

Marriage: America's Keystone Institution

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*M*arriage is linked to better financial, social, and emotional outcomes for children, men, and women—and many of these effects appear to have a causal dimension. Many social scientists have discovered these basic patterns of findings in their work over the years. But one new development in this research is that we are seeing more evidence that marriage may matter more than ever for the well-being of children and adults, at least on some outcomes. Scholars, journalists, professionals, and policymakers should not only take note of marriage's rising value, but they should also act to make sure that more men, women, and children benefit from our nation's most fundamental institution.

“[M]arriage represents the keystone institution for most—though not all—societies and may be the most primeval of human institutions,” observed the Harvard anthropologist Joseph Henrich. Certainly, this has been and is true for the United States.

But the role and value of our “keystone” institution has come into question in recent decades. Critics on the Left have long argued that if marriage holds any benefits, they are all on the man's side. This was the view of the feminist sociologist Jesse Bernard, who wrote in her 1972 book, *The Future of Marriage*, “[M]arriage introduced such profound discontinuities into the lives of women as to constitute genuine emotional health hazards” for them.¹

More recently, as it has become clear that married women are better off emotionally, financially, and physically than unmarried women,² many progressives have pivoted to a new argument: Marriage is correlated with but does not cause better outcomes for women and men. Psychologist Bella DePaulo aims to advance this view, stating that for “nearly [two] decades, I have been arguing that research does not support the pervasive claims that getting married makes people happier or healthier.”³ She continues, “[S]everal important studies and review papers have been published that make it clearer than it has ever been before that we have been misled about the supposed benefits of getting married.”⁴ In her estimation, any apparent benefits of marriage are illusory, deriving from other advantages that married Americans are more likely to have today—like greater education and income.

Up until recently, the critics of marriage have generally hailed from the Left. But that has changed in recent years, as online influencers such as Pearl Davis and Andrew Tate have articulated messages deeply critical of the institution. Tate, a former kickboxer and one of the biggest voices in the “manosphere,” argues that the “problem is, there is zero advantage to marriage in the Western world for a man,” adding that “[i]f you use your mind, if you use your head instead of your heart, and you look at the advantages of getting married, there are absolutely none.”⁵

Negative messages from the Left and the Right regarding marriage have helped push popular support for marriage down today among U.S. adults, especially young adults. Only a slim minority in the U.S. believe that being married is essential for a fulfilling life. According to the Pew Research Center, only 16 percent of men and 17 percent of women believe that marriage is important for such a life, while about four times that number believe having a “career they enjoy” is essential for a satisfying life.⁶

So, are the critics of marriage right? Is declining public support for marriage warranted? Or does marriage promote human flourishing?

Here is the truth of the matter: Seldom in the social sciences has there been such a strong and consistent pattern of findings than the one that marriage, as our keystone institution, is strongly linked to the welfare of children, adults, and the country itself.

A Recent History of Social Science on Marriage

The history of findings on the benefits of marriage stretches back decades. In the 1970s, for instance, Vanderbilt University professor and medical sociologist Walter R. Gove started chronicling the broad, notable health benefits of marriage.⁷ He observed then, “It is shown that, controlling for

age, the married have lower mortality rates than the single, the widowed, or the divorced,” and “these differences are particularly marked among those types of mortality where one’s psychological state would appear to affect one’s life chances.”⁸

A major question regarding such findings, which we explore more fully here, is whether marriage has a causal influence upon those who enter it, or whether it merely selects for healthier, more advantaged people. Put simply, does marriage actually increase well-being or does it simply exclude the less healthy or advantaged? Gove, through his investigations, concluded early on that these benefits are “in part, because of the ‘protective’ aspects of marriage.”⁹ Gove’s conclusion has been replicated in much of the research since then.

In the 1990s, Professor Robert H. Coombs from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Medicine investigated this question. He published a thorough literature review of marriage’s relationship to personal well-being in 1991.¹⁰ Reviewing more than 130 empirical studies related to this question, Coombs concluded that “there is an intimate link between marital status and personal well-being.” He noted, “Numerous investigations beginning decades ago attest that married people live longer and generally are more emotionally and physically healthy than the unmarried.”¹¹

Moreover, based on his review of the literature, Coombs concluded that “to date, however, there is scant evidence to support this hypothesis” of selection. He adds, “By contrast, the evidence consistently supports the protection/support hypothesis” that marriage and having a spouse actually change the behavior, habits, and psychological disposition of adults in healthier directions.¹²

