



A  
**Snapshot of  
Emerging  
RESEARCH  
THEMES**  
that **Influence  
Marriage  
Education:**  
**2 0 0 8**



**national  
healthy marriage  
resource center**

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center wishes to thank the scholars who authored this paper and Wendy Manning, PhD., from the National Marriage Resource Center at Bowling Green University for her contribution to this Research Synthesis.

## Background & Objectives

Distinguished scholars reported to the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) on new working papers or recently published research that they believe has significance to the field of marriage and relationship education. Because the field of marriage education draws from a variety of disciplines, there is no single source easily identified as *the* resource for the advancement of the field. For this reason, psychology, sociology, economics and public policy inform this Snapshot. The approach to this report included a review of unpublished papers recently presented at two national research conferences and an account of four newly published studies conducted for a public policy audience.

Highly-regarded academics in these fields were selected to author this inaugural project: Paul Amato, Ph.D., Frank Fincham, Ph.D., Alan Hawkins, Ph.D., and Galena Kline Rhoades, Ph.D. Collectively they have expertise in psychology, sociology, economics and public policy, and an interest in and familiarity with the field of marriage education (see Appendix A for authors' brief bios). In addition they actively participate in Research Advisory Groups that provide advice and guidance to healthy marriage initiatives in Texas, Oklahoma and Utah.

The two conferences drawn on to inform the Snapshot were held in 2008 and included the *Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies* and the *European Network for the Sociological and Demographic Study of Divorce* (see Appendix B). In addition a review was conducted of the following policy-related publications (i) *"Twogether in Texas: Baseline Report on Marriage in the Lone Star State,"* (ii) *"The State of California's Unions: Marriage and Divorce in the Golden State,"* (iii) *"Implementation of the Building Strong Families Program,"* and (iv) *"The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce"* (see Appendix C).

This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive review of current research. It does, however, provide a snapshot of some important emerging themes and research findings that will likely impact how marriage education is developed and delivered. The views and opinions expressed in this report are the authors' alone and do not represent the views of the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center or those of the Administration of Children and Families.

## Highlights

This Snapshot highlights the results of recent studies and papers that have scrutinized risk factors of divorce to both society and individuals. The information drawn from this research suggests possible new topics to address in marriage education services as well as potential strategies for service delivery.

*2008 Highlights include:*

- **Divorce costs to society are very high making it a public issue** - The first study estimating the enormous public costs of divorce and single parenting in the U.S. underscores the need for preventive approaches to family stability such as marriage and relationship education.
- **Age differential between members of a couple does not affect likelihood of divorce-** Contrary to previous research, age difference between partners is not a risk factor for divorce.
- **Husband's loss of employment, as it ties to role definition, is a strong contributor to divorce-** Selection was not an issue for this study as the population examined was laid off due to factory closures.
- **Military families face many special issues, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and deployment, that deserve special attention-** Practitioners and policymakers must be aware of the unique issues surrounding military families in order to ensure appropriate interventions.
- **Infidelity is on the rise for certain demographics and is not commonly addressed in marriage education curricula-** Men aged 65-90 and women and men aged 18-25 were the fastest growing groups to commit adultery.
- **Direct recruiting and outreach activities geared toward low-income couples as a pair rather than as individuals are optimal for engaging them in marriage education services-** A large scale implementation project to provide marriage and relationship education to low-income couples is currently underway.
- **State surveys show their residents have a strong commitment to the concept of marriage and an openness to marriage education services despite consistently high divorce rates-** Researchers are examining attitudes on marriage and divorce in order to target audiences for prevention services.
- **Negative adolescent behaviors are associated with divorce-** After parents divorced, a lack of co-parenting tended to result in negative behaviors in adolescents.
- **Joint custody, although a complex issue, enhances father/child emotional bonds-** European researchers are finding that joint custody arrangements often times result in enhanced emotional bonds between father and child.
- **DVD and web-based delivery systems may be a way to reach more couples who need marriage education-** Alternative methods to in-class relationships training and face-to-face marital counseling are being investigated in hope of reaching a wider audience.

## SOCIOLOGY:

**Selected Papers presented at the 6th conference of the European Network for the Sociological and Demographic Study of Divorce, Oslo, Norway, September 18-19, 2008**

**Authored by Paul Amato, Ph.D.**

Historical research suggests that the United States has always had one of the highest divorce rates in the western world. Nevertheless, after rising steeply during the 1960s and 1970s, the divorce rate reached a peak in the early 1980s and has declined modestly since then.<sup>1</sup> When the crude divorce rate (the number of divorces per 1,000 people) was assessed in 2005 by the National Center for Health Statistics<sup>2</sup>, the rate was 3.6. In contrast, divorce rates in many European countries, although lower than in the U.S., increased steadily between 1970 and 2005. During this period, for example, the crude divorce rate increased from .93 to 2.50 in France, from 1.13 to 1.80 in Poland, from .32 to .80 in Italy, from .95 to 2.4 in Norway, and from .73 to 2.9 in Belgium.<sup>3</sup> The following four papers presented at this conference are of particular interest to marriage educators.

