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Learning and Legislating to Love:
Marriage Promotion Policy and Family Inequality in America

By

Jennifer Marlene Randles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Barrie Thorne, Chair

Professor Sandra S. Smith

Professor Cybelle Fox

Professor Philip A. Cowan

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Abstract

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Jennifer Marlene Randles

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In 1996, Congress overhauled welfare policy to encourage work and marriage as routes to economic self-sufficiency for poor American families. This led to the subsequent creation of the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) in 2002. The HMI has funded hundreds of relationship skills and marriage education programs across the country, many targeting poor and low-income unmarried couples with children. To date, very little of the social scientific and policy debate over the value of such programs has focused on what relationship skills-based government-sponsored marriage promotion actually involves in practice. To address this gap, this dissertation draws on data collected during an 18-month participant observation study of one federally-funded relationship skills program for low-income, unmarried parents called Thriving Families, including in-depth interviews with 60 program staff, instructors, and participants.

I find that Thriving Families couples delayed marriage because of a phenomenon I call *curtailed commitment*, the belief that if they cannot live up to middle-class ideas of family life, including meeting a specific economic threshold, couples are not equipped for marriage. Staff and instructors employed three primary strategies to encourage couples to overcome this reluctance: 1) rather than promoting marriage directly, they promoted a healthy co-parenting relationship, preferably within the context of marriage, as the best resource poor parents have to bolster their children's life chances; 2) they reframed what I call *marital masculinity* by suggesting that marriageable men are those who have the capacity to be caring co-parents and good communicators, qualities that do not depend on their ability to live up to middle-class norms of male breadwinning; and 3) they tried to teach parents financial management skills that would presumably enable them to have more money and communication skills to help them talk through relationship problems. Though economic constraints challenged their abilities to use the skills promoted by the program, parents viewed the classes as a rare opportunity to communicate free of the material constraints that overwhelmingly characterized their daily lives and their intimate relationships. This suggests that rather than promoting an instrumental view of marriage—that marriage prevents poverty—healthy marriage policy could likely better serve disadvantaged families by acknowledging and addressing the socioeconomic roots of curtailed commitment as part of public efforts to strengthen family relationships.

For Mom and Dad

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements		iii
Chapter One	Introduction: Intimate Inequalities and Curtailed Commitments	1
Chapter Two	Public and Private Fantasies of the Married Family	24
Chapter Three	The Missing “M-Word”: Street-Level Strategizing and (Re)Framing Marriage Promotion Policy	46
Chapter Four	Repacking the “Package Deal”: Promoting Responsible Fatherhood and Marital Masculinity	64
Chapter Five	Talk is Cheap: Communication Skills and the Costs of Commitment	87
Chapter Six	Conclusion: Feelings, Finances, and the Future of Marriage Promotion Policy	108
	References	121

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Chapter One

Introduction: Intimate Inequalities and Curtailed Commitments

I met Gwen and Isaiah at their shared apartment on Valentine's Day, the holiday for celebrating love, romance, and commitment.¹ Both 24 and African American, they had been together on and off for five years and just welcomed a son named Joshua shortly after the New Year. No dozen long-stem, red roses adorned their kitchen table. While millions of other American couples went out for romantic dinners to celebrate their relationships, Gwen and Isaiah spent their Valentine's evening talking separately with me about love, commitment, and marriage. Even before Joshua came along as an unplanned addition to their family, they had talked a lot about getting married. Since then, Isaiah lost his job and had to quit school, Gwen's hours were cut back at work, and more arguments ensued as both felt the strain of living in a constant state of emotional and financial limbo.

After Gwen developed gestational diabetes midway through her pregnancy, her obstetric nurse told her about Thriving Families, a program for low-income and unmarried expectant parents hosted by a local healthy marriage organization. The nurse told Gwen it was a relationship skills class focused on communication, conflict-resolution, saving money, and adjusting to having a new baby. Gwen, excited that she and Isaiah could get some "free counseling" and "work on their relationship" before Joshua came along, eagerly signed up. Isaiah reluctantly agreed, hoping this would give Gwen an opportunity to work on the anger and trust issues that kept him hesitant about the relationship.

Four months after finishing the seven weekly Thriving Families classes, I interviewed them about their experience in the classes, asking them about what they learned, whether it helped their relationship, and how they were doing now. Both enjoyed the classes, especially the opportunity to sit down and talk with other couples experiencing the same problems. They both "had emotional walls up" in the relationship, Gwen told me, and the classes encouraged them to communicate about things they had never talked about before. Specifically, Isaiah opened up about his strong desire to be a good father to Joshua, a desire motivated largely by Isaiah's hurt over his own father being absent throughout his childhood. Yet, by the time I spoke with them that Valentine's evening, Thriving Families had already faded into the background memory of their relationship as a hopeful, yet futile effort to work things out. The tips they learned about how to communicate better were simply no match for the sources of stress they now faced: little money, a new baby to support, dwindling optimism that Isaiah would find a steady job anytime soon, and constant uncertainty about where their relationship was headed.

¹ To protect the confidentiality of those who graciously agreed to participate in this research, I have changed all names to pseudonyms.

Couples like Gwen and Isaiah, living together with children, but struggling emotionally and financially, have become the primary target of recent U.S. policy efforts to promote marriage as a route to economic self-sufficiency. Thriving Families, the relationship skills class they took before Joshua was born, was sponsored by the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative, a policy created in 2002 with the goal of promoting marriage, especially for parents in or near poverty. One of the overarching goals of governmental marriage promotion is to teach the communication skills associated with happy, lasting marriages and to encourage poor and low-income couples to think of the many ways that getting married would benefit their families' futures, especially financially. Embedded within the policy is what I call a *political ideology of marital prosperity*, the idea that since families with two married parents are less likely, statistically, to be poor and on welfare, encouraging marriage among poor families is one strategy to help them escape poverty and to raise children who will stay out of poverty.

But Gwen and Isaiah had already thought carefully and talked incessantly about getting married well before taking their first Thriving Families class. According to Gwen, Isaiah was eager to get married when he was employed. Everything changed after he lost his job and had to quit school:

When we both talk about marriage he wants to but he asks 'why would you want to marry me in this situation?' As a man, he really wants to provide for his family more. He doesn't see in himself what I see...I don't know if I should prepare to be a single parent or if I'm going to be carrying much of the load...I don't have a doubt in my mind that he loves me and I love him, it's just money...It's the reason for him not making the commitment to get married, and for us not having a future together.

Isaiah had a slightly different perspective about why, after dating and living together for almost five years and now sharing a son they both claimed to love more than anything, he was not ready to marry Gwen:

The money thing is an issue. I told her when I get work I'll be providing a lot more, and she wants to know when. I can't give her a timeframe because I don't even know...She'll question my commitment and my love for her, but I'm here every single day...I love her, but I need time...We both need to change. For one, her credit isn't that great, and when they check for a mortgage, they'll check both our credit...I want to have a house; I don't want to have an apartment with kids. I want to have a yard, a playground. It's going to be harder now. Even if we want to get a car, it's on us now...Her grandparents always say, 'if you loved each other enough to have a kid, you love each other enough to get married.' I'm like, 'no!' If we do get married, and I'm miserable for getting married, I don't want to blame my child for that...I love my son more than anything else in the world, and I can never blame him for anything. I can't blame my son for anything so I don't want to get married because of my son. I want to get married because I'm happy.

Gwen felt insecure about their relationship, fearing that Isaiah was not fully committed to her and worried that they had done things “backwards or less than sometimes” by not getting married before having Joshua. Isaiah was unsure that Gwen would ever be able to keep a job, given her penchant for being late to work, and he worried that they would never fully trust one another financially or emotionally. Both were continuously anxious about money and giving Joshua the life he deserved, including that house with a backyard playground and married parents. Ultimately, neither Gwen nor Isaiah needed a class to encourage them to think about whether getting married was what they wanted or what was best for Joshua’s future. They wanted to marry; they just did not feel they were economically or emotionally equipped to make that commitment.

In the mid-20th century, Americans were equally likely to marry regardless of social class; by 2005, those living below the poverty line were only half as likely to marry as those who lived above it (Edin and Reed, 2005). Americans still almost universally aspire to marry, but their expectations of whether or not they will ever be ready for marriage vary depending on social class (Cherlin, 2005). Being ready for marriage has become ideologically associated with all the advantages and accoutrements of being middle-class—finishing college, getting out of debt, being securely employed, and owning a home (Gibson-Davis, 2007; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). In part because of the growing cultural norm that marriage is what people do once they become financially secure, those in poverty are especially likely to view marriage as an achievement, a luxury to which they aspire, but which they may never achieve (Edin et al., 2004; Edin and Kefalas, 2005). However, changing ideas about being ready for marriage do not fully explain lower-income people’s retreat from marriage in recent decades. During the same time that marriage became ideologically associated with these various socioeconomic advantages, those advantages (e.g. a college education, owning a home) became further out of reach for many poor and low-income Americans. These ideological and economic changes explain not only why Americans, on average, marry at older ages than those of previous generations (Arnett, 2006), but also why many of the poor or near-poor like Gwen and Isaiah have delayed marriage indefinitely and could possibly end up eschewing it altogether. This phenomenon, which I call *curtailed commitment*, is founded on the belief that if they cannot live up to middle-class ideas of family life, including college degrees, stable jobs, cars, and single-family homes with backyard play areas, couples are not equipped for marriage.

In this dissertation, I use an ethnographic case study of one federally-funded healthy marriage relationship skills class for low-income couples like Gwen and Isaiah as an empirical lens. I do so to argue that there is a profound disconnect between the political ideology of marital prosperity embedded in marriage promotion policies and the lived experience of parents raising children in poverty, whose ideas and decisions about marriage often result in curtailed commitment. Although the federal government has funded over 200 community-based programs similar to Thriving Families since the Healthy Marriage Initiative began in 2002, very little of the social science and policy debate over the value of such programs has focused on what government-sponsored marriage promotion actually involves in practice (Acs, 2007; Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Hardisty, 2008; Hays, 2003; Lichter et al., 2006; Ooms, 2001; Sigle-Rushton and

McLanahan, 2003; Solot and Miller, 2007; Thomas and Sawhill, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005). With an eye toward filling this crucial gap, this dissertation has two main interrelated goals. First, it investigates empirically how the government seeks to influence attitudes about marriage through relationship skills education classes for low-income, unmarried parents. I gathered this information by observing and doing interviews in on-the-ground contexts where relationship educators teach and promote the government's pro-marriage messages and where couples accept, question, and contest these messages. My second goal is to develop broader, more theoretical insight into ways in which marriage is being used as a political tool to address poverty and other social problems that are often attributed to marital troubles and single parenthood.

This study addresses three important sociological questions: 1) How does U.S. federal marriage promotion policy use and transform ideas about love, family, and interpersonal commitment in the service of an anti-poverty, government expenditure reduction agenda?; 2) Do relationship skills classes for unmarried parents living in poverty address the empirical realities of curtailed commitment and meaningfully inform the relationship choices poor parents' make?; and 3) How is publicly-funded relationship skills education intended as a political tool of social change? This study of government efforts to shape ideas and practices relating to marriages and families demonstrates the continuing articulation of marriage and intimacy with patterns of social and family inequality. What I primarily discovered was a mismatch between the way Thriving Families parents thought about marriage—that it should come after achieving a greater degree of financial security—and the fundamental policy logic of marriage promotion policy, that marriage will help couples achieve this security. Policy intent and lived reality were often at odds in the implementation of marriage promotion policy.

The Wedded Welfare State and the Political Ideology of Marital Prosperity

Traditionally, the government has almost exclusively focused on helping families pick up the pieces after they break down. An ounce of prevention goes a long way, however, and the government is now taking a more proactive approach by providing services that support families by making them stronger before they break down.

Healthy Marriage Initiative Handbook
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That is the political logic of the most significant overhaul of American welfare policy since the 1960s. In 1996, spurred by the beliefs that too many people were on welfare for too long and avoided working and getting married to retain cash benefits, Congress passed a new welfare law, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. The Personal Responsibility Act ended a 60-year history of welfare as an entitlement program for poor American families. Faced with five-year lifetime limits and work requirements, welfare recipients, mostly single mothers and their children living in long-term poverty, were no longer guaranteed access to welfare benefits as a matter of political right. Leading up to this, welfare had long been characterized as an expensive government program that made the public pay to cure the social ills that resulted from broken families. The federal

government was intent on changing this; the proverbial *pound of cure* that was welfare ended as we knew it.

In its place, Congress offered the American poor *an ounce of prevention*. Asserting that “marriage is the foundation of a healthy society,” and “essential for family and child well-being,” the new law encouraged work and marriage as routes to “self-sufficiency” for poor American families. The Act listed the following four statutory goals for the new cash assistance program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families:

1. Provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
2. End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
3. 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
4. Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.²

As a continuation of this new policy focus on marriage, President George W. Bush created the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) in 2002 through the Administration of Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. According to the mission statement of the Initiative, the HMI aims: “To help couples who choose marriage for themselves develop the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages.” The Initiative earmarked \$100 million dollars annually in federal seed money to fund community-based marriage education programs, \$50 million per year for “responsible fatherhood” programs, and \$102 million a year for research to study the effectiveness of healthy marriage policies and programs.³

The Personal Responsibility Act essentially curtailed a half-century-old public commitment to financially assist the poor and simultaneously encouraged private commitment among poor couples through marriage. The assumption underlying this pivotal shift in legislative logic was that married families are more stable, less likely to be poor, and therefore less likely to need welfare; marriage promotion became a governmental plan to help families in poverty *learn* how to be successfully married and thereby self-sufficient. As a clear case of the privatization of dependency, Congress wanted marriage to become the definitive social safety net, the ultimate form of commitment in an era of shrinking public support for “broken” families.

² Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Public Law 104-193. 104th Congress.

³ When the Department of Health and Human Services launched the HMI in 2002, they approved funding for four years, through 2006. Through the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, Congress allocated \$150 million dollars per year to continue the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives. Most recently, Congress reapproved \$75 million for healthy marriage programs and \$75 million for responsible fatherhood programs for the 2011 fiscal year.

