The American Family: Marriage Crisis in "Middle America"

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Introduction

At present American culture seems obsessed with marriage, from TV shows like *Married*, *Surviving Marriage*, *The Bachelor*, *Marriage Boot Camp: Reality Stars*, *Married at First Sight*, through the $72 billion USD spent annually on weddings (Writer 2015), to the passionate debate on same-sex marriage. However, there has been a sharp decline in marriages among young adult Americans "for whom raising children amid unstable cohabiting relationships and serial partnerships is in danger of becoming the new norm" (Marquardt et al. 2015:xi).

The "marriage crisis" is especially affecting Americans (aged 26 to 60) who have a secondary but no higher education degree, the so-called "Middle America," that constitute nearly 60% of the total U.S. population. "Four decades ago, these moderately educated Americans led the kind of family lives that looked much like the family lives of the more highly educated classes. They were just as likely to be happily married, and just as likely to be in first marriages" (Whitehead 2012:4). Currently they are considerably less apt to create and sustain stable marriages, or even enter into one.

Why is this important? Marriage, besides being a contract between private citizens, is also a multifaceted cultural, political, social, economic and religious institution. Matrimony nurtures "small cooperative unions – also known as stable families – that enable children to thrive, shore up communities, and help family members to succeed during good times and to weather the bad times" (Marquardt et al. 2015: xi). According to the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the II Vatican Council: "The well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy condition of that community produced by marriage and family" (*GS* 1965:47).

Researchers are also discovering that the vanishing of conjugal unions among Middle Americans is following the loss of one of America's foundational pillars, the middle class, traditionally based on savings, work, and families (Baker 2003). This is "a change that strikes at the heart of the American Dream" (Marquardt et al. 2015:xi).

I Want to Marry But Not Yet

According to the 2001 *Results from Marital Status Life Tables for the United States*, "Middle Americans" plan to get married one day. They also report that being in a strong and long-lasting conjugal union is "extremely important" to them (Shoen and Standish 2001:553-563).Yet, the "signs of the times" show that the average marrying age is 29 for the groom and 27 for the bride in this segment of the population (Hymowitz et alt. 2013). That is higher than the 1990 average of 26 and 23 respectively (Castillo 2013). *The Knot 2014 Real Weddings Study* puts it even higher at 31 for men and 29 for women (XO Group 2014).

The increase of marrying age is linked to economic and cultural reasons. Economically, Americans are taking longer to graduate and find stable jobs. Countless employment opportunities have vanished from neighborhoods, medical management is tentative, and the expenditures for shelter and tertiary education have skyrocketed (Wilcox et al. 2011). Culturally, "young adults have increasingly come to see marriage as a 'capstone' rather than a 'cornerstone' – that is, something they do *after* they have all their other ducks in a row, rather than a foundation for launching in-

to adulthood and parenthood" (Hymowitz et al. 2013).

This economic and cultural paradigm shift has also resulted in 48% of American women cohabitating before marriage compared to 34% in 1995 (Copen 2013:1)[1]. Between 2006 and 2010 only 40% of young and old cohabitating women married after 3 years of living together with a partner, while the rest did not marry at all due to maintaining their cohabitating status (32%) or ending the relationship (27%) (Copen 2013:1). Across the nation as a whole, the likelihood that the first marriage after cohabitation will likely end in divorce after 10 years of marriage is 33% (DHHS 2002: 55, 72).The probability of divorce for those in a second marriage after 10 years of marital life increases to 39% (DHHS 2002:83).

Besides the cultural and economic reasons mentioned above, the 1960s sexual revolution continues to play a significant role in women's hesitation to marry today. Women used to depend on men financially, but that is no longer the case in most situations (DeParle and Tavernise 2012). In the past, approximately 1/3 of marriages in the United States were due to pregnancies (DeParle and Tavernise 2012). Couples would marry to maintain respectability, as well as, in the case of women, financial support. There is no longer societal pressure to maintain respectability in this way. Others cite their parents' failed marriages as reasons to wait. Nevertheless, "their children are exposed to precisely the kinds of instability – serial cohabitations and breakups – that their parents hoped to avoid by not rushing into marriage in the first place" (Marquardt et al. 2015:7).

Children Are the Biggest Losers

The biggest impact of the marriage crisis in Middle America is on the number of out-of-wedlock births. 24 years old is the median age within this segment of the population for having a first child, while 27 is the median age for their first marriage (Castillo 2013). Therefore, 58% of firstborns are born out of wedlock within this group (Castillo 2013). However, as Amber and David Lapp are documenting, Middle Americans still want offspring to have both parents while growing up, even if they still hesitate to tie the knot (Lapp 2012).

Although many cohabitating couples may be living together when their child is born, these tenuous bonds are unstable compared to permanent marital ones. Sociologist Andrew Cherlin has observed that these "turbulent" Middle American families live in "sheer movement: frequent transitions, shorter relationships. Americans step on and off the carousel of intimate partnerships… more often" (Cherlin 2009:5).

Researchers have regularly discovered that children of non-married parents, compared to those of married couples, are less likely to flourish on many social, educational, and psychological outcomes. They "face elevated risks of falling into poverty, failing in school or suffering emotional and behavioral problems" (DeParle and Tavernise 2012). These children tend to do as poorly as children in single-parent households (Marquardt et al. 2015:8). Moreover, according to the *IV National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect*, offspring raised in cohabiting partnerships had 10 times the rate of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and nearly "8 times the rate of neglect, than children living with married biological parents or single-parent families" (Seldak et al. 2010:12).