### Age Differences and the Likelihood of Divorce

Some previous research in the United States and in Europe has suggested that a large age difference between a husband and a wife is associated with an increased risk of divorce, especially when the wife is older than the husband. But this finding is not consistent across studies. Wilson and Smallwood did *not* find evidence of an association between spousal age differences and the likelihood of divorce, even in the earliest marriage cohorts in the 1960s. Their study is arguably the largest and most comprehensive to date on this topic.

The researchers analyzed marriage and divorce data compiled between 1963 and 2005 from England and Wales.<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, these researchers had access to *all* marriage and divorce records between these years – not just a survey sample. A study of this magnitude could not be conducted in the U.S. because the collection of vital statistics on divorce is incomplete and of poor quality (although the United States has a number of outstanding sample surveys, many European countries have superior collections of vital statistics on marriage, divorce, births, employment, and other factors<sup>5</sup>).

**Consequently, the widely-held belief that a large difference in ages between spouses, especially when the wife is older than the husband, is a risk factor for divorce, has been significantly challenged. Marriage and relationship educators may find it useful to know that regarding marriage, a notable age difference between spouses (or potential spouses) does not necessarily create a cause for concern.**

<sup>1</sup> US Census Bureau (2008). *Statistical abstract of the U.S. 2008*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Health Statistics (2005). *Fast Stats*. Retrieved December 30, 2008 from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Demographic Yearbook 1960-1999. New York: United Nations; Eurostat. (2008) *Europe in figures: Eurostat year book 2008*.

Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, B., & Smallwood, S. (2008). Age differences and the likelihood of divorce. *Office of National Statistics Population Trends*, summer, 17-25

<sup>5</sup> Four new reports from an extensive government funded study of the status of U.S. marriage and divorce statistics, *Exploration of Options for the Collection of Marriage and Divorce Statistics at the National State and Local Levels* are available at [www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org)

## **Husband's Job Loss and its Effects on Marriage**

Mari Rege, Kjetil Telle and Mark Votruba examined the effects of job loss in a paper entitled, "*Plant Closure and Marital Dissolution.*"<sup>6</sup> This Norwegian study is consistent with research in the United States showing that a husband's job loss appears to increase the likelihood of subsequent marital problems and divorce. The authors relied on panel data from approximately 80,000 married couples in Norway. The authors concluded that this increased risk of divorce is not due to an unexpected decline in the husbands' future earnings, rather these findings are consistent with role theories, in which the husband's self-esteem and attractiveness decline when he fails to fulfill the traditional "masculine" role of breadwinner. In a comparable analysis, the researchers found that when wives lost their jobs through plant closures, no subsequent increase in divorce ensued.

Their analysis included husbands who either experienced steady employment or the closure of their place of employment between 1995 and 2000. Husbands who experienced a plant closure were 11% more likely to see their marriages end in divorce by 2003. The study is particularly important because it rules out explanations based on "selection" factors. That is, men with certain problems, such as mental disorders, poor physical health, substance dependencies, or certain personality traits may be more likely to lose their jobs *and* experience problems in their marriages. When a business or factory closes, however, all workers are impacted equally, irrespective of the traits they bring to their jobs and marriages.

**Marriage and family educators, counselors and therapists should be sensitive to the fact that job loss-especially for men-is a risk factor for subsequent marital problems and divorce. This may also indicate an opportunity for marriage education programs to focus on spousal expectations of income contribution.**

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<sup>6</sup> Rege, M., Telle, K. & Votruba, M. (2007). *Plant closure and marital dissolution*. Retrieved January 7, 2009 from <http://folk.uio.no/torkildl/divnet/Papers/Telle.pdf>

## Divorce and Adolescent Behavior

In a paper entitled, *“Divorce, Delinquent Behavior and Substance Use Among Adolescents: The Role of Parental Characteristics,”* Sofie Vanassche, An Katrien Sodermans and Koen Matthijs analyzed data from 1,412 Flemish adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18.<sup>7</sup> They found that boys and girls living in single-parent households and in stepfamilies after a parental divorce reported more delinquent behaviors and more substance use (alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes) than did those living with their two biological parents. Furthermore, results showed that elevated levels of delinquency and substance abuse were related to decreases in parental supervision. That is, divorce was associated with less monitoring by parents, and low monitoring, in turn, was associated with greater delinquency and substance use. A second factor was weak emotional bonds between fathers and adolescents; the study found that divorce was associated with weaker bonds between children and fathers, and weak bonds, in turn, were associated with more delinquency and drug use. This latter finding was more prominent for sons than for daughters.