Another early and major contributor to this body of knowledge was University of Chicago sociologist Linda J. Waite. Her influential work stems from her 1995 presidential address to the Population Association of America, entitled, “Does Marriage Matter?,” which was subsequently published in *Demography*.¹³ In her view, marriage advances the health of both men *and* women because marriage leads to more healthy behaviors. In Waite’s words:

Married men and women exhibit lower levels of negative health behaviors than the unmarried. Perhaps as a result, a good deal of research evidence suggests that married men and women face lower risks of dying at any point than those who have never been married or whose previous marriage has ended.¹⁴

Waite’s research finds three primary reasons that marriage “reduce[s] the risk of dying and lengthen[s] life.” “First, marriage appears to reduce

risky and unhealthy behaviors.”¹⁵ This stems from the care and accountability that marriage typically furnishes. For instance, wives often monitor the health of their husbands and discourage them from engaging in risky behavior that would harm their health. At the same time, men who marry feel a greater sense of responsibility that motivates them to avoid risky or unhealthy choices.¹⁶ This is why, for instance, insurance companies deem married men a lower risk and allow them to pay lower monthly premiums.

Second, she explains, “marriage increases material well-being—income, assets and wealth.” Waite contends that these advantages “can be used to purchase better medical care, better diet, and safer surroundings, which lengthen life.” In her view, “This material improvement seems to be especially important” for women’s health.¹⁷

Finally, her research found that “marriage provides individuals with a network of help and support, with others who rely on them and on whom they can rely; this seems to be especially important for men.”¹⁸ Moreover, the research generally indicates that cohabitation and serious dating relationships do not provide the same kind of protection and support that marriage does.¹⁹

In 2000, Waite (with Maggie Gallagher) expanded this earlier research into a book, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, which chronicled even more research detailing the ways in which marriage provided distinct benefits to men and women.²⁰

Contemporary Research on the Benefits of Marriage

But what has happened with the academic research on this question in the intervening years? It has only continued to show, on average, that marriage is a keystone institution. In fact, we now have evidence that the benefits of marriage for both adults and children may be increasing for some outcomes.²¹

What does the latest social science tell us about the benefits of marriage? As noted in the book *Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization*, marriage continues to be linked to greater financial and emotional well-being for children, men, and women.²²

Let’s consider the financial health of women and men. As married women head into retirement, the best data show they have accumulated, on average, \$357,000 in median assets, compared to less than \$30,000 for their unmarried peers. Even after controlling for factors like education and race, the marriage premium amounts to more than \$300,000 for fifty-something women. Likewise, women ages 18 to 55 are 80 percent less likely to be poor,

compared to their unmarried female counterparts, after socioeconomic controls have been taken into account.²³

Much the same pattern applies to men. As this author noted in *Get Married*, “Stably married men heading into retirement...have a staggering ten times more assets than their divorced or never-married male peers” with all other things being generally equal.²⁴ They are also 55 percent less likely to be poor, after controlling for a range of sociodemographic factors.²⁵

These figures far exceed the amount gained by simply having a contributing partner. That is in part because married people also manage their money more prudently than those in other relational categories. The bottom line is that Americans who get and stay married are markedly more likely to be flourishing financially than their fellow citizens who do not.

But obviously, there is more to life than health and wealth. What about happiness? It turns out that married men and women are almost twice as happy, compared to their peers who are not married. For example, in the 2014–2018 General Social Survey (GSS), a leading social barometer conducted every two years by the University of Chicago, 40 percent of married men ages 18 to 55 are “very happy,” compared to 20 percent of unmarried men. Likewise, 39 percent of married women are “very happy,” compared to 23 percent of unmarried women.²⁶ In fact, after controlling for factors like race and education, the odds that married men and women are very happy with their lives increase by 151 percent, compared to those who are unmarried. This is a large effect and exceeds the effects of education and having a high income.²⁷ In other words, in a culture that tends to put a premium on the importance of education and money, the evidence tells us that marriage is a more powerful predictor of adult happiness than these two socioeconomic factors. And what is especially notable here is that couples who report high-quality marriages enjoy a staggering 545 percent increase in their odds of being very happy in life. There is no other life factor that can compete with marital quality—not money, career satisfaction, or sexual frequency, for instance—when it comes to predicting global life satisfaction.²⁸

