

Why Marriage Matters

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My intent today is to summarize and elaborate on the contents of a booklet entitled *Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, written by a team of family scholars chaired by Norval Glenn of the University of Texas, Steven Nock of the University of Virginia, and Linda Waite of the University of Chicago, and published by the Center of the American Experiment, CMFCE, and the Institute of American Values.¹ I encourage you to read it and use it to help you and your governments form family policy. Furthermore, I also want to make a few recommendations for moving beyond the empirical research I present hereafter. I argue that we cannot create a policy based solely on empirical research, but must have a broader philosophical and moral foundation for the value of marriage in society.

The *Why Marriage Matters* booklet summarizes a large body of scientific research on what we know about the importance of marriage on individual, familial, and societal well being. The studies cited here are for the most part based on large, nationally-representative samples that control for race, family background, and other confounding factors. While most of the studies are on U.S. samples, there are also some from Western Europe, Australia, and Canada. Unfortunately, studies of the type cited here have not yet been done in many parts of the world.

Can you generalize these American and Western European studies to your countries or culture? While I believe that some of the findings you will hear are universal and can apply to all cultures, you will have to decide how much this kind of research applies to the marriages and families in your nations. I have been working with families and children for almost thirty years and studying and publishing research about marriage and children for over twenty years. My own evaluation of this research is that many of the findings are applicable to marriages in all parts of the world.

Some of my research compared white couples from the U.S., Latino couples from the U.S., Mexican couples from Mexico, American Indian couples, and mixed ethnic couples. There were a few differences in attitudes about women's roles and such things, but the processes that predict marital success were the same for all couples, no matter what their racial or ethnic background. Therefore, I believe that many of the findings I report to you today will apply in a variety of nations, cultures, ethnic groups, and religious groups.

While scientific research has its limitations—and I will

discuss some of those limitations with you at the end of my remarks—this research is a better guide for social policy than uninformed opinion or prejudice. As leaders and policy makers in your countries and in the United Nations, you need to know what the best research available in the world suggests about the consequences of marriage and its absence in the lives of children and adults.

When looking at this research as a whole, this distinguished panel of scholars concluded: "Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike." Let's look at each of the twenty-one different areas and examine what the research shows. Then you can draw your own conclusions. First, I will share with a set of conclusions that the research suggests.

Twenty-one Conclusions

The first four are about the effect of marriage on family life.

1. *Marriage increases the likelihood that fathers have good relationships with their children.*

When parents are married, the child's relationship with both mother and father is better. In one study, 30 percent of young adults with divorced parents had poor relationships with their mothers, while only 16 percent of young adults had poor relationships with their married parents. The results are even more dramatic in relationships with fathers: 65 percent of the young adults with divorced parents had poor relationships with their fathers, compared to 29 percent from nondivorced parents.

Furthermore, children whose parents divorced or never married see their fathers less frequently and have less affectionate relationships with their fathers. Divorce appears to have an even greater negative effect on relationships between fathers and children than remaining in an unhappy marriage does. In other words, fathers who stayed in unhappy marriages had better relationships with their children than fathers in unhappy marriages who chose to leave the marriage.

2. *Cohabitation is not the same as marriage.*

Most adolescents and young adults believe that cohabitation is either a good way to prepare for marriage or that it is a "safer" way to have a stable, intimate relationship without the legal and moral obligations of marriage. However, couples who live together generally report lower relationship quality, more conflict, more violence, and lower commitment

than married couples report.

Please note that we are beginning to see, and you will see it over and over again, that women in nonmarital relationships suffer more violence from their partners. Thus, while the women's movement has helped women in many ways, it appears that the so-called "freedom" from the bondage of marriage has not necessarily freed women from many of the things that damage women physically, emotionally, and economically.

3. Growing up outside the intact marriage increases the likelihood that children will themselves divorce, have unhappy marriages, or become unwed parents.

Parental divorce approximately doubles the odds that the divorced couple's adult children will also go through a divorce. Females whose parents divorced or never married are about three times more likely to end up as young, unwed mothers, than are females from parents who married and stayed married.

