

The Value of the Natural Family for Individuals

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Introduction — The Benefits of Marriage

Numerous studies comparing the various types of household arrangements indicate conclusively that no other family structure produces such consistently positive outcomes as the natural family — a married couple, mom and dad, family. For instance, The Urban Institute, a well-respected center-left think tank in Washington, D.C. published information comparing family structures¹ — married couple families with cohabiting partners (where only one partner was a parent of the children in the household), cohabiting parents and single mother households. Not surprisingly, regardless of the outcome being measured, the married couple family was far superior to any other household arrangement in measurable positive outcomes. Clearly, structure matters in important ways when it comes to living arrangements. No wonder the institution of marriage is so universal and so pervasive across otherwise diverse societies throughout history. Civilized societies have always considered marriage to be a “contract of natural law”² and thus a foundation of the natural family and stable societies.

Even the liberal *New York Times* recognizes the benefits of marriage. Michael Novak, American Catholic philosopher, journalist, novelist, diplomat and author of more than twenty-five books on the philosophy and theology of culture, is credited with first describing the family as the “original” Department of Health and Human Services — a comparison that is very apt since social science evidence so clearly indicates the positive outcomes that flow from a strong family unit. Heritage Foundation scholar, Chuck Donovan said, “The fracturing of a family is not the breaking of a single link in a chain, but the opening of a hole in a protective net.”³ When a hole develops in the net, each family member suffers consequences, but when the net remains strong and whole, all individuals benefit.

Dr. Linda Waite, a prominent researcher on marriage, author of numerous books and professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, said, “Marriage may provide individuals with a sense of meaning in their lives and a sense of obligation to others, inhibiting risky behaviors and encouraging healthy ones.”⁴ An added plus, she tells audiences when she speaks at conferences or colleges, is, “Married people report having more and better sex than single people have.”⁵ She frequently concludes her remarks by comparing marriage to exercise. Though many will hear and not heed the facts, some people, Dr. Waite says, will take the information that is available showing the superiority of marriage over cohabitation and singleness and “have a healthier and more satisfying life.”⁶ That information, she adds, shows that in numerous ways married people are better off than those who are not married.

In her testimony before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, Subcommittee on Children and Families, another prominent social scientist, Barbara Dafoe

Whitehead⁷ (wife, mother of three, and University of Chicago PhD) summarized the research on marriage — citing the benefits for adults.

- On average, married couples are happier, healthier, wealthier, enjoy longer lives, and report greater sexual satisfaction than single, divorced or cohabiting individuals.
- Research indicates that married people are less likely to take moral or mortal risks, and are even less inclined to risk-taking when they have children; they have better health habits and receive more regular health care. They are likely to attempt or to commit suicide.
- They are also more likely to enjoy close and supportive relationships with their close relatives and to have wider social support network. They are better equipped to cope with major life crises, such as severe illness, job loss and the extraordinary care needs of sick children or aging parents.
- Married parents are significantly less likely to be poor — poverty rates for married couples are half those of cohabiting couple parents and one third that of non-cohabiting single parents.
- Even poor parents gain economic advantage from marriage — though it may not lift them out of poverty; it may reduce economic hardship because the couple can pool earnings, rely on a larger network of friends, family and community, share risks and thus mitigate the disruptions of a possible job loss.

Marriage Benefits Women

According to marriage researchers, David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, recent studies find “men and women benefit about equally from marriage” but in gender specific ways.⁸ The Witherspoon Institute’s “Ten Principles” project noted that both husbands and wives benefit in financial, emotional, physical and social ways, but that the benefits of marriage for wives are more sensitive to the quality of the marriage than are the benefits of marriage for the husbands.⁹ Both men and women live longer, happier, healthier and wealthier lives when they are married. Husbands generally gain greater health benefits, while wives gain greater financial advantages.¹⁰

Researchers have found a wide array of benefits for women who are in healthy marriages. Compared to the women in sexually-active single couples and couples who are cohabiting, women in healthy marriages are:¹¹

- In a more satisfying relationship
- Emotionally healthier
- Wealthier
- Less likely to be a victim of domestic violence, sexual assault or other violent crimes
- Less likely to attempt or commit suicide
- At decreased risk of drug and alcohol abuse
- Less likely to contract STDs
- Less likely to remain or end up in poverty

- More likely to have better relationships with their children
- Physically healthier

Marriage Benefits Men

One of the old sayings is: “If you’re susceptible to vice, find a wife.”¹² Certainly, men who get married typically rise to the occasion and become the family’s provider. The husband and wife together become a “wealth-creating and wealth-preserving institution.” When marriage fails to perform that function — as when single mother families predominate, the government has stepped in as a surrogate husband. There is a direct interacting connection between the rise since the 1960s in single motherhood due to unwed childbearing and no-fault divorce and the growth of the big-government welfare state or, as one author put it rather academically, “One proximate result of [marriage] weakening has been the growth of government as substitute provider.”¹³