According to the terms of the Initiative, earmarked education funding could be used for eight kinds of marriage promotion activities, including:

1. Public advertising campaigns on the value of marriage and the skills needed to increase marital stability;
2. Education in high schools on the value of marriage, relationship skills, and budgeting;
3. Marriage education, marriage skills, and relationship skills programs, that may include parenting skills, financial management, conflict resolution, and job and career advancement, for non-married pregnant women and non-married expectant fathers;
4. Pre-marital education and marriage skills training for engaged couples and for couples or individuals interested in marriage;
5. Marriage enhancement and marriage skills training programs for married couples;
6. Divorce reduction programs that teach relationship skills;
7. Marriage mentoring programs which use married couples as role models and mentors in at-risk communities; and
8. Programs to reduce the disincentives to marriage in means-tested aid programs, if offered in conjunction with any activity [listed above].⁴

Pursuant to these funding priorities, much of the HMI money has been funneled to programs that provide and/or study evidence-based marriage and relationship skills education⁵ that focuses on teaching communication and conflict-resolution skills.⁶ Evidence-based programs use findings from the field of relationship science, which seeks to theorize the basic laws that shape interpersonal social interactions. Relationship science is a multi-disciplinary endeavor that encompasses theories and empirical work primarily from social science fields, including psychology, sociology, anthropology,

⁴ “Healthy Marriage Matters to ACF (Administration for Children and Families)” Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, p. 2.

⁵ Some federal grantees, however, do not take a relationship skills-based approach to strengthening couple relationships, nor do they intend to specifically promote marriage. See Cowan et al. (2009) as an example of a federally-funded intervention that focuses, not on teaching communication skills or promoting marriage per se, but rather on strengthening family relationships using clinically-trained leaders to help unmarried couples address relationship difficulties and break negative generational cycles. Also, see Cowan et al. (2010) for a discussion of how “interventions to strengthen key family relationships” differs from didactic, skills-based programs; similar to arguments I make later throughout this dissertation, Cowan et al. (2010) argue that “marriage education...suggests that all couples can learn how to make their marriages or cohabitating relationships better. Our concern with this term is its implication that marriage educators know what a healthy marriage is and can transmit this knowledge to all couples in the same way that teachers convey reading and math skills” (209). Since the federally-funded program that is the focus of this study, Thriving Families, was a skills-based marriage promotion program, my analysis focuses on this approach to improving couple and family relationships.

⁶ For the purposes of this introduction, I will use “marriage” and “relationship” education interchangeably, in large part because those who create these programs do so. However, there is an analytical distinction, which I explain in Chapter Three. In addition, I found that Thriving Families staff and instructors often deliberately avoid use of the word “marriage” when working with low-income, unmarried couples.

social welfare, communication studies, and economics. Ellen Berscheid (1999), a psychologist and key proponent of relationship science, defines it as an attempt to “seek laws governing...the oscillating rhythm of influence observed in the interaction of two people...the goal of relationship science is to identify the causal conditions responsible for that rhythm” (261). As for its subject matter, “the question of relationship stability in general, and marital stability in particular, has been the single most frequently addressed question by relationship scholars” (Ibid.: 263). According to its advocates, relationship science holds the promise of not only improving our understanding of human relational behavior, but also improving the human condition, since “the contemporary epidemic of destructive interactions and toxic relationships contributes to many, if not most, of the pressing social problems of our time” (Reis, 2002: 601). Frequently designed with interventionist intentions, relationship science forms the theoretical and empirical bases for most relationship skills education programs whereby educators try to teach people how to develop the personal behaviors correlated with successful relationships. These advocates argue that decades of empirical research on interpersonal relationships have revealed the “best practices” that individuals can learn to develop these behaviors. By utilizing findings from relationship science, they claim, relationship skills education is an effective way to promote some of the most salient features of social prosperity, including marital satisfaction, child well-being, and economic self-sufficiency.

Though the Personal Responsibility Act and the Healthy Marriage Initiative were the first policies to explicitly promote marriage, recent marriage promotion policies are a new iteration of a long-standing American welfare logic. These policies continue an American tradition of using marriage to publicly institutionalize private support for families. Marriage has always been a way to pool economic resources, especially during times of scarcity; before love and personal fulfillment became the focus of marriage, this was thought to be one of its most important purposes (Coontz, 2005). Historically, the resource-pooling function of marriage worked very differently depending on the rung of the socio-economic ladder on which a couple lived. If they were poor or lower-income, marriage helped people survive. It increased their kin networks in times of need so that more people would be available to help out and share much-needed, but meager resources. For upper-class families who rarely, if ever, faced economic hardship, marriage served to combine fortunes and further increase wealth. At the same time that marriage helped the poor survive, it solidified the superior economic position of the wealthy, who adhered to strict social norms that prevented people from marrying outside their class. Historically, marriage was both a way to cope with social inequality and a way to perpetuate it.

American understandings of marriage have changed over the last two centuries, from a social and economic relationship necessary to serve the larger communal needs of society, to an intimate relationship intended to serve the emotional needs of two individuals (Coontz, 2005). Yet, many political ideas surrounding the institution have been obstinately consistent. Most U.S. welfare policies have historically operated as de facto marriage promotion policies. From the Colonial Poor Laws and the Freedman’s Bureau, to the New Deal and Aid to Families with Dependent Children in the 1960s, the American social safety net has included economic incentives for getting and staying

married and penalized those who were not married (Cott, 2000). In part because public aid was often conditioned on conforming to the type of married family the government deemed appropriate, an ideological and practical connection between marriage and economic security became entrenched throughout the history of American welfare policy.

In political discourse, marriage became synonymous with prosperity, and creating a family outside of marriage became equated with poverty. Traditionally, marriage was a primary social institution for creating and sustaining gendered norms, practices, and power differentials, particularly through a division of family labor in which husbands were primarily responsible for breadwinning and wives focused on homemaking and childrearing (Coontz, 2005). Beginning with Mothers' Pensions in the late nineteenth century, welfare policy has largely framed poverty as the result of marital breakdown, specifically the loss of a male breadwinner, and need-based, cash-assistance programs as the government stepping in to take his place. Drawing on this man-as-provider family model, welfare, specifically government cash assistance programs for poor families consisting almost exclusively of indigent mothers and children, has historically been conceptualized as a husband/father substitute (Abramovitz, 1996; Cott, 2000; Mink, 1990; Skocpol, 1995). The government created Mother's Pensions (the earliest precursor to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) as a subsidy for families with children but without an adult male income. Those who advocated for Mothers' Pensions argued that mothers without income because of fathers' desertion or unemployment deserved cash assistance from the state in exchange for the valuable public service they provided as guardians and caretakers of children (Abramovitz, 1996). Since then, many (Murray, 1984; Mead, 1986) have critiqued the welfare system for encouraging father absence by essentially replacing men's expected financial contributions to their families with public cash assistance and other supplementary programs. In a drastic turn, welfare reform of the 1990s pushed mothers into paid employment, mandated paternity establishment for welfare recipients for the purpose of collecting child support, and explicitly promoted marriage and father involvement (Hays, 2003).

Prior to mid-century, widows comprised the majority of women who received benefits through means-tested government welfare programs for single mothers with children. As never-married and divorced mothers, especially stigmatized women of color, began to comprise a greater share of welfare rolls, some child and welfare policy advocates became increasingly concerned that family structure was the driving social factor in rising poverty rates and that some poor women avoided marriage so they would not risk losing government benefits (Fineman, 1995). Critics such as Murray (1984) and Mead (1986) claimed that those in poverty valued marriage less and did not experience social stigma due to divorce or having children outside marriage; they also argued that, among the poor, falling marriage and rising divorce rates were rooted in a larger cultural devaluation of marriage. In recent years, pro-marriage policymakers have insisted that in a political climate where the goal is to get families off of welfare as quickly as possible, the public has a significant stake in promoting marriage as a way to minimize demands on public assistance programs. This approach is certainly not without critics; the promotion of marriage as a way of preventing poverty has sparked intense political and academic debate.

Statistics, Morality, and Politics: The Debate over Marriage Promotion Policy

Statistically, there is a clear correlation between marriage and socioeconomic status: married people are more highly educated (Fry and Cohn, 2010; Lefgren and McIntyre, 2006; Martin, 2006; Stevenson and Isen, 2010); they make more money (Chun and Lee, 2001; Fry and Cohn, 2010); and they accumulate more wealth over time (Zagorsky, 2005). Advocates of marriage and relationship education (Waite and Gallagher, 2000; Wilcox et al., 2005) invariably point to these and similar statistics showing a correlation between living in a married family and a lower likelihood of living in poverty. These advocates cite these correlations to support their claim that teaching couples the skills associated with higher relationship quality can lead to a better life for poor families and ultimately a better, stronger society with fewer social problems. In this view, marriage is an income-producing and poverty-reducing relationship and institution because it signifies unrivaled commitment to the financial and emotional well-being of an entire family unit, not just one's self. They also argue that marriage encourages spouses, especially men, to be more responsible and work harder, save more money, pool assets, and reduce living expenses (Nock 1998; Waite and Gallagher, 2000). Unmarried parenthood is especially problematic, advocates argue, because it divides and reduces the amount of resources available to children, and because, though two people are intimately, continually, and legally connected via a child, they have not made a legal, long-term commitment to each other that encourages them to make all their economic decisions with one another in mind.

As stated by the Administration for Children and Families:

Marriage education, a relatively new approach to preventing marital distress and breakdown, is based on the premise that couples can *learn how* to build and maintain successful, stable marriages. Couples can learn how to increase the behaviors that make a marriage more successful and decrease those associated with marital distress and divorce...The marriage education approach is based on years of research into the characteristics that distinguish marriages that succeed from those that fail. The difference between couples that survive and thrive in marriage and those that do not lies primarily in how couples understand and accept the fact that at times they will disagree and how they handle their inevitable differences. Behaviors and attitudes that predict success can be effectively and economically taught to couples, regardless of background, and at any state of their relationship...Marriage education highlights the benefits of strong and healthy marriages for both adults and children. These include being better providers; living longer; earning and saving more money; and being less reliant on government services, such as welfare, health care, and mental health care [emphasis in original].⁷

In other promotional materials describing the HMI, the government cites the following additional benefits of public policies and programs that encourage marriage: higher

⁷ "Premarital and Marriage Education" Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

education rates, specifically more college attendance; better academic performance among children; less crime, especially juvenile crime; less alcohol and drug abuse; children who are less likely to divorce; less need for social services; and greater happiness for both children and adults.⁸

Critics of marriage promotion policies (Hardisty, 2008; Solot and Miller, 2007) worry that the primary message these relationship skills classes send to poor couples is that marriage can solve their economic problems—that a wedding ring will be a golden ticket out of poverty. Their main critique is that marriage proponents, blinded by ideological biases that people should marry for moral reasons, confuse correlation with causation. They argue that research findings that married people make more money do not prove that marriage *causes* higher incomes. The main point of contention in this statistical debate is the role of selection effects: are people with more education, higher incomes, and more wealth the most likely to marry in the first place? Or is there something intrinsic and unique to marriage that helps people acquire these advantages? Simply put, it is a statistical chicken-and-egg dilemma: which comes first, marriage or social and economic well-being?

To measure the potential value of marriage promotion policies, many recent demographic analyses have used statistical models to test whether getting married would affect the poverty rates of poor women and their children. These analyses have yielded mixed results. Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan (2003) found that marriage alone would not lift most welfare recipients out of poverty, while Thomas and Sawhill's (2002) marriage simulation suggested that a majority of poor mothers and their children could rise above the poverty line after marriage. Lichter, Graefe, and Brown (2006) staked out a middle ground with an important caveat about the correlation, claiming that marriage could prevent poverty if poor women would “get married, stay married, and married well,” meaning if they were able to marry economically-advantaged men, which is unlikely.

Since 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 meeting the new work requirements (Collins and Mayer, 2010; Grogger and Karoly, 2005; Hays, 2003; Mink, 1998; Morgen et al., 2010; Seccombe 1998; Watkins-Hayes, 2009a, 2009b). However, the marriage promotion component of welfare reform, initially as controversial as the new lifetime limits and work requirements, has received almost no empirical attention from sociologists (see Heath, 2009, for a notable exception). At the extremes of the academic and political debates over marriage promotion, we have portrayals of a policy panacea for poor families and society on one end, and a view of the policy as a politically misguided push to the altar for poor couples on the other. What is needed is an in-depth, on-the-ground ethnographic study to understand how the practice of marriage policy actually works.

⁸ “Health Marriage Initiative: Building Real Solutions for Real People” Handbook, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Government marriage promotion efforts have specifically targeted those who have come to be known in academic and policy circles as *fragile* families—low-income, unmarried couples with children. Research on fragile families reveals that most unmarried parents in poverty aspire to marry, but various social and economic factors, including unmet standards of relationship quality and financial stability, operate as barriers to fulfilling these aspirations (Edin and Reed, 2005). Most (80 percent) unmarried parents are still romantically involved when their children are born, and almost half are living together at the time (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). Over 60 percent of these couples are no longer together within five years of their children’s births (McLanahan and Beck, 2010). The policy logic of marriage promotion is that if low-income couples who have children together could strengthen their relationships before likely breakups, more would stay together, eventually marry, and thereby increase their chances of escaping poverty.

The assumption that relationship and financial skills training could significantly help poor couples with children get along better, develop higher aspirations for marriage, and make more money—not through work, but through correct planning and budgeting—was perfectly-suited for incorporation into the 1996 welfare reform legislation that emphasized modifying personal behavior in the realms of work, sex, and family as a poverty-prevention strategy. The effectiveness of these practices for improving romantic relationships among low-income couples and for encouraging marriage or enabling economic security has not yet been established. Nevertheless, the neoliberal ideology underlying publicly-sponsored relationship skills training has gained enough traction to sustain political will for public marriage promotion funding for almost two decades. Neoliberal policies seek to manage large-scale problems of the population, such as poverty, while simultaneously reducing state spending and maximizing the efficiency of political resources by teaching individuals to self-regulate and make responsible choices in line with the aims of political projects (Dean, 1999; Lemke, 2001; Rose, 1999; Whitehead, 2007). Many of those involved in the marriage promotion debate have strongly critiqued this policy for promoting the rationale that learning how to communicate and manage money more effectively is a realistic route to escaping the poverty that presumably results from a disastrous combination of failed relationships and irresponsible spending habits (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Hardisty, 2008; Solot and Miller, 2007). However, although these critics argue that the government should pay more attention to the economic circumstances of low-income, unmarried couples, there is no existing data to support the idea that programs focusing on employment and other economic factors would help strengthen couple and family relationships.

