

## **We Got Married, Now What?**

### **Family Dynamics and Economic Well-being After Marriage**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Demographic changes in family behavior over the past five decades, including increases in non-marital childbearing, divorce and cohabitation and decreases in marriage, have resulted in children spending less of their childhood in two-parent biological families. Concern over child outcomes, high poverty rates and welfare dependence in single parent households resulted in an increasing focus on marriage among both social scientists (Poponoe & Whitehead, 2003; Waite & Gallagher, 2000) and policy makers (Horn, 2002). Encouraging marriage, particularly among low-income individuals, has become a stated policy goal and the Bush administration proposed spending over \$1.5 billion over the next five years on marriage promotion efforts. However, the extent to which transitions into marriage among low-income women will provide an escape from poverty and result in improvements in social functioning and child well-being is unclear. Critics worry that poor women will see few economic gains to marrying low-income men and voice concern that the incidence of domestic violence may increase.

The current policy focus on marriage has highlighted what we know and do not know about marriage, highlighting that we know more about the determinants of marriage and less about what happens after marriage. Knowing about what happens after, however, is essential for understanding the long-term implications of marriage promotion policies. Additionally, understanding life after marriage can help inform the design of marriage promotion programs.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Despite a substantial research literature on the determinants of marriage, few studies have focused specifically on low-income individuals, instead examining determinants on the population as a whole. This is particularly problematic because research indicates that marriage and cohabitation experiences differ substantially by socio-economic circumstances (Fein, 2004). Additionally, there is growing evidence that findings on the factors influencing union formation among the general population do not generalize to the poor (Fein, 2003; Jayakody, Seefeldt, Danziger, & Avellar, 2004). Although the majority of studies on marriage and cohabitation have not focused on disadvantaged individuals, there are some notable exceptions. The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FF) is a birth cohort study that follows 4,898 children who were born between 1998-2000 and interviews the parents, many of whom were unmarried at the time of the birth and many of whom are low-income. The FF can provide important information about union formation among low-income individuals (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004), but it is important to note that all couples in FF have a child together. Because of high rates of non-marital childbearing and divorce among this population, many low-income women will consider unions with men who do not have a biological connection to all or any of the children. Decisions about entering unions with men, how the new partner is integrated into the household, and the nature of his relationship and interactions with children, can substantially differ depending on whether he is biologically related to them. The current research explores the influence of biological and non-

biological children on family dynamics and well-being after union entrance, providing an important complement to FF findings.

In trying to understand why low-income women do not marry, Edin conducted in-depth interviews with 292 low-income single mothers in three U.S. cities (Edin, 2000). This research has highlighted economic issues and feelings of distrust as being crucial deterrents to union entry. While Edin's work focused on why low-income women did not marry, our sample consists of former welfare recipients who have recently transitioned into marital and cohabiting unions. Because Edin's focus was on non-marriage, she did not examine how individual, family, and environmental circumstances are related to marital outcomes. Examining the outcomes of new unions—the resulting family dynamics, and the implications for material and child well-being, is essential for scientific and policy discussions on the benefits of marriage. Our research specifically focuses on the implications of union entry for low-income individuals and their children. We are particularly interested in the role of the new male partner and his relationships with children, and how his role may vary depending on his biological connection to children within the household and the presence of children outside the household.

## **METHODS**

We use data from the Women's Employment Study (WES), a panel study begun in 1997 that follows a random sample of 753 welfare recipients who were living one urban Michigan county. Five waves of survey data have been collected with response rates between 86 and 93 percent (Danziger et al., 2000). Although the WES began as a sample of welfare recipients, seven years later this sample is more accurately described as low-income (only 20% of Wave 5 respondents were receiving welfare in 2003). WES is unique in the extent and quality of information it gathers, including labor market experiences, income, mental health problems (based on questions from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), maternal and child health problems, experiences of domestic violence, and household and family composition. To date, over twenty journal articles have been published using WES survey data on issues related to welfare reform, poverty, employment, barriers to self-sufficiency, and family life.

A qualitative component of WES was completed in July, 2004, after the Wave 5 panel interviews were finished, and provides further depth and detail on union entrance and the resulting family dynamics and issues to an already rich data source. The qualitative sub-sample selected respondents with particular work and family characteristics. To be eligible for the qualitative sub-sample, Wave 5 WES survey respondents had to have either 1) worked in at least 75% of the study months since the Wave 1 interview, or 2) had entered marriage or a long-term cohabiting relationship during the study period. Additionally, because we were interested in the work-family balance and in family dynamics after union entrance, we also restricted the sample to women who had at least one co-resident child age 14 or younger. Among the completed Wave 5 WES interviews, 34% met the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the qualitative component. We then recruited seven women to participate in a focus group in December, 2003, the primary purpose of which was to explore themes around the work and family balance, employment advancement opportunities, the formation of marital and cohabiting unions, and the challenges of integrating a new partner into an existing family. Using information from the focus group, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed and interviews were conducted with 60 respondents who met our qualitative sample eligibility criteria.