4. Marriage is virtually a universal human institution.

Since recorded history began, marriage in some form or another has been a universal human institution in societies that survive for any length of time. In those societies, marriage has always been about regulating the reproduction of children, regulating families, and regulating society. Therefore, marriage and family life with both biological parents seems to be almost universally recognized by all the major world religions and cultures as an essential institution for the continuation of civilized society.

The next five deal with the relationship between marriage and economics.

5. Divorce and unmarried childbearing increase poverty for both children and mothers.

When parents fail to marry or to stay married, children are more likely to experience deep and persistent poverty. Furthermore, the majority of children who grow up outside of an intact married family experience at least one year of dire poverty. Also, one-fifth to one-third of divorcing women end up in poverty following the divorce.

Certainly marriage is not the only factor related to the impoverishment of women and children. In many developing nations, families with married parents suffer extraordinary poverty along with women and children without a husband and father. But as nations develop economic stability and growth, the tendency is for adult couples to adopt not only the economic system of the industrial nations of the West but also too many of their social practices. This could include the tendency to divorce or not marry, as a consequence of which women and children are left in poverty.

This pattern of prosperity and then turning away from family and children is a frequently repeated theme in the scriptures and narratives of the great world religions. Words like "whoremongering, lasciviousness, and licentiousness"

are the terms used to show the turning away from marriage and family responsibilities by prosperous people.

This pattern is found in modern times as well. Demographer Ron Lesthaeghe examined Western demographic data and concluded that family disruption in fact paralleled the increase in affluence that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century and again during the 1960s and 1970s.²

6. Married couples seem to build more wealth than do otherwise similar singles or cohabiting couples.

Marriage seems to be a wealth-creating institution. These findings are not just because of access to two incomes. Like any partnership, there can be greater "economy of scale" in a marriage. Marriage encourages healthy, productive behavior such as buying a home and wealth accumulation. Furthermore, research shows that married couples are more likely to receive wealth transfers (inheritances) from both sets of grandparents than are cohabiting couples; single mothers almost never receive financial help from the father's kin.

7. Married men earn more money than do single men.

Married men earn 10–40 percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories. Indeed, the most current, sophisticated research confirms that marriage itself increases men's earning power by about 15 percent. This occurs because married men have greater work commitment, lower quit rates, and healthier and more stable routines (better sleep patterns, a healthier diet, and less alcohol consumption). They also benefit from the work effort and emotional support they receive from their wives.

8. Parental divorce (or failure to marry) increases children's risk of school failure.

Children of divorced and unwed parents have lower grades, are more likely to be held back, and are more likely to drop out of school. Children of divorced parents end up with significantly lower levels of education than children whose fathers are absent because of death.

9. Parental divorce reduces the likelihood that children will graduate from college and achieve high-status jobs.

Children of divorced parents have lower occupational status, lower earnings, increased rates of unemployment, and greater economic hardship. They are also less likely to attend and graduate from a four-year college.

The next five conclusions show the relationships between marriage, physical health, and longevity.

10. Children who live with two married parents enjoy better physical health.

Children with two married parents have fewer health problems. They also have an increased life expectancy by four years. One study found that forty-year-old men whose parents stayed married were three times less likely to die than forty-year-old men whose parents had divorced.

11. Parental marriage is associated with a sharply lower risk of infant mortality.

Unmarried mothers have a 50 percent increased risk of infant mortality. Children in single-parent homes have an increased risk of intentional and unintentional fatal injuries. Marital status remains a powerful predictor of infant mortality, even in countries with nationalized health care systems and strong support for single mothers.

12. *Marriage is associated with reduced rates of alcohol and substance abuse for both adults and teens.*

Married men and women have lower rates of alcohol consumption and abuse than do singles. Longitudinal research confirms that young adults who marry tend to reduce their rates of alcohol consumption and illegal drug use. Children whose parents marry and stay married have lower rates of substance abuse, using significantly less illegal drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.