Huston and Melz (2004: 944) have argued that, rather than focusing on the ideologies and partisan politics infusing the public debate over the value of marriage and government efforts to promote it, social scientists should focus instead on conducting rigorous research that can critically evaluate key questions that bear on the issue—questions such as: Is marriage equally good for everyone? and “What kinds of government efforts are likely to benefit society the most?” I take this directive seriously by posing a question implicated in widespread questioning of the social and economic value of marriage promotion policies and programs: What do participants think about

these programs? Do marriage promotion programs actually encourage a more positive view of marriage or the behavioral modifications that policymakers believe are necessary for upward mobility, escaping poverty, and getting off welfare?

Evaluations of government-sponsored relationship skills education programs have revealed mixed results. In May 2010, the Building Strong Families (BSF) Project, one of three major multi-site healthy marriage evaluation projects funded and coordinated by the federal government, released initial findings from eight relationship skills education programs for low-income unmarried parents distributed throughout the country (Wood et al., 2010). The goal of the project is “to learn whether well-designed interventions can help couples fulfill their aspirations for a healthy relationship, marriage, and a strong family.”⁹ BSF has two main components: relationship skills education and family support services, including services aimed at improving parenting skills and addressing employment, health and mental health, and substance abuse problems. After 15 months, when averaged across all eight programs, the experimental groups that took 30-42 hours of group relationship skills classes were not more likely to stay together, marry, or report having higher relationship quality than control groups. However, these results are, as of yet, only short-term, one of the eight programs did show positive results on key outcomes, and all eight sites showed positive outcomes for African Americans. Moreover, in what analysts call an “intention to treat” strategy, all participants in the experimental group, even the 45 percent who did not attend one group meeting, were included in the analysis. “It seems that it would be very difficult for the 55 percent of those who did attend to show a positive intervention effect, when combined with the non-attenders (Cowan et al., 2010: 217). In addition to the results from skills-based programs, interventions to strengthen couple and family relationships, such as the Supporting Fatherhood Involvement (SFI) program, showed significant positive outcomes in terms of child support, father involvement, parent-child relationship quality, and couple relationship quality, among others (Cowan et al., 2009).¹⁰

As public funding for these classes comes up for Congressional renewal in the future, large-scale evaluation studies are useful for identifying outcomes as defined by pre-determined program and policy goals. However, in-depth, smaller-scale studies are necessary to identify and understand the mechanisms by which particular programs fail or succeed in accomplishing those goals. Inductive ethnographic research is particularly well-suited for questioning and comprehending how participants, themselves, define program failure or success. For these reasons, the question of how and why low-income, unmarried parents benefit (or not) from government-funded relationship skills programs is a question that best lends itself to qualitative methodology. This question, and hence the perspective of the very families these policies were created to serve, has until now been largely omitted from the literature and public conversation about healthy marriage programs.

⁹ “Building Strong Families: Can Well-Designed Interventions Help?” Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. Available at: <http://www.buildingstrongfamilies.info/About/index.htm>.

¹⁰ See Cowan et al. (2010) for an overview of additional outcome studies of programs intended to support fatherhood involvement and strengthen couple relationships.

Cherlin's (2003) reframing of the marriage policy debate raises another important, largely unanswered question. He argued that the fight over marriage promotion programs is not primarily about data or statistics; it is about symbolism and morality, about the government taking an official stance via welfare policy that marriage is the family form we should choose over all others. "The marriage-promotion provision in the welfare reauthorization bill may be more important as a statement of how our government thinks family life should be lived than as a source of funds for particular programs" (Cherlin, 2003: 30). Yet, if we accept Cherlin's claim that the most important implication of marriage promotion programs is the moralistic view of family life they endorse, this exposes another fundamental gap in our knowledge about marriage policy. How does that particular sense of morality take shape on the ground in marriage education classrooms? That is, what does government-funded relationship skills education for low-income couples indicate about how family life should be lived? How is that stance conveyed, and how is it received?

As described above, existing research on healthy marriage programs consists of survey and interview-based intervention and evaluation projects that gauge whether relationship education can help improve participants' family relationships. Several longitudinal, quasi-experimental, and multi-site government-funded healthy marriage evaluations are currently underway. This type of research is important for measuring the effectiveness of marriage education in terms of specific outcomes, such as their effects on participants' marriage rates, how happy couples are in their relationships, how well they co-parent, and how long they stay together. Yet, marriage education is not just instruction in communication and conflict resolution skills, nor can its full significance be measured solely in terms of relationship outcomes. One of the goals of marriage promotion policy is to promote particular ways of thinking about marriage, including, importantly, its ability to transmit social and economic privilege. Because of this, the marriage education classroom is a political and discursive space where the politics of family, class, gender, race, and sexuality coincide to reveal a great deal about social inequality and policy efforts to ameliorate it. No one has yet studied marriage promotion policies in a way that reveals how instruction in communication skills may translate into overarching messages about how to value marriage, become better partners and/or parents, or how to become economically self-sufficient as a result of marriage. Analyzing how instructors promote these messages in the marriage education classroom and how participants respond to them are the empirical goals of this dissertation.

Site and Method

With these goals in mind, I conducted an 18-month ethnographic study of a healthy marriage relationship skills program for low-income, non-married couples who were expecting a child or had a child younger than three-months-old. In this dissertation, I refer to the program by the pseudonym Thriving Families. Between March 2008 and August 2009, I completed 150 hours of participant observation in Thriving Families classes, three focus groups with Thriving Families couples, in-depth interviews with 45 parents who graduated from the program, and in-depth interviews with 15 Thriving Families staff, 9 of whom were instructors. The six staff interviewees included the

organization's founder and executive director, the director of educational services, the program coordinator, and three program recruiters. During this time period, I also observed several informational recruitment sessions for the Thriving Families program held at a local social services office. Finally, I did participant observation in a two-hour training session for the Thriving Families relationship skills curriculum conducted by the curriculum's developers at a national marriage educator conference.

I chose to study Thriving Families because it targeted those families at the heart of the controversy over marriage promotion as poverty prevention policy—low-income, unmarried couples with young children. The site also represented what the federal government believed to be an exemplary healthy marriage program. Unlike many other relationship skills and marriage education programs funded by general grants for healthy marriage community organizations, the organization that coordinated Thriving Families received a Healthy Marriage Initiative grant from the Department of Health and Human Services specifically to create the program. They received an award for \$500,000 per year for five years beginning in 2006 to implement a relationship skills program targeting unmarried couples at around the time of the arrival of a new child. For this reason, the program was 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 18 months I spent studying the program, the federal government selected Thriving Families as one of three programs nation-wide to provide technical assistance to other programs within the same grant area of relationship skills classes for low-income, unmarried couples with children. In addition, the Office of Family Assistance selected the program as one of the top 25 “best practices” programs in the country.

The Thriving Families program was part of an umbrella community healthy marriage organization that coordinated various relationship skills programs for individuals and couples. The larger organization, which I will refer to as Healthy Marriages, was part of a larger state-wide healthy marriage coalition that received a multi-million grant in 2006 through the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative. Healthy Marriages also received a five-year HMI grant in 2006 specifically for the purpose of creating Thriving Families, a program that would directly target and recruit what has come to be known in academic and policy circles as *fragile families*—low-income, 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. This population is of particular concern to family scholars and policymakers because their economic position renders them most in need of government support. The program requirement that couples must be expecting a baby or have one younger than three-months-old reflected the assumption underlying fragile families research that around the time of a child's birth presents a unique window of opportunity, a “magic moment,” to encourage couples to get married.¹¹

¹¹ 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 1998-2000 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. See <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/index.asp>.

Site Description: Going Inside the Thriving Families Classroom

The Thriving Families program was based in a mid-size city of approximately 500,000 residents. Participants were referred to the program by their obstetricians or social service organizations, including the Women, Infant, Children (WIC) low-income family nutrition program, pregnancy and new mother support programs, and Child Protective Services (CPS). The Thriving Families program compensated participants \$10 per couple for transportation costs, served a full catered meal before each class, and paid couples \$100 if each member of the couple attended 14 hours of class time. To qualify for these “incentives,” as staff called them, couples had to meet a low-income requirement and could not be legally married at the beginning of the first class. Couples qualified as long as one parent was pregnant or had custody of a child younger than three-months-old; the other “parent” was not required to have a biological or legal connection to the child, only to be currently involved in an on-going relationship with the child’s parent. Couples could choose to attend seven weekly two-hour classes on weeknights or two seven-hour classes on consecutive Saturdays.

By the time of my fieldwork, the program had established a community partnership with a family resource center funded through the state Department of Health and Human Services that provided parenting and health education services to pregnant women and families with newborn babies. Thriving Families classes took place at one of the numerous center sites scattered around the city. Brochures, in both English and Spanish, about topics such as child development, breastfeeding, and how to apply for public aid lined the hallways of these family resource centers. Posters with pictures of new moms and dads with babies and toddlers spoke to parents with captions such as “No one told you being a parent was going to be this hard.” Thriving Families classes were offered in the largest meeting rooms available in these resource centers. The classes grew in size with the implementation of the incentive program, ranging initially from 1 to 4 couples to as large as 10 to 15.¹²

These meeting rooms resembled a typical classroom one would find in a middle- or high-school, complete with dry erase boards, pens, notebooks, and chairs and tables arranged in rows. Instructors distributed what they called “memory books,” course notebooks containing worksheets and lesson outlines, along with markers, glue, scissors, and magazines that parents were supposed to use to decorate and personalize their books. Instructors also took a Polaroid picture of each couple on the first day of class to place on the front cover of their books. Many parents added additional family symbols, including drawings and sonogram pictures. Approximately half of the women in the classes were visibly pregnant, many only a few weeks or mere days away from their due dates. Baby carriers and diaper bags sat next to workbooks and pens atop the tables. Older children went to the “play care” room provided by the program during class time to watch movies, play with toys, and color or draw. Play care providers were willing and happy to take care of babies during class, but parents often opted to keep their infants with them throughout the class. Couples often multitasked by listening to the instructors while rocking fussy

¹² I discuss in greater detail how the incentives increased class size in Chapter Five.

babies, filling out worksheets in their memory books while offering a watchful eye over naptime, and participating in group discussions while breastfeeding.

Each class had two instructors, in most cases a married couple, and always one man and one woman. There was also a staff person present during each class to take attendance, call absent couples, arrange and clean up after meals, answer questions, distribute incentives, and address any problems. The community-based organization that coordinated Thriving Families recruited instructors through a popular on-line classified ad website and trained them during a two-day workshop that included an overview of the curriculum and a brief teaching demonstration. There were no educational, professional, or personal requirements to become an instructor other than the two-day training. The program paid instructors \$25 per hour, per person to teach the classes.

The curriculum used for Thriving Families classes was created by faculty members of an outside-state university family and consumer sciences department using a federal grant from the Office of Child Support Enforcement. Based on pre-existing curricula for low-income, unmarried parents and step families, the Thriving Families curriculum included five main sections, including those focused on: 1) setting goals; 2) establishing a positive co-parenting relationship; 3) sustaining the involvement of both parents, especially fathers; 4) encouraging payment of on-going child support and support from non-custodial parents; and 5) making healthy decisions about romantic and couple relationships with a focus on marriage. Because the entire curriculum was intended for 24 60-minute lessons, and Thriving Families class series were only 14 hours long, instructors selectively used lessons from their leader's guides. They tended to focus on five lessons: goal setting, managing money, the importance of fathers, communication skills, and the benefits of a healthy marriage.

Instructors often sat at the front of the room and used a teaching style that attempted to elicit group discussion from participants in lieu of lectures. Though they sometimes read from their instructor notebooks and jotted down key points on the board to introduce a new topic, such as active versus defensive listening, they focused more on role-playing exercises, group and couple activities from the memory books, and sharing personal anecdotes to illustrate lessons. This semi-structured and minimally didactic approach allowed a lot of time and space for parents to share about their personal relationship struggles. Because of this, instructors often played the role of facilitator more than teacher in the traditional sense.

Most parents who participated in Thriving Families qualified as poor according to federal poverty line standards, were racial or ethnic minorities, and had little formal education.¹³ Eighty-four percent of those who enrolled in the program were on some form

¹³ These participant characteristics, collected via intake forms administered by program staff when they recruited participants into the program, refer to all program enrollees, not program graduates. I did not have access to the age distribution of participants in the classes, but it was a requirement of the program that participants be 17 years-old or older, and my observations and interviews indicated that most were in their 20s or 30s.

of public assistance, such as food stamps or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. Over half, 53 percent, reported combined household incomes of less than \$1,000 per month, while only 13 percent had household incomes of at least \$2,000, and fewer than three percent of participants lived in households that collectively brought in \$3,000 per month or more. Most of the parents had more than one child, and many lived with their own parents and partners. Since a three-person household was considered to be living in poverty if they made less than \$17,600 in 2008,¹⁴ these figures indicated that most participants in Thriving Families classes lived well below the poverty line. 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 or obtained a GED at the time of enrollment. Thriving Families classes were also very racially and ethnically diverse; 40 percent of participants identified as Latino/a, 24 percent as African American, and 22 percent as white.¹⁵

Method and Sample Description

I first gained entrée to the research site by contacting the program's founder and executive director asking about opportunities to do research on publicly-funded relationship skills programs for low-income couples. At the beginning of my fieldwork, the program director enlisted my help in conducting focus groups with Thriving Families parents to understand why the program had high levels of attrition. After completing three focus group sessions, I observed classes exclusively for six months; this initial data-gathering helped me develop a better sense of which questions would be most appropriate to ask parents about their experiences in the classes.

My involvement in the classes was a true mix of observation and participation. At the beginning of each class, the instructors introduced me as a graduate student doing research on relationship education classes. Unlike everyone else, I did not attend classes with a partner, nor did I participate in couples' exercises. I did, however, have my own program-provided workbook for each class and often filled out the same worksheets instructors asked participants to complete. These notebooks also allowed me to discreetly take extensive fieldnotes during the lessons and break-out exercises. Though I was overt about my role as a researcher, parents and instructors easily and completely incorporated me into the classes, and I participated as fully as I could in the classes when activities and life experiences reasonably allowed. As someone who did not yet have any children, I did not weigh in on discussions about childcare and concerns about parenting, though I fully participated in all group exercises and class discussions about childhood experiences, communication foibles, and the joys and woes of relationships. I most often sat on the side of the classroom, but occasionally, especially for smaller classes, I would sit at one

¹⁴ Department of Health and Human Services, 2008 Poverty Guidelines. *Federal Register*, Vol. 73, No. 15, January 23, 2008, pp. 3971–3972.

