

Marriage-Only Forces Don't Help Today's Families

by Dorian Solot and Marshall Miller

Marriage Rates Hits the Pits, Study Says

Kids Fail To See Benefits of Marriage Over Living Together

'Shacking Up' Means More Break-Ups

It's been hard to miss headlines like these recently. They've been splashed across newspapers across the country and become the focus of an endless stream of radio and television talk shows.

Reading further you might have learned:

- If you live with your sweetie but you're not married, you increase the chances that you'll divorce someday.
- If you're single you won't be as healthy as your married friends, and you'll die younger.
- Children raised by anything other than their biological parents, a heterosexual married couple, don't do as well in school, are at higher risk of dropping out of school, and are more likely to become delinquent and be imprisoned.
- The institution of marriage is in serious trouble.

Messages like these have captured the media's attention this year in part because of the work of a small organization based at Rutgers University, the National Marriage Project. Founded in 1997, this self-described "nonpartisan, nonsectarian, interdisciplinary initiative" has taken a leading role in attracting media attention for a pro-marriage agenda.

In the first nine months of this year, the National Marriage Project released three reports. The first, packaged as a review of research about cohabitation, included explicit warnings for young people about the

alleged dangers of living with an unmarried partner and conveniently ignored published research that didn't support its thesis. The second, entitled "Why Wed?" attempted to understand young adults' views on marriage by conducting focus groups with 24 twentysomethings from New Jersey. The most recent report, released in July, was the first of what the Project says will be an annual State of Our Unions report on marriage. Taken together, the three reports have a clear goal: to convince more people to get married.

Trying to push everyone into the marriage box is an old tactic. For much of history, patriarchal social structures didn't give women much choice about it: if you couldn't work to support yourself, you needed marriage in order to survive. Some religions added their voice to the cause by labeling unmarried relationships sinful. More recently, misrepresented social science research has been put to the same use by organizations like the National Marriage Project in an attempt to convince people that being unmarried is scientifically inadvisable.

Presenting the same ideas as "science" has been a highly effective way to get public attention, and the National Marriage Project wears a researcher's white-coated legitimacy. Its co-directors, David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, have Ph.D.s and impressive resumé's linking them to the conservative Institute for American Values and its research wing, the Council on Families in America. Four of the National Marriage Project's five goals focus on marriage research (publishing its annual report, reporting on attitudes toward marriage, critiquing the media's portrayal of marriage, and acting as a clearinghouse for marriage information). Even its fifth goal, to "revitalize marriage," may sound safe enough. Marriage needs revitalizing, the argument goes, because it's good for children and adults, and also -- in a bit of circular reasoning -- because it's a central life goal for most people.

And they're right, most people do want to get married. About 90% of us will do so sometime in our lifetimes. Many same-sex couples are fighting to legalize same-sex marriage, a possibility that suddenly seems within reach. We all want strong, healthy relationships. There aren't many who would take a stand against revitalizing marriage.

Nothing is wrong with helping people create healthy relationships or healthy families. Indeed, there are countless ways society already favors married couples, from health insurance benefits to hospital visitation rights to family inclusion and health club memberships. According to historian Stephanie Coontz, the proportion of never-married people today is actually lower than it was at the turn of the century, and more married couples today see their 40th wedding anniversaries (because of longer lifespans). But marriage isn't now and never has been a one-size-fits-all solution. Whenever one family structure -- in this case, marriage -- is spotlighted as the primary cure for everything from crime to sexual exploitation to childhood poverty, you can bet that the diverse kinds of relationships and families we all might choose will land back in the stigmatized shadows.

Cohabitation Confusion

The National Marriage Project's February report on the dangers of cohabitation was often described in headlines as a "new study," despite the fact that it was simply a review of past research that had been done, much of which contained significant flaws. The report slides between correlation and causation, alleging, for instance, that cohabiting increases the likelihood of domestic violence, sexual abuse, and unhappiness. These kinds of doom and gloom predictions in the executive summary make good sound bites. The acknowledgments buried deeper in the report, on the other hand, that much of the explanation for the link is attributable to other factors, never make it into the news that anyone hears.

The truth is, although it is widely accepted that marriage rates are closely tied to economics, most of the studies cited in the report do not control for socioeconomic status. On average, married couples have higher incomes than unmarried couples -- most couples only get married when they can afford to do so. So studies that purport to compare the happiness, domestic violence, or health differences between married and unmarried people are actually seeing effects of wealth. Wealthier people have better health care, safer neighborhoods, better access to education, and more choices in their lives. Living together without marriage isn't really their problem -- poverty is.

The cohabitation-divorce link is equally dubious. Multiple studies have shown that people who choose to cohabit are, on average, significantly less religious and more likely to believe divorce is an acceptable choice in a marriage gone bad. People who marry without living together first, on the other hand, tend to be more religious and more likely to be strongly opposed to divorce. It's no surprise that these two different groups of people act differently; it would hardly be newsworthy to say that people who are against divorce are less likely to divorce.

