

# Contextual Influences on Marriage

## Implications for Policy and Intervention

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**ABSTRACT**—*Current proposals to promote and strengthen marriage among low-income populations focus on values and behavioral skills as primary targets of intervention. Marital research that examines contextual influences on marriage calls these emphases into question. Ethnographic and survey research reveal no evidence that populations experiencing higher rates of divorce value healthy marriages any less than other populations do. Longitudinal and observational research reveals two mechanisms through which the environment of a marriage may enhance or constrain effective relationship maintenance. First, some environments contain fewer sources of support and pose more severe challenges than others, presenting marriages in those environments with greater burdens than marriages in more supportive environments are faced with. Second, when demands external to the marriage are relatively high, even couples with adequate coping skills may have difficulty exercising those skills effectively. Together, such findings suggest that successful policies and interventions to strengthen marriages need to acknowledge the environments within which marriages take place.*

**KEYWORDS**—*marriage; family policy; stress; relationship maintenance*

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To improve the well-being of low-income populations, federal policymakers have begun to emphasize the role of healthy marriages in shaping adult and child outcomes. The justification for this emphasis on marriage has been correlational research demonstrating that stable, fulfilling marriages are associated with improved physical and mental health and higher educational and economic achievement for parents and children and

that the absence of such relationships is associated with poorer health and economic outcomes (e.g., Amato, 2001; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Assuming that the parents' relationship plays a causal role in these associations, policymakers have proposed allocating over 1.5 billion dollars over the next 5 years to fund activities that support couples in forming and maintaining healthy marriages. Legislation currently being debated in the House and Senate specifies eight allowable activities for this funding, all of which involve some form of relationship education—e.g., teaching the value of stable marriages or teaching relationship and communication skills. Federal policy seems to be guided by two perspectives: one emphasizing values and another focusing on skills as primary determinants of marital outcome.

One challenge to applying educational interventions to low-income families stems from the fact that, although the target populations for these initiatives have been selected exclusively on the basis of their environment (i.e., low socioeconomic status), the models guiding educational interventions generally do not address the role of the environment in determining marital outcomes. Behaviorally oriented relationship education, for example, places the responsibility for marital success or failure squarely on the couple, without regard for how their relationship may be affected by the context within which their marriage takes place. Recent marital research that has directly examined the effects of context on couples' relationships calls this emphasis into question. Cross-sectional surveys and longitudinal studies of newlywed couples have begun to identify paths through which communication, problem solving, and other relationship processes may be constrained or enhanced by supports or demands present in a marriage's context. The emerging picture suggests that even skilled and relatively satisfied couples may have difficulty interacting effectively under conditions of stress or diminished resources. Thus, current research on contextual influences on marriage suggests broadening the focus of interventions and policies designed to support healthy families among low-income populations.

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### FAMILY VALUES: WHO HAS THEM? WHO NEEDS THEM?

Marriages are unquestionably less frequent and less stable in low-income populations. Survey data reveal that, compared to those in high-income populations, women in low-income populations are half as likely to be married, twice as likely to divorce if married, and several times more likely to bear children outside of marriage (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Singh, Matthews, Clarke, Yannicos, & Smith, 1995). The case for offering values education to these individuals rests on the assumption that people in low-income populations do not appreciate the benefits of stable, healthy marriages as much as do people in high-income populations, in which marriage is more common and divorce less common.

In fact, there has been little research on attitudes toward family issues in low-income populations, but what research does exist indicates that members of these populations may value marriage more, not less, than members of middle- or high-income groups do. For example, Edin (2000) conducted lengthy interviews with unmarried mothers receiving welfare, asking them to describe their attitudes and intentions toward marriage. Far from minimizing the importance of marriage, these mothers reported strongly positive feelings about the institution and expressed their own intentions to marry. They described their decisions to postpone marriage as having little to do with their values and more to do with their belief that their current economic circumstances and available partners would be unlikely to lead to an enduring marriage over time. Thus, members of low-income populations may postpone marriage not because they value it too little but rather because they value it so much that they are unwilling to enter into a marriage that has a high risk of ending in divorce.