Overall, these findings are consistent with many studies conducted in the United States and it is useful to know that the same patterns of behavior found among American adolescents are also found among adolescents in other countries. This replication underscores the importance of close maternal *and* paternal involvement in the lives of adolescents following divorce, as well as the importance of maintaining a minimal degree of cooperative co-parenting between former spouses. Attaining this outcome can be difficult due to animosity between parents following marital dissolution, as well as the complications that many noncustodial fathers experience in trying to maintain close ties to their children.

**The continuing challenge for divorce educators is to encourage parents to distinguish their former spousal roles from their continuing parental roles to relieve conflict. It is also essential for divorce educators to assist parents with the provision of emotional support to their adolescents in addition to encouraging both parents to maintain supervision of their children; this may keep adolescents from drifting into potentially self-destructive behaviors.**

<sup>7</sup> Vanassche, S., Sodermans, K., & Matthijs, K. *Divorce, delinquent behavior and substance use among adolescents: The role of parental characteristics*. Retrieved January 7, 2009 from <http://folk.uio.no/torkildl/divnet/Papers/Vanassche.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Spruijt, E., & Duindam, V. *Joint physical custody in the Netherlands and the well-being of children*. Retrieved January 7, 2009 from <http://folk.uio.no/torkildl/divnet/Papers/Spruijt.pdf>

## Joint Custody and Child Well-Being

In general, the links between custody arrangements and children's well-being is an understudied topic, both in the United States and in Europe. Yet, on both sides of the Atlantic, an increasing number of parents and children have joint physical custody arrangements. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2005, 85.3% of the 6.8 million parents due child support had arrangements for joint custody or visitation privileges with the non-custodial parent. It is important to note that there are considerable variations between state definitions of joint custody and there is no specification in statute to how much parenting time each parent is allocated in joint custody situations. Although joint physical custody following divorce was once rare in both the United States and Europe, it has become more common in recent years. In the Netherlands, for example, the percentage of children in joint physical custody increased from 5% to 16% between 1998 and 2008.

The topic of joint physical custody was the focus of a paper, "Joint Physical Custody in the Netherlands and the Well-Being of Children," by Ed Spruijt and Vincent Duindam. The Spruijt and Duindam study was based on 3,561 children between the ages of 10 and 16 who completed questionnaires from 2006 to 2008. Of these children, 680 had experienced either a parental divorce or the disruption of their biological parents' cohabiting relationships. Among children with divorced parents (including informal divorces), children living under joint physical custody arrangements reported having the strongest emotional bonds with fathers (roughly equivalent to children living with both biological parents). Children living with both biological parents tended to have the highest level of psychological well-being, as reflected in measures of fear, depression, and aggression. Among children with divorced parents, however, psychological well-being did not vary substantially with children's living arrangements. Finally, parents with joint physical custody had the lowest reported levels of pre-divorce conflict, based on adolescents' reports.

More research on this topic would be of great use to family court personnel (family court judges, mediators, and custody evaluators), lawmakers, and parents. The Spruijt and Duindam study showed that children in joint physical custody tend to have especially close ties to fathers and do about as well as other children of divorce in other areas of psychological well-being. One should keep in mind, however, that in both the United States and the Netherlands, the great majority of parents with joint physical custody have voluntarily requested this arrangement. In other words, these former spouses are especially willing (and probably able) to form cooperative co-parental relationships following separation. This conclusion is consistent with the finding that parents with joint physical custody had the lowest reported level of conflict prior to breaking up.

**This study suggests that joint physical custody is a viable option for many parents and children. But we should be cautious about generalizing this finding to cases in which parents are unable to cooperate, remain hostile toward one another, and/or prefer an alternative custodial arrangement.**



## PSYCHOLOGY:

Selected research papers presented at the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, Orlando, Florida  
November 13 – 16, 2008

Authored by Galena Rhoades, Ph.D. and Frank Fincham, Ph.D.

Selected work presented at the *Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies* conference was categorized by three themes: novel approaches to methods of dissemination and intervention, new research and treatment approaches to infidelity and research on the impact of military life on relationships.

