

The Ties that Bind: Influences on Couple Relationships:
Comments on Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, and Purvin;
Edin, England, and Linnenberg; and Ahituv and Lerman

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These three papers all represent excellent scholarship based on very different methods with a similar effect: all three make you think. One study has an ethnographic focus (Edin, England, and Linnenberg), another combines large sample survey research with ethnographic methods (Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, and Purvin), and the third relies on large sample methods using complex econometric analyses (Ahituv and Lerman).

I will focus my comments along broad conceptual grounds, with a focus on implications for public policy discussions about marriage and specifically for prevention efforts. I will not present any detailed critique of particular research methods involved except to note that all three studies appear to me to be very sound within their respective approaches. If I had to reduce the findings from each to the barest, it would be as follows:

Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, and Purvin: Women who have experienced physical abuse or sexual abuse are less likely to be married or to be in stable, long-term cohabiting relationships than women who have not experienced those assaults. By implication, they are less apparently able to have success in relationships because of what they have experienced. It is important to note that sexual abuse is not more likely to occur among the poor, but physical abuse is more likely.

Ahituv and Lerman: Married men have a more stable job profile than all other groups, and causality appears to run in both directions: Job stability and opportunity promotes marital stability, and marriage increases job stability and earnings for men.

Edin, England, and Linnenberg: Among unmarried couples having a child out of wedlock from a sub-sample of couples in the Fragile Family research project(s), gender (sexual) distrust is a powerful and corrosive dynamic.

Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, and Purvin

The findings of Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, and Purvin are important. They present clear evidence of risk factors that are rarely overtly attended to in prevention work with

couples—low income or otherwise. Therefore, the findings are of significance to practitioners of relationship and marriage education and/or therapy. Simply put, they find that women who have experienced childhood physical or sexual abuse are less likely than other women to enter and sustain stable adult relationships in either marriage or cohabitation. Further, women who have experienced adult physical abuse are less likely to be in relationships, with some pulling back altogether from relationships with men.

A clear implication of this work is for society to continue to reduce the degree to which women and children are abused. The long-term negative impacts in the lives of women (and no doubt some men) are a sobering reminder of the reasons for efforts to reduce all forms of abuse.

Their findings also show that people who have been abused in their past may be deficient in the ability to make careful choices about the relationships they enter into. Some of the consequences of these poor choices accrue not only to the women but also to their children. About Marilyn, a 45-year-old white woman with four children, Cherlin et al. note:

As a young adult and now as a woman in mid-life, Marilyn continually enters and exits relationships with men, moving them into her household only a few days after meeting them and allowing them to stay for a maximum of six to eight months. Most of the men that Marilyn has invited into her home, her life, and the lives of her children have abused her or abused her children. Marilyn appears unable to recognize the pattern of revolving-door relationships and the risks that these relationships create for her children.

This example raises an important, testable question: Can women or men who are at high risk of choosing to be around dangerous or damaging partners learn to make better choices, if not for themselves, for their children? This question could be the focus of a demonstration project designed to test the hypothesis that people who are at high risk for landing in dangerous relationships can learn how to identify such relationships (and dangerous partners) prior to getting too involved or trapped in them. We currently do not

have evidence that such instruction can be effective, but the plausible effect, certain need, and potential value warrant such investigations.

The paper by Cherlin, Burton, Hurt, and Purvin also epitomizes the concerns that some people have about “marriage promotion” in the government sector. People rightly fear trapping women in dangerous relationships. To be clear, no reasonable person should want to constrain the exits of a burning building. Indeed, for those who are in dangerous situations, government or private sector programs should make it easier, not harder, for people to move to safety. Additionally, reasonable people can agree that it is an appropriate goal of preventive education to attempt to steer people at risk away from smoldering buildings in the first place.

Edin, England, and Linnenberg and Ahituv and Lerman

Both of these papers involved phenomena that highlight fundamental aspects of commitment in relationships, union formation, and marriage. Among other things, both sets of researchers are seeing effects that I believe are related to core elements of the development of commitment and the effects of commitment in relationships. In the first of these two papers noted above, I think there is much evidence that some of the fragile family couples they studied have trouble regulating the permeable and undefined boundary around their union because a level of commitment has not developed that provides clear agreement about such boundaries. In the second, I think there is evidence for the powerful regulating effects that commitment in marriage may have on the behavior of men.

Yesterday, Ron Mincy commented to this group that “people see marriage as deliberate.” In other words, marriage is a form of relationship that requires an act of volition; a choice made more deliberately by some than others, no doubt. In my own work in the area of commitment, I see commitment as something that develops in various forms to secure the attachment between two partners. Commitment, especially in the form of marriage, implies two things: a sense of “us” and a sense of a future (e.g., Stanley & Markman, 1992). Hence, marriage is a powerful emblem of the conditions existing wherein two partners have communicated to each other and to others around them that

there is both a boundary and a future to their relationship. I think this is played out in the findings that both these papers present to us.