¹⁵ Of the remaining participants, 3 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander, 2 percent were Native American, and 10 percent identified as multi-racial or "other."

of the main tables in between two couples. During class 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. This gave me an opportunity to observe participants, instructors, and staff during classes, as well as interact with them more informally.

After observing six months of classes an average of four hours per week, I began recruitment for the interviews. I obtained parents' contact information from staff, as parents had signed a permission form to be contacted after the end of the course for research purposes.¹⁶ On a rolling basis, I contacted the full list of parents who had taken the English classes and graduated from the program between September of 2008 and June of 2009.¹⁷ I aimed to interview parents approximately six to eight weeks after they attended their last class. I chose this length of time to strike a balance between giving them enough time to incorporate the information into their daily lives, while not letting so much time elapse since they finished the program that they would be likely to forget their experience. Those I observed in classes overlapped to some degree with my interview sample. As the program offered several class series simultaneously, I had only observed 14 of the 45 parents in classes prior to the interviews.

The 45 parents I interviewed ranged in age from 17 to 57, though most were in their 20s or 30s, and the average age in my sample was 27-years-old. Twenty-two were men and 23 were women. Nineteen respondents (42 percent) were African American, eight were Latino/a (18 percent), 17 were white (38 percent), and one (2 percent) was Asian American.¹⁸ At the time of the interviews, 40 of the parents were still romantically involved with the partners with whom they had taken the class; two were separated but planning to co-parent after their birth of their daughter; two, one man and one woman, had already broken up with their respective partners; and one was still involved with her fiancé, but he was not available to participate in an interview with me due to work constraints. Of the 21 couples who participated in interviews subsequent to the classes, 13 were cohabiting, five were cohabiting and engaged, and one was dating and co-

¹⁶ I communicated frequently with the Healthy Marriages director and grant evaluator, but when reporting on my findings to the organization, I never associated any of the findings or interview quotations with participants' names or other identifying information to protect their confidentiality. I explicitly told interviewees in recruitment material, consent forms, and during the interviews that I did not work for Thriving Families or have any other professional association with them. I contacted parents via the home address they gave on intake forms and email addresses when available. Many of the letters were returned indicating "no such resident," suggesting that parents often moved or were no longer associated with the residents at the address, and most had only intermittent access to computers to check email. Therefore, though all the parents I interviewed were very low-income and many lived in public housing, my sample represents a relatively stable portion of parents who attended Thriving Families, since I was not able to contact parents who were homeless or otherwise did not have a permanent address.

¹⁷ Healthy Marriages also offered Thriving Families classes in Spanish. Program "graduates" were those parents who had completed at least 14 hours of class time.

¹⁸ Latinos are underrepresented in my interview sample because most of the parents who took the Spanish courses spoke Spanish almost exclusively. Since I do not understand or speak Spanish, I did not interview any of the parents who took the Spanish classes because of the language barrier.

parenting their six-month-old son, but living separately. The final couple had been married for several years, but had different last names and did not inform the program staff of their marital status so they could qualify for the program incentives, which were only available for unmarried parents per federal funding guidelines.

With the exception of the sole married couple who were jointly raising their four shared biological children and another couple in which the man was the social, but non-biological father for his fiancée's biological daughter since before birth, all of the other 41 parents were either expecting or had just experienced the arrival of their first biological child together. In one case, a couple was already jointly expecting another baby by the time of the interview. As is the case with many non-married, low-income couples, almost half (19) of the parents had children from previous relationships. Of the 20 non-married couples who were still together by the interviews, at least one partner had a child from another relationship in 13 cases. At the time of the interviews, only 13 (eight of the women and five of the men) of the 45 parents were employed for pay. Therefore, compared to couples in the large fragile families study (McLanahan, 2006), Thriving Families couples were more likely to be cohabiting and less likely to be employed, but were very similar in age distribution, education, racial/ethnic diversity, and incidence of multiple-partner fertility.

The interviews I conducted lasted from one to two hours. I interviewed 37 parents at their residence, four in a public space near their residence, two at a café, and two at a friend's residence. I interviewed parents both separately and as couples, depending on their preference, the space available in their residence, and childcare needs. Eleven couples chose to be interviewed together, while I interviewed the other 11 couples and the three individuals separately.¹⁹ After collecting basic demographic information and a brief sketch of their relationship history, I asked questions pertaining to three broad topics: parents' experience in the classes, whether and how they found the course material useful, and whether and how they thought the experience influenced their couple and family relationships. The majority of my interview questions were open-ended, and I asked all parents at the end of the interview if they wanted to comment on anything else pertaining to their experience, thereby allowing them to discuss issues they felt important that I did not ask about. Though I wanted information about their opinions on specific topics, I also wanted to allow room for respondents to talk about topics important to them that I had not anticipated.

As with the participants, when I interviewed staff and instructors, I opted for a semi-structured interview guide to ensure answers directly related to my primary research

¹⁹ It is possible that a partner's presence influenced how much parents were willing to discuss their relationship, for fear of upsetting their partner, but I found that either together or alone, parents easily and willingly discussed their challenges and divergent views on the classes and instructors. I opted to let parents decide whether to be interviewed separately or together to increase their comfort, aware that each scenario had advantages and drawbacks. For the couple interviews conducted together, I ensured that each partner answered my questions separately. If they indicated that they agreed with what their partner had said, which was not always the case, I asked them to elaborate on why they agreed so as to ensure that I had responses to my questions from both members of the couple.

questions, as well as to leave openings for unanticipated, though germane topics that arose from the unique experiences of specific interviewees. I interviewed 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. In these interviews, my questions focused on what motivated staff and instructors to work for a healthy marriage education program. Specifically, I wanted to understand how they saw their work as fitting into larger social policy efforts to promote marriage, to help couples improve their relationships, and to help people move out of poverty.²⁰

All interviews were transcribed in full, and I thoroughly coded both the interview transcripts and my fieldnotes from the classes for major themes. When possible, I cross-checked interviewees' accounts of what happened in classes with my observation data and interviews with staff. This combination of complementary methodologies was necessary to gain a full picture of how relationships skills classes unfolded on the ground; how staff, instructors, and parents interacted; how parents responded to course material; and how parents felt about the classes in ways that were not always obvious given their participation in class. I was able to observe their participation and their spontaneous responses to course subjects and interactions, while the interviews gave them the opportunity to be self-reflective about their experiences. During the course of my fieldwork, I employed both deductive and inductive ethnographic orientations (Burawoy, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1969). I entered the field with knowledge of existing theories about the social and economic constraints faced by low-income parents, findings from previous studies of similar courses for the general population, and the controversy surrounding marriage promotion policies. Given that there are no previous ethnographic studies of these types of programs for low-income couples, the Thriving Families classroom served as an ethnographic *tabula rasa*, a context in which the conceptual categories I used to code my data necessarily emerged from the parents themselves.

Outline of the Dissertation

My main goals in this introductory chapter were to familiarize readers with the policy, acquaint them with the main points of contention in the debate over marriage promotion policy, and give them a brief overview of the study I designed to gauge how marriage promotion policy was implemented and received in a particular case. Until now, much of the debate about marriage promotion policy has focused almost exclusively on why the government should or should not promote marriage (Acs 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005; Cherlin, 2003; Hymowitz, 2006; Ooms, 2001; Waite and Gallagher, 2000; Wilson, 2002). Beyond just asking this important *why* question, which keeps the debate at the level of theory and policy rhetoric, this dissertation answers two equally important *how* questions that bear on this timely policy issue: How did staff and instructors promote marriage in Thriving Families classes? Second, how did parents respond to these messages and tactics? The answers to these questions are crucial for understanding why large-scale evaluations of healthy marriage programs, such as those included in the

²⁰ I include demographic information about staff and instructors as appropriate throughout the remaining chapters.

Building Strong Families evaluation, have found that healthy marriage programs are not having the intended outcome of encouraging marriage. These answers could also help influence the debate over how we might use public healthy marriage resources for the greatest benefit to low-income families.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that there is a profound disconnect between the *instrumental* logic of marriage promotion policy and low-income parents' *symbolic* understanding of marriage. Underlying marriage promotion policy is a key assumption that marriage modifies individuals' behavior in ways that directly lead to greater financial prosperity. Conversely, low-income parents believed that individuals should marry only after they become more economically secure. To parents, marriage represents the culmination of financial prosperity, not a means to attain it, as the policy presumes. Parents' economic circumstances undercut the instrumental assumptions of the policy, specifically the presupposition that one and hopefully both partners can contribute stable wages to the household. The disconnect between these two fundamentally opposed understandings of the relationship between marriage and escaping poverty undermines political attempts to encourage poor couples to marry, and even more importantly, to pull them above the poverty line. However, based on the perspective of the Thriving Families parents I interviewed, there is still much value to be found in publicly-sponsored relationship skills classes for poor families. To fully grasp this value, I argue, we must refocus the marriage promotion policy debate according to low-income parents' perspective, which is largely shaped by the economic deprivation and hardship that characterizes their daily lives and intimate relationships.

Due to the already strong ideological link between marriage and economic security, policies and programs that promote marriage as a way to rise above poverty will not only likely be ineffective, but ultimately reify middle-class ideals of marriage and family. This is especially true for communication skills approaches to marriage education and promotion that gloss over the material inequalities that shape intimate life and frame communication problems as the major barrier to intimate and marital bliss. This approach is problematic for two reasons, one practical and one ideological. As a practical policy matter, it elides the economic problems that legitimately challenge poor couples' abilities to realize their marital aspirations. Ideologically, it further entrenches the idea, in both politics and personal life, that marriage is the antithesis of poverty and is instead synonymous with social privilege, economic security, and prosperity—an idea to which parents in poverty already strongly subscribe.

In Chapter Two, I introduce emblematic Thriving Families couples who told me they could not “afford” marriage until they met certain economic goals, such as finishing school, getting out of debt, or finding a job. Growing social inequality—specifically economic trends that push middle-class employment and lifestyles out of reach for more and more Americans—has converged with this growing belief that marriage is something you do only after you accomplish other life goals and become financially stable. This results in what I call *curtailed commitment*, the growing tendency for couples in poverty to indefinitely delay marriage, especially when a partner's position on the economic margins renders him or her a risky bet for marriage. In comparing the relationship narratives of Thriving Families parents with the instrumental anti-poverty logic of

marriage promotion policies, two incompatible ways of thinking about marriage emerge: *a public fantasy of the married family* and *a private fantasy of the married family*. The *public fantasy of the married family* is the legislative intent behind marriage promotion policies, the idea that encouraging marriage among families in poverty will improve their socio-economic position and their children's life chances. I call this a fantasy because research has yet to show that marriage, per se, lifts families out of poverty, especially among couples in which both partners have limited earning capacities and often struggle to maintain stable, moderately-paying employment. The *private fantasy of the married family* is the idea that, because economic security is increasingly becoming the ultimate prerequisite for marriage, poor couples' aspirations to marry too often remain just that, an unfulfilled hope, a fantasy. In Chapter Two, I contextualize the emergence of this symbolic understanding of marriage as an achievement within a historical overview of significant changes within the political economy of American marriage.

Chapter Three takes us into Thriving Families relationship skills classes where the word "marriage" had disappeared. Highlighting its controversial connotation, staff and instructors even sometimes referred to it as the infamous "m-word." I explain this highly ironic finding as a result of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2003)—in this case, Thriving Families staff and instructors—implementing marriage promotion policy based largely on their understanding of how economic constraints led to curtailed commitment for Thriving Families couples. That is, staff and instructors knew parents were reluctant to marry for economic reasons and tailored their marriage promotion messages accordingly. In lieu of marriage, instructors employed concepts, such as commitment and co-parenting, they believed to be more amenable to parents' understandings of relationships and that were not fraught with the same economic connotations as marriage. Rather than marriage, instructors encouraged parents' commitment to one another as a way to promote children's best interests, specifically that parents' intimate relationships could bolster their children's life chances. This focus on children's life chances was, I argue, an attempt to reconcile the tension between the instrumental logic of the policy and parents' symbolic understanding of marriage.

In Chapter Four, I analyze the responsible fatherhood component of Thriving Families classes. I found that Thriving Families classes also implicitly promoted marriage for couples in poverty by reframing what it means to be a good father and prospective husband in a way that initially challenged, but ultimately reinforced, middle-class norms of what I term *marital masculinity*. Marital masculinity, another instrumental assumption inherent in marriage promotion policy, is a highly gendered understanding of the role men and marriage play in pulling children out of poverty. It is the idea that marriage is a primary social context for the realization and continuous enactment of masculinity and proper fatherhood since it allows low-income fathers to become occupationally and financially successful. Much like staff and instructors attempted to reconcile the instrumental logic of the policy with parents' symbolic understanding of marriage by focusing on children's best interests, rather than on marriage, classes initially challenged the middle-class patriarchal views of marriage by reframing marital masculinity. Rather than someone who brings home a sizeable paycheck, a "real man," according to the classes, is someone who plays with and cares for his children and provides significant

support of any kind—emotional, housework, or financial. Both minimizing the marriage message and reframing marital masculinity allowed staff and instructors to promote marriage in ways that downplayed the instrumental logic of the policy and economic conceptions of the marriage bar. Ultimately, these marriage promotion strategies also effectively downplayed the class assumptions upon which the policy was built, specifically those related to pre-marital prosperity and breadwinning fatherhood. They did not, however, encourage parents to marry.

The final empirical chapter, Chapter Five, refocuses the analytic lens on the perspective of Thriving Families parents. I describe how they found the relationship skills classes useful, but not in ways that policymakers would have predicted—and certainly not in ways that will reduce poverty or the need for welfare. Financial management and communication skills techniques have become central to relationship skills curricula designed for low-income couples; the goal of these approaches is to help them meet the economic and emotional thresholds for marriage. Though couples' economic challenges significantly impeded their ability to use these techniques, parents did view the classes as a rare opportunity to communicate free of the material constraints that overwhelmingly characterized their daily lives and their intimate relationships. The classes served as a unique forum for discussion that allowed parents to interpret much of their emotional stress and, in many cases, their unfulfilled hopes for marriage, as a result of trying to sustain romantic relationships amid economic disadvantage. Hearing other couples in similar circumstances talk about their relationship challenges normalized many of the conflicts they had and encouraged them not to take their economic stresses out on one another. Parents' responses to the classes suggest that relationships skills classes could be more useful if classes acknowledge the emotional toll that economic stress takes on romantic, co-parenting relationships. Thus, rather than promoting an instrumental view of marriage, healthy marriage policy could likely better serve disadvantaged families by acknowledging the socioeconomic roots of curtailed commitment.