### Novel Methods for Dissemination and Intervention

It was reported that current methods of intervention (e.g., workshops or couples therapy offered at clinics or community centers) may not be reaching people who most need intervention. In a symposium entitled, *“Increasing Our Reach: Dissemination of Couple Interventions via DVDs and the Internet,”* moderated by Brian Doss, research was reviewed regarding the ways in which couples seek relationship education or therapy. The results showed that about one third of couples receive premarital training<sup>9</sup> while only about one third of couples seek help before divorcing.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the following argument was made: relationship interventions should be more easily accessible in order to increase the reach of this field to larger numbers of people and to more diverse populations.

Three other researchers presented information on the outcomes of their studies on self-directed relationship interventions. Kim Halford discussed a DVD-based relationship education program for new parents (“Couple CARE”). This program requires an initial in-person contact with a practitioner. Then couples can complete the course primarily at home on their own schedule. This intervention showed positive effects for communication and relationship satisfaction.<sup>11</sup> Scott Braithwaite presented data on a one hour computer-based version of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (“ePREP”). Among college students, this intervention demonstrated positive effects for both individual and relationship skills.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, Howard Markman reviewed preliminary data from a study of a web-based version of “PREP” designed for foster and adoptive parents. Relative to the control group, couples who completed the Internet intervention reported gains in communication skills.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random, household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology, 20*, 117-126

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, C. A., Stanley, S. M., Glenn, N. D., Amato, P. R., Nock, S. L., Markman, H. J., et al. (2002). *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce (S02096 OKDHS)*. Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Department of Human Services

<sup>11</sup> Halford, W. K., Markman, H. J., & Stanley, S. (2008). Strengthening couples' relationships with education: Social policy and public health perspectives. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*, 497-505

<sup>12</sup> Braithwaite, S. R., & Fincham, F. D. (2007). ePREP: Computer based prevention of relationship dysfunction, depression and anxiety. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 26*(5), 609-622

These findings suggest that self-guided psychoeducational programs show promise both in terms of reaching at-risk relationships and improving them. In addition, they illustrate that diverse couples benefit from such curricula. Notably, many of these self-guided interventions may be much less time consuming and more cost effective than other dissemination and intervention methods. For example, Briathwaite and Fincham's ePREP is only a one-hour program.

It is important to note that some of these studies were conducted under highly controlled conditions. For example, one of the studies had participants access the internet materials in a research laboratory. Absent further research, we do not know how well some of these approaches will work when used in more natural practice settings.

**Future research is needed before conclusions can be drawn about the long term effectiveness of self-directed marriage education online and on DVDs, but it is clear that they may be useful in reaching individuals or couples who would not otherwise attend a relationship or marriage education program.**

### **Infidelity in Relationships**

Infidelity is an issue for many American couples and is a common presenting problem for couples seeking therapy. David Atkins addressed recent rates of marital infidelity in the United States and suggested possible reasons for increases among certain age groups in a presentation entitled, "*Infidelity is on the Rise: But for Whom and Why?*" Based on data from the General Social Surveys of years 1991 to 2006, Atkins and colleague James Furrow found that marital infidelity increased during this period for most age groups; men and women aged 18 to 25 and men aged 65 to 90 demonstrated the largest increases.<sup>13</sup> The researchers speculate that changing views of relationship commitment in our society, the rise and widespread availability of Internet-based pornography and online social interaction, as well as the introduction of prescription drugs for erectile dysfunction (e.g., Viagra) in the late 1990s may, in part, account for the increases among these cohorts. No data on these speculations were available, so future research should pursue these hypotheses more directly.

In a separate workshop, Kristi Gordon offered information on an empirically-based couples therapy approach she developed with colleagues Don Baucom and Doug Snyder for couples who present problems related to infidelity.<sup>14</sup> In, "*Getting Past the Affair: How to Help Couples Heal After a Major Betrayal*," Gordon described the ways in which infidelity causes a deep sense of betrayal for the injured partner and how the injured partner's reactions can include behavior and intrusive cognitions that resemble responses to trauma. The cognitive-behavioral therapy approach that she suggests is structured around three phases of treatment. Briefly, the first phase includes recognizing the impact of the infidelity. The second phase focuses on finding meaning in the experience and understanding why the infidelity occurred. The third phase is about moving forward.

<sup>13</sup> General Social Surveys <http://www.norc.org/gss>

<sup>14</sup> Baucom, D., Snyder, D. K., & Gordon, K. C. (2009). *Helping couples get past the affair: A clinician's guide*. New York: Guilford. See also Gordon, K. C., Baucom, D. H., & Snyder, D. K. (2008). Optimal strategies in couple therapy: Treating couples dealing with the trauma of infidelity. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 38(3), 151-160

Depending on the couple, moving forward might mean defining new relationship expectations and goals for continuing the relationship or it may mean deciding to end the relationship in a way that is least damaging to those involved. It is in the last phase that forgiveness is usually best addressed, as it may be a part of what helps a relationship move forward.

