

IS THE HEALTHY MARRIAGE INITIATIVE REALLY HEALTHY FOR FAMILIES?: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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The Healthy Marriage Initiative is a government proposal to expand programs promoting marriage, particularly among low-income families and welfare recipients. In this paper, I examine the implications of this proposal as it applies to child poverty. I argue that contrary to the claims of its proponents, the Healthy Marriage Initiative would not substantially reduce child poverty rates, would increase as many unhealthy as healthy marriages, and would intrude inappropriately into the lives of poor men and women.

Changes in American family structure – including a rising divorce rate, increasing numbers of single parents, and growing numbers of same-sex couples with children – are some of the most frequently discussed issues in social welfare policy today. Scholars often assert that family structures other than the “traditional” family (headed by two married, heterosexual parents) are potentially detrimental to children’s well-being. Some research has found a correlation between parental marriage and positive outcomes for children, especially decreased child poverty rates (Brown, 2004; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Based on this association, some policy-makers have concluded that social problems such as child poverty are at least partially caused by the declining marriage rate. For example, the conservative Heritage Foundation states on its Web site that “the collapse of marriage is the principal (sic) cause of child poverty in the United States” (Heritage Foundation, 2004). The rise of single parenthood has also been blamed for social ills ranging from high school dropout rates to drug use among youth (Fagan, Rector, Johnson, & Peterson, 2002).

Child poverty is a very complex problem, posing questions to which there are no clear-cut answers. However, I would like to present some concerns about using marriage as a primary strategy for addressing this problem. In this article, I will discuss the proposed Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI), a policy that is intended to reverse the trend of rising single-parenthood and improve children’s well-being on all counts. I will focus on the HMI’s relationship to child poverty, one of the primary targets

of this initiative. Finally, I will argue that HMI programs will have limited effectiveness in decreasing child poverty and that they are inappropriately intrusive and coercive in the lives of poor men and women.

Background

Historically, it is not new for marital status to be a consideration in the awarding of social benefits. For example, the widows' pensions that existed in many states prior to the Social Security Act of 1935 were not always extended to non-widowed single mothers and could be denied if a home was considered "unsuitable" (Trattner, 1994). However, proponents of marriage promotion policies claim that recent welfare policy has actually benefited single parents, thereby functioning as a disincentive to marry, and contributing to the decline of marriage (Besharov & Sullivan, 1996). For this reason, the promotion of (heterosexual) marriage has been a stated goal of welfare programs since the 1996 "welfare reform" that replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children with the Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) program. In addition, some individual states have chosen to use TANF money to promote marriage (Chase-Lansdale & Pittman, 2002).

The proposed Healthy Marriage Initiative would set aside \$100 million annually from TANF funds to be used by states for the following activities: (a) public advertising campaigns on the value of marriage and the skills needed to increase marital stability and health; (b) education in high schools on the value of marriage, relationship skills, and budgeting; (c) marriage education, marriage skills, and relationship skills programs, that may include parenting skills, financial management, conflict resolution, and job and career advancement for non-married, pregnant women and non-married, expectant fathers; (d) pre-marital education and marriage skills training for engaged couples and for couples or individuals interested in marriage; (e) marriage enhancement and marriage skills training programs for married couples; (f) divorce reduction programs that teach relationship skills; (g) marriage mentoring programs, which use married couples as role models and mentors in at-risk communities; and (h) programs to reduce the disincentives to marriage in means-tested, aid programs (ACF, 2004a).

The policy also provides for an additional \$102 million annually for "research, technical assistance, and demonstration projects" related to the above activities (ACF, 2004a). Congress has not yet approved funding for the Healthy Marriage Initiative (which is part of the 2006 TANF reauthorization bill). However, TANF funds are already being used for

marriage promotion in many states (White & Kaplan, 2003).

Marriage and Child Well-Being

The debate over the HMI and other marriage promotion policies generally revolves around three questions: first, whether higher marriage rates would improve children's well-being; second, whether government policy is able to affect marriage rates; and third, whether government has the right to intervene in favor of marriage.

