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**Parenting in Poverty and the Politics of Commitment:  
Promoting Marriage for Poor Families through  
Relationship Education**

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The federal government has recently taken an unprecedented role in actively promoting marriage through social policies to address family instability and poverty in America. In 1996, Congress overhauled welfare policy to encourage work and marriage as routes to economic self-sufficiency for poor American families. This policy focus eventually led to the creation of the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative, a program that primarily funds relationship skills classes to promote marriage. Using ethnographic data from a community-based marriage education program for poor parents funded through a healthy marriage grant, I analyze how government-sponsored relationships skills classes intended to promote marriage tailor their messages for poor families. In doing so, this study addresses a broader sociological question: how does policy co-opt and transform ideas about love, family, and interpersonal commitment in the service of a particular political agenda? Moreover, how do parents accept, contest, and transform these ideologies on the ground when such ideas come up against the lived experience of families trying to create and maintain *love* while raising children in poverty? Ultimately, without addressing the structural issues that undermine poor couples' aspirations to marry, relationship education frames *healthy marriage* as an emotional and economic partnership, one in which communication, conflict resolution, and financial management skills can be a social and psychological bulwark against the stresses of parenting in poverty.

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## Introduction

Nine couples were joined together on a fall Saturday morning for a relationship skills class for unmarried, low-income expectant and new parents. José, one of the class instructors, a Latino in his early 50s, began the session by sharing a central tenet of the program: “Hard times will not destroy you if you’re committed. We talk about loving each other, but love isn’t a feeling, it’s a commitment. When you tell someone you love them, it should mean that you’re committed to them.” Reading from the instructor’s manual, José explained that research has shown one of the main characteristics of a strong family is “an ability to cope, that strong families draw strength from each other when problems arise. If you don’t have your families, you really don’t have anything. I know that if I have Susan, [my wife], I can do anything. I have her and she has me. If for some reason you can’t cope with your problems, ask yourself why you can’t, why aren’t you committed? These are things you can learn.” José then asked the class participants what their families’ strengths were. One female participant said they help support each other financially and emotionally, while another woman said that her family provided her “spiritual comfort” and prayed for each other during tough times. A young dad said they take turns watching the kids.

Susan, José’s co-instructor and wife of 13 years, white and in her late 40s, emphasized that being committed was particularly important because of all the stressors couples face, especially now during the worst economic recession since the Great Depression: “The jobs may not be there, the kids may be screaming, but you’ve still got each other. You can have all the money in the world,” she said, “and be miserable; it’s all about relationships. The most important people in the world are the person sitting next to you and that little bundle of joy you’re holding in your arms or in your stomach.” Referring to a young dad, who had just told us that finding out about his girlfriend’s pregnancy while he was in prison was what encouraged him to want to turn his life around, Susan went on to say that “relationships were what really mattered, through the

good times and the bad, just knowing that that person is going to be there for you is what really matters...[because] the tough times make you so much stronger, and we're all going to go through tough times." Inspired by the candor of the dad who had just gotten out of jail and Susan's talk of tough times, another female participant raised her hand and told us about how her boyfriend really mattered to her because he stuck by her when her father was dying. Susan took this poignant moment as an opportunity to say, "When you're going through tough times you need to focus on the positive and remember the times when you stood by each other and you made it through." To wrap up this lesson on strong families, José told us that it doesn't take spending money to create a healthy, strong family. José's advice that we should view love, not as a sentiment, but as a secure, committed relationship, was well received by this room full of struggling parents, none married, most on welfare, many unemployed, a few homeless, and one just weeks out of jail.

José and Susan's message fell on amenable ears—and hearts—that day in class. Yet, the main comment that made their message so convincing to parents—"love isn't a feeling, it's a commitment"—is the very idea that makes the larger political context of this conversation so controversial. This discussion was part of a government-funded marriage promotion class that seeks to help poor couples improve their co-parenting relationships and encourages them to think about marriage as part of their families' futures. The federal government has recently taken an unprecedented role in actively promoting marriage as a matter of public policy to address family instability and poverty in America. In 1996, Congress overhauled welfare policy to encourage work and marriage as routes to economic self-sufficiency for poor American families through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. The two most significant changes in welfare policy instituted by the Act were a five-year lifetime limit on cash assistance and work requirements, often called "workfare," which mandated that welfare recipients work or seek work for a required number of hours per week in exchange for benefits. The Act also proclaimed that marriage was essential for family and child wellbeing and the foundation of a

healthy society, a message Congress affirmed and codified by citing four specific statutory goals for a new welfare system. These included:

- Provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies; and
- Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.<sup>1</sup>

Continuing this new policy focus on marriage, President George W. Bush created the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) in 2001. Part of the Administration for Children and Families, the HMI put federal money behind the PRA's marriage promotion message. In an explicit effort to encourage marriage, reduce divorce, and increase the number of children raised in two-parent married families, the Initiative earmarked \$150 million annually in federal seed money to fund community-based marriage promotion programs. States apply to receive project funds through federal grants that can be used for marriage education and skills training, marriage mentoring programs, public campaigns that advertise marriage, and high school programs that educate teenagers about the value of marriage. The majority of HMI funding has been granted to marriage education programs that seek to teach couples how to value commitment within marriage by learning to communicate and resolve conflict more effectively using research-based relationship skills curricula that emphasize empathy and respect as the foundation of healthy family relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Since the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act in 1996, numerous scholars have studied changes in welfare rolls, fluctuations in poverty rates, and the personal experiences of welfare-reliant parents as they strive to balance the demands of supporting their children and

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<sup>1</sup> Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Public Law 104-193. 104<sup>th</sup> Congress.

<sup>2</sup> According to the HMI mission statement, the purpose of the Initiative is: "To help couples, who have chosen marriage for themselves, gain greater access to marriage education services, on a voluntary basis, where they can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage." A healthy marriage is one that is: "mutually enriching, and...both spouses have a deep respect for each other; it is a mutually satisfying relationship that is beneficial to the husband, wife, children (if present); it is a relationship that is committed to ongoing growth, the use of effective communication skills, and the use of successful conflict management skills." Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services. Available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html#ms>.

meeting the new work requirements (Edin and Lein 1997, Hays 2003, Mink 1998). However, the marriage promotion component of welfare reform, initially as controversial as the new lifetime limits and work requirements, has received relatively scant empirical attention from researchers (see Heath 2009 for a notable exception). The academic and policy literature on marriage promotion policy that does exist focuses almost exclusively on debating the merits of using public money to fund programs that promote marriage, especially for poor families, and what these programs should look like if they are implemented. Surprisingly, though over 200 community-based programs have been funded since the HMI was created in 2001, very little of this conversation among researchers and policy advocates focuses on what government-sponsored marriage promotion actually involves in practice.

This paper will discuss how one of these community-based programs, Prosperous Parenting,<sup>3</sup> promotes marriage in the classroom. Prosperous Parenting is a relationship skills class for low-income, unmarried couples who are expecting or who have a child younger than three months old. As I discuss in greater detail below, critics of marriage promotion policies worry that the primary message being preached to poor couples throughout the country in programs like Prosperous Parenting is that marriage will somehow solve their economic problems, that a wedding ring and a couple of “I do’s” will be a golden stepping stone out of poverty. At the same time, advocates of marriage and relationship education point to a plethora of statistics showing the relationship between living in a married family and a lower likelihood of living in poverty to support their claim that teaching couples the skills associated with higher relationship quality can lead to better economic outcomes for adults and their children. But what both groups tend to neglect is a meaningful discussion of how these classes operate in practice, including how they frame the relationship between marriage and economic stability and how couples respond to such messages.