The attacks against marriage and the retreat from marriage over the past 40 years have been driven by the attitude that marriage is a bad deal for both women and men. Years of research have surprised many by showing that marriage benefits men in a wide variety of ways — what is most surprising is that, in many ways, marriage benefits men more than women. In short, “marriage is a different deal than it was 40 years ago,” said Pew economist Richard Fry. He explains, “Typically, most wives did not work, so for economic well-being, marriage penalized guys with more mouths to feed but no extra income. Now most wives work. For guys, the economics of marriage have become much more beneficial.”¹⁴ In many respects, if you think men get a bad deal out of marriage you are very much living in the past.

The benefits for men from marriage are just as numerous — and significant — as for women:

- Live longer
- Physically healthier
- Wealthier
- Increase in the stability of employment
- Higher wages
- Emotionally healthier
- Decrease risk of drug and alcohol abuse
- Have better relationships with their children
- More satisfying sexual relationship
- Less likely to commit violent crimes
- Less likely to contract STDs
- Less likely to attempt or commit suicide¹⁵

The Economic Benefits of Marriage

Economists refer to the economic benefit that accrues to married couples as the “marriage premium.” A recent CBS television special asked the question, “Why is marriage such an

economic turn-on?” The program, MoneyWatch,¹⁶ gave three reasons based on a report from the Pew Research Center’s report, “Women, Men and the New Economics of Marriage”:¹⁷

1. Economies of Scale — Married couples share the cost of necessary expenses, like health insurance, utility bills, mortgage payments, etc. That is especially significant today when more than two-thirds of men have working spouses and 22 percent of wives make more than their husbands.
2. Married Couples Earn More — From 1970 to 2007, median household income for married couples rose more than incomes for unmarried couples. The mutual support that couples give each other and their mutual stake in the relationship means they work together toward their financial goals.
3. Married Couples Invest Better — Married women invest in stocks more than unmarried women and, as couples, they “invest more, save more and are more future-oriented.”

Even during the current economic downturn, married couples are discovering that marriage is a safe haven. According to an article in the *Washington Post*, The Great Recession that began in 2007 “exposed an economic factor” (i.e., lower unemployment rates of married men and women) that had pushed ahead of more romantic reasons for marriage, such as “emotional intimacy, sexual satisfaction and individual happiness.”¹⁸ W. Bradford Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project, said, “The economic downturn reminds us that marriage is more than an emotional relationship. It’s also an economic partnership and a social safety net.”¹⁹

Alex Roberts, writing for the Institute for American Values, notes that marriage is especially important for poor and working-class couples who of late have been “drifting farther and farther away from the institution of marriage.”²⁰ He contends that marriage, while still economically *advantageous*, is not economically *necessary* now that women are so prevalent in the work force.²¹ Ironically, that social circumstance has merely changed the dynamics of marriage; it has not changed the demand for marriage. According to Roberts, women with greater economic resources are *now significantly more likely to marry*; they just marry for different reasons — they marry for companionship; not for financial benefits.²²

Other researchers take a different perspective and argue that the hard financial times are increasing the importance of finding a mate with money. A study at the University of Iowa found that being a “good financial prospect” is increasingly important to men looking for a mate. For men that attribute ranked #12 on a 2008 list of desirable attributes, while for women it ranked #10.²³ Ironically, having a fancy car and other status symbols enhances a man’s marital odds while it does not work well for a woman to have those same status symbols when seeking marriage.²⁴

In their report on “Money and Marriage,” the National Marriage Project and the Institute for American Values observes that the current “Great Recession” seems to be “solidifying, not eroding” the marital bond for most couples — the divorce rate is falling as couples realize that as they make it through this rough time they are learning to compromise and, thus, can stick it out.²⁵ Indeed, a Pew Research survey found that four in 10 Americans report that the recession has brought their family “closer together.” In other words, said Wilcox, “Americans are discovering

the power that family ties have to carry them — financially, socially and emotionally — through tough times.²⁶

Conclusion —

When people debate the benefits of marriage attention focuses primarily on the benefits for children — which are enormous and essential and I discuss those benefits and the risks of single parenting in a previous book, *Children at Risk*.²⁷ Less attention is given to the major and significant benefits of marriage for the individuals and for the couple together. There are, of course, many positive emotional and intangible benefits of marriage — couples do better financially and have fewer psychological problems when married instead of cohabiting — but there are also numerous tangible and/or legal benefits that accrue to married couples.

