Testimony On Healthy Marriage before the Committee on Finance, Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy United States Senate, May 5, 2004
(Excerpt)

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Building Bridges: Marriage, Fatherhood, and Domestic Violence

What is Healthy Marriage?

"Healthy" marriage has become the language of common ground. While the term "healthy" is somewhat clinical and limited for purposes of describing such a complex and rich relationship, the term has significant political utility because it clarifies what reasonable public policy goals about marriage promotion and support are and are not about. Healthy marriage, by definition, does not include marriages that are dangerous or chronically damaging.

My colleague Howard Markman and I at the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver have been expanding the theory that underlies our prevention approach along the lines of what we call safety theory.[i] In this model, sound and healthy marriages have three fundamental types of safety:

1) *Safety in interaction*: being able to talk openly and well (enough) about key issues, with the strongest expressions of such safety including emotional safety and support
2) *Personal Safety*: freedom from fear of physical or emotional harm and intimidation
3) *Safety in commitment*: security of mutual support, teamwork, and a clear future together

Based on a wide range of research as well as experience working with people from various cultures around the world, it appears to us that these themes are basic and universal. To provide more detail, I will draw on thought from a recent paper of mine.[ii]

Interaction Safety. There is a tremendous amount of evidence that relationships that are characterized by chronic negative interaction are damaging to adults and the children living with them. Negative interaction includes patterns such as frequent escalation of conflict, criticism, invalidation, withdrawal, demand-withdraw, contempt, and so forth.

- Negative patterns of interaction strongly differentiate happy from unhappy couples.[iii]

- Negative patterns of interaction are one of the best discriminators of which couples will go on to experience chronic distress, break up, or divorce, and which will succeed.[iv]

- Negative patterns of interaction among adults put children at greater risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including mental health problems, decrements in school performance, and various forms of acting out behavior.[v] This may be the most clearly agreed upon single fact in the family science literature.

- Negative patterns of interaction are associated with negative mental health outcomes for adults, such as depression and anxiety,[vi] and also reduced work productivity.[vii]

There is therefore compelling evidence that chronic, negative interaction and poorly managed conflict places adults and children at risk. A healthier marriage would be characterized by lower levels of such negativity. An unhealthy marriage would be marked by higher, chronic levels. Beyond negative interaction being a hallmark of an absence of interaction safety, positive dimensions such as supportiveness and friendship foster a day-to-day sense of positive

connection in a marriage—moving a marriage from merely healthy to great.

Personal Safety. Domestic violence puts people—and especially women and children—at greater risk for mental health problems, physical health problems, and death.[viii] Domestic violence and aggression can include physical threats and harm as well as psychological abuse and intimidation. Healthy marriages do not include such dangerous and debilitating behaviors.

Interventions to foster healthy marriages could be expected to help reduce domestic violence by any of several means, such as (1) educating young people about the dangers of aggression, and how to avoid aggressive relationships and behaviors; (2) reducing the likelihood of ongoing violence in relationships where poorly managed conflict has spilled over to physically aggressive contact that is, nevertheless, not the type of domestic violence that is most dangerous and least likely to change; and (3) helping women at risk realize a need to leave or avoid relationships with the most serious and dangerous types of aggression.[ix] Research is becoming ever clearer that, while all forms of domestic violence can be dangerous, some forms are far more dangerous and more likely to last than others.

The healthy marriage concept clearly implies that one outcome of good relationship education occurs when a woman in a dangerous relationship learns she has better options, while learning about steps she can take to increase safety for herself and any children involved. Metaphorically, a goal of marriage education should be to help people in burning houses leave, and to help people considering entry into smoldering buildings to gain the strength and support to flee.

Commitment Safety. Marriage can be fundamentally construed as a long-term investment, and in many ways, functions like one. It is the expectation of longevity that makes the day-to-day investment rational.[x] People require a sense of security about the future of the relationship in order to fully invest in the present for that future. This is the nature of commitment in marriage, in which some options are given up in favor of the richer possibilities of building a life together.

In contrast, relationships with no clear sense of a future favor pressure for performance in the present (because there is no guarantee that the partner will stay), with score-keeping about levels of effort and investment, and anxiety about continuance, being the logical outgrowth. Simply put, couples do best when they have a clear sense of couple identity and a long-term view. This does not mean that it makes sense for all couples to have a future. Some relationships are destructive and would be better ended than continued. Yet, informed opinion is that the average couple with reasonable potential in marriage will do best if they are able to maintain a clear commitment that provides the protective benefits of having a secure sense of a future together. These are the conditions of family stability that also give children the most secure base.