Atkins and Furrow's research raises important questions about how societal shifts in views on commitment in relationships, the widespread availability of pornography on the Internet, and the "hooking up" culture among youth may relate to faithfulness in marriage. Given Atkin's and Furrow's findings, Gordon's presentation on treatment of infidelity is especially important. She highlighted how specific training in treatment for infidelity may be important for couples therapists and relationship educators as this type of problem may require a different approach than couple therapists would typically take. Together, these presentations also raise an important question for relationship educators: how do we prevent infidelity?

**Few relationship education programs address infidelity directly, yet the work described here suggests that it is a problem for many couples and one that can be difficult to treat.**

### **The Impact of Military Life on Relationships**

A symposium chaired by Keith Renshaw discussed the effects of military service in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) on military families. Specifically, in the symposium titled, *"Interpersonal/Family Environments of OEF/OIF-Era Military Service,"* a panel of researchers discussed mechanisms that might help explain exactly how military service and deployment affects families. Because so many U.S. military personnel are currently or have recently been deployed, understanding how deployment affects families and couples is important. It is likely that specific problems or issues arise in these families of which practitioners and researchers need to be aware and address.

Within this symposium, Elizabeth Allen presented findings from a large on-going study of couples in the Army. Allen and her colleagues found that the degree to which military husbands reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was related to both their own and their wives' marital satisfaction. Specifically, more symptoms were related to lower satisfaction. Potential mechanisms that may account for this association were examined and it was found that the degree of negative communication in the marriage partially accounted for the association between PTSD symptoms and lower satisfaction for both husbands and wives. These findings suggest that struggling with PTSD symptoms may make it harder to communicate in a marriage, which in turn may lead to lower satisfaction. Thus, communication could be an important target of intervention for military couples.

Although the sacrifices made by military personnel have been recognized, the hardships faced by their families during and after deployment are too often overlooked. Deployment during war time is unpredictable, as is the response of the service member to the experience of war, and this constitutes a stressor for the couple/family. It is tempting, in the face of this salient experience, to overlook the role of pre-existing vulnerabilities. This research reminds us to consider military families' pre-existing strengths and vulnerabilities as well as the nature of the deployment experience when working with military families.

**Typical approaches to relationship education or therapy likely apply to military families, but this population may also have specific needs related to the stress of combat and deployment. Veterans and their families often receive services through the Department of Veterans Affairs (<http://www.va.gov>), but may seek other services as well. Coordinating care among providers and understanding how individual mental health issues may impact relationship/family functioning seem particularly important for this population.**

## PUBLIC POLICY: 2008 Papers

Authored by Alan Hawkins, Ph.D.

During the past year, a number of noteworthy research reports of interest to marriage and relationship educators were produced by private research organizations or state Healthy Marriage Initiatives. Four of these are reviewed here. The results highlighted interesting themes that reinforce the need for marriage education and illustrate the disconnect between the availability of services and the general public's awareness of these services.

### The Public Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing

Benjamin Scafidi, an economist at Georgia College & State University, presented a comprehensive estimate of the public costs associated with the very personal challenges of divorce in a paper called *"The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing: First-Ever Estimates for the Nation and All Fifty States."*<sup>15</sup> A generation of good research has documented that children and adults are at greater risk for a host of economic, physical, psychological, and social problems when marriages fail (or fail to form). And we know that family dissolution is one of the most common pathways to poverty. Scafidi's paper is the first attempt to estimate the public costs of divorce and unwed childbearing for the nation and for all fifty states.

Adopting a set of conservative assumptions about how divorce and unwed childbearing contribute to poverty and generate public costs in the United States, Scafidi systematically estimated the public costs of family fragmentation to taxpayers. These costs stem from the fact that divorced and single-parent families are much more likely than two parent families to enroll in public assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, housing assistance, Medicaid, State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) assistance, school lunch and breakfast programs, and others. Family breakdown also increases costs associated with the justice system. And it reduces the potential earnings of adults and children that, in turn, reduce tax revenues. The bottom line, Scafidi estimates, is that divorce and unwed childbearing costs taxpayers at least \$112 billion a year, more than one trillion a decade. Scafidi also breaks down this overall figure for all 50 states. The populous states of California and New York lead the nation in the public costs of family fragmentation.