The importance of marriage for individual happiness also has implications for national trends in happiness. After demonstrating that married adults are happier, the University of Chicago economist Sam Peltzman went on to explore how national shifts in this core institution help account for recent declines in reports of happiness from men and women across the United States. He concluded that the “recent decline in the married share of adults can explain (statistically) most of the recent decline in overall happiness.”²⁹ In other words, across the nation, less marriage equals less happiness. In fact, the evidence that marriage is linked to happiness is so

strong that one writer at *The Atlantic*, an outlet not known for being a platform for conservative messaging, recently acknowledged in an article on the subject that “[m]arried people are happier. Period.”³⁰

And who are happiest of all people? Contrary to a lot of messaging you will encounter on mainstream and social media today discounting the value of parenthood, it is married men *and* women with children, and by notable margins. For instance, looking at men ages 18 to 55 in the 2022 GSS, sociologist Wendy Wang and I found that 40 percent of married mothers are very happy with their lives, compared to 25 percent of married childless women, 22 percent of single, childless women, and 17 percent of unmarried mothers. Likewise, 35 percent of married fathers are very happy, compared to 30 percent of married men with no children, 14 percent of single, childless men, and 12 percent of unmarried fathers.³¹ Many people today would be surprised to learn that the happiest Americans are married fathers and married mothers. All this suggests that the path to happiness in America runs through family life, encumbrances and all.

So, more than 50 years of social science and medical research generally demonstrate that married men and women live longer, have healthier lives, earn and save more money, recover more quickly and successfully from illness, steer clear of trouble with the law, are less likely to attempt and commit suicide, and are more likely to be happy.³² Indeed, on most measures of financial, physical, social, and emotional well-being, men, women, and children in stable married homes do better.

But we must return to a question I raised earlier: Is all of this because healthier and more advantaged people choose marriage, or is there evidence that the institution of marriage exerts a causal influence on well-being?

Marital Selection or Protection?

After reviewing the literature on this question, I concluded in *Get Married* that

marriage is not simply an institution that collects relatively hardworking, socially adept, and happy people. It is also an institution that transforms people, bonding men and women to a particular person, to a whole way of life. In doing so...it endows their lives, day in and day out, with more meaning, prosperity, stability, and solidarity, all of which typically boost the sense of satisfaction that men and women take from their lives after they enter our civilization's most fundamental institution. In other words, the effect of marriage on human happiness...is also causal.³³

My conclusion here is informed by studies that rely on innovative methodological approaches to the study of marriage. For instance, two Canadian economists, Shawn Grover and John Helliwell, studied the British Household Panel Survey and the United Kingdom's Annual Population Survey to examine married and unmarried individuals over decades.³⁴ They wanted to test the assertion made by scholars such as Bella DePaulo that happiness is higher for married men and women early in marriage, but that the happiness premium associated with marriage declines as the decades pass.³⁵ In other words, to assess the idea that there is a "honeymoon effect" associated with marriage that is not sustained over time.

Their study controlled for pre-marital well-being levels to see if marriage itself was linked to a boost in emotional well-being. They found that "the married are still more satisfied" even after these controls and that the "difference between married and unmarried is greatest when people are in their late 40s and 50s," well after any honeymoon effect. In their view, all this "suggest[s] a causal effect at all stages of the marriage, from pre-nuptial bliss to marriages of long-duration." They added, "We explore friendship as a mechanism which could help explain a causal relationship between marriage and life satisfaction, and find that well-being effects of marriage are about twice as large for those whose spouse is also their best friend."³⁶ In other words, marriage seems to have a causal effect on life satisfaction, provided that spouses are good or great friends to one another.

Two other studies followed identical genetic twins, one married, the other unmarried, to see how marital status was linked to other measures of well-being.

One of these studies, published in *The American Economic Review* and conducted jointly by economists at University of California San Diego (UC San Diego) and the University of Minnesota, looked at men and their earnings and found that married twin men earned more than their unmarried twin brothers.³⁷ "Thus," they concluded, "the findings indicate that little, if any, of the marital wage premium is due to the selection of more productive men into marriage." In fact, they found a "26-percent increase in wages associated with marriage" in their twin study, adding that "our results suggest that marriage causes men's wages to rise."³⁸

The other study about twins looked at marriage and anti-social behavior longitudinally among genetic twins "to estimate what the married twin would have looked like [behavior-wise] had he remained unmarried."³⁹ This study found support for both selection and protection; on the latter front, the psychologist Aleandra Burt and her colleagues discovered that "the married twin engaged in less antisocial behavior following marriage than his

unmarried co-twin.” The authors concluded that “the current results provide an important constructive replication and extension of prior findings indicating that entrance into the state of marriage inhibits male antisocial behavior,” adding, “[R]ather than resulting solely from misidentified selection processes, it appears that marriage represents a potent and at least partially environmentally mediated influence on desistence from antisocial behavior.” In other words, being married seems to push men’s behavior in a more pro-social direction.⁴⁰