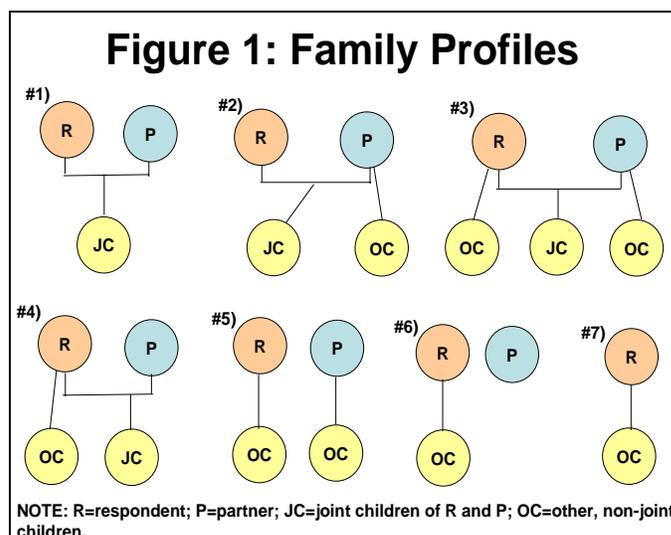
Topics covered during the semi-structured qualitative interviews included: benefits and disadvantages to cohabitation, marriage, and remaining single; reasons for

entering into a union; issues around integrating the male partner into the household (with a particular focus on the relationship between the partner and children in the household); issues with past partners and children (e.g., step- and half-siblings of the respondents' children) living outside of the household; and work-family balance challenges. Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes and most took place in the respondents' home. The overall response rate for the qualitative supplement was 93%.

After we have coded and analyzed the qualitative data, we will turn to the survey data to help inform further analyses of our qualitative data. Blending the quantitative survey data with the qualitative interview data allows for comparative analyses of the responses of subgroups within the sample with respect to themes, concepts, or issues raised in the qualitative material (Bazeley, 2003). For example, we can group sample members by whether or not they ever experienced domestic violence or mental health problems, by their employment histories, or by their race to see if there are associations between these experiences/demographics and outcomes of interest.

**Research Question:** When low-income couples form unions, what does the resulting "family" look like and how does it function?

The first step in answering this question is already underway with the development of "family profiles" that describe family relationships after union formation. The profiles, illustrated in Figure 1, describe the family structure of our sample by focusing on children who are involved in the newly formed relationship and highlighting their biological and non-biological ties to the respondent woman (represented by the circle labeled R, for respondent) and her new partner (the P circle). JC designates joint children of the respondent and partner, situations in which the respondent is the biological mother and the partner is the biological father. OC designates other children that are not biologically related to both the respondent and partner. These may be the respondent's children from prior relationships, or the partner's children from prior relationships. For example, Profile #1 depicts a family in which the respondent and partner have a biological child or children, and neither have children with anyone else. Alternatively, Profile #3 depicts a family in which the respondent and spouse have a child(ren) together (JC), the respondent has a child(ren) with someone else (OC), and the partner also has a child(ren) with someone else (OC).



In examining family dynamics and well-being after marriage, we will use the profiles to see whether respondents living in certain family types share common experiences in well-being. We can then use our qualitative data to explain why these relationships may exist. For example, do women who have a biological child with their partner (Profiles 1,2,3, and 4) describe different experiences with the partner's role in the family?

We will also conduct mixed-methods analyses on this question by linking the family profiles to a variety of outcomes from the WES survey data to explore whether or not there are associations between certain family types and material well-being. For example, we can merge survey information on the household income-to-needs ratio (income divided by the poverty rate for that family size) and other measures of material hardship such as lack of health insurance, utility shut-offs, evictions and other measures of housing instability. We will examine whether or not certain family profiles are more likely to experience economic and material hardship compared to others (our preliminary analyses indicates that some relationships might exist). The richness of our qualitative data can then be used to try and explain why certain family types are more likely to experience material hardships or certain family dynamics. Because qualitative data provides detailed information on individuals' experiences and their interpretation of those experiences, we will be able to provide insight into the processes by which certain family profiles are associated with certain outcomes.

Finally, on this question we will explore the perceived benefits and disadvantages of these family types for children's well-being. Similar to the procedures outlined above, we will code text units in the qualitative interviews related to women's perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages to her children of having the male partner in the household and ways in which the partner-child relationship functions and does not function from the perspective of the mother. We can also explore variation in these responses by family profile and by child-related measures from the survey. The WES survey contains detailed child well-being measures related to a focal child in the household, such as a subset of the Behavioral Problem Index (BPI). Not specific to one child are measures of parenting stress, health problems in children, and involvement with the Child Protective Services system. Depending upon the themes that arise in the qualitative analysis and/or in the mixed-methods analysis, we may also develop new hypothesis to test with the larger sample in the WES survey data.