Everybody talks about the 50 percent divorce rate and many young people disparage marriage because they believe that “half of all marriages end in divorce.” It is important to note that the risk of divorce is far below fifty percent under the following conditions:

- Couples who are educated and entering their first marriage.
- Couples who are in their mid-twenties or older at the marriage.
- Couples who have not lived with different partners prior to the marriage.
- Couples who are strongly religious and marry someone of the same faith.²⁸

Jennifer Steinhauer reported, “Throughout three days of paper presentations, at least half a dozen demographers of family structure made strong arguments against cohabitation, offering research showing that those who live together before marriage have higher divorce rates, are more likely to be incompatible and sexually disloyal and are generally less happy than married couples.”²⁹ At the end of their paper cataloging risks, authors Cohen and Lee³⁰ make 4 recommendations for priorities that should be taken to increase life expectancy in the United States. Their first recommendation sums up a lot. Reduce the number of unmarried adults.

¹Laura Wherry and Kenneth Finegold, Marriage Promotion and the Living Arrangements of Black, Hispanic, and White Children, No. B-61 in Series, “New Federalism: National Survey of America’s Families” Urban Institute, September 24, 2004, <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=311064>

² Chuck Donovan, “Marriage, Parentage, and the Constitution of the Family,” *WebMemo*, No. 2783, The Heritage Foundation, January 27, 2010. <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/01/Marriage-Parentage-and-the-Constitution-of-the-Family>

³ Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Conflict of Laws*, cited by Chuck Donovan, Heritage, January 17, 2010.

⁴ Linda Waite, association president, in an address before the Population Association of America, San Francisco, CA., April 8, 1995, as cited by Steinhauer, *New York Times*.

⁵ Linda Waite, Population Association Address, quoting from the 1992 National Health and Social Life survey, cited by Steinhauer, *New York Times*.

⁶ Linda Waite, cited in Steinhauer, *New York Times*.

⁷ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, Co-Director, National Marriage Project, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. "Testimony Before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions: Subcommittee on Children and Families." United States Senate, April 28, 2004. http://www.virginia.edu/marriageproject/pdfs/print_whitehead_testimonial.pdf

⁸ Popenoe and Whitehead, "Top Ten Myths."

⁹ Witherspoon Institute, "Marriage and the Public Good: Ten Principles," Witherspoon Institute, Princeton University, August 2008, p. 13. http://www.winst.org/family_marriage_and_democracy/WI_Marriage.pdf

¹⁰ Popenoe and Whitehead summarize the research that is reviewed in Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000): Chapter 12.

¹¹ W. Bradford Wilcox, *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Science*, Second Edition, The Center for Marriages and Families, Institute for American Values, September 2005. <http://center.americanvalues.org/?p=7>

¹² Anna Maltby, "The Benefits of Being Married," Men's Health Lists, Men's Health, 2010. http://www.menshealth.com/mhlists/benefits_of_marriage_and_commitment/index.php

¹³ Chuck Donovan, Heritage, January 17, 2010.

¹⁴ Sharon Jayson, "Study: Marriage Benefits Men Economically, Too," *USA Today*, January 19, 2010. http://www.usatoday.com/life/lifestyle/2010-01-19-1Amarriage19_ST_N.htm

¹⁵ "Benefits of Healthy Marriages," *The Healthy Marriages Initiative*, Administration for Children and Families, The United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2005. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/benefits/index.html>

¹⁶ Kate Ashford, "Does Love Make You Richer? Research Shows That Marriage Can Have Financial Benefits," *MoneyWatch.com*, CBS Television Network, February 12, 2010. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/02/12/business/moneywatch/main6202431.shtml>

¹⁷ Richard Fry and D'Vera Cohn, "Women, Men and the New Economics of Marriage," A Social and Demographic Trends Report, Pew Research Center, January 19, 2010. <http://pewsocialtrends.org/assets/pdf/new-economics-of-marriage.pdf>

¹⁸ Michelle Singletary, "Money Matters in a Marriage," *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2010. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/12/AR2010021205908_pf.html

¹⁹ As quoted in Michelle Singletary, "Money Matters."

²⁰ Alex Roberts, "Marriage and the Great Recession," *The State of Our Unions*, Institute for American Values and the National Marriage Project, 2009. <http://stateofourunions.org/index.php>

²¹ Alex Roberts, "Marriage and the Great Recession."

²² Alex Roberts, "Marriage and the Great Recession."

²³ As quoted in Kate Ashford, "Does Love Make You Richer?"

²⁴ Kate Ashford, "Does Love Make You Richer?"

²⁵ W. Bradford Wilcox, "Can the Recession Save Marriage?" *The Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2009. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703558004574584042851448128.html#printMode>

²⁶ Wilcox, "Can the Recession Save Marriage?"

²⁷ Janice Shaw Crouse, *Children at Risk: The Precarious State of Children's Well-Being in America*, (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2010). www.JaniceShawCrouse.com

²⁸ Popenoe and Whitehead, "Ten Important Research Findings."

²⁹ Steinhauer, *New York Times*.

³⁰ Cohen and Lee, "A Catalog of Risks."