To address this important gap, I ask: Given the marriage-as-poverty-prevention framework legislated in the Personal Responsibility Act and the Healthy Marriage Initiative, *how*

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<sup>3</sup> I have changed the names of the program, instructors, and participants in this paper to protect the confidentiality of those who have graciously allowed me to observe and participate in these classes.

does the government promote marriage for poor families through relationship skills education? To fully understand the significance of marriage promotion policies, we need to understand how particular strategies used to encourage marriage among families in poverty take shape on the ground. Since the passage of the PRA in 1996, states have developed many strategies to encourage marriage, including: expanding eligibility for cash assistance to more two-parent families; eliminating the welfare marriage penalty by disregarding the income of a new spouse when calculating eligibility for benefits; offering additional benefits and services to married couples; and forgiving child support arrearages owed to the state by non-custodial parents if they choose to reunite with their spouses after separation or divorce (Falk and Tauber 2001, Gardiner et al. 2002). However, marriage promotion through relationship skills education has received the most explicit endorsement by the federal government through the Healthy Marriage Initiative. Moreover, it has also received the most critical attention because, presumably, it most directly subjects parents in poverty to the government's marriage-as-poverty-prevention message. To fully comprehend the potential pros and cons of marriage promotion policies for addressing poverty, we must first understand the nuance of relationship education as the most commonly funded marriage promotion strategy.

### **The Healthy Marriage Controversy: Promoting Marriage to Prevent Poverty?**

Based on current divorce rates, researchers predict that around 48 percent of marriages will end within 20 years (Bramlett and Mosher 2002), and over a third of American children are born to unmarried parents (Cherlin 2005). Scholars strongly disagree about what these trends mean for marriage and family life in America. Some argue that a marriage and family crisis exists because most people now deviate, in one way or another, from traditional family-formation patterns that put life-long marriage at the center of family life (Blankenhorn 1990, Glenn 1996, Hymowitz 2006, Popenoe 1996, Waite and Gallagher 2000, Whitehead 1996, Wilson 2002). These marriage advocates share what Amato et al. (2007) call a marital-decline



perspective. They argue that excessive individualism is undermining the institution of marriage and that we should actively strengthen it to prevent the negative consequences that the declining status of marriage has for adults, children, and society. Other marriage and family scholars (Coontz 2005, Hackstaff 1999, Skolnick 1991, Stacey 1996) who adopt a marital-resilience perspective claim that marriage is not deteriorating but simply changing to accommodate changing gender roles, economic restructuring, and growing social acceptance of different family forms. They believe that public resources should be used to support all families, not only married heterosexual couples and their children.

Of particular concern to those who adopt a marital decline perspective is the *marriage gap* (Hymowitz 2006, Whitehead and Popenoe 2006, Wilson 2002). This gap refers to differences in marriage and non-marital childbearing rates between those who are poor and those who are not. Today poor men and women are only about half as likely to marry as their more economically advantaged peers (Edin and Reed 2005). Moreover, the likelihood a child will be born to unmarried parents is much higher for those who are economically disadvantaged (England and Edin 2007). Child poverty rose significantly after 1960, a trend linked with the decline in two-parent families and, more specifically, the rise in households headed by poor single mothers. Pearce (1978) coined the phrase *feminization of poverty* to underscore how American poverty became increasingly concentrated in female-headed families with only one parent since the 1950s. Currently, single-parent families are more than four times as likely to be poor as two-parent families (Thomas and Sawhill 2002). This strong correlation between marriage and poverty rates leads some scholars to argue that family form has become a primary mechanism of class, race, and gender inequality, as children in married families have access to more material resources and higher quality parenting, as well as a greater chance of experiencing intergenerational socio-economic mobility (McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

This relationship between changing family-formation patterns and poverty has been a central concern of the debate over how welfare policies should address poverty among poor parents with children. Pro-marriage policy advocates argue that the government has a

responsibility to promote marriage because it is a social and public good connected to various measures of social and economic well-being (Waite and Gallagher 2000, Wilcox et al. 2005). They point to studies that reveal statistical correlations between marital status and a variety of positive social outcomes for children and adults, including better social relationships among family members, greater physical, mental, and emotional health, and less crime and domestic violence. Those who protest the use of public funding for marriage promotion activities challenge these claims, arguing that marriage is a private decision that the government has no right or reason to promote (Hardisty 2008, Solot and Miller 2007). They claim that since the purpose of welfare is to reduce poverty, diverting welfare money to marriage promotion programs that have not been proven to do so is misguided and ideologically motivated. Second, they insist that policies intended to promote child well-being should focus not on the parents' legal marital status, but instead on promoting those factors that help children living in any family form thrive. Marriage promotion programs, they claim, essentially take money away from proven poverty-reduction programs, such as food stamps and cash-assistance programs, and encourage poor women to marry their way out of poverty.

Those in the middle of this debate agree that promoting marriage could be potentially helpful for ameliorating social problems, namely reducing poverty, but that several factors should encourage us to proceed with caution as we devote public funding to marriage programs. First, more research is needed to identify which programs are most helpful for supporting all families, including those for whom marriage is not a desirable or realistic option. For those who do not want to or cannot get married, pro-marriage policy initiatives should focus on helping parents cooperatively fulfill their parenting responsibilities (Ooms 2001). Second, given the economic underpinnings of differential marriage rates, any reasonable governmental attempt to promote marriage must also entail promoting economic security via education and stable employment for both men and women (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Since other socio-economic factors, such as mothers' educational attainment, have been found to be more strongly correlated

with positive childhood outcomes, we should also consider how they might be more amenable to targeted policy interventions (Acs 2007).

All the issues at stake in the ever-raging culture war over family values come together in the political controversy over Healthy Marriage programs. Marriage conservatives and liberals<sup>4</sup> tend to agree on several things, including: 1) Marriage as a social institution is now much less stable than in previous generations; 2) there is a clearly established link between relationship and economic stability; and 3) the government should encourage family stability to support the best interests of children and adults. Despite this common ground, though, marriage conservatives and liberals diverge most when it comes to what exactly the government should do to encourage relationship stability. Marriage conservatives tend to think the marriage crisis is largely a cultural problem that has dire economic consequences. Their primary concerns are that marriage has been culturally devalued as the best context for raising children, especially among lower-class groups, and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships are at the root of family breakdown and poverty (Hymowitz 2006, Waite and Gallagher 2000). They advocate government-sponsored marriage education programs that focus on teaching individuals how to make family-formation decisions that privilege marriage and having children in wedlock as the most desirable way to create a family. This values-based marriage education would essentially involve teaching people how and why they should value marriage as a social good. Conversely, marriage liberals believe that poverty, social inequality, and discrimination undermine family stability. They claim that class-based marriage and non-marital childbearing rates are largely the result of poverty and stratified access to resources that allow people to seem like safe marriage prospects, namely education and stable employment (Coontz 2005, Edin and Kefalas 2005). They support relationship education programs that teach people life skills applicable to all family relationships, regardless of marital status. Hence, these diametrically opposed understandings of the relationship between inequality

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<sup>4</sup> I use the label *marriage conservative* to indicate people who are politically committed to conserving and strengthening the institution of marriage. By *marriage liberal* I refer to people who want to use political resources to strengthen all family types, regardless of marital status. Though I recognize that these labels are without nuance, I use these terms only for the purpose of brevity, specifically in the context of the marriage promotion policy debate, not to suggest any of the cited authors' political affiliations.

and family stability lead to two very different sets of ideas about what the government and public programs should do to help families. This is why the Personality Responsibility Act and the Healthy Marriage Initiative have become political touchstones for reinvigorating the culture wars over family values and social inequality.

That marriage and welfare are so intimately linked in the political logic of the PRA should come as no surprise. Though the PRA and HMI are the premier policies to explicitly promote marriage as a legal, social, and economic institution, marriage has always been a primary way to codify financial responsibilities and family commitments. The political foundation of marriage is one that legally institutionalized men's financial responsibility for their wives and (legitimate) children and women's obligation to attend to their husbands' domestic needs and desires (Cott 2002). Similarly, drawing on this man-as-provider family model, welfare, in the form of government cash-assistance programs for poor families, has always been conceptualized as a husband/father substitute. As Mink (1990) argues, ideologies of gender difference and racialized citizenship were the two cornerstones of early American welfare policy. Productive economic activity for men and domesticity and moral motherhood for women were the gendered ideals linked to proper democratic citizenship. Nineteenth and early twentieth century policymakers worried that poverty and improper family values would undermine political efforts to Americanize and "uplift" a citizenry increasingly comprised of immigrants and American-born racial and ethnic minorities. Ultimately, despite these underlying nativist concerns, the policies they created only provided economic support to a specific group of Americans, as discriminatory eligibility requirements conditioned public assistance on "moral fitness." This generally meant that, in order to receive even minimal support from the state, a woman had to be widowed, white, and have a reputation for being virtuous and a good mother whose unfortunate economic predicament was due to the death of her family's wage earner, rather than divorce, illegitimacy, or inability to work (Mink 1990, 110).