Research in the social sciences has established a clear correlation between single parenthood and increased poverty rates (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). However, the causal direction of this correlation is not clear. For one thing, poverty itself can be a factor in marital success; as Roberts (2004) points out, stressors associated with poverty may contribute to marriage breakups. In addition, a number of researchers hypothesize that many of the apparent benefits of marriage are actually brought about by selection, or differences between those who choose to marry and those who do not. Based on her review of the research, Roberts estimates that about half of the alleged economic boost from marriage can be explained by selection. Similarly, Acs and Nelson (2004) found that "50 to 80 percent of the differences in child well-being between cohabiting and married families can be explained by differences in family characteristics, such as parental age, education level, and race" (p. 1). Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan (2002), examining data from the Fragile Families study, conclude that differences in human capital between married and unmarried adults translate into differences in poverty level. The authors note that proponents of marriage "are substantially overstating its benefits when they compare the earnings or poverty rates of single-mother families to those of married, two-parent families" (p. 20). Even many authors who believe marriage has beneficial effects acknowledge that these effects may not be very large. According to statistical simulations, if all single parents were to marry someone of a similar background to their own, the child poverty rate would fall 3½-4 percentage points (Acs & Nelson; Roberts). Although this difference is not insignificant, it is based on the highly unrealistic scenario of all single parents choosing to marry (and staying married) and is therefore not particularly helpful in guiding policy.

In addition, the type of family structure may not be as important as the quality of relationships in the family. Marriages marked by high levels of conflict or domestic violence clearly have negative effects on children's emotional well-being. One study that compared married parents and

divorced parents found a strong relationship between parental conflict and children's well-being, but none between family structure and children's well-being (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Although HMI proponents claim the initiative wants to increase only healthy marriages, it is unclear whether their proposed activities would be able to increase healthy marriages without increasing unhealthy ones as well. Many currently funded marriage promotion projects offer marriage skills training (ACF, 2005a). This type of program might reduce conflict in some marriages but would not offer a solution to relationships marked by domestic violence and might even be harmful to victims trying to leave such a relationship. Thus we can see that, based on the available research, increased marriage rates might create some improvement in children's economic well-being. However, it would probably not be a very large improvement, and it might have negative side effects such as increasing children's exposure to conflict or domestic violence.

Policy Effectiveness

Turning to the question of whether government programs and policies will really be able to create the desired change, there is very little empirical evidence one way or the other. In particular, there appears to be very little research documenting the effectiveness of the above-mentioned marriage skills trainings and similar activities among low-income welfare recipients. Moore, Jekielek, and Emig (2002) note that although there are "promising insights" from research, "there is not yet a proven approach for building strong marriages" (p. 7). For example, the authors cite one study that found positive short-term results from a marriage skills improvement program. However, participants in this study were primarily white, were not economically disadvantaged, and were already married prior to the program. Therefore, it is not clear whether similar programs would be generalizable to the TANF recipients who would be targeted by HMI programs.

An aspect of the HMI that has received a lot of research attention is the use of changes in welfare benefits to favor married couples, changes which have been implemented in some states (White & Kaplan, 2003). One program with positive findings in this area is the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), in which a subsidy of employment earnings (without any explicit marriage promotion initiatives) brought about a small increase in marriage rates (Ooms, 2002). However, this type of employment-related subsidy is not part of the proposed HMI. Most research does not tend to support the claim that benefit changes have an effect on the marriage

rate of welfare recipients. For example, a National Poverty Center working paper states that generally, “research has found little to no effect of welfare policies on family formation decisions” (Seefeldt & Smock, 2004, p. 10). Preliminary analysis of data from the Fragile Families Study indicates that more generous welfare benefits correlated with higher rates of cohabitation, but had no effect on marriage rates (Mincy & Dupree, 2001). Besharov and Sullivan (1996), supporters of marriage promotion, were surprised to find that New Jersey’s benefit changes had little or no effect on marriage rates among women on welfare.

These findings should not be particularly surprising when we consider the research on which factors influence expectations of marriage. For example, in communities with high rates of joblessness, partners with low earning potential may not be seen as “marriageable.” In Waller’s (2001) study of unwed parents, low expectations for marriage were highly correlated with factors such as a partner’s drug or alcohol problems, frequent conflict, and physical violence in the relationship. Under such circumstances, the author notes, encouraging marriage may “not only be inappropriate, it may also be detrimental to parents and their children” (p. 482). Despite these and other findings, policy-makers continue to rally around the claim that the marriage choices of single mothers can – and should – be shaped by welfare benefit policy.