The future of the United States is being raised in non-stable environments that do not prepare them for ever-increasing and rapid economic changes, mounting privatization, and expanding globalization. The loss of social prospects for these Middle American offspring and kinfolk is substantial (Marquardt et al. 2015:7). The cost to tax payers of non-stable families is staggering: $112 billion annually, according to conservative estimates (Scafidi 2008:5).

The *National Surveys of Family Growth* for 1982 and those for 2006–2010 report that

in 1982 only 31% of 14-year-old girls from high school educated homes were living in non-intact families as opposed to 40% of those in less educated homes. Between 2006-2010 the average increased to 43%, closer to the 49% of those from the least educated homes (NCHS 1982, BCHS 2006-2010). Conversely, "over this same period of time, family stability has remained high in college-educated homes, with only about 21 percent of female adolescents from college-educated homes living in a non-intact family" (BCHS 2006-2010).

The dire predicament of this Middle American population is the chief challenge to the present and future state of marriage and family life in the United States. William E. Simon Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, Kay S. Hymowitz, has noted: "The Great Crossover marks the moment at which unmarried motherhood moved from the domain of our poorest populations to become the norm for America's large and already flailing middle class" (Hymowitz et al. 2013). As W. Bradford Wilcox argues, when the family lives of the secondary-educated population begin to resemble that of the poor, their family patterns become "more likely to resemble those of high school dropouts, with all the attendant problems of economic stress, partner conflict, single parenting, and troubled children" (Wilcox 2010:xi).

Good-bye Middle Class

Researchers are also discovering that the vanishing of matrimony in Middle America is following the diminishment of the middle class in the United States in general (Marquardt et alt. 2015:xi). The Pew Research Center discovered that, in 2011, 51% of all U.S. adults belonged to middle-income households, whereas back in 1971 that number had been 61%. The reduced proportion of middle-income homes led by married couples (from 74% to 55%) has been in sync with the decrease in the middle class (Pew Foundation 2012).

This vanishing of matrimony in Middle America "imperils the middle class and fosters a society of winners and losers" (Marquardt et alt. 2015:8). Children born into cohabiting partnerships are more prone to duplicate their fragmented family patterns, and thus experience the distress, poverty and dangers that result, than offspring raised in families headed by their biological, married fathers and mothers who, in all probability, will have the same advantages of their parents' life: obtaining higher education degrees and entering into generally more secure and higher-quality marriages (Hymowitz 2007).

The Brookings Institution economist, Isabel Sawhill, additionally maintains that: "The majority (61%) of Americans achieve the American dream by reaching the middle class by middle age, but there are large gaps by race, gender, and children's circumstances at birth. […] Success begets further success. Children who are successful at each life stage from early childhood to young adulthood are much more likely to achieve the American Dream" (Sawhill et al. 2012:2).

Conclusion

In the past, when the American family has experienced dramatic changes, there have been calls for national action.[2] This has not been the case, instead, in the latest family and marriage crisis affecting the majority of Americans (Whitehead 2012: 8). "Even as unstable cohabiting relationships, breakups, and serial partnerships have become increasingly common in Middle American families, our national leaders, presidential candidates, and political parties seem to have barely noticed" (Marquardt et al. 2015:6).

Can the future of the American family be secured? The United States needs to change its federal and state policies as well as do a cultural overhaul, according to experts. The Institute for American Values and the National Marriage Project of the University of Virginia recommend:

> [E]liminating marriage penalties and disincentives for the poor, for unwed mothers, and for older Americans; tripling the child tax credit; helping young men to become marriageable men; ending anonymous fatherhood; preventing unnecessary divorce; providing marriage education for newly-forming stepfamilies; investing in and evaluating marriage and relationship education programs; engaging Hollywood; launching social media campaigns about the facts and fun of marriage; and modeling how to talk about our shared marriage values despite our differences" (Marquardt et al. 2012:xi).

In the United States, the institution of marriage has always been, and remains, a fundamental gateway to social, political, cultural and economic opportunity. Hence America needs to confront today the challenge of improving the health of the family for the sake of its future. Even minimal efforts to strengthen the family unit today will set the foundation for a strong and sustainable "vital cell" for the American society of the future. But ultimately this will only happen if Middle Americans consciously and intentionally "want to bond with one another and give their children the gift of their father and mother in a lasting marriage" (Marquardt et al. 2015:12).

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NOTES

[1] "Between 1995 and 2006–2010, the percentage of women who cohabited as a first union increased for all Hispanic origin and race groups, except for Asian women. In 2006–2010, 70% of women with less than a high school diploma cohabited as a first union, compared with 47% of women with a bachelor's degree or higher. First premarital cohabitations were longest for foreign-born Hispanic women (33 months) and shortest for white women (19 months)" (Copen 2013:1).

[2] "In the 1960s, we debated marriage among African Americans and the poor. In the 1990s, we debated whether the two-parent home was generally better for children than the alternatives. And in recent years, we've been fiercely debating gay marriage" (Whitehead 2012:8).