Edin, England, and Linnenberg

While commitment can secure the attachment among partners, the chief finding that Edin, England, and Linnenberg present is that sexual distrust is common among the couples they have studied in the Fragile Family research project. There may be no higher level of agreement about basic expectations in marriage than for sexual fidelity (e.g., Johnson et al., 2002); and Edin, England, and Linnenberg find similarly high expectations in these relationships where partners are expecting a child together.

As I read their paper, it is clear that many of these couples have good reasons for not having set a stronger boundary around their relationship, such as in marriage; some because they are truly not ready for that step, some because they never intended this person to be their life-long partner, and some because, even if they thought this person was someone they wanted to spend their lives with, they have come to distrust their partner's ability to be sexually faithful. Hence, for a multitude of reasons, these couples are having trouble defining the "us" or the boundary around the relationship. Defining such a boundary is particularly challenging for these couples. Trust about fidelity is apparently harder to come by for many of these couples than the expectation for it. In part, this is because of the presence for many of children from prior relationships (50% of Fragile Family project couples have multiple partner fertility; Mincy, 2001). This leads to ongoing associations between people who were once sexual partners but who have now moved on to new relationships where they are having children.

Clearly, many of these couples are not ready for marriage and know it. That is a good thing. They may not be personally ready, may doubt they have chosen a partner wisely, and they generally tend to believe that they need to be better established financially before marriage. Related to this latter point, the very poor among them are aware that they will lose government supports if they do marry. Thus, for many complex reasons, some of these couples are either not ready for, or do not have easy access to, the form of relationship that is arguably the most protective about healthy boundaries—

marriage. Marriage carries with it private and public expectations that can be protective of a relationship.

Consider this quote from their paper:

As these relationships are quite tumultuous, and often characterized by repeated break-ups and reunions, these episodes of so-called “cheating” sometimes occurred when it was unclear whether the couple was really still together. One father, for example, had a brief affair with another woman when he found his girlfriend’s engagement ring on her dresser one day. He thought this meant their relationship was over, while she had merely taken the ring off because she didn’t want to wear it to work.

This quote points to an important difference between cohabitation or dating relationships (even if a child is on the way) and marriage. One may well wake up any given morning and decide he or she is unhappy with his mate, but one does not wake up on any given morning in marriage and doubt he or she is married. In contrast, many of the couples described by Edin, England, and Linnenberg live in a state of vigilant anxiety about the security of their relationships, in part because they have not made a clear commitment about their future—albeit sometimes for very good reasons.

I first heard this very intriguing idea from Theodora Ooms in a conference we were both speaking at in Oklahoma. She noted that some people in the liberal policy establishment back East had begun to wonder if marriage was yet another public good that the very poor simply had less access to than more advantaged couples. She did not say from whom she had heard this idea, though it has been suggested to me that it may have originated on the team from Mathematica. Wherever it hails from, the point was haunting for the implications; that for some couples who might be interested in marriage—who might even be good candidates for developing and sustaining healthy marriages—current conditions and government policies make it harder to access marriage.

Many of the relationships Edin, England, and Linnenberg discuss are higher risk no matter what else is true, but for some of these couples, their inability or unwillingness

to access marriage denies them a powerful emblem of a public and private agreement about trust and fidelity. I would suspect that causality runs both directions here. Relationships characterized by low trust among the partners (whether justified or not) are less likely to move along pathways to deeper commitments, and for some couples, moving toward clearer and deeper commitment is one of the more potent ways to help stabilize an understanding about trustworthiness. Some relationships should not move toward marriage, and some will not move forward on a pathway of trust because they do not find a way to move forward on a pathway of marriage as an emblem of “me and you with a future.” This means that some of these relationships that are otherwise viable will not survive even though the partners share a child.

Edin, England, and Linnenberg report a phenomena with parallels to a hypothesis we are exploring in our research group for explaining some of increased risk in marriage associated with cohabitation prior to marriage. They note that many of the couples they have studied would not still be together if they were not having a child. We (me, Galena Kline, & Howard Markman) suspect that there are increasing numbers of couples who find themselves on pathways of togetherness where they are somewhat *stuck* together because they made decisions (or allowed themselves to drift into situations) that constrained their options prior to developing a clear sense of wanting to *stick* together in a commitment to a long-term future. Specifically, this inertia hypothesis suggests that some people who cohabit prior to a clear commitment to marry go on to marry a partner whom they never would have married had they not increased their constraints for continuance of the union by living together. Simply put, it’s easier to break up if you do not share a residence. This kind of dynamic raises very complex policy and values questions with regard to situations where couples have added to their constraints by having a child together. When should such unions be encouraged or aided to continue, and when not?

I conclude my comments about this ethnographic research by noting that it is a wonderful advertisement for broadening the range and richness of measures that are employed in basic research on relationships, whether among the very poor or others. As future quantitative studies are planned, we should be mindful to measure constructs such

as commitment and trust to provide a better understanding of the barriers and risks that confront poor couples.