In Chapter Six, I conclude the dissertation by contextualizing these findings in the debate over family and poverty policy outlined earlier in this introductory chapter. Publicly-sponsored relationship skills education programs and other marriage support services for low-income couples could be a valuable social service in a society in which healthy marriage is increasingly becoming a privilege and a luxury of the most highly educated and economically secure. Yet, communication skills approaches that promote neoliberal notions of individual responsibility and that take for granted middle-class resources of intimate life will only further simplify and vilify the personal relationship choices that couples like Gwen and Isaiah make while diverting political attention away from how social and economic constraints shape those choices.

Chapter Two

Public and Private Fantasies of the Married Family

We join your friends and family in congratulating you on your anniversary. May the commitment you celebrate and the companionship you share bring you happiness for years to come.

With best wishes,
George W. Bush and Laura Bush

On the date of their 52nd wedding anniversary in July of 2002, my grandparents received this congratulatory note from then President George W. and First Lady Laura Bush, governmental recognition of a marriage that had lasted over half a century. Embedded within its few brief lines of text celebrating commitment, companionship, and happiness are two interrelated stories, one largely private, the other profoundly public. The private story began in 1950 when my 20-year-old grandfather, a farmer with a ninth-grade education, met and fell in love with my 16-year-old grandmother who quit school after completing the eighth grade to cook, clean, and help out on the family farm. They married a few months after they met in a five-minute civil ceremony at the local courthouse with neither debt nor property to their names. They welcomed their first child 11 months after they married and another three within five years, as my grandmother had always wanted and planned for four children. Starting from practically nothing, they proceeded to build a life together, one characterized by hard work and a vow to stay together for richer or poorer. When I asked my grandfather why he married so young and so soon after meeting my grandmother, he answered as I imagine many of his generation would have: “we were in love, we were grown, and we were ready to start our lives and our family.”

The presidential note my grandparents received over 50 years later was part of the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI), a public policy created to promote marriage for those who have yet to say “I do” and to celebrate and strengthen marriage for those whose lives were already built around it. As detailed in Chapter One, the explicit purpose of the Healthy Marriage Initiative is to make relationship and marriage education programs accessible to as many people as possible in an effort to create more healthy American marriages. The HMI is a multi-stranded policy with both instrumental and symbolic goals. Embedded within the larger symbolic goal of celebrating and encouraging marriage for all Americans is the pointedly instrumental goal of promoting marriage to prevent poverty. As it relates specifically to welfare-reliant families, healthy marriage policy seeks to teach poor couples the communication skills that research has shown to be associated with marital longevity, with the hope that they will be more likely to get and stay married, thereby increasing their chances of becoming economically self-sufficient.

Jennifer and Peter were one such welfare-reliant couple who took Thriving Families classes in an effort to improve their relationship. She 26, and he 35, both were white, unemployed, and struggling to stay together despite the toll that emotional and

financial strains took on their relationship. Together four years, they shared only one child, one-year-old Caleb, but Peter played a father-like role in the life of Jennifer's other child, a six-year-old daughter, Lily. Jennifer's ex-boyfriend and Lily's father, Russell, lived with them, along with Russell's girlfriend, Bethany, and her five-year-old, Sarah. Bethany also happened to be Jennifer's best friend. Peter had two older children, teenagers with whom he barely spoke. It was a complicated living arrangement, Jennifer told me, but one that worked really well since "all our kids kind of have four parents...and are very well taken care of." When I interviewed them a month after they completed the Thriving Families classes, Jennifer had discovered she was pregnant again. Though Caleb was the result of a planned pregnancy, this baby would not be. According to Jennifer, this new baby was "a blessing, a surprise that was meant to be." Peter got laid off around Christmas, about three months before I met them in a Thriving Families class, but they were making ends meet with government assistance and a creative living arrangement of four adults and three, soon to be four, children—all in a two-bedroom apartment.

When I asked Jennifer and Peter if they foresaw staying together for the long term, Jennifer simply pointed to a tattoo in the shape of a wedding band on the ring finger of her left hand. Peter had a matching tattoo on the same finger. Both rings, however, were unfinished. Neither of them could tolerate more pain after the tattoo artist drew the initial outlines of the bands. Jennifer's outlines were even starting to fade away. They intended to eventually go back, get the lines redrawn, and fill in the bands with solid black ink. After all, Peter said, we have to finish because we already have "both lines, and people are going to think, 'what kind of marriage is that?!'" This gave me the perfect opening in our conversation to ask if they had considered and talked about getting married. Jennifer quickly replied, "Oh yeah, lots, but we're waiting."

Why, I asked, were they intent on waiting? They lived together, shared children, wanted to get married, and even had permanently, though as of yet, only partially, tattooed symbols of their shared commitment on their fingers. Thus, one might reasonably think they were ready for marriage. "We're waiting," Jennifer said, "until we can have a proper wedding...not going to the courthouse and getting hitched, but all planned out, a nice wedding, one where Lily can be the flower girl and Caleb can be the ring bearer." Peter immediately chimed in "by the time we get married, Lily's going to be too old to be a flower girl; she'll have to be a bridesmaid." But after I scratched the surface of their waiting on the wedding response, both clearly articulated a strong desire to wait until their larger financial and emotional problems were resolved. Peter had severe anger and paranoia issues, the result of "being kicked around so much" all his life. Jennifer told me she wanted to regain some of the independence she had lost since getting together with Peter. She continued:

I know I have a lot of growing to do too before we're able to be together. Financially, I'd like for us to be able to get our bills in order, have a place of our own, have jobs, and just not feel like we're at the bottom of the well. Because I wouldn't want to start our new married life in this kind of situation...I'd like to have all my debts paid off and even just be able to start at zero instead of where

we are now. I'd just like to be able to afford a house with a yard and have to tell the kids 'stop playing with the dog in the house. I told you to put the cats outside. Quit chasing the chickens.'

Peter immediately chimed in, "and with me not having worked for a few months, my self-esteem is so low. I feel like I'm dead weight in the water." Jennifer lovingly replied "I don't feel like that at all [about him]. We've gone through periods of not working before,...but he holds a lot of worth in what he does and what he gets back from it, but that's not all that makes you worth something." I came to understand their unfinished ring tattoos as a larger symbol of Jennifer and Peter's relationship. Both clearly wanted to commit to each other and had the outlines of a married lifestyle in place, including cohabitation, intimacy, and children, but there was something about ultimately filling in the marital picture by making it official that was difficult to achieve. The gap between what they had and what they wanted was painful for them to discuss.

Most of the other Thriving Families couples I interviewed described the current state of their relationships and finances with the same mix of optimism and despair. Couple after couple told me they could not afford marriage. As in Jennifer and Peter's case, not being able to "afford marriage" meant not having the means to pay for a "proper wedding" and not feeling fully prepared to get married until they met certain economic goals, such as finishing school, getting out of debt, finding a job, or getting a house. Being married, much like being employed, meant you are, in the words of Peter, "worth something." As when my grandparents married, when Jennifer and Peter got married, if they ever did, it would represent a new beginning. However, in stark contrast to how my grandparents' generation understood it, marriage requires, rather than produces, a steady economic foundation. I discovered a common belief among the Thriving Families parents I spoke with that marriage is something you do only after you accomplish other life goals and become financially stable. This echoes the findings from previous sociological research asking why poor couples now marry at about only half the rate as those who are not poor (Edin and Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis 2007), a trend I call curtailed commitment, as explained in the introductory chapter. Yet, no one has analyzed this phenomenon in relation to marriage promotion policies, especially among couples who took a government-funded relationship skills class. In this chapter, I illustrate how curtailed commitment, a phenomenon I argue is rooted in growing social inequality and idealizations of the necessary foundations of marriage, points to a deep contradiction between the lived experience of poor families and the legislative intent of marriage promotion policies.

A comparison of the anti-poverty agenda of marriage promotion policy and Thriving Families parents' views of marriage reveals two oppositional logics: *a public and private fantasy of the married family*. The public fantasy of the married family is the legislative intent behind marriage promotion policies, the idea that encouraging marriage among families in poverty will improve their socio-economic position and their children's life chances. I use the term *fantasy* because research has yet to show that marriage, per se, lifts families out of poverty or that marriage promotion programs influence poor parents' ideas about marriage. The private fantasy of the married family

refers to curtailed commitment, the tendency for poor couples' marital aspirations to remain unfulfilled in the face of similarly unfulfilled ambitions of economic security. This is significantly different than how earlier generations thought about marital readiness. For my grandparents' generation, marriage was simply the next step in the adult life course. As stringent social norms involving marriage become more flexible in the face of high rates of divorce and rising rates of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing, people increasingly view marriage as an achievement and status symbol (Cherlin, 2004). Instead of a general route to family legitimacy, marriage has become a marker of middle-class status and respectability as having sex and children and living together outside marriage lost much of their social stigma. I analyze the public and private fantasies of marriage to argue that policies explicitly promoting marriage as a means of escaping and avoiding poverty reinforce the ideology of marital prosperity without addressing the structural constraints that often lead to curtailed commitment.

The New Economics of Marriage

Now that marriage is increasingly considered a private, intimate relationship—yet one still tightly bound up with various public and social meanings—marriage promotion policies passed with the intent to fix and prevent poverty have reinforced the privatization of family life in the public imaginary and in the material reality of poor families' lives. This is at odds with the historical origins of marriage, since the institution emerged as way to pool resources during times of scarcity, not just between two spouses, but between two large extended families. Known as *institutionalized marriage*, this was the dominant understanding of American marriage until the end of the 19th century (Burgess and Wallin, 1954; Burgess et al., 1963; Cherlin, 2004, 2009; Coontz, 2005).

During the early 1900s, the first of two major cultural changes in marital norms deemphasized the role of marriage as a social and economic institution that governed all aspects of family, including economic arrangements, labor, child and elder care, and social and legal legitimacy. It was during this time that institutional understandings of marriage waned in favor of *companionate marriage*, which became the dominant cultural idea of family life. Rooted firmly in a strictly gendered division of family labor, companionate marriage emphasized the emotional, intimate, and sexual bonds between spouses. Economic cooperation was still foundational to marriage, but the social unit deemed responsible for meeting a family's economic needs shrank from a large extended kin network to a mere two-person economic partnership between a male breadwinner and a female homemaker.

The overall demographic trend during the first half of the 20th century was towards earlier and more marriages; the age of first marriage declined and a greater percentage of the adult population married during their lifetimes. In the 1950s, often hailed as the Golden Age of American family life, the median age for first marriage was 20 for women and 23 for men, a historic low for both sexes. At mid-century, American marriage was nearly universal, with 95 percent of whites and 88 percent of African-Americans eventually taking at least one trip down the aisle (Cherlin, 2005). After 1960, that trend reversed as people postponed marriage until later in life, cohabitation became increasingly common, divorce rates accelerated, and more children were born to

unmarried parents (McLanahan et al., 2005). All these changes, according to Cherlin (2004), signaled a new era of *individualized marriage*. As opposed to mid-century brides and grooms who married early, young, and in droves during the relatively prosperous post-WWII period, people began to delay marriage until after they accomplished other major life goals. Whereas marriage used to be the foundation of adult life, it increasingly became framed as a capstone of the move to full adulthood. Getting married and having children used to provide young men and women with well-defined routes to socially-acceptably adulthood. Now, according to Cherlin (2004), people are much more likely to develop a sense of themselves as adults by finishing college, pursuing a career, and exploring different identity options through dating or living with different partners before they settle down into the roles of spouse and parent. These changing cultural norms about what renders someone ready to marry are fraught with significant challenges for economically disadvantaged men and women. Many of the prerequisites for marriage Cherlin describes, namely college and a stable career, are not simply symbols of adulthood, they are markers of middle-class affluence. What has emerged is a class-inflected understanding of full adulthood. Marriage is not merely a symbolic capstone of the transition to adulthood; it has become symbolic of acquiring the core resources needed for socio-economic security. As political and cultural understandings of marriage and family life are increasingly privatized and associated with ideas of prosperity, marriage has become a status symbol that two people have “made it,” complete with all the accoutrements of a middle-class lifestyle.

Because these new marital prerequisites in the age of individualized marriage all assume a certain level of economic stability and privilege, this shift has also ushered in a new era of intimate inequalities. Twentieth century changes in cohabitation, marriage, and divorce rates have altered marriage and family life for Americans largely along lines of class. At mid-century, when companionate marriage was approaching its end, all women married at roughly the same rates, regardless of class (Edin and Reed, 2005), and the least educated were the most likely to marry. In 1950, 93 percent of high-school female dropouts married by the time they turned 40, as compared to only 90 percent of high school graduates, 92 percent of women who had completed some college, and only 74 percent of female college graduates (Stevenson and Isen, 2010). As gender arrangements were being reconfigured, including a gender revolution in college attendance, the marriage rates of college-educated women rose until 1980 when marriage rates began to fall for all women. In the mid-1980s, demographers noted that poor women were only 75 percent as likely to marry as those who were not living in poverty, a pattern strongly correlated with whether or not they were college-educated (Edin and Reed, 2005).