A more subtle problem is embedded throughout the cohabitation report: the assumption that marriage is and should be the goal for all people. Authors Popenoe and Whitehead express concern for long-term cohabitators who are not "enthusiastic" about marriage and childbearing, and worry about the suggestion that cohabitators tend to become less religious. They warn that if cohabitation continues to become more common, "marriage as an institution" will be weakened. In *The State of Our Unions*, they're distressed that a growing percentage of high school seniors believe their lives can be just as "full and happy" even if they never get married. From a feminist perspective, the identical statistics might be worth celebrating -- a generation of young people who realize that there's more to life than marriage! If the overall goal were to help people create and sustain healthy relationships and families, people's enthusiasm for getting hitched or having kids wouldn't matter. But when "revitalizing marriage" is the goal, the need to protect the institution outweighs real concern for people's lives.

Feminist -- Or Not

Throughout their writing and quotes in the media, Popenoe and Whitehead stress that they don't believe women should lose any of the gains they've made over the last decades. The advice Popenoe and Whitehead actually dispense, however, weakens their pro-woman claims. In their efforts to discourage people from living with an unmarried partner, Popenoe recommended to a Rutgers University reporter that women return to dishonest game-playing: "If you want to get a man to marry you, it's important to play a little hard to get." This advice sounds eerily reminiscent of *The Rules*, not to mention etiquette books for girls from earlier generations.

As representatives of the National Marriage Project, Popenoe and Whitehead say "we should be trying to revitalize marriage -- not along classic male-dominant lines but along modern egalitarian lines," but that isn't what they've said in previous years. In 1992 *Family Affairs* published Whitehead's article "A New Familialism?" in which, according to Judith Stacey, Whitehead argued that women should choose to pass up "traditional male models of career and success" in favor of being at-home moms. Of course the importance of choice has long been crucial to feminism, but Whitehead is clearly ready to tell working moms they've make the wrong choice. In his 1996 article "Modern Marriage: Revising the Cultural Script" Popenoe devotes pages to his theory that women should be the primary caretakers of children because they're better-suited for it biologically. And in her 1997 book *The Divorce Culture*, Whitehead breathtakingly sidesteps any evidence that marriage -- once a transaction between the bride's father and the groom -- ever oppressed women in any way. She argues that since the "modern nuclear family," a married couple and their children, is based on the 18th century ideal of the "pursuit of happiness," there is no evidence that it's rooted in patriarchy. Popenoe and Whitehead's history of preferring to keep women at home with the kids leads one to wonder whether their new "egalitarian" language is nothing more than a calculated move to appear sympathetic to women.

Perhaps even more worrisome is the 1995 report *Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation* produced by the Council on Families in America with Popenoe as the primary author. Among its long list of recommended strategies is the suggestion that unmarried teenage mothers should be encouraged to "give up their children for adoption by married couples." Thousands of birthmothers today can speak of the coercion they experienced to place their children for adoption, a loss many grieved for the rest of their lives. Welfare reform similarly forces poor women to go to work regardless of their children's needs. Teen parents -- both mothers and fathers -- need help and support to make decisions that will be best for them and their children. "Encouraging" them toward an already-decided right answer sounds like one more policy that restricts the freedoms of less-privileged women.

Throughout their work, Whitehead and Popenoe worry particularly about girls' and women's attitudes toward marriage. Many feminists take

pride in the statistics showing that today, young women are less likely to believe that securing a husband is the ticket to a lifetime of fulfillment. Whitehead and Popenoe seem baffled when they write, "Compared to men, young women are more disenchanting with marriage." Perhaps no one has pointed out to them the decades of women trapped in bad marriages, women who worked and cared for children and did all the housework, girls who were told that they could be whatever they wanted in life -- and saw some options that looked more appealing than "wife." Although Whitehead and Popenoe say women's reduced enthusiasm for marriage may be because they wish men would participate more in housework and childrearing, the authors don't make any suggestions that men should change their behaviors. As increasing numbers of women reject the "traditional" models and make conscious choices about how to structure their lives, with or without a partner or children, it's no wonder the people who liked the old model feel threatened.

LGBTs -- Invisible, As Usual

One can't exactly criticize the National Marriage Project for being openly homophobic, since from reading the Project's materials one would never even know that lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) people exist. As they recommend that we educate children about marriage "from the early school years onward," one could almost believe that no one's told them that unless things change, some of those kids won't have the right to marry their partners when they're grown. And so it goes, continuing in the long, proud tradition of erasing LGBT lives. The State of Our Unions, the National Marriage Project's annual report on marriage in America, tells us the numbers of different-sex cohabiting couples and the numbers of married couples, but allows same-sex couples to vanish from population (even though the Census does collect data on cohabiting same-sex partners).