There is growing empirical evidence that it is this element of a commitment to a future that is most strongly linked to healthy types of sacrifice or mutual giving among partners.[xi] Further, we have preliminary but compelling evidence that the degree to which males will sacrifice for female partners, without a sense of personal loss and ensuing resentment, is strongly related to

how committed they are to a long-term future.[xii] In fact, the relationship between commitment to a future and sacrifice appears to be strong for men and weak in women—a finding warranting further research. This, along with data from various studies, has led me to hypothesize that women may give their best to men as long as they are attached to them while men may not give their best to women unless they have committed to a future. If this is, in fact, generally true, it holds dramatic implications for understanding inequities in what men versus women get out of less committed forms of relationships than marriage. Unhealthy marriages can be damaging to women, but it is also becoming clearer that women are too often on the short end of differential levels of commitment and investment in relationships with men outside of marriage.

While many other details and nuances of healthy marriages can be, and are, delineated by various marriage and family experts, these elements of safety can be seen as foundational to what a healthy marriage provides. That also means that educational or therapeutic programming designed to foster such dynamics, where appropriate, hold promise for helping more couples to achieve stability and happiness resulting in obvious benefits for their children.

In close parallel, the national marriage scholars comprising the Research Advisory Group for the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative recently discussed ways to empirically define healthy marriage in the context of government programming and policy, suggesting that progress toward a goal of increasing healthy marriages could be tracked with existing survey methods along these lines[xiii]:

- The percentage of children living with their biological or adoptive parents who are also in healthy marriages defined by simple measures of relationship quality on several dimensions already reasonably well measured in the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Baseline Survey[xiv]:
  o Moderate to high relationship satisfaction
  o Lower levels of negative interaction
  o Lower levels of divorce potential (thinking and talking about divorce)

Healthy marriages would be characterized by reasonable levels of marital satisfaction, though the levels would not have to be the highest levels to argue that the marriage was healthy. This assumption is well founded on Paul Amato's (of Pennsylvania State University) concept of the "good enough" marriage. These are marriages in which adults and children derive most of the major benefits of marriage even though the adults are, at least at present, not highly satisfied.[xv] While these marriages have chronic vulnerability, and are therefore not as "healthy" as they could be, they provide clear benefits as long as the marriages remain stable (and do not encounter any major destabilizing events).

Post script 4/14/06: *Stanley has recently revised and added to the above safety model with two important changes[1].*

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[1] Stanley, S. M. (2006, March 20). The development of relationship education for low-income individuals. Invited address to the National Poverty Center. Ann Arbor, Michigan.

*1. First, interaction safety is now referred to as **emotional safety** to broaden the concept from the absence of negative interaction to emphasize closer emotional connection and support between partners.*

*2. Second, he has added a fourth construct of **environmental or contextual safety**, reflecting that which is based on having a relatively secure and safe environment for one's relationship. For example, those in poverty would have a general impoverishment of this type of safety because of factors such as lower financial opportunity, lessoned trust in community environment, diminished supportive connections, and crime; all of which lead to greater levels of stress, conflict and problems regulating negative affect between partners.*

[i] For example: Stanley, S.M., Markman, H.J., & Whitton, S. (2002). Communication, Conflict, and Commitment: Insights On The Foundations of Relationship Success from a National Survey. *Family Process, 41(4)*, 659-675.

[ii] Stanley, S. M. (2003, November). *Assessing Couple and Marital Relationships: Beyond Form and Toward a Deeper Knowledge of Function*. Paper presented at Healthy Marriage Interventions and Evaluation symposium of the Measurement Issues in Family Demography Conference, Washington D.C.; Stanley, S. M. (In Press). Assessing Couple and Marital Relationships: Beyond Form and Toward a Deeper Knowledge of Function. In S. Hofferth & L. Casper (Eds.), *Handbook of Measurement Issues in Family Research*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associations.

[iii] For example: Birchler, G., Weiss, R., & Vincent, J. (1975). Multimethod analysis of social reinforcement exchange between maritally distressed and nondistressed spouse and stranger dyads. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 31*, 349-360.; Christensen, A., & Heavey, C.L. (1990). Gender and social structure in the demand/withdraw pattern of marital conflict. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59*, 73-82.; Fincham, F.D., & Beach, S.R. (1999). Marital conflict: Implications for working with couples. *Annual Review of Psychology, 50*, 47-77.; Gottman, J. M., & Notarius, C. I. (2000). Decade Review: Observing marital interaction. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62*, 927-947.; Stanley, S.M., Markman, H.J., & Whitton, S. (2002). Communication, Conflict, and Commitment: Insights On The Foundations of Relationship Success from a National Survey. *Family Process, 41(4)*, 659-675.