As the earliest precursor to welfare policies, Mothers' Pensions, initially called Widows' Pensions, were founded on the belief that (some) children were entitled to full-time care, and that

government assistance should allow the widowed parent to stay home and not work all day so that she might provide for the child's basic needs and nurture a future citizen. The Social Security Act of 1935 created the Aid to Dependent Children program, which entitled families with children under 18 who met certain low-income requirements to cash assistance from the government. Both of these policies were highly racialized and moralistic, as governments doled out money only if poor mothers adhered to eligibility requirements that differentiated between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, two categories defined in a way that made it difficult for never-married, divorced, and non-white mothers to receive benefits.

Aid to Dependent Children, later renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children, remained an entitlement until 1996. Thus, for over 60 years, the American welfare state was founded in theory, if not in practice, on the idea that if children's parents were poor enough, the government was committed to providing for them financially and allowing them to be cared for by a parent who would not have to spend all her time seeking and performing work. This all ended with the Personal Responsibility Act. The PRA revoked welfare as an entitlement by creating five-year lifetime limits on welfare receipts, as well as work requirements for poor parents. Though previous changes to welfare policies tried to create work requirements and indirectly promote marriage, the PRA and the HMI were the first to actually fund government programs to realize these goals.<sup>5</sup> Hence, these two policies represent the first institutionalized efforts to promote greater individual commitment to work, family and marriage, and they did so

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<sup>5</sup> Congress amended the Social Security Act several times between 1935 and 1996 to include the provision of public services aimed at strengthening the nuclear family and imposing work requirements. This was largely in response to changing family-formation patterns, particularly the rise in female-headed households, and the pervasive belief that family instability and laziness primarily contributed to poverty, especially among so-called "welfare queens," the pejorative stereotype applied to single, black, and presumably promiscuous women who had more illegitimate children just to collect additional welfare payments. This racist stereotype remained a powerful political ideology throughout the twentieth century, despite the reality that white women and their children always comprised the majority of welfare rolls. The 1956 and 1962 Amendments to the Social Security Act authorized federal funds for family counseling services for welfare recipients, but due to inadequate funds, the federal government never allocated any money to the states for these services. The Social Security Amendments of 1967 created the Work Incentive Program (WIN) and the Family Support Act of 1988 created the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program, both of which would have required all welfare recipients, except those with young children, to work as a condition of assistance eligibility. Due to inadequate funding and job unavailability, previous attempts to earmark federal welfare funds for counseling services and mandatory work programs failed. However, these provisions aimed at strengthening the nuclear family and encouraging employment foreshadowed the primary statutory goals of welfare reform in the 1990s, the promotion of job preparation, work, and marriage (Trattner 1999).

within a larger political context of less government commitment to poor children and their parents. More specifically, the Healthy Marriage Initiative represents a new political framework for addressing poverty by drawing on and shaping poor parents' ideas about love, family, commitment, and marriage.

One of the most important theoretical contributions of feminist analyses to sociological understandings of family is the claim that the divide between “public” and “private” realms of social life are “deeply ideological” and that this imagined divide obscures more than it reveals about the working of “the state” and “the family” (Thorne 1992, 22). That is, the values of the political sphere profoundly shape the workings of intimate life by structuring class, gender, and race relationships, perhaps no more so than through the relationship between poor families and the social welfare system. This study continues that tradition by using the case of marriage promotion policy, specifically an empirical case study of relationship skills classes for poor parents, to ask a broader sociological question: How does policy co-opt and transform ideas about love, family, and interpersonal commitment in the service of a particular political agenda? Moreover, how do parents accept, contest, and transform these ideologies on the ground when such ideas come up against the lived experience of families trying to create and maintain *love* while raising children in poverty?

Existing research on healthy marriage programs consists of survey and interview-based evaluation projects that seek to ascertain how well marriage education services help improve the relationship quality of participants. Several longitudinal, multi-site, government-funded healthy marriage evaluations are currently underway.<sup>6</sup> This type of research is certainly important for gauging the effectiveness of marriage education vis-a-vis behavioral and relationship satisfaction outcomes. Yet, what is notably absent from this body of research on government-sponsored relationship skills and marriage education programs is an in-depth, critical analysis of the messages marriage education promotes and how these messages are communicated and received

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<sup>6</sup> The three main federally-funded evaluation projects are: 1) Building Strong Families, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (see [www.mathematica-mpr.com](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com)); 2) Supporting Healthy Marriages, MDRC (see [shm@mdrc.org](mailto:shm@mdrc.org)); and 3) Community Healthy Marriage Initiative, Urban Institute (see [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)).

in the classroom. As a complement to existing and on-going evaluation projects that assess the efficacy of marriage education classes for improving communication and conflict resolution skills, there is a need for ethnographic research that details and analyzes how government-sponsored relationship education programs endorse particular values and skills pertaining to marriage and family life.

The academic and policy debates over whether public money should be used to support relationship skills and marriage education courses do not only focus on whether these programs work to enhance couples' communication and conflict resolution skills. They hinge largely on whether government money should be used to promote a particular relationship status, and, if in doing so, these programs stigmatize other family forms and discount the socioeconomic factors that are also correlated with poverty, childhood outcomes, and marriage rates. Given the stated goals of recent welfare policies to reduce poverty by promoting marriage, there is a need for qualitative research that analyzes how healthy marriage programs attempt to teach poor and low-income couples how to become economically self-sufficient by making particular family-formation choices. Per the stated goals of the HMI, we know that classes must focus on building communication skills, but we do not know how instruction in skills-building techniques translates into overarching messages about how to value marriage and become economically self-sufficient. Moreover, we do not yet know if or how classes that target personal behavior within relationships and marriage also address the larger social and economic conditions that undermine or support them, such as financial constraints.

This research will fill that gap in our understanding by providing an in-depth picture of how these programs work in practice, especially as they tailor their messages for low-income families. In doing so, it will reveal how government-sponsored relationship education reflects particular assumptions about the government's proper role in addressing social inequality through welfare policies that target family-formation trends. Marriage education is not just instruction in communication and conflict resolution skills. Because of its explicit pro-marriage agenda and political context as an anti-poverty social policy, it also promotes a particular way of

thinking about marriage and its role in society, specifically its ability to transmit social and economic advantages. This is a much-needed contribution in the debate over a controversial public policy that has been lauded by some as a policy panacea for poor families, and criticized by others as a misguided push to the altar for poor couples.

### **Methodology: Going Inside the Marriage Education Classroom**

I chose Prosperous Parenting, a program serving low-income families in a racially diverse, mid-size city in Northern California, as my primary research site for three reasons. First, unlike many other HMI relationship skills and marriage education programs funded by general grants for healthy marriage community organizations, the organization that coordinates Prosperous Parenting received a Healthy Marriage Initiative grant from the Department of Health and Human Services specifically to create Prosperous Parenting. They received an award for \$500,000 per year for five years beginning in 2006 to implement a marriage education program targeting unmarried couples at around the time of the arrival of a new child. For this reason, the program is subject to more direct federal oversight of the use of funding and therefore more likely to closely reflect the stated policy goals of the Healthy Marriage Initiative. During the two years I spent studying the program, the federal government selected Prosperous Parenting as one of three programs nation-wide to provide technical assistance to other programs within the same grant area, relationship skills classes for low-income, unmarried couples with children. The program was also selected to be in the top 25 programs nationally by the Office of Family Assistance as a best practices program. Therefore, this site represents what the federal government believes to be an exemplary healthy marriage program.

