

CORNELL EVOLVING FAMILY CONFERENCE:

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY: COMPLEXITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACTS

Session 1: Theoretical Perspectives on the Changing Meaning of Marriage

Reading the Past, Present, and Future Sideways: Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Family Life

Arland Thornton, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan

For centuries, scholars, policy makers, and ordinary people have been fascinated by temporal and cross-cultural variation in family life. Human experience has provided these observers with enormous amounts of temporal and geographical variation to consider—so much so, in fact, that observers have kept very busy just describing and categorizing the many family forms. Family theorists of many types have also used the enormous cross-cultural differences and temporal changes to create and test their theories. Ordinary people, policy makers, and scholars have frequently confounded temporal and cross-cultural variation, so that, for many, culture has become history and history has become culture. Many have read history sideways (geographically) by assuming that current family life in a society perceived to be less advanced can serve as a proxy of what family life was like in the past in a society currently viewed as more advanced. And, this reading of history from cross-cultural information has been used to point the way to the future for both societies that consider themselves developed and for those that see themselves as developing. For those considered less developed, the way to future advancement and progress is often believed to be in the direction of the family life of societies perceived to be more advanced. And for those considered more developed, the way to yet more advancement and well-being is often seen through becoming even less like those who are seen as less developed. In addition, cross-cultural observations have been used to identify certain human conditions as defining fundamental principles of human rights. This paper will discuss some ways history, culture, and their intermingling can influence family life, public policy, and the future.

Women's Lives: Fertility, Family, and the Future

Bobbi Low, Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan

Women's Lives have changed in many ways from the times of traditional societies. But one thing has not changed: in many important domains, women face harsher tradeoffs than do men with regard to balancing their reproductive lives and their efforts to acquire important resources. Here I consider the patterned variation in women's life history patterns, and how they are influenced by ecological constraints, individual history, and social influences.

A Gender Perspective on Marriage

Paula England, Sociology, Stanford University

Is marriage good for women? It turns out that the answer depends a lot on what comparisons we make. Feminist analyses have often focused on the ways in which marriages encourage a gender-

based division of labor and give men power over women. The power differential is surely bad for women. Yet low-marriage regimes also have a strong gender division of labor that is often not recognized—women still generally also do all the child rearing, this time with little money or help from men. Whether this is good for women depends a lot on how much the state collectivizes the costs of child rearing.

Session 2: Empirical Evidence on Mate Selection and Marriage: Economic and Evolutionary Perspectives

The Economics of the Marriage Contract: Theories and Evidence

Imran Rasul, Department of Economics, University College London

In this paper we ask, what is the role of the marriage contract? We first formalize three prominent hypotheses on why people marry. These are based on marriage providing an exogenous payoff to married partners; marriage as a commitment device; and marriage as a signaling device. The comparative static we focus on is how a fall in divorce costs affects the divorce hazard. Each theory highlights that divorce costs affect the divorce hazard both through an effect on married couples directly; and through an effect on the composition of couples that decide to marry – a selection effect.

We then bring these alternative views of the marriage contract to bear on the data using individual marriage and divorce certificate data. Such disaggregated information allows us to identify both the direct and selection effects. The results emphasize the importance of viewing marriage as a commitment device for explaining behavior in the American marriage market.

Human Pair-bonds as Mixtures of Cooperative and Conflictual Elements: An Evolutionary Perspective

Steven W. Gangestad, Department of Psychology, University of New Mexico

In most species, care for and investment in offspring is performed almost exclusively by one sex, typically females. In a few species, parents of both sexes have evolved to invest substantially and cooperatively in offspring. The extent to which adaptations for biparental care have historically been selected in humans has recently been debated. Though the matter is not yet fully settled, evidence, I suggest, favors the view that men and women do possess adaptations that function to provide investment in offspring in cooperation with mates. Male-female pair-bonds partly take shape out of mates' shared interests. The existence of shared interests, however, does not imply identical interests. In many species in which males and females cooperatively raise offspring, conflicts of interest between the sexes have fueled coevolution giving rise to sexually antagonistic adaptations, ones that benefit the bearer's sex at the expense of costs to mates of the other sex. Clear footprints of sexually antagonistic coevolution can be seen in adaptations of both men and women. Human romantic relationships ultimately take shape out of people's adaptive design for cooperating—often lovingly—with partners in pursuit of shared interests in conjunction with each sex's adaptive design for pursuing their own interests (or those of same-sex ancestors) that conflict with partners'.