In the following decades, education, and presumably its effect on social class positioning through marriage and job opportunities, significantly stratified the marriage market in ways that effectively pushed most disadvantaged individuals entirely out of marriage. Now, college-educated women are the only group with higher marriage rates than at any point in the 1950s (Stevenson and Isen, 2010), and poor men and women are only about half as likely to marry as those not living in poverty (Edin and Reed, 2005). Known in social science circles as *the marriage gap*, this class disparity in marriage rates

is the most decisive statistical evidence used to support marriage promotion policies (Hymowitz, 2006; Whitehead and Popenoe, 2006; Wilson 2002), despite disagreement over which way the causal arrow points in the relationship between marriage and poverty. Another key component of the marriage gap, perhaps even more important than the lower statistical likelihood that poor people will tie the knot, is the fact that those most socially and economically disadvantaged in terms of income, education, and race are also the most likely to become single parents, especially poor women (England and Edin, 2007). This, too, is a class-based trend that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century. Currently, only about one out of 20 women living above the poverty line has a child outside of marriage, which in the 1950s was the non-marital childbearing rate for all women, regardless of class. The figure jumps to one in three for women currently living below the poverty line (Edin and Reed, 2005), and more than two in three African American children are now born to single mothers (Kennedy and Bumpass, 2008).²¹ These statistics are slightly misleading, since 40 percent of children born to “single” parents are actually the children of couples who are involved in a relationship and living together (demographers categorized these children as “non-marital” births simply by virtue of the parents’ legal marital status) (Cherlin, 2005). Yet, here too, socio-economic disadvantage plays a role: cohabiting parents are less likely to stay together than married parents after the birth of a child (Carlson, McLanahan, and England, 2004).

Not all of the concern about whether or not parents are married is simply a matter of the morality of “out-of-wedlock” pregnancy. Single-parent families are more than four times as likely to be poor as two-parent families (Thomas and Sawhill, 2002). After 1960, as the number of unmarried families with children grew, so too did child poverty, a trend linked to the decline in two-parent and married families and a precipitous rise in families headed by poor, single mothers. Pearce (1978) coined the phrase *feminization of poverty* to underscore how, since the 1950s, American poverty has become increasingly concentrated in female-headed families with only one parent. This strong correlation between marriage and poverty rates led many scholars of American family life to argue that marriage has become a primary mechanism of social and economic inequality (Massey, 2007; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008; Western, 2006).

Kay Hymowitz (2006) is perhaps the most forthright among those who argue that marriage has become paramount in the transmission of class privilege from one generation to the next. She insists that lower rates of marriage and more single parenthood among the poor are creating a new American caste system. The lower caste consists of families headed by members of the “single-mother proletariat” consisting of poor, uneducated, non-married mothers who, although they often come from poor families themselves, choose to further impede their life chances by forgoing marriage and having children anyway. Further up the socio-economic ladder sit highly educated, middle-class, married mothers who follow a “culturally-endorsed life script” by preparing

²¹ Racialized differences in what sociologists and demographers call “non-marital childbearing” are particularly stark, with only one in four white children and less than one in two Hispanic children born to single mothers. Much, but certainly not all, of these racial-ethnic differences in rates of single parenthood can be attributed to racial-ethnic differences in income and education, as African American women are more likely to be single mothers at every level of education and income (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008).

“for marriage by becoming self-sufficient and looking for the right partner to share a home and children” (Hymowitz, 2006:10). In a culture-of-poverty manner of reasoning, Hymowitz, along with others, most notably James Q. Wilson (2002), believe that the poor neither value nor aspire to marriage as much as everyone else, nor do they make major life decisions with the goal of creating a stable married family life.

The logical extension of this argument is that if women cannot graduate from high school, earn a college degree, acquire a high-paying job, and find a responsible, college-educated, high-earning husband who would be a dutiful and committed father, they should avoid having children altogether. This is a tall order given that only three in 10 Americans receive a four-year college degree and that fewer than one in 10 goes on to earn the graduate degrees that may be necessary to qualify for the high-paying, secure jobs that are still left in our economy (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Despite Hymowitz’s and Wilson’s critiques of poor women’s life choices, these single mothers got it half right by not marrying men who did not fit the role of the male protagonist in the “culturally-endorsed life script.” They just were not willing to give up having children when their socioeconomic circumstances did not allow the rest of the script to unfold.

Many have feared that feminism and women’s gains in higher education and the labor market since the 1950s undermined marriage as an institution founded on a gendered division of labor that assigned women to the home and a subordinate position in the marital power hierarchy (Goode, 1992). On the contrary, these changes actually fortified marriage for the middle-class. Educational attainment is strongly correlated with one’s potential earnings, ideological views, bargaining power within marriage, and the economic benefits one gains by getting married and pooling expenses and resources with an equally advantaged spouse. Recent demographic analyses show that the current age cohort consisting of people between 30 and 44 years old, the age range during which most people have presumably completed all their education, started working and earning money, and gotten married, is the first in American history where more women have college degrees than men (Fry and Cohn, 2010). Women have not yet reached full parity with men in the labor market; in 2007 they still made only \$0.71 for every \$1.00 made by men (though this is significantly better than the \$.52 for every \$1.00 as in 1970). Yet, women’s earning potential in the labor market is increasing significantly faster than that of men, which has stagnated in recent decades and taken bigger hits in recent years. Women are closing the earnings gap; from 1970 to 2007, women’s earnings grew 44 percent, compared to a mere six percent for men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Of course, this is largely due to the fact that women’s earnings started out much lower than those of men, but it does not diminish the importance of the gains, especially as they relate to marriage. Also, 80 percent of jobs lost most recently during the Great Recession, often colloquially called the “Mancession,” have been in male-dominated fields, such as manufacturing, metaphorically recoloring the proverbial “pink slip” blue. For the first time in American history, women now comprise almost half of paid workers (Ibid.).

Why is this important? When couples married in the 1950s, most wives were not considered potential primary or co-breadwinners. Out of necessity, lower-income families, especially racial minorities who faced wage discrimination, often had to rely on

women's (and even sometimes children's) wages just to survive (Collins, 2008; Mintz, 2004). However, most husbands did not expect that getting married would significantly improve their overall financial position; gender norms that relegated women's place to the home and blatant discrimination kept most women out of college, and even when they did work, they were paid a fraction of what men received. Since then, two large socioeconomic trends have collided to change these patterns: women's gains in higher education and the job market, and growing income and wealth disparity between those with and those lacking a college education. As women have outpaced men in higher education and as they approach equitable earnings, marriage has become a mechanism to further increase the gains made by highly-educated, and therefore often higher-paid, individuals. Marital researchers use the terms *homogamy* and *marital endogamy* to describe the tendency for individuals to marry within their own social groups. There is a strong tendency for people to marry others with similar social characteristics, such as race, religion, and education. Education has been a strong and consistent form of marital endogamy throughout American history (Rosenfeld, 2008). For previous generations, college-educated women's earnings did not correlate well with their educational attainment, as many women stopped their education, even often mid-semester, when they got married, and most certainly stopped working when they got pregnant. This is no longer the case. Women with more education are now more likely to marry and continue working after they have children (Stone, 2007).

Moreover, both unmarried men and women have fared less well in the labor market since 1970 compared to their married counterparts. Unmarried men without a college education lost the most ground between 1970 and 2007; as their real earnings decreased, they did not have a wage-earning wife to compensate for the decline. On its face, this evidence would seem to lend support to the anti-poverty logic of marriage promotion policies. But let us not forget the powerful role of homogamy in stratifying the marriage market and shaping social inequality. Since people tend to marry within their own socioeconomic class, when poor and low-income individuals do get married, they do not tend to "marry well" in the words of Lichter et al. (2006), since they most often marry others who are poor and low-income. They therefore have few assets to pool and make barely enough between them to cover rising living expenses, much less have any to save or invest (Glei, Garfinkel, and McLanahan, 2002). Thus, not only have college-educated Americans made the largest income gains since 1970, they "have fortified their financial advantage over less educated Americans because of their greater tendency to be married," and especially their greater tendency to be married to others who are also high-earners with college degrees (Fry and Cohn, 2010). Much like the traditional wedding portrait showcasing a couple's new wedding bands, these three social advantages go hand-in-hand: those with any sense of financial security now tend to be those who were fortunate enough to get a college degree, acquire a high-paying job, and find an equally or higher-educated spouse who can buffer them against any occupational or financial setbacks.

Educational attainment, one of the most common proxies sociologists use to determine class, is now one of the most reliable predictors of one's chances of getting married, staying married, and being happy throughout one's married life (Isen and Fry, 2010; Wilcox, 2011). Though it may be a cliché that money cannot buy you love, it is

increasingly becoming a sociological fact that it can buy you a happy marriage, and not just the \$22,000 average cost of an extravagant wedding (Otnes and Pleck, 2003). It can pay the increasing costs associated with getting a college degree that will likely keep you out of poverty and drastically improve your marital odds.

Social Inequality and the Economic Marriage Bar

Instead of thinking that marriage can prevent poverty, as marriage promotion policies advocate, the sociological research on why the poor marry less urges us to consider how poverty might prevent marriage. According to sociologists, there are two primary ways that socioeconomic inequality, particularly inequities in income, prevents marriage. First, poor couples find it increasingly difficult to reach the *marriage bar*, which is “the standard of living a couple is expected to obtain before they marry” (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008: 261; see also Gibson-Davis, 2007). Secondly, poor men who suffer the most from wage inequality find it most difficult to meet the financial expectations embedded in the still-dominant male breadwinner norm (Sweeney, 2002; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Risk-averse, low-income women are reasonably reluctant to take on the financial burden of low-income men who may very well be a drain on, rather than a contributor to, their financial resources (Edin and Kefalas, 2005).

Growing social inequality tends to prevent marriage among the poor because of how it affects understandings of the marriage bar. This assumed requisite standard of living is not an absolute standard that stays stationary, but rather a relative standard. As median income rises, forced upward mostly by high-earning, college-educated individuals who tend to marry other high-earning, college-educated individuals, the marriage bar also rises, making it increasingly difficult for those with less education and fewer high-earning job prospects to ever feel as though they are socioeconomically equipped for marriage (McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). Both qualitative and quantitative sociological research consistently finds that poor and low-income couples cite wanting to be more financially stable as one of the main reasons they delay or avoid marriage (Clarkberg, 1999; Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Smock et al., 2005). This seems to be the case for all couples who are not solidly middle-class. Based on their interviews with lower-middle and working-class cohabiting couples, Smock et al. (2005) found that “marriage signifies that one is no longer struggling economically” (692). In this study, couples referred to three types of economic prerequisites for marriage. First, they wanted to be able to pay for a “real wedding,” often in a church, with a large reception, instead of just going “downtown” to the courthouse or justice of the peace. Second, more money is necessary for completing what Smock et al. (2005) call the “respectability package,” which includes getting out of debt, finishing school, acquiring a well-paying, stable job, buying a nice car, and owning a house. They also found that gendered expectations about men’s ability to provide and fulfill the breadwinner role influenced decisions about when to marry, as both men and women expected men to have a good job and be financially stable before being husband material. Finally, though typically not considered an economic determinant of marriage, strained finances impact relationship quality; when couples fought, it was most often about money and the stressors of “living paycheck to paycheck” (692-3). Another in-depth interview

study of a sub-sample of poor couples with children recruited to the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study also revealed that couples most often cited financial problems as the reason they had indefinitely delayed their plans to marry (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Moreover, financial constraints do not just create problems on the front end of the marital trajectory. Dew (2009) found that a couple's assets and the number of conflicts they had about finances were two main predictors of divorce. Couples with \$10,000 in assets were 70 percent less likely to divorce than those who had none. Couples who disagreed about money weekly were 30 percent more likely to divorce than those who fought about money less.

The "Marriageable Men" Problem

The other main way in which social inequality and poverty could prevent marriage is, in the words of William Julius Wilson (1987, 1996), the lack of "marriageable men" in poor and low-income communities. Despite women's gains in education and employment, the idea that men should be primary breadwinners and are not "marriageable" if they cannot provide for a family remains strong. As income inequality increases, those men lower down the socioeconomic ladder who are most likely to be unemployed and poorly paid are viewed as the least desirable husbands, especially relative to middle- and upper-class men who have benefited from income gains.

Ironically, the gender norms underlying the "marriageable men" problem are the same ones that many marriage promoters argue render marriage an income-producing institution. Waite and Gallagher (2000) argue that marriage, itself, helps couples create and accumulate wealth, as "something about being married causes people to save and acquire more" (114). Marriage, they extol, allows spouses to "specialize" by dividing family labor in a way that allows them to collectively accomplish more than they could alone. This often results in the woman becoming more responsible for household labor and men taking on more of the income-earning responsibilities. The married couple ultimately increases their productivity as each spouse becomes more efficient at performing their specific roles. Not only do spouses pool labor and expenses, which allows them to produce and save more, they also behave more responsibly about money because they are financially accountable to one another. Recognizing the life-long commitment of a married couple, in-laws and extended kin are more likely to help them if they are legally married. Although it seems that many of the economic benefits of marriage would also accrue to cohabiting couples because they share the same residence, this is not the case, argue Waite and Gallagher. Marriage, unlike cohabitation, boosts spouses' confidence in the relationship and encourages partners to combine finances. "In practice, cohabitators' lesser commitment to each other and greater emphasis on personal autonomy prevent the development of the kind of interdependence that produces long-term economic gain" (117). Waite and Gallagher's argument that marriages based on a foundation of economic interdependence tend to be more stable finds mixed support in research, depending on how couples divide family responsibilities. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found that, as measured by divorce rates, marriages between a homemaking wife and a breadwinning husband were most stable. However, Cooke's (2009) analysis

revealed that couples who more equitably shared housework and paid labor were significantly less likely to divorce than couples in which the man earned all the income and the wife did all the housework.

Nock (1998) offers another explanation for why marriage increases wealth. He argues that marriage provides men with a socially-acceptable set of parameters within which to enact a sense of masculinity that affords economic well-being, social status, and prestige. In his understanding, masculinity is an acquired identity that orients men away from dependency and toward productivity and responsibility. As men continuously enact their masculinity, they must achieve, especially through working, earning, and providing. Essentially, marriage fundamentally changes men, binding them to a set of social expectations about providing for women and children and encouraging them to work harder to live up to the social identity of the husband role. Men, unlike women, Nock claims, must continuously prove their masculinity and enact their gender. Normative marriage is a “masculinity template,” a primary “venue in which adult masculinity is developed and sustained” (6). According to various analyses performed by Nock, men earn more, work more, have better jobs, and achieve more once they are married, and marriage is the causal factor in these trends. Marriage, itself, is “the engine that fuels greater effort and dedication to the goal of doing well” (63).