Second, Prosperous Parenting targets so-called “fragile families,” unmarried couples who are in a romantic relationship around the time of their child’s birth, but who are at a greater risk



of breaking up and falling into poverty because of their relationship and economic status.<sup>7</sup> This population is of particular concern to family scholars and policymakers because many believe that their economic position renders them most in need of government support, while the fact that they are still together and have a new child presents a unique window of opportunity to encourage them to get married. Given that the controversy over marriage promotion polices is most heated when it comes to unmarried poor and minority families, I wanted to do in-depth participant observation in a program serving these families, especially a population that was racially and ethnically diverse. The majority of parents who attend Prosperous Parenting classes are considered poor by federal poverty line standards, have little formal education, and are racial/ethnic minorities. Eighty-four percent of those who enroll in the program receive some form of public assistance, such as food stamps or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families.<sup>8</sup> Over half, 53 percent, report combined household incomes of less than \$1,000 per month, while only 13 percent have household incomes of \$2,000, and fewer than three percent of participants live in households that collectively bring in \$3,000 per month or more. Almost all of these parents have more than one child and many live with parents and partners. Since a three-person household was considered to be living in poverty if they made less than \$17,600 in 2008, these figures suggest that most participants in Prosperous Parenting classes live well below the poverty line.<sup>9</sup> Half of all participants had only a high school diploma or GED when they enrolled in the classes. Less than 20 percent had some post-secondary education, while one-third of participants had not graduated from high school.<sup>10</sup> The classes are very racially and ethnically diverse. Forty

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on this framing of poor, unmarried families, see The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal study of nearly 5,000 American families conducted between 1998 and 2000 by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing and Center for Health and Wellbeing, and Columbia's Population Research Center and National Center for Children and Families. Principal Investigators of the Fragile Families Study include: Sara McLanahan and Christina Paxson at Princeton and Irwin Garfinkel, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Ron Mincy, and Jane Waldfogel at Columbia. See <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/index.asp>

<sup>8</sup> Participant characteristics cited here are based on all program enrollees, not necessarily program graduates, and are collected via intake forms administered by program staff when they recruit participants into the classes.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, 2008 Poverty Guidelines. *Federal Register*, Vol. 73, No. 15, January 23, 2008, pp. 3971–3972. Also available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/POVERTY/08poverty.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup> I do not have access to the age distribution of participants in the classes, but it is a requirement of the program that participants be 17 or older, and my observations suggest that most are in their 20s and 30s.

percent of participants are Latino/a, 24 percent are African-American, and 22 percent are Caucasian.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, marriage promotion advocates insist that living in married families promotes the best interests of parents and children because it encourages cooperative co-parenting from both mothers and fathers. Therefore, a class that requires participants to be members of couples who are expectant or new parents would be the most likely to include messages about marriage's ability to promote children's wellbeing through effective parenting, including information on the gendered nature of parenting roles. I chose this program because it would likely have the strongest pro-marriage message when compared to other classes for already married couples that exclusively focus on communication skills. This consideration was key given both the primary goals of the HMI to promote children's interests and adults' economic self-sufficiency through marriage and the policy's connection to recent welfare reforms. Ultimately, this program was best suited to explore how marriage education classes address the relationship stressors unique to low-income couples, racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, co-parenting in blended families, and the specific roles of mothers and fathers. Between December 2007 and August 2009, I attended approximately 150 hours of Prosperous Parenting classes and conducted three focus groups with Prosperous Parenting participants. I also interviewed six staff, including the organization's executive director, the director of educational services, the program coordinator, and three program recruiters, nine instructors, and 45 parents who had recently graduated from Prosperous Parenting, for a total of 60 in-depth interviews.

My own involvement in the classes was a true mix of observation and participation. At the beginning of each class, the instructors introduced me as a student doing research on relationship education classes. I most often sat on the side of the classroom, but occasionally, especially for smaller classes, I would sit at the main table in between two couples. Unlike everyone else, I did not attend classes with a partner, nor did I participate in couples' exercises. I did, however, have my own class notebook for every class and often filled out the same

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<sup>11</sup> Of the remaining participants, 3% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% are Native American, and 10% are multi-racial or "other."

worksheets participants were asked to complete. This notebook also allowed me to discreetly take fieldnotes during the lessons and break-out exercises. I participated as fully as I could in the classes when activities and life experiences reasonably allowed. As someone who does not yet have any children, I did not weigh in on discussions about childcare and concerns about parenting, though I did fully participate in all group exercises and class discussions about childhood experiences, communication foibles, and the joys and woes of relationships. During breaks, I ate meals with participants, chatted with instructors and recruiters, played with older children, and held newborns so parents could have both hands free to eat. I interviewed all five staff in their offices during regular business hours and one in a separate office at a recruitment location. I conducted one instructor interview via phone and the other eight at nearby coffee shops after classes. For the participants, I asked that we do the interviews at the most convenient location for them: two chose a coffee shop, two met me a park near their home, 37 had me meet them at their own residence, and the remaining four spoke with me at a relative's or friend's residence.

### **Findings: The Missing “M” Word and the Rationalization of Relationships**

Prosperous Parenting was in its second year of federal funding when I started my fieldwork in the fall of 2007. The program provides a variety of incentives to encourage couples to participate, including \$10 in cash per class, per couple for transportation costs, free childcare, and a meal. If both partners attend 14 hours of class time, they receive \$100 for “graduating” from the program. The Prosperous Parenting program has established a community partnership with a family resource center, Support for a Healthy Start<sup>12</sup> (SHS), that is funded through the state Department of Health and Human Services. SHS provides parenting and health education services to pregnant women and families with newborn babies. Prosperous Parenting classes are offered at one of several SHS family resource centers located around the California city that is the site of the program. Brochures, in both English and Spanish, about topics such as child

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<sup>12</sup> This is a pseudonym.

development, breastfeeding, and how to apply for public aid line the hallways. All around the centers, posters with pictures of new moms and dads with babies and toddlers speak to parents with captions such as “No one told you being a parent was going to be this hard.”

Parenting classes are usually offered in the largest meeting room available in the SHS resource centers. As the classes have grown in size with the implementation of the incentive program, a creative rearrangement of the tables is often necessary to accommodate anywhere from six to ten couples. For the most part, the meeting rooms resemble a typical classroom you would find in a school, with dry erase boards, pens, notebooks, and chairs and tables arranged in rows. Instructors give each participant a “memory book,” a course notebook containing worksheets and lesson outlines that they are told to decorate and personalize. To help participants get a start on personalizing their memory books, instructors take a picture of each couple to place on the cover. Some participants include personal mementos of their family by adding family pictures, drawings, magazine cutouts, and even sonogram pictures of their unborn child, a strikingly visible reminder that taking this class is symbolic of the couple starting a new family. One particularly stunning memory book cover displayed a beautiful family portrait hand-drawn by a talented artist who a dad had recently befriended while he was in jail.

Yet, there are several indicators that a Prosperous Parenting classroom is not a traditional educational venue. Half of the women in the class are visibly pregnant, many only a few weeks or mere days away from their due dates. Baby carriers and diaper bags sit right next to workbooks and pens atop the tables. Older children almost always go to the “playcare” room during class time to watch movies, play with toys, and color or draw. Playcare providers are willing and happy to take care of babies during class, but parents often opt to keep their infants with them throughout the day. Couples often multitask by listening to the instructors while rocking fussy babies, filling out worksheets in their memory books while offering a watchful eye over naptime, and participating in group discussion while breastfeeding. Fathers are just as likely

as mothers to rock babies throughout the classes that last anywhere from two hours on weeknights to five and a half hours on Saturdays.<sup>13</sup>

Some participants affectionately hold hands, massage a pregnant partner's swollen feet or aching back, snuggle closely on a couch, playfully touch one another, and exchange inside jokes, loving glances, and flirtatious banter. Others, however, never touch, barely speak to one another, and only look at each other to literally point fingers and indicate "that sounds just like *you*" when an instructor is talking about negative behavior in relationships. Most couples fall somewhere in the middle. Participants' levels of engagement in the classes also vary considerably. While some are hard-pressed to stay awake and incur the occasional friendly reminder from an instructor to wake up and stay alert, others hang on the instructor's every word and frequently nod in agreement when their fellow participants or the instructors share a personal story or offer relationship advice.