Another study on criminality among married and unmarried men conducted by sociologist Robert Sampson at Harvard University and his colleagues found that getting married is associated with an approximately 35 percent reduction in the odds of engaging in criminal behavior for men who had been unmarried and had previously engaged in criminal activity.⁴¹ These scholars tracked high-risk young males over time to test, in part, whether it was selection or causation that drove this result. In Sampson and his colleagues’ words, their “results are robust, supporting the inference that states of marriage causally inhibit crime over the life course” and, they added, that marriage seems to have a “‘civilizing’ effect” on the men in their sample.

They also note existing data showing reductions in criminal behavior “were greater in marriage compared with cohabitation for men and women” because the relational clarity and social expectations of marriage make different claims upon the couple than cohabitation does.⁴²

Additional research done by Tyler VanderWeele, a professor of biostatistics at Harvard’s School of Public Health, examines leading life factors associated with human flourishing.⁴³ Drawing upon his work and his assessment of the broader research on marriage, he also concludes that many of marriage’s beneficial “effects” appear to be causal.

In his article, “On the Promotion of Human Flourishing,” VanderWeele explains:

[T]he existing longitudinal studies indicate...that marriage is associated with higher life satisfaction and greater affective happiness. Evidence moreover suggests that marriage is associated with better mental health, physical health, and longevity, *even controlling for baseline health* (emphasis added).⁴⁴

This last statement suggests that healthier people choosing to marry (what social scientists call the “selection effect”) does not appear to entirely explain the positive mental and physical health outcomes tied to marriage. VanderWeele thereby concludes the following:

The *effects of marriage* on health, happiness and life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial stability are *thus profound* (emphasis added).⁴⁵

He adds that these benefits do not flow only to adults, but to children as well.

Marriage also has profound effects on the lives of children. Children within, rather than outside of, marriage are more likely to have better mental and physical health, to be happier in childhood and later in life, and less likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behaviors, are more likely to have better relationships with their parents, and are themselves less likely to later divorce.⁴⁶

All of this is why, in VanderWeele’s view, “[m]arriage and family thus appear to be an important pathway to flourishing,” rather than merely an expression of flourishing that preceded wedlock.⁴⁷

A Growing Marriage Premium?

There is no question that marriage is linked to better financial, social, and emotional outcomes for children, men, and women—and that many of these effects appear to have a causal dimension. As we have seen, many social scientists have discovered these basic patterns of findings in their work over the years. But one new development in this research is that we are seeing more evidence that marriage may matter more than ever for the well-being of children and adults, at least on some outcomes.

Take adult mortality, for instance. One study published in the journal *Demography* and conducted by the RAND Corporation found that not only is mortality “higher among unmarried individuals,” but that the protective power of marriage when it comes to mortality is *increasing* in the contemporary world.⁴⁸ The RAND scholars report stated:

Our results are instead more consistent with the cross-national comparative findings of *widening* mortality differences between married and unmarried individuals in high-income countries over recent decades (emphasis added).⁴⁹

In other words, the power of marriage to protect against an early death seems to be growing.

Or take children’s educational attainment. Two different studies indicate that the link between family structure and children’s educational attainment

is increasing in recent decades. In *Education Next*, Kathleen Ziol-Guest of New York University and her colleagues studied the link between family structure and years of schooling children completed.⁵⁰ From the late 1960s to the 1990s, the scholars found that “the estimated relationship between the single-parent family structure variable and educational attainment more than tripled in size.”⁵¹ Likewise, research done by this author and a number of colleagues found that the effect of coming from an intact family boosted Baby Boomers’ odds of graduating from college by 78 percent, but “[m]illennials who reached their twenties in the 2010s got a bigger boost, of approximately 163%, in their odds of graduating from college when they came from a stably married family.”⁵²

Findings like this suggest not only that marriage matters, but that it may matter more than ever for children and adults. The marriage premium for some key adult and child outcomes may be increasing because we live in a world in which there are fewer alternative sources of solidarity than there once were, and a world in which married men are more engaged husbands and fathers. Regardless, the latest social science suggests that the value of this keystone institution may not just be enduring but growing. Scholars, journalists, professionals, and policymakers should not only take note of marriage’s rising value, but they should also act to make sure that more men, women, and children benefit from our nation’s most fundamental institution.

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