[iv] For example: Clements, M. L., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2004). Before they said "I do": Discriminating among marital outcomes over 13 years based on premarital data. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*, 613-626.; Gottman, J. M. (1993) A theory of marital dissolution and stability. *Journal of Family Psychology, 7*, 57-75.; Karney, B.R., & Bradbury, T.N. (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, method, and research. *Psychological Bulletin, 118*, 3-34.

[v] Cummings, E. M., & Davies, P. (1994). *Children and marital conflict*. New York: Guilford.; Emery, R. (1982). Interparental conflict and the children of discord and divorce. *Psychological Bulletin, 92*, 310-330.; Grych, J., & Fincham, F. (1990). Marital conflict and children's adjustment. *Psychological Bulletin, 108,* 267-290.

[vi] For example: Beach, S. R., & O'Leary, K. D. (1993). Marital discord and dysphoria: For whom does the marital relationship predict depressive symptomatology? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 10(3)*, 405-420.; Fincham, F. D.; Beach, S. R., Harold, G. T., & Osborne, Lori N. (1997). Marital satisfaction and depression: Different causal relationships for men and women*? Psychological Science, 8(5)*, 351-357.; Halford, K., & Bouma, R. (1997). Individual psychopathology and marital distress. In K. Halford & H.J. Markman (Eds.). *Clinical Handbook of Marriage and Couples Intervention*, (pp. 291-321). New York: John Wiley and Sons.

[vii] Forthofer, M.S., Markman, H.J., Cox, M., Stanley, S., & Kessler, R.C. (1996). Associations between marital distress and work loss in a national sample. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 58*, 597-605.

[viii] Straus, M. H., & Gelles, R. J. (1990). *Physical violence in American families: Risk factors and adaptations to violence in 8,145 families*. New Brunswick, NJ.).

[ix] It has become widely recognized among social scientists that there are different types of domestic violence that have different implications in terms of treatment, prevention, and prognosis. For example: Johnson, M. P. (1995). Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57(2)*: 283-294.; Johnson, M. P. & Ferraro, K. J. (2000). "Research on domestic violence in the 1990s: Making distinctions." *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62,* 948-963.; Johnson, M. P. & Leone, J. M. (2005). The differential effects of intimate terrorism and situational couple violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey. *Journal of Family Issues, 26*,

322-349.; Holtzworth-Munroe, A., & Stuart, G. (1994). Typologies of male batterers: Three subtypes and the differences among them. *Psychological Bulletin, 116*, 476-497.

[x] Amato, P.R. & Rogers, S.J. (1999). Do Attitudes Toward Divorce Affect Marital Quality? *Journal of Family Issues, 20(1)* 69-86.; Stanley, S.M. & Markman, H.J. (1992). Assessing commitment in personal relationships. *Journal of Marriage and The Family, 54*, 595-608.;   Waite, L., & Gallagher, M. (2000). *The case for marriage*. New York: Doubleday.;   Waite, L. J. & Joyner, K. (2001). Emotional Satisfaction and Physical Pleasure in Sexual Unions: Time Horizon, Sexual Investment, and Sexual Exclusivity. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 63*, 247-264.

[xi] Van Lange, P. A. M., Rusbult, C. E., Drigotas, S. M., Arriaga, X. B., Witcher, B. S. & Cox, C. L. (1997). Willingness to sacrifice in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 1373-1395.

[xii] Whitton, S. W., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2002). Sacrifice in romantic relationships: An exploration of relevant research and theory. In H. T. Reiss, M. A. Fitzpatrick, A. L. Vangelisti (Eds), *Stability and Change in Relationship Behavior across the Lifespan* (pp. 156-181). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; Whitton, S. W., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (In Press). If I help my partner, will it hurt me? Perceptions of sacrifice in romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*.; see also Stanley, S. M., Whitton, S. W., Low, S. M., Clements, M. L., & Markman, H. J. (In Press). Sacrifice as a predictor of marital outcomes. *Family Process*.

[xiii] From the two day meeting held with Secretary Howard Hendrick and all the members of the advisory group, in December 2003. Those attending included nationally recognized social scientists, policy experts, and state and social scientists.

[xiv] Johnson, C. A., & Stanley, S. M. (Eds.). (2001, Fall). *The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative Statewide Baseline Survey* (Available from the Bureau for Social Research, Oklahoma State University, 306 HES, Stillwater, OK 74078-6117).; Johnson, C. A., Stanley, S. M., Glenn, N. D., Amato, P. A., Nock, S. L., Markman, H. J., & Dion, M. R. (2002). *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce* (S02096 OKDHS). Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Department of Human Services.

[xv] Amato, P. R. (2001). Good enough marriages: Parental discord, divorce, and children's well-being. *The Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law, 9*, 71-94.