Instructors often sit at the front of the room and use a teaching style that attempts to elicit group discussion from participants in lieu of lectures. Though they sometimes read from their instructor notebooks and jot down key points on the board to introduce a new topic, such as active versus defensive listening, they will more often use role-playing exercises, refer participants to activities in their memory books, or share a personal anecdote to illustrate a lesson. As with all types of classes, some participants talk and share much more than others. It is especially common for participants to use the class to ask about common relationship problems they encounter, often in the hope that the instructors will validate their point of view over their partners' or that fellow participants will offer them advice.

Admittedly, much like critics of marriage promotion policies, I initially thought that relationship skills classes would involve conveying to couples a dubious message that marriage prevents or alleviates poverty. To my great surprise, I found that not only do Prosperous Parenting classes not promote marriage, per se, but the word *marriage* is rarely, if ever,

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<sup>13</sup> Participants have two attendance options to complete the program. They attend either seven weekly classes that last two to three hours each or three Saturday classes that last five and a half hours each. The majority of my observations are from the Saturday classes.

mentioned in class. There were even instances when instructors would use the word *marriage*, only to quickly correct themselves and replace it with the word *relationship*, as in the following exchange between an instructor, José, and a male participant called Michael:

José: “I want to thank you guys for coming out to the Prosperous Marriages class.”

Michael: “Wait, I don’t know what you guys got going on here...”

José: “Well, [the program] goes by a lot of different names.”

Michael: “That was a good comeback there, man!”

This joking exchange between José and Michael indicated that there was at least some discomfort about how much of the class would focus on getting married. Assuring them that this was not going to be a class that was just about marriage, José added that some of the people who take the class as unmarried couples eventually get married, and that many couples have that as a goal, though he stopped short of saying that that was the explicit goal of the program. Susan, José’s wife and co-instructor, immediately jumped in and said that this was the Prosperous Parenting class, hosted by the Healthy Marriage Organization, and that the couples who take this class are not married. To emphasize that everyone, even the instructors, were all here to learn about *relationships*, José continued by saying, “Well, we just want to thank you for coming out. Basically, we’re trying to learn the skills that will help us be better parents, to nurture our children, to help them grow. [...] We want our children to be better than we were, to be better than we are.” Michael satisfyingly nodded in agreement.

When I asked the program’s creator and director, Cynthia Campbell, if not including explicit messages about marriage in the Prosperous Parenting classes was intentional, she quickly remarked:

Yes, it’s intentional. This is not about beating people over the head. When I read all of the material about our population it isn’t that these people don’t believe in marriage, it’s that they don’t believe they can do a good job. And they also believe they have to have all the accoutrements before they get married—they have to have a house, they have to have everything in place before they get married. So addressing marriage is not the issue. [...] They’re not choosing this way to go, they’re doing it because they are afraid they can’t do this well. And all the research on this population indicates that getting a divorce is worse than having a child out of wedlock. So they need to build confidence in their ability to do a relationship well. And when that is in place, the marriage will follow.

“[O]ur population” referred to low-income and poor parents, and Cynthia’s insistence that the marriage gap is rooted in poor couples’ fear that they cannot do relationships well underlies what it is that these classes actually do promote. Much more than promoting marriage, I found that these relationship skills classes promoted a rational approach to making relationships work with the hope that couples’ newfound confidence will lead to marriage, which will in turn provide economic benefits. In line with the findings of previous studies that try to explain significantly lower marriage rates among poor couples (especially Edin and Kefalas 2005), when I asked Prosperous Parenting couples if they had considered getting married, most said they wanted to but they “couldn’t afford it.” When I asked what they meant by not being able to *afford* it, they offered answers such as: “Well, we want a house first, or to at least get out of Section 8 housing,” “I want to have a steady job first,” or “I want to get out of debt before even considering marriage.” Coming from the recognition that couples assume marriage is what you do once you are more economically secure, these classes try to turn that logic on its head by promoting the idea that emotional commitment, preferably made official via marriage, is the foundation of socio-economic security. They do this by promoting the idea that healthy relationships are not about what you *have*, but rather about what you *do*. That is, creating and maintaining healthy families is a matter of knowledge, skill, and effort, not money.

Acquiring *relationship skills* generally means two things in these classes: learning to communicate with and be committed to partners and children, and learning to make *better* family-related decisions, especially when it comes to children, money, and commitment. To demonstrate this, every series of Prosperous Parenting classes begins with the yarn network activity. By tossing a ball of yarn around a circle through several rounds, while each individual

holds their several pieces of yarn taut, we ultimately create a web of yarn that is meant to symbolically represent a collectively held set of hopes that all these parents have for their children. The exercise has two goals: to introduce everyone and to help participants visualize the main purpose of the class, which is to emphasize that a healthy co-parenting relationship is what allows children to thrive. For the first round, we say our name, then how many children we have, and then for the final round, everyone alternately tells their fellow classmates their hopes and dreams for their family. Parents' expressed wishes for their children range from the basic necessities of everyday living, such as having enough to eat and clean clothes, to the social advantages of a quality education and a life free of racial discrimination lived above the poverty line. Some parents simply say that they want to raise a happy or successful child, or one that won't "turn out like me" or "get pregnant or knock someone up when they're in high school." One particularly memorable comment came from a participant who said he wanted to raise a daughter with self-esteem, "because she's surely going to need it in this world."

Next, one of the instructors then takes a beach ball, tells participants that it represents their children, and throws it into the middle of the circle onto the web of yarn. If there is sufficient yarn, if participants hold their strands very tightly, and if the ball is inflated enough, it usually stays atop the web. Instructors tell participants to notice how the net supports the ball, and that our relationships work the same way. If our relationships with our partners are strong enough, they suggest, it can help keep our children from falling through the cracks and help them acquire all the things we hope for them. The final step of the activity involves one of the instructors using a pair of scissors to cut one of the pieces of yarn. This, they tell us, is what happens when partners don't support one another, when they don't communicate effectively, or when they don't resolve conflict in a healthy way. The instructor continues to cut pieces of the yarn until the web can no longer support the beach ball and it falls to the floor. The message is clear: children fall through the cracks when their parents do not have a healthy relationship to support them.



The point of the exercise is to get parents to make the connection between what they want for their children and the quality of their current relationship. The yarn network activity implies that the hopes we have for our families, and especially our children, are directly dependent on our ability to create and maintain committed interpersonal relationships. Though instructors sometimes suggest that extended family members and other community ties are important components of this web of support, the focus is clearly on the two individual parents. Instructors use this visualization to teach participants about the purpose of the class, which is to help parents learn how to strengthen their relationship.

A strong family, according to the curriculum used for the program, is one that can cope well with challenges, spends time together, shares a spiritual connection, and communicates well. A healthy marriage is defined as one characterized by: commitment, satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution, lack of domestic violence, fidelity, spending time together, emotional support and intimacy, commitment to children, and durability and legality.<sup>14</sup> Other more socio-structural characteristics of stable families are glaringly absent. Instructors continuously emphasize that a strong family is one that has the ability to cope with life's challenges. In so doing, the theme that emerges most strikingly from these classes is an emphasis on relying on family, and especially partners/co-parents, to cope with the stresses of life. These "stresses" however are rarely talked about explicitly in relation to being poor or low-income. Though participants often talk at length and repeatedly about difficult childhoods, conflicts or severed relationships with family members, being in jail, being unemployed, or being on drugs, the larger social forces that shape the problems more commonly experienced by low-income couples and families are never discussed. These types of struggles are incorporated into parts of the curriculum, such as a story about Mary and John (a fictional poor couple with a new baby who are thinking about marriage), but only to the extent that the problems experienced by these fictitious characters resemble those more commonly faced by the low-income participants,

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<sup>14</sup> The lesson on what constitutes a "healthy marriage" is one of only two lessons in the entire curriculum that mentions marriage. Another is a brief true/false quiz with only five questions that tests participants' knowledge of the correlation between marital status and other variables, including spousal weight gain, how much money married versus non-married couples make, and the likelihood married men will develop heart disease.

namely unemployment or underemployment, not having enough money, finding housing, having a baby outside of marriage and struggling to support and spend time with children shared with ex-partners. In no part of the curriculum, or the discussion of it, do the instructors talk about how these factors have also been shown to undermine interpersonal relationships and delay marriage among the poor.