Government Intervention

Finally, we must ask: does the government have the right to intervene in the marital choices made by individual welfare recipients? United States government welfare policy has a history of discriminating against particular groups in order to coerce recipients into valued behaviors (as in the earlier example of widows’ pensions); however, this does not mean it is right. The HMI Web page asserts that the HMI is not coercive because Americans already value marriage: “more than 93% of Americans say marital success is important to them” (ACF, 2005b). As mentioned earlier, studies have shown that welfare recipients’ reasons for not marrying are often factors such as the partner’s drug addiction, abusive behavior, or infidelity (Waller, 2001), rather than a lack of marriage values. However, administration official Wade Horn has asserted that the goal of marriage promotion is “to reinstate marriage *as an ideal* in low-income communities” (1997, p. 43, emphasis added), revealing the HMI’s true agenda: to impose specific values onto welfare recipients, who are perceived as being anti-marriage.

In addition, the HMI Web site insists that it only wants to help people

“who choose marriage for themselves [to] acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages” (ACF, 2005b). This argument seems disingenuous, given that the HMI would be directed toward welfare recipients, who are vulnerable to government coercion. Also, many existing marriage promotion programs recruit participants who are not married or engaged. For example, some healthy marriage projects currently funded by the Administration for Children and Families recruit unwed parents from hospitals through the paternity establishment process (ACF, 2004b). In addition, the HMI would not be simply a supplement to already-existing services for TANF recipients, but rather would divert TANF funds from other services.

Furthermore, the ideological underpinning of marriage promotion policies is marked by an insistence on traditional gender roles; these policies encourage job training opportunities for men (to make them more “marriageable”) while attempting to move women back into the home. For example, Besharov and Sullivan (1996) admiringly describe how if welfare benefits are lowered, “a mother who prefers to stay home with her children rather than work might trade her now lower-value benefit package for the role of housewife, caregiver to her children, and, perhaps, part-time worker” (p. 94). In essence, these authors implicitly argue that “mothers should trade dependence on welfare for dependence on a husband” (p. 92). Ultimately, it is not the government’s duty – or its right – to dictate family structure. It is the government’s function to provide as much support as possible for all families so that children’s (and adults’) well-being will be improved. The Healthy Marriage Initiative inappropriately attempts to take charge of individuals’ private decisions about family formation.

Alternative Policy Options

Many other policies could be more directly supportive of family and child well-being. Welfare benefits could be marriage-neutral (rather than privileging marriage, as encouraged by Horn & Bush, 1997), which would allow family structures to be determined by individual families. Marriage could also be made available to same-sex couples, who represent a significant percentage of cohabiting couples with children (Parke, 2003). Universal availability of quality child care would go a long way toward reducing poverty among low-income families. With quality child care easily accessible, the availability of job training for both men and women would allow partners to decide whether one or both of them would choose to work. The government could also supplement employment earnings, as in the

MFIP. Based on research findings, Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan (2002) suggest that it might be more cost-effective to focus on employment than on marriage promotion as an anti-poverty strategy.

These are just a few examples of the types of policies that would support families and help raise children out of poverty, without coercing families into what politicians believe they should be. If TANF funds were used for such policies, extensive evaluation should occur to ensure that they were actually having positive effects on children's well-being. Outcomes should be measured by children's financial, physical, and emotional health, not by whether or not more parents are getting and staying married. Policies that support working families of all kinds would be likely to have beneficial effects on children's economic well-being. In addition, once parents are able to provide basic economic support for themselves and their children, their own improved well-being will give them greater resources to focus on parenting their children and creating healthy relationships.

In contrast, implementation of the Healthy Marriage Initiative would take away funding from resources like child care, job training, and other services, which are desperately needed by working families (including single, cohabiting, and married parents). Although the HMI might increase healthy marriages, it might also increase the incidence of marriages plagued by conflict or domestic violence, and its effect on child poverty rates might be minimal. Far from bringing about its stated goal of reducing poverty, the HMI would be likely to further stigmatize single parents and to intrude coercively into the lives of poor men and women.

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