Two main assumptions undergird the thesis of marriage as an income-producing institution: first, marriage changes people’s behaviors; and second, this behavioral change increases spouses’ socioeconomic opportunities. This thesis, the underlying logic of marriage promotion as poverty prevention, completely ignores the role of societal discrimination against the unmarried; it also misrepresents how most people, regardless of class, understand marital readiness. The married benefit from numerous policies that distribute social and economic advantages based on marital status, such as tax breaks and insurance coverage, since being married is often considered a socially desirable “status characteristic.” (A status characteristic is when someone is assumed to be more competent or worthy because they belong to a particular social group based on traits such as gender, race, or marital status [Berger et al., 1977].) Cultural stereotypes deem the married to be more responsible than their unmarried counterparts (DePaulo, 2006), which likely results in more job opportunities, especially for men who are expected to be primary breadwinners. Moreover, though marriage might strengthen the bond between two spouses, it has the reciprocal effect of weakening ties among married couples and their wider community; as such, it can be thought of as a “greedy institution” (Coser and Coser, 1974). Gerstel and Sarkisian (2006) found that, although the married couples whom they studied were more likely to receive help, they were less likely to need it. They were also less likely to give help in return. The married, compared to the non-married, were less likely to see, call, and offer emotional or practical support to their family and friends. This suggests that part of the economic benefits of marriage is the result of resource hoarding by married couples. In her classic study of African American families in poverty, *All Our Kin* (1974), Carol Stack found that marriage, and especially the resource hoarding it tends to entail, was at odds with the ethic of sharing among extended kin networks that allowed poor black families to survive.

Marriage as Symbolic of “Already” Being Middle-Class

Bumpass and Sweet (2001) found that, for cohabitators to get married, they had to believe that marriage would fundamentally change their lives. If they were reading Waite and Gallagher (2000) and Nock (1998), perhaps they would. Yet, other sociological research that specifically explores why poor and low-income individuals and cohabiting couples often do not marry has found that, to be motivated to marry, they need to feel that something has *already* changed. As Smock et al. (2005) found, “a feeling of readiness to marry hinges not on the hope of a comfortable financial future but on the sense that it has already been attained” (694).

Similarly, Edin and Kefalas (2005) set out to understand why poor women marry less and continue to have children they must struggle to support, often deliberately. After following 162 low-income women over several years, they refuted the explanation that poor women marry at lower rates and have more children as single mothers because they do not respect marriage and want to collect welfare. The authors argue: “While the poor women...saw marriage as a luxury, something they aspired to but feared they might never achieve, they judged children to be a necessity, an absolutely essential part of a young woman’s life, the chief source of identity and meaning”(6). In recent decades middle-class young women have tended to delay childbearing until after they pursue higher education and get married because a child, especially one born outside marriage, would negatively impact their life chances. This has not been the case with poor, uneducated women who have little to lose in the way of socioeconomic mobility and who believe that it is ultimately better to have a child without being married than to risk marrying capriciously and end up getting a divorce. Poor women, Edin and Kefalas claim, also imbue children with a redemptive quality, believing that their children bring purpose, validation, companionship, and fortune into their life.

Class and racial-ethnic differences in marriage rates, Edin and Kefalas argue, are not the result of different cultural values related to marriage and family, but realistic views about different chances of finding a partner who can meet the high financial and emotional standards all women share about marriage. While poor, low-income, and middle-class women share similar values about marriage, economic circumstances make it increasingly difficult for those with fewer resources to live up to the middle-class norms of family life that marriage increasingly entails. Ultimately, because marriage is so entwined with upward socio-economic mobility for these women, it all too often remains an aspiration rather than a reality. Poor, single mothers value and aspire to marriage as much as their middle-class, married counterparts, but refuse to marry poor, unemployed men who seem like risky long-term marriage prospects who might end up costing more to support in expenses than they would bring in through income.

Competing Fantasies of the Married Family

As reflected in documents pertaining to the Healthy Marriage Initiative, the government promotes the idea that having a “healthy marriage” has nothing to do with class, resources, or material constraints. The Department of Health and Human Services adopted Lewis and Gossett’s (1999) definition of a healthy marriage to guide Healthy

Marriage Initiative programs. This definition includes the following eight “essential characteristics of a healthy marriage”:

1. Both partners participate in the definition of the relationship;
2. There is a strong marital bond characterized by levels of both closeness and autonomy;
3. The spouses are interested in each other’s thoughts and feelings;
4. The expression of feelings is encouraged;
5. The inevitable conflicts that do occur do not escalate or lead to despair;
6. Problem-solving skills are well-developed;
7. Most basic values are shared;
8. The ability to deal with change and stress is well developed.²²

Interestingly, not one of these eight “essential characteristics” involves anything akin to financial stability, the main obstacle cited by previous studies for why the poor and low-income are less likely to marry.

In a *Child Trends* study, funded by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Administration for Children and Families, Moore et al. (2004) insist that it is important to distinguish between the definition of a healthy marriage, its antecedents, and its consequences. The definition of a healthy marriage, they argue, includes components such as commitment and communication, while the *antecedents* of a healthy marriage include employment, education, and physical and mental health. By consequences, they mean outcomes such as wealth and social support. A marriage that lacks the antecedents does not mean that it is not a healthy marriage: “for example, a couple may experience unemployment and economic difficulties...[and] these problems are quite likely to affect their marriage; but the presence of these difficulties does not necessarily mean that the couple, by definition, has an unhealthy marriage” (2).

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC), the federal clearinghouse for marriage education information funded through the Healthy Marriage Initiative, offers various “strategies for couples dealing with financial strain.” According to the NHMRC, money is often a problem in relationships because partners have different values related to money and therefore struggle over how to handle it:

While money means different things to different people, there is no denying that we all need it! And for everyone, especially couples, the challenge is to manage it consistently. A couple doesn’t always agree on how their own financial priority should be balanced or checked by their mate. This management of finances is where the strain on the relationship comes into play. Success at the finish line is not determined by how you start but is more influenced by how you both keep your eyes on the prize.²³

²² “Premarital and Marriage Education” Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, p. 1.

²³ “Strategies for Couples Dealing with Financial Strain,” Tip Sheet; National Healthy Marriage Resource Center; TS-6-09; www.TwoOfUs.org.

The NHMRC tip sheet includes the example of a couple who is frustrated with having to go to the laundromat every week and is trying to decide whether or not they should purchase an in-home washer or dryer. To help them communicate effectively, the tip sheet provides an “Eye on the Prize Model,” a multi-step communication process that should allow each partner to vocalize their financial priorities in the situation. The tip sheet also offers advice about how to “deal with tough financial times.” It urges couples to prioritize their relationship above all else; proactively be in touch with creditors about their “temporary circumstances”; rank financial accounts in order of priority; “make some difficult lifestyle adjustments” to bring expenses in line with income; and seek out community resources that assist families in times of need, such as food banks and energy assistance programs for help with paying electric bills.

When one considers the lived experience of the low-income couples targeted by the marriage promotion provisions of welfare reform—parents raising children in poverty—the government’s definition of a healthy marriage and financial management tips seem out of sync with many couples’ realities. While the “antecedents” of a healthy marriage do not define it, in the view of the Thriving Families couples with whom I spoke, antecedents such as a stable income were often what was needed to pass through the relationship threshold to marriage. Rarely do the financial struggles these couples face take the form of “temporary circumstances.” Their financial struggles are neither brief nor rare. Whether or not to purchase an in-home washer and dryer is not the kind of financial problems about which Thriving Families couples tended to argue. In what follows, I offer a brief glimpse into the relationships of three couples I met through the Thriving Families program.

In the interviews, before I asked how participants felt about Thriving Families classes, I wanted to know more about them, including their family backgrounds, how they met, how they felt about their pregnancies, their current family circumstances, what motivated them to take the classes, and especially how they felt about marriage. This more holistic picture of the parents who took a relationship skills class promoting marriage was very illuminating. It allowed me to understand that unmarried couples raising children in poverty conceptualize the value of marriage quite differently than do marriage promotion policies.

In line with previous quantitative and qualitative studies of how economic considerations shape marital decisions, for Thriving Families couples, not being able to afford marriage typically meant one of three things: 1) not having enough money to get married in a wedding ceremony that one or both partners desired as a symbol of a strong, healthy marriage; 2) not yet having circumstances in place that would allow the couple, if not to be economically secure, at least to be employable; and 3) not feeling financially secure enough to “settle down,” which for these couples, often included stable jobs and a house. In addition, constantly struggling with financial problems took a significant toll on the emotional aspects of their relationship.

Jessica and Mitch

Jessica, 22, and Mitch, 26, both white, met through mutual friends about two years ago. A month after meeting them in a class, I interviewed them when their newborn daughter, Neveah—heaven spelled backwards—was merely five days old. Neveah was Mitch’s only child, but she was the second for Jessica who also had a four-year-old son named Patrick. Patrick had been living with Jessica’s uncles ever since she lost custody of him through Child Protective Services over a year before because of a severe drug problem. Patrick did not yet even know that he had a new baby sister since Jessica was not allowed to see him, and she called infrequently. Neveah’s arrival was timely, as Jessica and Mitch had just settled into a new apartment only a few weeks before her birth. “It’s a decent place,” Jessica told me, “only a small problem with roaches and some neighbors who are meth heads.” Up until her second trimester, Jessica and Mitch had been homeless, alternating between community shelters, tents, and the occasional motel room when they could scrape together enough money. Once Jessica reached four months into her pregnancy, they decided that she needed to live with her grandmother for the safety and health of the baby, while Mitch slept in a shelter known as “the mission.” As mandated by Child Protective Services, Jessica had to take a parenting class as part of the requirements for keeping Neveah. Mitch grudgingly agreed because, as he told me, “they pay you, and we really needed the money.”

Jessica and Mitch emphasized how strong their relationship was and how all their problems—being homeless, Jessica’s drug use and brief incarceration for writing bad checks, and now trying to create a stable home for Neveah—had made them a stronger couple. As Jessica told me, “I was writing bad checks to take care of everybody. I was writing checks to the store, writing checks to the hotel, making sure that we were all taken care of, which is noble, but still illegal...I thought it was the right thing to do at the time. My morals and ethics were in the right place. My brain might not have been.” When I asked Jessica and Mitch if Neveah was a “surprise,” they immediately corrected me:

Jessica: No, it was all planned...I don’t know how it came up, just one night we decided we wanted her and nine months later there she was...She’s just so perfect. It’s like she knows how much she’s wanted and how much she’s loved.

Mitch: She makes us a complete family.

Jessica: She’s the little missing piece of our family. I’m so proud of me and Mitch because we always make sure she has what she needs first. It’s like if they turn my cable off, so what, I want to make sure my daughter has diapers.

Mitch: It makes our sobriety even better. I don’t want to drink or do drugs or stuff like that.

Jessica: We only did drugs because we were depressed. You know, we had nothing, and now we have her. She depends on us.

Mitch: And we ain't got no money to do it anyway.

Jessica: Welcome to the world of parenting. We will never see money again unless we walk down the street and find a \$100 bill, which we'll end up spending on her...It just comes naturally. We wanted her that bad.

Even though they had discussed and planned getting pregnant, Mitch initially wanted Jessica to have an abortion because they were still struggling with just finding a stable place to live. Neveah was conceived while they were homeless. When I asked them if they had considered getting married, they told me they had discussed it occasionally because, as Jessica said, "I feel bad because my daughter, because her parents aren't married." Mitch quickly interjected: "What's a piece of paper supposed to say about being a family...it doesn't mean we're bad parents necessarily, and I doubt we're less committed to each other [than married parents]." "Well," Jessica said: "we'll probably end up getting married, but not today. I can barely pay to keep our lives going; I can't pay to go get married."

Chelsea and Simon

Both white, Chelsea, 32, and her boyfriend of eight years, Simon, 34, were living together and enjoying their two-week-old son, Collin, when I interviewed them. Chelsea was slowly adjusting to first-time motherhood, a task made difficult by Collin's constant colic and high-pitch screaming. Collin was unplanned, and Chelsea had seriously considered getting an abortion in her first trimester. When I asked her why she contemplated terminating her pregnancy, she told me while sobbing:

Truthfully, I had a rough childhood. I'm ashamed to say that I thought I couldn't keep him. My head said no you can't do this...[JR: Why?] Oh boy, lots of reasons. I'm a drug addict, up until that moment when I found out I was pregnant. I'm an alcoholic. But I stopped drinking that second. Simon doesn't have his GED, he doesn't have a license. Both of my cars are total buckets, both two-seaters, too. We're talking '85 and '81 [year models]. But the drug history was a big thing because I don't feel that I should put that on anyone else. Simon is an adult, he has a choice to walk out and leave. The baby doesn't have a choice, that's not fair. I was abandoned by my mom and dad, and it really bothers me when I don't see kids taken care of. I guess I didn't think I could be good enough to be better...In the end, I told myself even though we're fuck ups, we love each other. If we don't have a house, a nice car, an education, really, we do love each other, and we try, and that's what we're going to do for our baby...He's my miracle...because I have purpose now.

Chelsea and Simon were also about to get another addition to their family, Simon's 11-year-old son, Bradley, who was preparing to come live with them full-time,

after his mother, Simon's ex-girlfriend, had to relinquish custody of her four children. Though Simon had been unemployed for a while, Chelsea was a part-time surgical tech. Happy to at least have a job, her commute was 100 miles each way, and because she "was lowest on the totem pole at work," she had to take the on-call shifts that often got cancelled because "there was no work," which often left them questioning how much money would come in every month. However, thus far, she told me, "we're not broke, so we can still pay the bills."

When I asked Simon if he and Chelsea had ever considered getting married, he told me very matter-of-factly, "yeah, but we can't afford it." When I asked him what they could not afford, he explained: "We'd like to get married, we just can't afford it. I'm like 'let's go to Reno and do it, it's fine.' But she wants the wedding. That'll probably be my only wedding, so if she wants to do it that way, that's fine." I had earlier asked Chelsea the same question, and her initial answer was exactly the same, "we can't afford it." Yet, when I asked her what she meant by "not afford it" it had nothing to do with dreams of a big, expensive wedding. According to Chelsea, it was because they could not afford to pay the fines Simon had accrued from traffic tickets. Because they now had a child, and would soon have two to support, she did not want to marry Simon if he did not have a legal driver's license, which was necessary for him to drive to work and stay out of jail. She further explained:

My mom has been married three times, so when I was growing up, I didn't believe in marriage. I was like 'what's the point?!', so I've never been married...I didn't dream about getting married, but now that I'm getting older and having babies, now I feel like [Collin's] mom and dad should be married, but I want him to have his license first...Simon doesn't have a license. That's one of the biggest problems in our relationship, well, not in our relationship, but in our life because that just makes for more problems. I told him 'I won't marry you without a license.'...It's just, it's so much money. We pay what we can, but his has to drive [when he works], and he gets pulled over again and gets another ticket. It's a vicious cycle.