One of the most important parts of a healthy co-parenting relationship, the instructors later explain, is that parents must learn to successfully manage their finances to accomplish the goals they have for their families. Whereas relationship education curricula intended for the general population tend to focus almost exclusively on communication exercises such as speaker/listener techniques,<sup>15</sup> lessons in Prosperous Parenting classes also focus on money-related topics such as goal-setting, creating a budget, learning to distinguish between needs (e.g., food and diapers) and wants (e.g., cigarettes and alcohol), and filing for child support. Instructors also pass out tools to help participants manage their finances, including calculators (to add up expenses) and plastic boxes (to organize receipts and other important financial papers). The classes also ask participants to explore the connection between their values about money and their spending habits. The most common values participants cite when asked to list their values are security, family, education, faith/spirituality, trust, kindness, respect, honesty, and good relationships. They are then asked to list their financial goals (having a house, a car, a savings account, paying off credit cards) and talk about how their goals align with their values.

The main overarching theme in the courses is that no matter what financial or other difficulties the couples are experiencing, they need to remember that they always have each other through the good and the bad, such as during times when “the jobs may not be there” as Susan told our class. Implicitly rejecting the idea (and the sociological reality) that economic or social disadvantage tends to undermine intimate relationships rather than bolster them, instructors

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<sup>15</sup> For example, PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program), the curriculum most commonly used by Healthy Marriage Initiative grantees, does not include information about budgeting and assumes that most couples taking the program are already married. Developed by Scott Stanley and Howard Markman, and informed by research on “marital failure” among predominantly middle-class couples, PREP is known as a marital enrichment and divorce prevention program, one that focuses almost exclusively on managing conflict (Markman et al. 2001).

promote the idea that couples' relationships could and should be stronger. Though their economic situation may be tenuous, their relationship could be stronger, not in spite of this difficulty, but because of it. The couples respond very positively to this message because it emphasizes the value of something they have (their current partner), rather than what they do not have, but desperately need (i.e., a job, more education, more money). It also frames those relationships as the most important thing in life, and much more important than money. Though access to jobs, education, and other economic resources are largely out of the participants' control and mediated primarily through larger social mechanisms, this relationship skills class frames interpersonal relationships as a more secure form of social support that individuals can control by treating their partners better, carving out time for the relationship, and communicating more effectively. The message is that you may be unemployed through no fault of your own, but *you* can decide whether to stay in this relationship. The individual, not the whims of the economy, decides whether or not to keep one's family intact. Therefore, this class does not just promote the idea that individual responsibility is what makes a relationship, marriage, or family work. It frames relationships, and how crucial it is to make them *work*, as important precisely because they are one of the few *social goods* that these poor couples have.

The operative assumption of the program and the larger policy in general is that intact, married families are more likely to be economically self-sufficient (i.e., not poor or on welfare). The overall message of this relationships skills class for poor families is that social and economic privileges are transmitted at least partially through the mechanism of relationship skills, both because not having them leads individuals to make poor choices, such as getting in unhealthy relationships and managing money unwisely, and because acquiring them can help individuals form relationships and habits that lead to social and economic success. This language of skills implies that creating healthy relationships is about knowledge and ability, something one can cultivate with the right training and adequate practice. More specifically, the message is that one can at least partially overcome socio-economic disadvantage by *learning* how to create and sustain interpersonal relationships that are better-suited to mitigate the struggle associated with

this disadvantage. As conveyed quite clearly in the yarn network activity, it is the family, specifically the parents' relationship, that serves as the web of support for children, the social unit on which all our hopes for them depend.

The following class discussion about the common toilet seat dilemma is a case in point. This conversation, recounted from a lesson on active and empathic listening, is a good illustration of how instructors remind participants of another main take-home message of all the Prosperous Parenting classes: It is not the problems themselves that undermine relationships, but how a couple communicates about them that really matters. Moreover, instructors and program coordinators frequently cite a statistic from John Gottman's (1999) research on communication within stable marriages that 69 percent of the things couples argue about are never resolved, such as the challenges of blended families and in-laws. Called "perpetual problems," these are issues that don't necessarily have solutions, but that matter profoundly for the couple because how partners talk about them largely determines the emotional tenor or "affect" of the relationship.<sup>16</sup>

The instructors, an African-American couple married for over 36 years, both in their late 50s, named Karl and Katherine, illustrate a lesson on defensive listening and non-verbal communication by pretending that Katherine is confronting Karl about hurting herself because she fell into the toilet in the middle of the night after he used it and did not put the toilet seat down. Katherine pretends to be a "defensive" communicator by angrily and loudly attacking Karl, accusing him of being careless, and rolling her eyes at him. Demonstrating a more active listening and empathic communication style, Karl responds by sweetly acknowledging Katherine's upset, apologizing for Katherine getting hurt because of his inconsideration, and telling her gently that he will be more mindful of putting the toilet seat down in the future. Yet, instead of understanding this as an exercise in different communication techniques, the

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<sup>16</sup> This claim that 69 percent of relationship troubles are "perpetual problems" is based on a slight misinterpretation of Gottman's (1999) work, though it does not misrepresent his main argument. In *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically-Based Marital Therapy*, Gottman writes: "Our research has revealed that an overwhelming majority of (69%) couples experience perpetual problems—issues with no resolutions that the couple has been dealing with for many years. Whatever the specific context of a perpetual problem, it will also include: (1) basic differences in partners' personalities, and (2) basic differences in needs that are central to their concepts of who they are as people. For most perpetual conflicts in marriages, what matters is not the resolution of the conflict, because it will never generally get resolved, but the *affect* around which the conflict is not resolved" (96).

participants use this as an opportunity to vent their own frustrations about the ubiquitous toilet seat problem that is obviously an issue in many of their own relationships:

Female Participant #1: “We have this exact same problem. Each time I get up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, I always fall in because he didn’t think to put it down when he was done.”

Male Participant #1: “But just think, when you make us put the seat down, you’re making our target smaller, and that makes us more likely to pee on the seat. Is that what you want?”

Katherine (interrupting): “Hey, guys! Is a toilet seat a major problem in a foundation of a relationship?”

Male Participant #2: “Hey men, can’t we just put up a caution sign so they won’t fall in?”

Male Participant #3: “Yeah, this bothers me. Now that women have women’s rights, they should have to put the toilet seat down!”

Male Participant #1: “That’s right, or better yet, why can’t they put it up for us. It’s the same as asking us to put it down for them.”

Katherine (interrupting again): “Come on, what I’m trying to say is that this is really about communication, not the problem itself. The goal is to try and understand where your partner is coming from.”

Female Participant #2: “We had this problem, too, when we first got together. I have a plan to try and fix it. Every time he was done and I heard him flushing, I would go slam down the toilet seat to make my point...”

Female Participant #3: “...on his thing?!”

Female Participant #2: [Laughing] “No, when he was done, after he left the bathroom.”

Katherine: “You’re all missing the point, which is that you need to learn to work these kinds of disagreements out between yourselves.”

Female Participant #4: “Well, actually, both toilet seats should be down because the germs go everywhere when you flush...”

Female Participant #5: “...yeah, and your kids could fall in, too. It’s very dangerous.”

Karl: “This kind of stuff is why couples end up filing ‘irreconcilable differences’ in court for divorce. Are you really going to let a toilet seat be one of your irreconcilable differences?”

Katherine: “Guys, don’t you see the point, we just got into a heated discussion about a toilet seat. If, as a group, we can’t come to an understanding about this, if you can’t work out an argument over a toilet seat, how are you going to address major problems and form the foundation of a healthy family?”

Female Participant #3: “Then there’s no hope!”

We quickly moved on to the next lesson.