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<sup>15</sup> Scafidi, B. (2008). *The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing: First-Ever Estimates for the Nation and All Fifty States*. New York: Institute for American Values

Scafidi concludes that given the high public costs of family fragmentation, reducing divorce and promoting more stable, healthy marriages are legitimate governmental concerns. Moreover, given these high costs, even very small increases in stable, healthy marriages will yield significant savings to taxpayers. The study authors calculated that every 1% reduction in rates of family fragmentation will likely save more than \$1 billion every year. Scafidi does not make specific recommendations of what government should do to strengthen marriages. But this paper does indicate that marriage and relationship educators provide a public service that may reduce tax burdens. Further studies using different assumptions and measures are needed.

### Texas and California Marriage Reports

According to the Scafidi report discussed above, California has the highest taxpayer cost of family fragmentation at \$4.8 billion a year. Texas is the third highest at \$3 billion a year. Both Texas and California have statewide Healthy Marriage Initiatives to help couples. Two reports published in 2008, *“Together in Texas: Baseline Report on Marriage in the Lone Star State”*<sup>16</sup> and, *“The State of California’s Unions: Marriage and Divorce in the Golden State”*<sup>17</sup> summarize the findings of statewide surveys of attitudes and behaviors regarding marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and related matters in Texas and California respectively. Each report is based on a survey of a generally representative sample of 2,000 adults. The reports provide some insights that, among other things, support the value of marriage and relationship education. In addition, the Texas report has a special focus on Hispanic marriage and divorce attitudes and behaviors.

Despite a common perception that people have casual attitudes towards divorce, these surveys reveal that the vast majority of Texans (89%) and Californians (84%) believe that marriage should be a lifelong commitment and should be broken only under “extreme conditions.” More than 95% of married Californians said that they wanted to stay married to their spouse no matter what rough times they experienced. Eighty-five percent of non-Hispanic Texans and 64% of Hispanic Texans said that they were willing to accept disappointments in order to keep their relationship together. Accordingly, the value of marital permanence remains strong in these two states.

Given these strong endorsements of marital permanence, it is interesting to note that lack of commitment was the most common reason given for divorce by individuals who had experienced their own divorce. Fifty-seven percent of ever-divorced Texans and 55% of ever-divorced Californians said lack of commitment was a major reason for their divorce. Other common reasons given for divorce were infidelity (CA=42%, TX=49%) and lack of communication skills or too much arguing (CA= 54%, TX=44%). Abuse was given as a major reason for divorce by 17% of ever-divorced Californians. Among Texans, 32% of ever-divorced women said abuse was a major reason for divorce while only 6% of men said this. Also noteworthy, nearly one-third (32%) of ever-divorced Californians agreed that they and their ex-spouse could have worked harder to save their marriage.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, S.M., Glenn, N.D., Rappleyea, D.L., Diaz-Loving, R., Hawkins, A.J., Daire, A.P., et al. (2008). *Together in Texas: Baseline Report on Marriage in the Lone Star State*. Austin, TX: Health and Human Services Commission

<sup>17</sup> California Healthy Marriage Coalition. (2008). *The State of California’s Unions: Marriage and Divorce in the Golden State* (Report available at [www.camarriage.com](http://www.camarriage.com))

Overall, marriage and relationship educators in California, Texas, and elsewhere should be optimistic from these state surveys. Marriage is centrally important to a statistically significant group of Americans. There remains a strong commitment to the marital value of permanence and working through difficulties. The primary reasons people give for their divorces are addressed by marriage and relationship education and a large majority of individuals from various ethnic backgrounds express interest in participating in marriage and relationship education. The challenge is to deliver these services on a larger scale to all interested populations.

### **Helping Fragile Families Strengthen Their Relationships**

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. in January 2008 published a report entitled *“Implementation of the Building Strong Families Program.”*<sup>18</sup> The Building Strong Families (BSF) program is a large-scale, federally-funded demonstration project that provides marriage and relationship education to low-income, romantically-involved, unmarried couples who are expecting or have recently had a child together. The program has three components: group instruction in relationship and marriage education, individual level support from a “family coordinator” and referral to a range of family support services. The report analyzed the implementation of the BSF programs serving over 2,500 participants in seven sites. This implementation study sheds light on the potential value and feasibility of marriage and relationship education for low-income, unmarried parents and focuses on curriculum development, participant recruitment and retention, program implementation, “dosage,” and cost. The BSF program is being evaluated with a rigorous longitudinal design involving random assignment of eligible couples to either a program group or a control group, and participant data is collected three times over the course of three years.