It is important to note that Edin's data exclude low-income men, who are notoriously underrepresented in family research. However, quantitative survey data from low-income men and women paint a similar picture. A recent survey commissioned by the state of Florida examined family structures and attitudes in a representative sample (Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003). Over 6,000 residents of Florida, Texas, California, and New York were asked in telephone interviews about their own experiences of marriage and families and about their opinions regarding marriage and family issues. Confirming the pattern in the broader census data, low-income respondents were far more likely than high-income respondents to be unmarried, to be divorced, and to be raising children outside of marriage. At the same time, however, compared to middle- or high-income respondents, members of low-income populations on average expressed the same or more positive attitudes toward traditional family structures (see Fig. 1). For example, when asked to rate their agreement with the statement "A happy, healthy marriage is one of the most important things in life," low-income respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed at the same rate as did middle- and high-income respondents. When unmarried respondents were asked if they would like to be married someday, members of low-

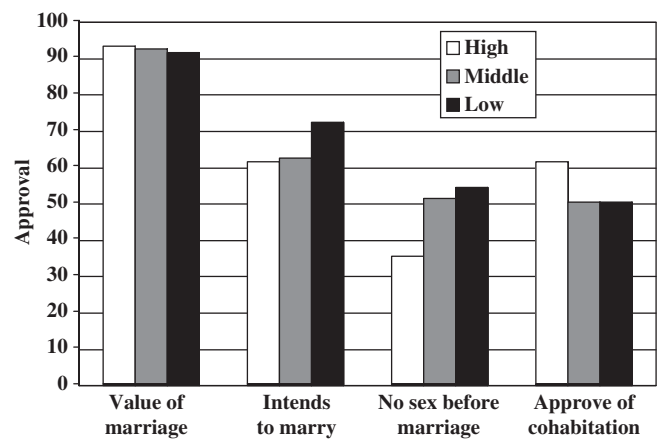


Fig. 1. Attitudes toward family issues by household income (high, middle, low). The low-income groups that report the highest rates of divorce, premarital sex, and cohabitation also express the lowest approval of them.

income households were substantially more likely than members of middle- or high-income households to say yes.

Existing research offers little justification for allocating limited resources toward values education for low-income populations. At least among women in this population, promarriage values appear to be in place already, and in any case such values may not be sufficient to bring about stable, fulfilling relationships.

### CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON MARRIAGE

Whereas there is little evidence that values are associated with decisions to enter into or postpone marriage, there is growing evidence to suggest that the quality of a couple's communication and problem solving is associated with marital outcomes over time (Heyman, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005). Furthermore, several studies provide evidence that premarital education programs focusing on communication can affect problem solving and that such programs may have long-term benefits for marriages (e.g., Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001).

Despite this evidence, the existing research has been limited in two main ways. First, research on marital interaction and premarital education programs has addressed primarily white, college-educated, middle-class samples. In terms of their risk of experiencing marital dysfunction, the support available to them, and the demands they face outside of the marriage, such samples differ greatly from the low-income populations of interest to policymakers. It remains an open question whether programs developed within middle-class populations can be effective for improving the marriages of low-income couples. Second, when assessing relationship processes like problem solving and support, researchers have assumed that such processes are generally stable in the absence of intervention. Research on marital interactions in particular has treated the quality of a couple's communication as a stable, trait-like condition of the relationship that accounts for later marital outcomes. Far less frequent

has been research on how marital interactions and relationship processes themselves may vary and develop over time. As a result, the conditions that encourage or discourage effective interactions in marriage remain poorly understood.

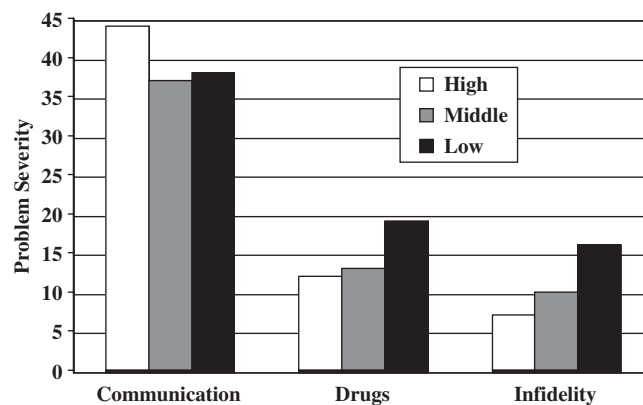
Current research on the effects of context and environmental stress on marital processes is beginning to illuminate both of these issues. Drawing from cross-sectional survey research, researchers have begun to examine relationship processes across a wide range of contexts and cultures, to understand how the predictors of marital success may differ depending on the context within which particular marriages form and develop. Using intensive longitudinal designs, researchers have begun to identify the correlates of variability in relationship processes within couples over time, in order to understand the forces that support or constrain couples in their efforts to maintain their relationships. Although it has long been known that marriages under stress report lower marital quality and are at increased risk of dissolution (e.g., Hill, 1949), research adopting these approaches has now elaborated on the mechanisms through which context affects marriage.