This next example from another class about active listening raises the question of how useful such communication skills are when a couple's "perpetual problems" arise from being poor. Joseph, a Latino instructor in his early 30s, is addressing a class of me and three couples, one of which is Cody and Mindy, both white, 18, and the parents of an eight-month-old daughter. Joseph asks everyone what their last argument was about and how they might apply active listening to that type of conversation. He also mentioned another oft-cited relationship expert, John Gray (1992), of the well-known *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus*, who argues that most communication problems are due to the fact that men and women have very different communication styles, with "Martian" men being more likely to withdraw and "Venetian" women being more likely to henpeck and strike out. Ben, another male participant in the class, chimed in to say, "and some women are so crazy, they're from Saturn." As the whole class erupted into laughter, Cody took this opportunity to confirm what Joseph was saying about how men and women communicate differently, interpreting their problem as one of Mindy's inability to communicate clearly, rather than the fact that they were about to run out of money:

Mindy never tells me things straight! Why can't women just say what they mean? Man, I'll tell you about the last fight we had. It was just last week. We were having a fight about completely running out of money by Wednesday. Then, when it was time for me to take the bus to work on Thursday, I didn't even have enough money for bus fare. Why was she going on and on about this day, that day? Why didn't she just tell me that we were broke?! I would have understood that!

Joseph thanked Cody for sharing as Mindy just stared into space, and said, "Yep, there you go, that's a good example of why it's so important to be clear with your partner."

A narrow focus on the idea that it is not *what* a couple is talking about, but rather *how* they talk about it that really matters frames communication skills in particular way, one that does not address head-on the relationship stressors unique to poor couples. For example, how compromise and negotiation might differ depending on the class circumstances of the couple is not acknowledged at all. Instructors frame skilled communication similarly whether a couple, real or hypothetical, is talking about where to take a vacation or whose turn it is to take out the trash, versus when they must negotiate how to stretch a welfare check or the food stamps for the month.

Moreover, the practices of romance and relationship skills these classes promote assume a lot about the material circumstances of the couples. Specifically, they assume a distance from material necessity and control over time, two luxuries that poor parents are less likely to have. Beyond the obvious – that going out to nice restaurants, purchasing flowers, or getting a babysitter to have time away from the kids costs money – for couples in poverty, it is more a matter of space, time, and energy. Another story about Joseph, Cody, and Mindy powerfully illustrates this point. During a different class, Joseph gave the class a homework exercise. He asked them to spend a mere 15 minutes actively listening and talking to one another about their feelings before going to sleep. The point, he told us, was to set aside a little time each day just for one's partner to keep the relationship strong. The following week, Joseph asked if everyone had done the homework exercise. Cody answered that they had wanted to, but since they live in a small studio apartment with his father, their infant daughter, and occasionally another friend who crashes at their place from time to time because he is homeless, they had no privacy and thus no opportunity to talk with the baby, the dad, and the friend sleeping on the floor right next to their bed. Cody compared their apartment to the classroom, which suggested that it could not have been more than a few hundred square feet. So, he said, unless he and Mindy wanted to go into the closet or the bathroom, they had no privacy in the apartment. In addition, their neighborhood was too crime-ridden for them to feel safe going outside, especially at night. Finally, he said, though he really wanted to know more about Mindy's day at home with the baby, he was simply too tired to keep his eyes open after working two full shifts during the day.

Similarly, instead of promoting the idea that family time has to be about consumption, that is, buying things or spending money to spend time together, classes teach families that there are a lot of things they can do for free. In one class we even brainstormed at length about all the many low- or no-cost activities available in the community, such as going to the zoo or taking a home-made lunch to the park for a picnic. The instructors, Deborah, an African-American woman in her early 50s, and Mark, a 23-year-old white college student, asked us to write down as many free family activities as we could think of on a piece of paper. Next, we decorated

family boxes with magazine photos of kids and families. When we were done, we cut up our list of activities, folded the pieces of paper, and were told to take them home and pick out one activity to do as a family per week. Mark told us that his favorite childhood memories were the ones that were about spending time, not money, together. He wrapped up this lesson on family time with the message that it is not the things that you buy your kids or partner, but simply the time you spend with them that matters most. And, in the end, the time is free and ultimately more valuable anyway.

This is not to suggest that couples living in poverty do not experience romance. I interviewed Mitch, 26, and Jessica, 22, in their new Section 8 apartment when their daughter, Neveah (heaven spelled backwards), was five days old. We had attended Deborah and Mark's classes together, and when I asked them about romance during our interview a month later, Jessica told me that two of the most romantic things she remembered involved Mitch. One was a conversation they had in a homeless shelter when they decided to create a family by getting pregnant. The other was how, when living in a tent city throughout most of her pregnancy, Mitch would go to different local hotels, pretend to be a customer and get free continental breakfasts for them. She thought this was a romantic, loving gesture, especially because he was so mindful to get orange juice for her, which they knew was important for a healthy pregnancy.

Sometimes this disconnect between the instructors' messages and the participants' experience is evident in simple misunderstandings. For example, during a lesson emphasizing the importance of expressing the positive in relationships, Mark asked, "So, when you go to buy a car, what kinds of things do you look for?" A young African-American male participant quickly answered, "Well that all depends, do you have to live in it or just drive it, 'cause a heater's real important if you have to live in it?"



## **Discussion: The Sociology of Marriage Promotion Policies**

Much of the controversy over marriage promotion politics speaks to the multifarious nature of marriage in contemporary American society, one characterized by numerous tensions and contradictions, both structural and cultural. On one hand, marriage is a legal contract, a mechanism of class, race, gender, and sexual inequality, a primary way to distribute political rights and economic privileges, and the most legitimate and structurally-supported social site of interpersonal commitment among lovers, parents, and children. On the other, it is the social teleology of romantic love, the context in which we are supposed to express, and have met, our most intimate sexual and emotional desires and needs; it is where we are expected to realize self-fulfillment, intimacy, and our innate need to merge with our one true soul mate. Put another way, it is, in the terms of Bellah et al. (1985) in *Habits of the Heart*, a social institution that reconciles, though not entirely well as divorce statistics would suggest, the contradictory demands of two competing logics of American individualism, *utilitarian individualism*, which “views society as arising from a contract that individuals enter into in order to advance their self-interest,” and *expressive individualism*, which “holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized” (333-6). Marriage promotion policies speak to the former, while relationship skills classes clearly reflect the latter.

Many sociologists have theorized the profound connection between love, marriage, and the class structure. Engels (1985) conceived of romantic love as a dominating ideology that legitimates marriage as a social institution founded on sentiment, rather than one that actually serves to increasingly consolidate wealth and private property from one generation to the next. Goode (1968) cautioned against love’s ability to disrupt the class structure when the children of upper-class families married “beneath” them into lower-class ones, thereby undermining privileged parents’ attempts to merge and increase wealth by ensuring their children married into families who were their socio-economic equals. Weber described sexual love as “the greatest irrational force of life...a boundless giving of oneself [that] is as radical as possible in its opposition to all functionality, rationality, and generality” (Gerth and Mills [Weber] 1946, 343).

Marriage should transform the “feeling of love which is conscious of responsibility...and a mutual granting of oneself to another...to value in pure form,” value that is almost impossible to realize in other social realms (Gerth and Mills [Weber] 1946, 350). Extending Weber, Collins (1986) argues that love is the ultimate respite from rationality, one so desperately needed as the impersonal realms of politics, economics, and science are increasingly rationalized.

Illouz (1997) describes how the idea that marriage is an instrumental, “economic and even profitable transaction” is antithetical to modern ideals of romantic love, as “money and social status are not supposed to interfere with sentiment” (75). Marriage promotion policies, in general, and the relationship skills classes they have created, in particular, implicitly turn this logic on its head. Without explicitly promoting marriage, government-funded relationship skills classes deploy ideas about interpersonal commitment, and what it takes to sustain such commitment in the face of poverty, as tools to prevent poverty and get parents off of government assistance. As Illouz argues in her compelling theory of the relationship between love and inequality within advanced capitalism, the dominant ideology of marriage and romance is that “not only is love blind to status and wealth, it ultimately transforms poverty into abundance, hunger into satiation, lack into surplus” (247). Within this dominant ideology is the trope that *money can't buy you love*. Though true to a point, money is certainly required to buy those things that enable the practices of love and romance, as many of the participants I observed and spoke with remind us.