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<sup>18</sup> Dion, M.R., Hershey, A.M., Zaveri, H.H., Avellar, S.A., Strong, D.A., Silman, D., et al. (2008). *Implementation of the Building Strong Families Program*. Washington D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

The implementation report showed that general recruitment strategies (e.g. distributing flyers) were ineffective in BSF. Instead, direct, in-person recruitment was optimal; outreach staff stationed themselves at locations frequented by low-income couples and recruited in person. Recruiting couples together was more effective than recruiting one partner and relying on him or her to get the significant other interested. Some sites found male-female recruiter teams were most effective in recruiting couples. Recruiters stressed the couple education component of the service and its potential benefits; this seemed unique to many potential participants and was a positive factor in recruitment. Screening for domestic violence was done at intake and as a result some couples were screened out of the program and referred for more intensive services. Sponsoring organizations made significant efforts to overcome attendance barriers, such as offering bus tokens, gas vouchers, or van service and providing on-site child care or child care vouchers.

For many reasons, full participation in voluntary programs for low-income couples is a challenge. With BSF, about 60% of original enrollees attended at least one session. After one session, couples generally returned for much more. On average, couples participated in 21 hours of group sessions, which was about half of the total potential “dosage” at most sites. But 21 hours of program involvement is about double the dosage of what most marriage and relationship education programs targeted to middle-class couples receive. Finally, the researchers estimated that the average cost of this premium program was about \$11,000 per couple.

These implementation findings are encouraging and make it more likely that the upcoming impact results of BSF (anticipated in late 2009/early 2010) will show positive effects on couple relationships and family stability. Research has shown that most low-income couples are still romantically involved at the birth of their child, often living together, are committed to the best interests of their children, and usually have high hopes for the long-term future of their relationship. Unfortunately, the research also documents the fragility of these families. A large percentage of these couples break up over the first few years of their child’s life and thus these couples are unable to achieve the hopes they had for their relationships and their families.

**Low-income couples seem genuinely interested in services that help them build stronger relationships, although more-intensive, in-person recruitment may be necessary to enroll couples in programs, and program providers will probably need to support attendance with transportation and childcare services. Once couples come to programs, they appear to enjoy the experience and usually return for many more hours of learning.**

However, even if future research shows that BSF was successful in helping low-income, unmarried parents strengthen their relationships over time, a crucial question remains: how can this kind of service be replicated at a lower, more feasible cost?



## Conclusion

The following emerging themes will likely impact the marriage education field. This Snapshot of select research presented in 2008 highlights the following findings:

- **The societal costs associated with raising children outside of marriage are high**
- **Marriage education can address issues that can lead to divorce** by preparing couples to deal with specific stressors such as job loss, financial instability and military life
- **A strong positive attitude exists toward marriage and there is an unmet demand for marriage education**
- **A focus on fostering supportive post-divorce situations is necessary** (i.e. joint custody arrangements and effective co-parenting) to minimize the negative impact of divorce on children

Researchers also recommend answering the following questions to further inform the content of marriage education programs and the way that they are implemented. Questions to impact the field include:

- To what extent does the adjustment and well-being of children experiencing the dissolution of cohabiting parents differ from that of children experiencing divorce, or that of children in intact families?
- Do the predictors of divorce vary across racial and ethnic groups, and if so, why?
- How does the quality of family life prior to divorce affect child outcomes over the short- and long-term?
- Why do some couples end marriages that are not seriously troubled?
- What are the effects of divorce education, mediation, and varying custody arrangements on parent and child well-being?
- How can marriage education better target individuals before they are married?
- Can using new technologies such as DVDs and the internet to deliver relationship education improve the cost-effectiveness of providing this service without diminishing its impact?

Recent presentations, papers and on-going research projects continue to advance the field of marriage education, especially as they inform how public policy can support interventions to help families sustain healthy marriages, improve stability and create positive child outcomes. Emerging research suggests that issues once considered ancillary in the field are proving to be more central. The fields of psychology, sociology and economics will continue to inform the effectiveness of and access to marriage and relationship education.

## Appendix A: Participating Authors

**Paul Amato, Ph.D.** is a Professor of Sociology, Demography, and Family Studies at Pennsylvania State University. His research interests include marital quality, the causes and consequences of divorce, and subjective well-being over the life course. He has published over 100 journal articles and book chapters, along with several books, including “Alone Together,” published by Harvard University Press. Dr. Amato was awarded the Reuben Hill Award from the National Council on Family Relations for the best published article on the family in 2008, 2001, 1999 and 1993. He received the Stanley Cohen Distinguished Research Award from the American Association of Family and Conciliation Courts in 2002, the Distinction in the Social Sciences Award from Pennsylvania State University in 2003, and the Distinguished Career Award from the Family Section of the American Sociological Association in 2006. Dr. Paul Amato received his doctorate in Social Psychology at James Cook University in 1983.