Ahituv and Lerman

I found this study fascinating and provocative. It is also noteworthy for the clear care taken to examine possibilities for the direction of effects that they observed. They summarize:

A second key finding is that marriage enhances job stability. The results show that this observed marriage effect is not the result of reverse causation; it is significant even after taking account of the fact that job stability and higher earnings increase the likelihood of marriage. The presence of a marriage premium in the context of adjustments for heterogeneity and simultaneity is a strong signal that projects that promote healthy marriages might indirectly improve job market outcomes as well.

Thus, the paper by Ahituv and Lerman lands squarely in the middle of the classic debate about whether the often seen findings suggesting advantages in life to married people are mere selection or whether they also include causal elements (e.g., Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Ahituv and Lerman's findings suggest a clear causal element, with marriage having an effect on male employment behavior in the direction of increased job stability and earnings. They also find the direction running the other way, with job stability being linked with a greater likelihood of entering marriage—a finding with some overlap to Edin, England, and Linnenberg's, where they show that fragile family couples put off marriage (or plan to put it off) until they have their financial prospects more settled.

If you are inclined to believe there might be a causal element that partly explains some of the evidence for marriage being beneficial in peoples' lives, I would like to suggest where to look further for it: at men. I do not mean to suggest that there are not important effects for female behavior as a result of marriage, but I think there are clear reasons to believe such changes may be particularly salient for men; and these are

changes that benefit both men and women. I will briefly consider two lines of reasoning that support this hypothesis.

First, Steve Nock has hypothesized for some time now that marriage has particularly important effects on male behavior (Nock, 1998). Nock notes evidence that men seem to change as a result of marriage on a variety of dimensions: they earn more, they work more, they spend less time with friends outside the neighborhood, and they form stronger ties with relatives, congregations, and co-workers. In essence, they become more rooted in their new identity, investing time and energy in the roles of husband and father. Nock argues that it is marriage as an institution that has potent effects because of the long-standing personal and societal expectations associated with it. Ahituv and Lerman's findings are consistent with the hypothesis that marriage has some effect on the behavior of males in the direction of increased responsibility.

In our own work on commitment and, most recently on the nature of sacrifices made in relationship, we find evidence of plausible mechanisms of effect that can be studied in further research. Research in our lab conducted by Sarah Whitton, me, and Howard Markman shows that male willingness to sacrifice without resentment for their wives and female partners is strongly related to the degree to which they have a long-term view and clear couple identity in their relationships—again, us with a future. The importance of long-term view for attitudes about sacrifice was only a fraction as important for females as it was for males, suggesting that there may be something potent for men in having decided a particular woman is who they want to be with in the future (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2002). These findings require further testing and replication, but it raises an intriguing hypothesis: Many men are changed by marriage in the direction of greater investment and sacrifice for the union and the partner because marriage is a particularly potent symbol of a commitment to a future. Further, it is a relationship status that may signal to males that these are the conditions under which one sacrifices for a partner. For a young, single male considering moving into marriage, it may well symbolize needing to make sacrifices in terms of sexual fidelity and renunciation of other partners, reliable job behavior, and co-mingling of financial behavior such as saving together and paying bills. Such effects would be consistent with

other evidence that clarity about a future as a couple can have a stabilizing and positive effects (Amato & Rogers, 1999).

None of this type of thinking should be taken to suggest that marriage makes all men better; nor can marriage make a dangerous man safe. Yet, marriage may otherwise make the average man a better partner because the powerful expectations and identity connected with the institution that may regulate his behavior. Ahituv and Lerman's findings are consistent with this hypothesis. It warrants ongoing research.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

Each of these studies raise important themes that have both policy and practice implications when it comes to marriage, marriage and relationship education, and marriage supportive efforts in the government sector. I close with five specific implications from these studies and the related social science:

1. As research programs that are designed to advance knowledge of union and marriage formation unfold, researchers should look for ways to expand the depth and breadth of what is measured. Such efforts are needed in order to develop more sophisticated understandings upon which efforts to help couples and families can be based. In a context where there is often more heat than light, we need not only more light, but more complex measurement that can help refract the light into the range and depth of color that lies within. Constructs such as commitment, support, trust, confidence, and acceptance have been getting increasing attention from psychologically trained marital researchers. The use of such constructs in research focusing on lower income couples might further advance understandings of key relationship dynamics.
2. We need more research that can advance our understandings of the way things work for males when it comes to decisions and behaviors about union formation and marriage. There are enough hints that marriage has some special effects on their outlook and behavior that research to elucidate this is clearly warranted.
3. Relationship education practitioners need to consider the ways in which several themes seen in these studies impact what they do, including the effects of

- childhood or adult physical or sexual abuse, the effect of children from prior relationships, and gender distrust dynamics. Specific elements of preventive interventions could be developed to more explicitly deal with these issues.
4. Early prevention is likely to have a better return on investment than efforts coming later in the process of risk development and expression. Liberals and conservatives alike can agree on the importance of goals such as reducing teenage pregnancy, increasing the number of women (couples) who wait until they are adults and married to have children, reducing physical and sexual abuse, and helping adults to avoid risky relationships prior to engaging in behaviors that raise their constraints against leaving them.

Research such as was presented in these three excellent papers has the potential to inform both public discussions about family formation and the work of those who develop prevention oriented relationship education materials for couples.

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