Drawing on Daniel Bell's (1976) classic argument “that the culture of capitalism is self-contradictory, demanding that people be hard workers by day and hedonists by night,” Illouz (1997) argues that ideals of romantic love as magical, uncontrollable, and pleasure-centered, “coexist with an experience of love as rational, utilitarian, and laborious” (11). This is especially true now given the prominence of *therapeutic culture*, a set of ideas and practices that rely on psychological theories and psycho-therapeutic techniques to solve individual and social problems purportedly rooted in maladjustment to social life and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships (Becker 2005, Herman 1995). Part of this therapeutic ethos is the *scientization* of love and the

discursive blurring of the market and intimate life. That is, the same rational and instrumental calculation used to pursue economic ends is repackaged into telling people how they can manage and control their personal lives.

It is this tension between love and rationality that can help us understand what is essentially going on in these classes. Instead of love, it is the market that is framed as uncontrollable and outside these poor couples' control—parenting in poverty is the ultimate *perpetual problem*. Relationship skills classes promote the idea that love and commitment should be skillful and take work, and that relationship stability and sticking together will keep children secure. For largely uneducated and poor racial and class minorities who have the least control over job prospects, money, their time, and especially their children's life chances, this is a provocatively compelling message.

Marriage promotion via relationship skills education does not involve telling poor women to get off of welfare by marrying their way out of poverty, as some critics have feared. What government-sponsored marriage educators actually try to convey to participants is a more nuanced, though no less explicit, message about the relationship between marriage, poverty, and child wellbeing. Marriage promotion in the classroom is less about promoting a particular relationship status than a specific state of mind about the relationship and the social and economic benefits it confers. Marriage education frames a good relationship as requiring continuous investment, emotional work, and a sense of solidarity that is largely impermeable to economic strain and the stressors of everyday life lived in poverty. This skills-based approach does not present marital problems as a result of specific life circumstances nor one's position in the class hierarchy, but as a consequence of the inability to communicate, resolve conflict effectively, and accomplish major life goals. Hence, it is not the content of the couples' disagreements that matter, but the form they take, that is presented as the largest challenge for relationship stability. As communicated to participants in the discussion about the toilet seat, every relationship has difficulties, most problems are perpetual, and therefore successful couples are those who learn to talk through the inevitable strain as empathically as possible.

What is notably absent from this framing of *healthy relationships* is any reference to larger social forces that affect individuals' abilities to create and thrive in interpersonal relationships, such as economic insecurity, stratified access to material and cultural resources, and the availability of economically secure marriage partners. The operative logic of marriage education is that marriage is an emotional and economic partnership, one in which communication, conflict resolution, and financial management skills can be a social and psychological bulwark against the larger socio-structural stressors that shape modern family life, especially for poor families. The underlying message is that government's responsibility in promoting the welfare of American families is to *teach* struggling families to help themselves.

Skeptics of governmental marriage promotion programs would likely be pleased to learn that these classes do not promote marriage, *per se*, as a route out of poverty. However, these classes do promote the idea that marriage, defined as a committed, *skillful* co-parenting partnership is a socioeconomic good that ultimately supports children and families both emotionally and financially, one that should be of particular value to poor parents who have less access to other resources. What isn't addressed in these classes for poor families or by marriage promotion policy advocates in general, is the fact that poverty tends to undermine poor couple's efforts to marry, not support them. Though this message could be interpreted as empowering for economically disadvantaged families, it does not reflect the reality of their socioeconomic situation. Unfortunately, the reality is that poverty cuts a couple's chances of marrying in half, an indication that intimate relationships are not particularly well-suited for mitigating the challenges of poverty.

Despite often stark disagreements over whether or not the government should promote marriage as anti-poverty policy, family scholars tend to agree that anti-poverty policy in general should support family-formation goals that allow parents to create secure and loving families for children. Many of the lessons in these classes further that goal, such as encouraging parents to communicate in a nicer way with one another and their children. Yet, there are many other socioeconomic goods that families need to create a secure environment for their children, namely

access to education, job skills, and secure employment that pays a living wage. Instead of promoting the dubious message that marriage leads to economic stability for poor families, government-sponsored relationship education should also largely focus on teaching poor individuals how they can access government and social services that allow them to improve their economic situation, and in turn, increase their chances of getting married, should they personally choose to do so. This approach would simultaneously promote marriage, support diverse family forms, and recognize the intricate connection between the stability of intimate and family relationships and economic security. Critics of marriage promotion programs argue that it is not the government's business to create policies that target an individual's personal relationships. This study shows that government funding for relationship skills classes that offer individuals social support for creating and sustaining healthy relationships is prudent public policy, but only when its goal is to promote all healthy relationships, not just marriage. This is especially important for low-income parents who face more than their fair share of relationship stressors, but have fewer means that enable them to access other counseling-type services when such stressors ultimately take their toll on those relationships.

There is an extensive literature on how welfare policies have been used as powerful arms of a punitive government, one that has controlled indigent populations, especially poor, single mothers on welfare, by conditioning assistance on poor women's abilities to conform to norms of middle-class married life (Abramovitz 1996, Mink 1998, Skocpol 1995). Yet, something quite different is going on here. Marriage promotion policies, at least in the form of government-funded relationship skills programs, are neither coercive nor are they a condition of receiving assistance. Moreover, in contrast to other interactions disadvantaged families tend to have with the government, such as signing up for cash-assistance at the local welfare office, the relationships skills classroom is not characterized in the same direct way. The macro policy logic of the PRA and the HMI is that poor couples should get married in an effort to increase their chances of getting off welfare. What emerges from conversations in relationships skills classes and in discussions with poor parents is the logic of lived experience: poor couples believe that

marriage is what you do only after you get out of poverty and off welfare. Prosperous Parenting classes provide a social forum for poor couples to challenge the anti-poverty logic of marriage promotion policies. Instructors who come armed with a manual and statistics correlating marriage with lower poverty rates are simply no match for a room full of parents who are more than equipped with the fodder of lived experience to challenge such claims. Despite the controversy that this type of *education* is sending the wrong message to poor American families, couples don't tend to disagree with the government's message. They want to get married, they just don't feel ready. These classes provide a social forum for poor, unmarried couples raising children to collectively talk about the stresses and strains they experience as they negotiate money and emotions within their relationships.

Beyond the theoretical contribution this work makes to understanding the nuances of the government's marriage promotion efforts, this study offers a unique empirical lens into the politics of commitment as parents accept, contest, and transform the government's pro-marriage messages. Parents do not blithely or blindly accept the government's pro-marriage messages. In fact, they often challenge and contest them in humorously, poignantly, and sociologically telling ways. We can learn more about the potential pitfalls and promises of this policy if we refocus our questions about its efficacy less on the debates over marriage promotion embedded in the larger culture wars over family values, and more with an eye towards the agency these parents assert when grappling with these messages out loud and in conjunction with others who share, all too unfortunately, the task of parenting in poverty.

More often than not during the introductory yarn network activity, we either don't hold our strings of yarn tightly enough, the beach ball is partially deflated, or there are gaps in our web large enough for the ball to easily fall through. When this happens and the instructor throws the ball onto the web, it slips through and falls to the floor. Despite repeated attempts by the entire class to hold our yarn more tightly, the web can rarely support the ball without the instructor holding it in place. These botched attempts at the yarn network activity serve as a poignant symbol of the social reality of many American families, especially poor ones, those

whom these relationship skills programs were largely created to help. Much like our loosely held threads, the marriages and co-parenting relationships of poor parents tend to be less stable. Poor children have access to fewer economic and social resources that allow them to ultimately accomplish all that their parents wish for them. Just as the ball falls through our web, this combination of deflated life chances and a more precarious family support system leaves many children on the socioeconomic floor, despite their parents' best attempts to support them and give them a better life than the ones they had. This should be a reminder that healthy relationships, both between couples and parents and children, thrive most when interpersonal love and commitment exist within the context of larger social and economic support.

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