13. *Married people, especially married men, have longer life expectancies than do otherwise similar singles.*

Husbands and wives live longer, on average, than single people—even after taking into account race, income, and family background. In most developed countries, single, divorced, or widowed nonmarried men are twice as likely to die as married men, and nonmarried women have 1.5 times greater risk of dying than married women.

14. *Marriage is associated with better health and lower rates of injury, illness, and disability for both men and women.*

Married people live longer and live better—including having better health, more wealth, and better relationships with their children. These differences remain “dramatic” even after controlling for age, sex, and race/ethnicity.

The next three concern marriage and the mental health and emotional well being of children and adults.

15. *Children whose parents divorce have higher rates of psychological distress and mental illness.*

These mental health risks do not go away soon after divorce. Instead, children of divorce remain at higher risk for depression and other mental illnesses. When parental conflict is high and lasts a long time, then children may benefit psychologically from divorce. However, recent research shows that 60 percent of divorces were not characterized as “high conflict.” In other words, these marriages were not doing appreciable damage to the children, and with a little effort they could have been saved.

16. *Divorce appears to increase significantly the risk of suicide among both adults and adolescents.*

Divorced men and women are more than twice as likely as their married counterparts to attempt suicide. The single most important predictor of the three-fold increase in youth suicide is the increased share of youth living with a divorced parent. According to one new study, the effect is “large,” explaining as much as two-thirds of the increase in youth suicide over time.

17. *Married mothers have lower rates of depression than do single or cohabiting mothers.*

One study of mothers of preschool children found that the risk of depression was substantially greater for unmarried mothers when compared to married mothers. Among eighteen- and nineteen-year-old mothers, 41 percent of single, white mothers report high levels of depression, as compared to 28 percent of white married mothers.

The last four conclusions deal with the relationship between marital stability, and the risk of crime or abuse of the marriage partners or their children.

18. *Boys raised in single-parent homes are more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior.*

By the time they reach their early thirties, boys raised in single-parent homes are twice as likely to commit crime that leads to incarceration, and boys in step-families are three times as likely. This is true even when taking into account the boys’ race, cognitive ability, neighborhood quality, and mothers’ education.

19. *Marriage appears to reduce the risk that adults will be either perpetrators or victims of crime.*

Single or divorced women are four to five times more likely to be victims of violent crime—and ten times more likely to be raped—than married women. A study of five hundred chronic juvenile offenders found that those who married and stayed married reduced their offense rate by two-thirds. Married men spend more time with their wives, who discourage criminal behavior, and less time with peers, who often do not.

20. *Married women appear to have lower risk of experiencing domestic violence than cohabiting or dating women.*

Being unmarried, and especially living with a man outside of marriage, is related to an increased risk of domestic abuse. Indeed, cohabitators are three times more likely to experience violence than spouses (13% vs. 4%).

21. *A child who is not living with his/her own two married parents is at greater risk of child abuse.*

Children living in single-mother homes have increased rates of death from intentional injuries. One study found that a preschooler living with a stepfather was forty times more likely to be sexually abused than one living with both his or her biological parents. Boyfriends commit half of all reported child abuse by nonparents.

Fundamental Conclusion: Marriage is an important social good, associated with an impressively broad array of positive outcomes for children and adults alike.

The question is, “How do we use this knowledge?” I have presented you with an overwhelming collection of findings from social science research. As the “fundamental conclusion” suggests, marriage is related to a broad array of positive outcomes for men, women, and children. This is not to say, however that science must be the basis of all government family policy decision making. I would like to close by trying to help you understand how these “facts” that have just been given to you should and should not be used.