### Context Shapes the Content of Marital Interactions

An emphasis on relationship skills reflects the assumption that the way couples communicate is more important than the specific issues they discuss. One reason that this assumption has gone unchallenged may be that studies have examined couples in a relatively narrow and privileged segment of the population whose problems are, on average, relatively mild. Surveying a broader range of the population, however, confirms that the couples in different contexts may face different sorts of marital problems. For example, when respondents rated the severity of potential relationship problems in the survey cited earlier (Karney et al., 2003), communication was rated as a relatively severe problem regardless of household income, although it was rated most severe in high-income households (see Fig. 2). Drugs and infidelity, in contrast, were rated as more severe problems by low-income households. Research on middle-class newlyweds indicates that spouses tend to report more severe relationship problems during periods of relatively high stress than they do during periods of relatively low stress (Neff & Karney, 2004). Not surprisingly, the more severe the problems discussed by a couple, the more negatively their communication is rated by objective observers (Vogel & Karney, 2002). Thus, independent of spouses' relationship skills, marriages taking place in more stressful contexts may be more challenging simply due to the increased severity of the obstacles that couples must face inside and outside of their marriages. Interventions that acknowledge those obstacles may prove more effective than interventions addressing communication skills alone.

### Context Affects Spouses' Ability to Interact Effectively

When the context of a marriage contains many demands and few sources of support, spouses not only have more severe problems to cope with but may also have diminished ability to exercise the



**Fig. 2.** Severity of specific relationship problems by household income (high, middle, low). Although couples at all income levels report problems with communication, low-income couples are more likely to report problems with drugs or infidelity.

coping skills they possess. A 4-year study of 172 middle-class newlywed couples (Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005) revealed that couples experiencing relatively high levels of chronic stress (e.g., financial difficulties, lack of social support, inadequate employment) not only reported lower marital satisfaction overall but also seemed to have more difficulty maintaining their satisfaction over time. Relative to couples reporting better conditions, those reporting high levels of chronic stress experienced a steeper decline in marital satisfaction over the early years of marriage, a finding that held even after these couples' initially lower levels of satisfaction was controlled for. Moreover, for wives experiencing chronic stress, marital satisfaction was especially reactive to increases in acute stress, such that the same negative life events were associated with steeper declines in satisfaction for stressed wives than they were for less stressed wives.

Why would marital satisfaction be more difficult to maintain when conditions outside of the marriage are more adverse? The activities that maintain relationships take time and energy, so those activities should be harder to undertake under adverse conditions. Supporting this view is an independent study of 82 middle-class newlyweds that examined how spouses' willingness to forgive their partners' negative behaviors was associated with changes in their levels of stress over time (Neff & Karney, 2004). Within-couple analyses revealed that individuals who could excuse their partners' negative behaviors during intervals of relatively low stress were more likely to blame their partners for those same behaviors during periods of relatively high stress. In other words, spouses who are capable of making adaptive responses appear to be less likely to do so when facing challenges outside of their marriages.

It is worth noting that both of these studies sampled from a population experiencing a relatively narrow range of stress. In samples that included severely disadvantaged families, Conger and colleagues (e.g., Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999) also showed that economic strain inhibits effective relationship maintenance. Together, such studies begin to suggest how stressful

environments come to be associated with negative marital outcomes. Stressful environments not only present couples with more challenges, but they diminish those couples' ability to deal with their challenges effectively.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MARITAL INTERVENTIONS AND POLICIES

Given what is currently known about the effects of context on marriage and marital processes, there are two reasons to expect that, by themselves, interventions developed for middle-class couples may not be adequate to support marriages among the low-income couples of interest to policymakers. First, the skills relevant to solving the problems faced by middle- and upper-income couples may not be relevant to the types of problems (e.g., substance abuse, domestic violence, infidelity) that low-income couples are more likely than other populations to face. Second, even if a set of valuable relationship skills could be identified and taught, those skills may be difficult or impossible to practice in the context of low-income marriage. Effective problem solving will matter little, for example, to couples who have few opportunities to interact together due to demands outside the marriage. Providing such couples with relationship skills training without also addressing the external forces that impede couples' ability to practice those skills may be akin to offering piano lessons to people with no access to a piano.

Providing a solid empirical foundation for interventions to promote and support low-income marriage requires basic research on marriage in this population, not only to identify the processes that make for successful relationships among low-income couples, but also to describe the circumstances that make those processes more or less likely. The unfortunate irony is that, just as this research is needed to inform policy, funding for research on marital outcomes has been explicitly removed from consideration at the National Institute of Mental Health, formerly the major source of support for marital research.

The drive to provide services that improve the lives of low-income families thus presents marital research with a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to find ways to specify the minimum conditions that must be met before behavioral skills training can have a positive impact on low-income marriages. The opportunity is the chance to reexamine what is known about the significant predictors of marital outcome in this new context, and thereby to establish which of those predictors are not only significant, but substantial.

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