being, and family formation.

Support for this philosophical position relies on two forms of evidence:

1. Secondary research about programs which do not include analysis of multiple variables; do not use statistical techniques such as regression analysis to isolate causal variable impacts and interdependence; and often are applied to middle class married couples; and
2. Research which infers from various macro trend data sources a causal relationship between marriage and child poverty, out-of-wedlock childbearing and welfare dependence, and marriage and educational performance.

Fagan, Patterson, and Rector (2002), for example, cite 29 peer-reviewed social science journal articles, an analysis of 85 studies, a meta-analysis of 16 studies, another meta-analysis of 71 studies, and several individual studies to assert "marriage education and enrichment programs work"(p.1). However, the programs and interventions in the studies were designed to improve relationships and deter divorce in married, predominantly middle class couples, yet they are cited as evidence for a marriage formation policy directed at unmarried low-income, working class, and TANF recipient populations

In another example, Fagan, Rector, Johnson, and Peterson (2002), produce a 48-page chart book asserting the positive effects on marriage and, conversely, the negative effects of non-marriage. Their assertions are based on 29 charts from 17 different sources none of which are subjected to statistical tests of either statistical or clinical significance. Without such measures, it is difficult to evaluate the social scientific validity and reliability of the asserted causal relationship.

Whitehead (2004) similarly asserts, "Overall, the available research evidence persuasively demonstrates the advantages of marriage for children, adults, and the society" (p. 2). She cites twelve different studies and a report to support her position. The report (Institute for American Values, 2002) reviews multiple studies which use different sample sizes, target populations, methodologies, goals, and outcome measures. Many of the studies involve white middle-class populations. However, the report is used by Whitehead and in the President's TANF Reauthorization proposal to support a healthy marriage policy targeted primarily to non-white low-income and TANF populations.

The Constellation of Interdependent Variables

In addition to the paucity of valid and reliable research supporting the singular cause approach to marriage formation policy, there are many researchers who support increased marriage formation and enhancement programs who acknowledge the potential limited impact of such policies unless broader, interdependent causal variables are addressed. Lerman (2002), Director of the Labor and Social Policy Center at the Urban Institute, for example, conducted three studies which he claims support the value of marriage, but he could not support marriage as having a singular or determinative effect on reducing poverty and material hardship and improving child well-being:

The findings strengthen the case for policies that support marriage or at least avoid discouraging marriage. At the same time, the studies do not provide evidence as to whether government programs aimed at promoting healthy marriages will, in fact, increase the number of such marriages and whether the induced marriages will achieve the economic benefits generated by existing marriages. (The Urban Institute, 2002, p. 1)

The Urban Institute further reports, “The analyses of material hardship, Lerman cautions, do not yield conclusions about a causal role for marriage, but they do show strong associations between marriage and reduced hardship” (p.2).

McLanahan (2003), another major supporter of the potential positive role of marriage, is also cautious about using marriage formation as an isolated and singular policy to improve particularly fragile family well-being. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) often are cited as a primary source of research evidence that children do better living with both biological parents and that single parenthood increases the likelihood of increased risks of poor educational, behavioral, and other outcomes (Seefeldt & Smock, 2004). While McLanahan reports from the Fragile Families Study that many unmarried parents were romantically involved and had high hopes of marriage, she also observes:

Despite their “high hopes” for a future together, very few parents in the study had married by the time of their child’s third birthday. Only 21 percent of the cohabiting couples and 11 percent of the “visiting” couples were married. Further, breakup rates were very high; 38 percent of cohabiting couples and 51% of “visiting” couples were no longer together three years after the birth. (p.9)

McLanahan also observes in her analysis that marriage occurred more frequently when fathers were employed and that poverty is a deterrent to marriage. After comparing poverty rates of parents who did and did not marry, McLanahan notes, “This finding is important and suggests that marriage alone cannot eliminate the income gap between married and unmarried parents, although it can take them part of the way”(p.15).

Waller (2001), also drawing on the Fragile Families Study (FFS) data, finds that lower expectations of marriage were not associated with disinterest with marriage, but with substance abuse, physical violence, conflict and mistrust. McLanahan and Garfinkel (2002), also using the FFS database in a separate analysis, conclude, “Our findings underscore the precarious socio-economic circumstances of many unmarried parents, but they also hold out hope” (p.9) and that large gains in marriage promotion “...are unlikely to be achieved without an increase in the capabilities of parents to support a family and a reduction in marriage and cohabitation penalties in our tax and transfer policies” (p.10).

In data from a new FFS longitudinal study, Carlson, et.al. (2004) find, “Net of other factors (including baseline relationship status), women’s education and men’s earnings

encourage marriage. Cultural and interpersonal factors also have strong effects” (p.1). Mincy and Huang (2001) and Gibson, et.al. (2003) also analyze FFS data and conclude the pre-requisite importance of economic and lifestyle security, including cash benefits and fathers’ employment, on marriage formation, not the reverse. Bloom and Michalopoulos (2001), in their respected analysis of 29 welfare reform initiatives also stress the pre-requisite importance of financial resources to marriage or any type of family stability. They observe that “...policymakers who aim to improve outcomes for families and children may need to develop new ways of providing ongoing financial support to low wage workers-an approach that may raise costs-while continuing to test strategies for raising wages through education and training” (p. ES-3).

Other researchers (Parke, 2003; Ooms, 2002; Newman, 1999; Coontz, 1997 & 2000; Taylor, et.al., 1997) support the importance of housing, medical care, and support systems, including multiple extended and other family arrangements, in determining adult and child well-being, often in addition to or in spite of an unstable or non-existent traditional heterosexual marital relationship. Such research is not discussed by the marriage promotion advocates.

Research on child well-being also raises questions about marriage being the singular independent variable responsible for child well-being. Seefeldt and Smock (2004) cite a variety of research which indicates “...that, on average, children fare better when living with their married, biological parents, provided the marriage is a low conflict one” (p.10) and “that marriage in and of itself, without reasonably good economic circumstances supporting the marriage, may not yield substantially improved levels of well-being” (p.11). Wulczyn, Barth, Yuan, Harden, & Landsverk’s (2005) extensive literature and child welfare databases review linking child development to child well-being indicates that marriage is not a significant factor in child well-being, parenting programs have demonstrated limited success with both single and married parents, and that greater government intervention at early child development stages appears to be the most effective policy direction.

Conclusion

The evidence indicates that a constellation of interdependent economic and social variables must be considered in developing research and policy related to reducing poverty and welfare and improving child, and adult, well-being. Focus on marriage formation or any other single variable defies the existing research literature and masks the underlying issue of unequal resource allocation. Marriage formation is only a relevant variable within such a context, contrary to the current policy direction of the Bush Administration’s marriage promotion agenda for TANF reform.

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