In his 1996 book *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence That Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society*, Popenoe says that children need a mother and a father. In *Marriage in America* he and his co-authors write, "we have never met the child who did not say that she or he wanted to be raised by both a father and a mother." Those who find adoptive homes for abused children regularly work with children who say that, having bounced from foster family to group home to shelter, they don't care about how many parents they get or what sexes they are: they simply want a family that will be theirs forever. At a time when 20,000 children turn 18 every year and "age out" of the foster care system without ever being adopted, it is downright irresponsible -- not to mention purely discriminatory -- to argue that every child needs a mother and a father. Although Popenoe may intend his recommendations as an ideal goal, legislators routinely use this type of academic guidance as a basis to forbid single people, unmarried different-sex couples, and LGBT people to adopt. Half of American children today live in a family that is something other than two married, biological parents. Contrary to the concern for children Popenoe and Whitehead profess, elevating one family form above all others hurts more children than it helps.

Re-Writing History

History itself becomes a slippery notion in Popenoe and Whitehead's hands. In this year's cohabitation report, they write that "the institution of marriage remains a cornerstone to a successful society." Popenoe makes a similar statement in *Life Without Father*, claiming that marriage "has been a central feature of every known society to date." And *Marriage in America* says that failing to teach the next generation about the importance of marriage "will constitute nothing less than an act of cultural suicide."

Yet anthropologist Leanna Wolfe points out in her book *Women Who May Never Marry* that 98% of the Jamaican population is unmarried, that marriage is not important to many Mayan women where she did fieldwork in Mani on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, and that !Kung girls in the Kalahari desert are often reluctant to marry since marriage isn't a necessity for survival. Sweden's marriage rates are much lower than the United States'. Although it's common and accepted for unmarried couples in Sweden to have children, child poverty and teen pregnancy are almost non-existent there. The claim that the institution of marriage needs to be rescued simply because no society has ever survived without it is simply inaccurate.

The National Marriage Project further misrepresents history by reviewing data only back to 1960. Although it's mentioned casually, choosing to begin in 1960 was no arbitrary decision. Most historians point out that although many like to remember the 1950s as an era of "normal" family life, the decade was actually a dramatic aberration from 150 years of marriage trends. During the '50s, the average age at the time of marriage fell to a 100-year low, the divorce rate dropped sharply from its pre-'50s levels, and there were fewer childless women than any other decade since the late 1800s. By using 1960 Census data as the starting point of their tables showing the percentage of married adults, for example, the National Marriage Project can connect the dots in a direct line representing how marriage rates have dropped since 1960. But pull the 1950 numbers off the Census website, and 1960 becomes a peak, with a lower percentage of married people both before and after it. Some of the drama of the marriage "crisis" dissipates.

Only by looking at average marriage ages in 1960 can the National Marriage Project lead us to believe that the current average marriage age, in the late twenties, is somehow deviant. They even call the median ages at first marriage "the oldest ages in American history." Actually, the average ages today are about the same as the average marriage ages of the 1890s -- something Popenoe openly admits in his book *Life Without Father*. Popenoe and Whitehead's alarmist news about marriage ages seems to have more to do with re-aligning ages with 1960 levels than creating the strongest relationships.

Does This Really Help Families?

It is interesting to notice how the National Marriage Project selects its recommendations. It encourages people to get married at certain ages and not to live with unmarried partners because these things are statistically correlated with higher divorce rates (though savvy readers always remember that correlation is not the same thing as causation). It advises us to get married because married people are happier and healthier than unmarried people (again, the truth here is not as simple as these assertions). But research has also shown that married couples without children are happier, on average, than people with children, and that women with college educations are more likely to divorce than non-college-educated women. What if Jewish people were found to have longer marriages than Protestants? The National Marriage Project hasn't advised couples not to have children; nor has it told women not to attend college; nor, we predict, would it encourage Protestants to convert to Judaism in order to prevent divorce. The Project's claims to care about "our nation's social health" are unconvincing given how its one proposed solution -- marriage -- is both pre-determined and oversimplified.

In an interview with a reporter this summer, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead said that marriage's less central role in people's lives wouldn't be a problem "if Americans were more like Scandinavians, who are able to maintain stable, long-term partnerships that resemble marriage, even though they are not legally married." Maybe the National Marriage Project could devote its energies to studying those successful partnerships in Scandinavia -- not to mention the ones that are working in the United States -- and helping Americans emulate them. Two things are clear: American trends have been moving steadily away from marriage for the last century, and increasing numbers of Americans are, like Scandinavians, forming families without marriage or choosing to live happy lives without partners. The proclamations of the National Marriage Project do nothing for the single people struggling to raise their children, for the people who are married and employed but still have trouble paying the rent, or for people in unmarried relationships who face regular discrimination on the basis of marital status or sexual orientation. There are countless ways to help real families and support real relationships. Trying to push us all back into the marriage box isn't one of them.

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Our other work critiquing the marriage-only movement includes "Ten Problems With The National Marriage Project's Cohabitation Report"; an op-ed piece in the *Arizona Daily Star*, and a press release issued in response to the National Marriage Project's Cohabitation Report.

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