**Frank Fincham, Ph.D.** is the Director of the Florida State University Family Institute. He has published many scholarly articles and has been awarded the Reuben Hill Award from the National Council on Family Relations. His research interests include marriage/partnerships, particularly cognitive processes involved in conflict, forgiveness in family relationships, and substance abuse and the family. Dr. Fincham's recent research projects include children's perspectives on divorce and programs that help children deal with the transitions of divorce, sustaining African American marriages, relationships between adolescents and adults, and interventions for families of alcoholic fathers. He has been recognized as one of the top 25 psychologists in the world by the American Psychology Society Observer and was the 2007 President of the International Society for Relationship Research. He received his doctorate in Social Psychology from Oxford University in 1980.

**Alan J. Hawkins, Ph.D.** is a professor of Family Life at Brigham University in Provo, Utah. Professor Hawkins' early scholarship and outreach focused on fathers' involvement with their children and the effects of that involvement in men's development, as well as the division of domestic labor in dual-earner households. Recently his scholarship and outreach has focused on educational and policy interventions to strengthen marriage and reduce divorce. In 2003 and 2004, he was a visiting scholar with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, working on ACF's federal healthy marriage initiative. He also serves as vice chair of the Utah Commission on Marriage. He earned a doctorate in Human Development and Family Studies at The Pennsylvania State University in 1990.

**Galena Kline Rhoades, Ph.D.** is a Senior Researcher for the Center for Marital and Family Studies in the Psychology Department at the University of Denver. Her research is on romantic relationship development and functioning, and the related implications for children and adults. Her research projects and collaborations include studies of cohabitation, mechanisms of change in couple interventions, infidelity, spouses' perceptions of one another, relationship processes and psychopathology, as well as adolescent adjustment. She is currently working with Scott Stanley and Howard Markman on several federally-funded projects, one focused on measuring and modeling early relationship development (funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) and three other studies on the effectiveness of relationship education (funded by NICHD and ACF). Dr. Rhoades received her doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the University of Denver in 2007.

## Appendix B. Overview of Conference

The *European Network for the Sociological and Demographic Study of Divorce (ENSDDSD)* brings together scholars so that they may form a European network for empirical and comparative research on the sociological aspects of divorce. The 6<sup>th</sup> annual conference gathered in Oslo, Norway, on September 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>, 2008. Such research impacts marriage education by providing practitioners with information on the risk factors associated with divorce so that skills can be incorporated into interventions to address issues that can escalate into divorce. The network meets twice a year to discuss current research of the members, to promote comparative research and to stimulate publications on this topic. This conference is relevant to the advancement of the scholarly understanding of research and divorce in the U.S. because of the commonalities in Western culture.

The *Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ACBT)* holds an annual conference in which researchers and practitioners from clinical psychology and related fields present work in symposia, poster sessions, panel discussions, and workshops. The audience includes researchers, students, and practitioners; it was held in Orlando, Florida on November 13<sup>th</sup> through the 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The focus for this review included research related to couples and couple intervention. Broadly, this conference concentrates on work that is relevant to behavioral and cognitive approaches to intervention. Those that are relevant to the following three themes are highlighted: novel approaches to dissemination and intervention, new research and treatment approaches to infidelity, and research on the impact of military life on relationships.

## Appendix C. Overview of Reports

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. conducted an implementation analysis of a large scale demonstration project exploring the viability of marriage and relationship education programs for low-income, unmarried couples who are expecting or recently had a child together (funded by the U.S. Health and Human Services Commission Administration for Children and Families). The result was a report entitled *“Implementation of the Building Strong Families Program.”* The researchers discovered effective recruitment strategies for this population’s participation in marriage/relationship education and were able to track the population’s participation rates in marriage education classes.

*“The Public Costs of Divorce,”* written by economist Benjamin Scafidi, puts a dollar amount on the societal costs of divorce and unwed childbearing by estimating the costs of family fragmentation in the United States. Four organizations worked together to fund the study: the Institute for American Values, the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy, and the Georgia Family Council and Families Northwest.

*“Twogether in Texas: Baseline Report on Marriage in the Lone Star State”* and *“The State of California’s Unions: Marriage and Divorce in the Golden State”* both investigated adult attitudes on marriage and divorce (and related matters) as part of the respective states’ healthy marriage initiatives. The Texas report was funded by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission and provides a much needed examination of Hispanic attitudes on these topics. The California report was funded by a grant through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.







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The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) is a clearinghouse for high quality, balanced, and timely information and resources on healthy marriage. The NHMRC's mission is to be a first stop for information, resources, and training on healthy marriage for experts, researchers, policymakers, media, marriage educators, couples and individuals, program providers, and others.

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