Let me begin with a quote from Professor Don Browning and Gloria Rodrigues, from their recent book *Reweaving the Social Tapestry*:

There is no way to move directly from the facts of social science research to a public philosophy about families. One can collect all the scientific data in the world about families—and the best data at that—and not be able to derive from them even a rough consensus about how to respond to the challenges facing families. . . . All of us learn so much from the social sciences that we are tempted to think that they can give us the really big answers.³

Look at an analogy to the social science research on tobacco, obesity, and other factors of health. Evidence is overwhelming, yet ever increasing numbers of adolescents and adults continue to smoke, and the majority of Americans are overweight. The “language” of the research in the social sciences is the language of “individual self-interest.” While this is not a bad way to argue, it is incomplete and does not have the power to change lives in and of itself. Those who really understand science know that science cannot, and indeed was not designed to, answer the most fundamental questions about meaning.

I just studied a large sample of youth, adults, and married couples who completed a survey about relationships during the six months before 11 September 2001 and compared them to a matched sample of unmarried and married couples who answered the same survey in the six months following 11 September. My preliminary analysis shows that while there may be a few differences, there are not as many as the media suggested. In other words, overwhelming scientific evidence and even a major catastrophic event cannot seem to create a needed cultural change to any large degree. Therefore, what is needed? The answer is certainly NOT that the developing countries that want to maintain a strong commitment to marriage and family life should follow unthinkingly all the paths trod by Western countries as they have prospered in the last fifty years.

A recent “Letter to America” published by the Institute for American Values and signed by sixty leading American thinkers, political scientists, academics, and scholars, reviewed four values of American culture that may be attractive to developing nations. First, the conviction is that all persons possess equal dignity. Second, there is a conviction that universal moral truths exist and are accessible to all people. Third, the conviction that, because of our individual and collective access to truth is imperfect, most disagreements about values call for civility, openness to other views, and reasonable argument in pursuit of truth. And fourth, a conviction that the freedom of conscience and freedom of religion are a universal good.

But there are some values of American society which are “unattractive and harmful.” These include 1) consumerism as

a way of life, 2) the notion of freedom interpreted as meaning no rules, 3) the idea of individuals as self-made and utterly sovereign, owing little to others, to society, or to the God who gave them life, and 4) the weakening of marriage and family life—as we have seen so clearly in the research I [and others] have presented. Add to that “the enormous entertainment and communication apparatus that relentlessly glorifies such ideas and beams them, whether they are welcome or not, into nearly every corner of the globe.”⁴

I would add one more: The forgetting of our history and the declining influence of religion in the lives of Americans. This forgetting and ignoring has done much to weaken marriage and family in Western countries.

Social science does best to work within the “deeper traditions” of our cultures, not to replace them. The world’s major religions—Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism—provide the language of “commitment” that is needed. Humans are by their very nature truth seekers. In our heart of hearts, most of us genuinely want to know who we are and what meaning life has for us. Therefore, we can have some confidence in the major world religions, because we can assume that their survival for millennia means that they hold answers to most people’s fundamental questions about meaning, about existence, about life, and about death.

I had a friend and colleague, a highly-skilled researcher and clinician, who had been trained in the behavioral sciences at one of the most prestigious universities in the United States, who called me one evening at home. His question to me was, “Tom, how do you talk to your children about religion? I can talk to my children about sex, or drugs, or just about anything. But my daughter asked me a question about religion just now, and I had no idea what to say.” The therapist, highly trained in the best that behavioral sciences have to offer, was stumped by a child’s simple yet probing question about God and the meaning of life.

My call then, is for us to return to the roots of our great religious traditions that have within them the kernel of our redemption from marital and family disintegration and the suffering that entails for men, women, and children. With the descriptive findings of social science providing what Christian scriptures call a “second witness” to the foundational truths of all great religions, we can, I believe stop the decline of family life in many parts of the world, and prevent other peoples from going down that “slippery path” as their nations come out of poverty, tyranny, and disease.

Notes

1. To obtain copies of the booklet you may contact the Institute of American Values, 1841 Broadway, Suite 211, New York, NY 10023, (212) 246-3942.

2. Browning, Don W. & Rodrigues, Gloria G. *Reweaving the Social Tapestry*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2002.

3. *Reweaving the Social Tapestry*, p. 28.

4. A Letter to America, February 2002, Institute for American