Session 3: Contemporary Families

The Association between Change and Stability in the Family of Origin and Mental Health across the Transition to Adulthood

Claire M. Kamp Dush, Institute for the Social Sciences, Cornell University

Mothers in contemporary families move in and out of romantic relationships – including marriage and cohabitation – over their children’s youth and beyond. This paper will examine how change and stability in the family of origin impacts children’s mental health in adolescence and longitudinally into young adulthood. Specifically, this paper extends previous research by examining multiple types of transitions, including divorce and cohabitation dissolution, as well as the number of transitions, and also by examining mental health not only in adolescence but across the transition to adulthood.

Gay Parenthood and the Redefinition of Motherhood, Fatherhood, and the Politics of Gender and Family

Judith Stacey, Department of Sociology, New York University

Visible, intentional gay parenthood signals transformations in the meaning and practice of maternity, paternity, and family formation more generally. At the same time that it has become a leading flash point in the culture wars, it presents a wealth of opportunities and challenges for research and theory in gender and family. Building upon the analysis of research on lesbian and gay families in the article I co-authored with Tim Biblarz, (How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter? this presentation will draw on the newer generation of research on planned lesbian and gay parenthood to ask what it can contribute to an understanding of how the gender of parents matters, and thereby reconfigure social science research on gender differences in parenting as well as public debates about fatherlessness and motherlessness.

Reconsidering the Association between Stepfamilies and Adolescent Well-Being

Megan Sweeney, Department of Sociology, University of California – Los Angeles

Although almost one-third of all children born in the United States in recent years are expected to spend some time living in a stepfamily, our understanding of the implications of parental remarriage for the well-being of youth remains largely incomplete. A growing body of evidence, however, suggests that remarriage may not tend to benefit children, which is surprising given that remarriage can increase family income, offers the potential for improved supervision of children, and can provide emotional support to a potentially over-extended single parent. Yet most previous research on family structure has focused on the well-being of youth in single-parent families. The less extensive body of research focusing on stepfamilies has been limited in a number of respects. For example, many previous studies of family-structure effects on children have failed to clearly define “stepfamilies” and have overlooked major sources of heterogeneity in stepfamily forms. Although contributing considerably to our understanding of stepfamily dynamics, samples analyzed in more psychologically-oriented studies have also tended to be non-population based and to under-represent minorities and poor children.

My research reconsiders the association between stepfamilies and the well-being of adolescents using data from a large and nationally-representative sample. I pay particular attention to diversity in stepfamily forms, distinguishing stepfamilies formed after divorce from those formed after a non-marital birth, as well as stepfamilies formed through marriage from those formed through non-marital cohabitation. I consider two sets of questions in my research. First, how do youth in stepfamilies fare, and do the apparent effects of parental (re)marriage and union formation tend to vary across child outcomes? Second, what underlying processes might be responsible for observed relationships between stepfamilies and child well-being? Are these relationships causal or spuriously produced by the nature of selection into stepfamilies?

Session 4: Cohabitation

The Role of Cohabitation in Family Formation -- The United States Experience in Comparative Perspective

Patrick Heuveline, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago

The prevalence of nonmarital cohabitation is steadily increasing in the United States. In evaluating the contribution of this new living arrangement to family formation, analysts have relied primarily on comparisons between individuals who cohabit and those who do not. We complement this line of inquiry by comparing the U.S. and 16 industrialized nations. We first identify six conceptually distinct ideal types of cohabitation with respect to family formation. We then propose empirical indicators to distinguish between the different ideal types, and estimate the values of these indicators for each of the 17 nations. Our findings indicate that although a number of countries fit an empirical pattern corresponding to one ideal type, cohabitation in the U.S. is more difficult to characterize.

Why Shack Up? Motives to Cohabit among Young Adults in the United States

Pamela Smock, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan, Wendy Manning, Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, Penelope Huang, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Mills College, and Cara Bergstrom, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan

Unmarried cohabitation has become the modal path to marriage in the United States for heterosexual men and women; thus understanding marriage formation requires in-depth understanding of the meaning of cohabiting unions. Drawing on data from 18 focus group interviews (n=138), supplemented by data from roughly 50 in-depth interviews with cohabiting working and middle-class young adults, this paper explores motivations and beliefs surrounding reasons to cohabit or to refrain from doing so. Our goal is two-fold: (1) to identify central themes regarding motivations for cohabitation; and (2) to explore possible variation in themes along the lines of gender and race/ethnicity. Our findings suggest that primary motives to cohabit include spending more time together due to affection, attraction, and logistics; the ability to share expenses; and the opportunity to evaluate compatibility. Further, while there is little evidence of variation by race and ethnicity, the results suggest gender differences in how love and sex are discussed as motivations to cohabit, with men being more likely than women to emphasize sex and less likely to emphasize love. Moreover, we find that men and women understand cohabitation to constrain different processes. Men tend to perceive a loss of freedom associated with cohabitation, while women express concerns that cohabitation delays marriage. Overall, for women more so than for men, the goal of cohabitation is marriage; for men, the linkage between cohabitation and marriage appears less clear. These differences are consistent with the notion that gendered cultural schemas of intimate relationships extend to cohabiting unions, indicating a gender gap in understandings of the role of cohabitation in the union formation process.

Session 5: Issues Surrounding the “Strengthening of Marriage”

The Case for Preventive Interventions to Strengthen Couple Relationships: Good for Couples, good for Children

Carolyn Pape Cowan & Philip A. Cowan, Department of Psychology, University of California - Berkeley

On the average, without intervention, satisfaction with couple relationships decline over the childrearing years - for fathers and mothers in both married and cohabiting couples. This decline has consequences for the well-being of both parents and children. Hundreds of correlational studies now show that children whose parents have high levels of unresolved conflict and are unhappy with their couple relationship are at risk for academic, social, and emotional difficulties. Data from our own and other intervention studies with middle class families demonstrate that couple relationship distress plays a causal role in shaping the quality of parent-child relationships and children's intellectual and social adaptation to school. For these families, early preventive interventions to strengthen couple relationships before distress becomes intractable have the potential for positive effects on all family members. For low-income families, there were no systematic studies of couple-focused interventions until very recently. Preliminary results from a new study of families in four California counties suggest that couples group interventions for low-income married and unmarried couples can reduce parents' psychiatric symptoms and parenting stress, increase fathers' involvement in the care of their children, increase parents' satisfaction as a couple, and reduce children's aggressive behavior. We will discuss the implications of these results for policy, with particular attention to whether "marriage" or "couple relationships" should be the stated focus of intervention.

The Goals and Challenges of Federal Initiatives Evaluating Marriage Education Programs Among Low-Income Populations
Lisa Gennetian, MDRC

This paper will first provide a historical overview of the Federal Healthy Marriage initiative, paying particular attention to federal commitment for research and evaluation of marriage education programs for low-income populations. This sets the context for a more detailed discussion of two, large, random assignment studies of marriage education programs for low-income unmarried couples who are first-time parents, and low-income married couples with children. The paper describes the conceptual framework for these evaluations, understanding how relationship skills can affect marriage and marital stability as well as the importance of variety of individual, family and community factors that can influence relationship skills, marital behavior and participation in marriage education programs. The details of the programs, the random assignment design, and the research are described. The paper particularly highlights unique challenges in developing these programs—such as the focus on the couple as a unit of intervention as compared to an individual—and the accompanying research studies relative to comparable evaluations of welfare and employment policies.

Differentiating Among Types of Domestic Violence: Implications for Healthy Marriages
Mike Johnson, Department of Sociology, Pennsylvania State University

The global concept of "domestic violence" actually refers to a number of quite distinct phenomena that have different causes, different developmental trajectories, and different effects. They therefore have different implications for healthy marriages and healthy marriage initiatives. I will present a typology of intimate partner violence (IPV) that is rooted in feminist theories of control and that resolves the long-standing debate in the literature regarding the gender asymmetry of IPV. Data from a number of different studies in the United States and Britain indicate that the three major types of IPV (intimate terrorism, violent resistance, situational couple violence) have different causes and different effects on relationships. I will discuss the implications of the distinctions for healthy marriage initiatives and for policies that encourage women to enter into or stay in marriages.