For the last ticket he got, the traffic court judge sentenced Simon to two days in a correctional center because he had yet to pay off his existing \$5,000 in combined traffic fines. Chelsea told him that he had to serve his time before she was due to give birth. He went in on a Thursday, planning to get out the following Saturday, but Chelsea called from the hospital on Friday morning, in labor. Luckily, he was able to get to the hospital. Chelsea understood, but it was just one more problem that the license issue caused for their relationship. Chelsea did not demand that Simon have a high-paying job that would give their growing family a sense of economic security. She simply wanted him to be employable. When Simon did work, he had to drive several hours a day, which is why he kept getting tickets. Though Chelsea was willing to pay off his \$5,000 if and when she got the money, Simon seemed like too much of a risk to marry until those traffic fines were paid off.

Elise and Matthew

A little over a year ago, Elise, 38, and Matthew, 34, both white, met and fell in love in an on-line chat room and quickly decided they wanted to marry. After getting to know one another via phone for about six months, Matthew decided to move from the Midwest to be with Elise and her children in another state. At the time, Elise had a grown daughter, a 10-year old son, Jack, and was pregnant with her third child, a daughter she would name Julia. They were living with Andrew, Elise's ex-boyfriend who was also Jack's father. Julia had just turned eight-months-old, and Matthew was proud to claim her as his own. Matthew officially proposed the following Christmas with a modest, but beautiful diamond ring. Elise joyfully accepted. Though both dreamed of their wedding day, their lives had just taken an unfortunate turn.

On a tip from Jack's teacher who reported that Jack was complaining about 10 people sleeping in their apartment at night, Child Protective Services took him and Julia from the apartment and put them in foster care. The social workers cited the filthy condition of the apartment and that there was absolutely no food in the kitchen and diluted orange-drink mix in the baby bottle, rather than formula or milk, as reasons why the home was currently unfit. I interviewed Elise and Matthew three days later as they were preparing to go to court, not only for a custody hearing to get Jack and Julia out of foster care, but also for a paternity hearing filed by Julia's biological father.

Distraught over the loss of her children, Elise still perked up when talking about how much she adored Matthew. After Elise told me that she and Matthew got "fake married" in the online chat room where they first met, and even had a print out of a fake marriage license, I asked Elise why they had not made it official. She told me it was because the weather was not yet conducive to the type of ceremony they wanted to have, and the time just was not right for their friends, whom they desperately wanted to be there.

He asked me to marry him in December, so we've been engaged three months now, but we're taking our time because we want to...get married outside... We want our friends to be able to come down and be a part of it...and we're waiting because I want to be able to make it as affordable as possible. I'm not one for extravagance. I'm a very simple person. It doesn't take too much to make me happy.

Yet, later during the interview, she admitted that the tough economic times were taking a toll on their relationship, and she wanted to wait until she was sure that it would last this time. She had been married briefly once before, and she would be Matthew's fourth wife. "I'm not going to have Matthew and I become a statistic. The divorce rate, I'm sure, has skyrocketed compared to what it was before because of the economy; you know, everyone is feeling the stress."

I later interviewed Matthew, who was trying to remain strong about the Child Protective Services case in front of Elise, but described to me in detail how difficult it was for him, too:

I've been happy in my relationship with [Elise]. It's just the situation we've been in with bouncing around and everything else. It just takes its toll on both of us... Sometimes I get upset because I feel like I'm not doing enough for her even though I'm bringing in a little money... She keeps assuring me that there's no problem because I do enough when we did have the kids... But to me, just taking care of the kids isn't enough. For me, I get upset because I don't have the extra income to help bring in more money so we can afford more. That's one of the reasons why we're here because we can't even afford a place ourselves. It's a lot of stress, especially when you have multiple families living in a one-room apartment... At one point, it got bad enough that we had to take stuff to a pawn shop just to get diapers because of the fact that we'd run out of money... One of the things we had to put on loan was the ring I got her, the ring I got engaged to her with. I look at it as, yeah, it's a bad thing she had to give up our ring, but then again, it's stuff we need... I have nothing left that I used to have that I could even try to pawn.

Matthew wanted to do whatever he could to keep the family together, even if that meant living with Elise's ex-boyfriend and two kids in a one-bedroom apartment for a while longer so they could avoid homelessness. But, now, they were facing the overwhelming task of working with the Child Protective System to get back Jack and Julia. They were going to have to figure out some way to address the problems cited by the social worker—cleaning up the place, getting food in the kitchen, buying proper formula for Julia—and somehow they had to figure out how to stretch Elise's \$800 monthly welfare check a little further. After all, Michael told me, they did not even have Elise's engagement ring to pawn anymore. Their plans for that outdoor wedding ceremony would have to wait a little longer. At that point, they had more pressing things on their minds.

The Symbolic Value of Marriage

Many marriage scholars argue that, as the practical importance of marriage has waned, its symbolic significance is perhaps greater than ever (Coontz, 2005). Cherlin (2005) argues that marriage has become a symbolic capstone of adult life and an achievement, while Edin and Kefalas (2005) found that poor, single mothers viewed marriage as a luxury, a symbol of upward social mobility. Marriage promotion policies symbolize marriage in yet another way, as a social and economic good, not just a status characteristic, but as a tool poor parents can use to craft a better life for themselves and their children. The couples I interviewed, however, did not understand marriage as a means to a better life or a stronger family. In line with previous studies about why poor couples with children indefinitely delay marriage, Thriving Families parents understood marriage as something you do when that better life, complete with a house, a degree, a good job, and a balance sheet in the black, had already been realized. To them, marriage was symbolic of a strong, loving relationship that supported and was supported by what

Smock et al. (2005) call the “respectability package.” Without the rest of the package, these couples understood marriage alone to be “expensive,” “unaffordable,” and “just a piece of paper that wouldn’t change anything” about the circumstances of their daily lives as they struggle to make ends meet and raise their children. For the most part, marriage would not change the nature of their relationships, and it certainly would neither put food on their tables, nor keep a roof over their heads. Often, when couples explicitly told me “we can’t afford marriage,” people, like Jessica, literally meant that it would be an economic hardship for them to pay the fee for a state marriage license, which depending on the county, would be around \$50. To people who are not struggling to raise children in poverty, this might not seem like much, perhaps the equivalent of a meal at a nice restaurant for two. The relatively small expenditure for the actual license seems minuscule compared to all the other expenses associated with a big, white wedding. But, when one considers that the day-to-day worries of couples who attended Thriving Families classes included how to pay for gas to get to work the next day and how to scrape together money for formula and diapers, thinking of how to pay for marriage, whether just for the actual license or a simple wedding, becomes a very different cost-benefit analysis. After all, that \$50 could pay for a week’s groceries or the month’s electric bill. Given this, the very idea that marriage alone could possibly lead to economic security, the logic underlying marriage promotion policy efforts, seemed absurd to parents.

These poor parents did not believe that marriage would change their lives, especially their economic situation; marriage was symbolic of a lifestyle they merely fantasized about. Getting married was also a deliberate act, which starkly contrasted with how they thought about having children. Parents viewed children as an opportunity to drastically change their lives for the better, even if the costs of raising a child would make their financial situation more complicated and would certainly cost more than a marriage license or ultimately even an extravagant wedding. Even if the children were unplanned, parents decided to continue the pregnancy and rationalized the costs of raising a child as well worth the joy that children brought to their lives. They thought they would figure it out along the way. Marriage is very different. It has receded in importance in poor couple’s lives, not because they devalue it, nor because they fear they cannot make it work. Compared with the struggles of their daily lives, such as feeding their children and maintaining a place to live, marriage gets pushed way down on their list of their priorities. These couples did not view marriage, as marriage promotion policies would have them believe, as a wealth or income-producing institution. If anything, getting married, whether it is the price of the license or having a simple outdoor ceremony, is costly. In their view, it would be foolish to think that it could somehow pay dividends, much less be a route to economic security.

Conclusion

Ideologies of marital prosperity and male breadwinning remain inflexible as growing social inequality makes it increasingly difficult for poor families to live up to these norms. The “marriage bar” and “marriageable men” dilemmas are two outcomes of these trends. As low-income men continue to lose ground in the labor market, high-

earning couples push the economic marriage bar higher and higher. The result is curtailed commitment, a problem the government now wants to fix by promoting marriage and relationship skills education for poor, unmarried couples with children.

Marriage promotion policies as they are currently conceptualized hearken back to a time when economic constraints did not strongly shape ideas about being ready for marriage. This has huge implications for how one thinks about marriage promotion policy and the messages embedded in marriage education, especially for poor couples. Since the 1950s, social and economic privilege (defined in terms of race, education, employment, income, and wealth) has become the strongest sociological predictor of who gets married, stays married, and is happy within marriage. Changing cultural and economic factors, especially growing social inequality, are converging to undermine marriage for those who cannot live up to middle-class ideals of family life, despite aspirations to marry expressed by women and men across all classes. While marriage was once considered a companionate economic partnership, it is now thought of as a primarily emotional relationship, but one that is most likely to survive and thrive among those with the advantages of middle-class affluence. Significantly higher marriage rates and lower divorce rates among the socially advantaged reveal that, much like many other resources in post-industrial society, American marriage is quickly becoming a luxury reserved for the heterosexual, white, college-educated, middle-class. Public policies and education programs that promote marriage as a route to prosperity frame marriage as a means to security, whereas poor parents understand marriage as the result of being financially stable. Thus, the financial messages embedded in marriage policies gloss over the material constraints of poor couples and are completely at odds with their life circumstances and views about marriage.

Waite and Gallagher (2000) argue that “the social norms associated with marriage encourage people to do things that build wealth: buy a house, save for children’s college, acquire a car and a set of furniture suitable for entertaining” (116). Based on the perspective of Thriving Families couples, this reasoning should be revised: for unmarried parents in poverty, the social norms associated with marriage—*the ability to buy* a house, save for children’s (or their own) college, and acquire a car—prevent them from realizing their marital aspirations. The new economics of marriage and growing social inequality undermine poor couples’ abilities to live up to the economic standards that all Americans, regardless of class, now hold as a prerequisite for marriage. Ultimately, I argue, the private and public fantasies of the married family come into conflict: the economic prerequisites of marriage all too often turn poor couple’s aspirations to eventually marry into a private fantasy; these prerequisites also point to how a 21st century policy premised on marriage as an anti-poverty measure is a misguided, nostalgic public fantasy that harkens back to a time when socioeconomic advantage neither shaped ideas about one’s readiness for marriage, nor largely predicted one’s chances of getting and staying happily married.

On a final note, it is interesting for us to think about how many notes the President will be able to send in the year 2061 congratulating couples married in 2011 on a 50-year anniversary. Though people marry, on average, a few years older than they

used to, they live equally longer compared to life expectancy rates in the mid-20th century. And, despite high divorce rates, many millions of couples (well over half of those married) stick it out each year. So, perhaps the more important question is: to what kind of people will those notes be sent? Will any of them still resemble my grandparents, who had little education and grew up, married, and started a family in near poverty? Are Jennifer and Peter, Jessica and Mitch, Simon and Chelsea, or Elise and Matthew the likely recipients of such notes? What about all the other American couples raising children in poverty who have to pawn away, not only the engagement rings that most symbolize their hopes for marriage, but ultimately those very hopes themselves? The answer to this question is crucial for helping us think about the value of marriage promotion policies that are currently part of our social welfare system, policies founded on a fantastical logic about how easy it is to come by the socioeconomic advantages it now takes to rise above the marriage bar.

Chapter Three

The Missing “M-Word”: Street-Level Strategizing and (Re)Framing Marriage Promotion Policy

Almost all state and community groups funded by the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative have the word “marriage” in their organizational titles. Up until 2010, this was the case with the local organization that coordinated the Thriving Families program. That year, they decided to replace the organizational name highlighting “marriage” with one geared towards “relationships.” Just as marriage has recently become one of the most controversial words in larger political debates over family and welfare policy in America, its use in the relationship skills education classroom has been equally contentious. Ironically, the word “marriage” was conspicuously absent in the Thriving Families classes I studied. Staff and instructors often referred to it as the “m-word,” highlighting its controversial connotation both for the couples targeted by the program and in national debates over marriage protection and promotion.

As described in the previous chapter, unmarried couples raising children together in poverty—one of the main groups targeted by marriage promotion policy—generally believed that marriage is what you do only after you reach a certain economic threshold. Conversely, the policy logic of marriage promotion is that couples should marry first, and then marriage will help lift them out of poverty. Put another way, for parents, marriage seemed largely *symbolic*—of economic and emotional security, of having accomplished significant financial and life goals, and of having a future orientation to life beyond a focus on day-to-day survival. In this view, marriage is a consequence of prosperity and finding a partner who, if not a financial asset, would at least not pose a greater financial liability. The policy, however, was characterized by an *instrumental* understanding of marriage—as a means to, rather than outcome of, attaining economic and emotional security, accomplishing significant financial and life goals, and developing an intimate relationship that helps one manage risk and insecurity. These opposite understandings of the relationship between marriage and economic wellbeing created a puzzle for translating marriage promotion policy for poor unmarried couples into practice: how, without targeting economic circumstances, can marriage be promoted among low-income people who deliberately eschew it for economic reasons? This mismatch between the policy logic of marriage promotion and poor couples’ beliefs about marriage can be illuminated by studying on-the-ground negotiations between instructors, who believed marriage is a means to an end, and couples taking relationship skills classes, who rebuffed this instrumental logic.

Michael Lipsky’s (1983) theory of street-level bureaucracy provides useful framing for this sort of inquiry. Lipsky argued that those who actually implement policies on the ground are an integral part of the policy-making community and exercise immense political power. This also suggests the potential for disconnection between the logic of a policy at the state or national level where it is created, and the practical application of that logic at the local level where it is actually implemented. That is, many unexpected things can happen as policy is translated into practice. One reason for this, Maynard-Moody and

Musheno (2003) have argued, is that street-level bureaucrats do more than just implement policy; in the process of service delivery, they actually make significant policy choices that affect the shape and outcomes of policies created by elected officials. As official policy guidelines interact with street-level bureaucrats' perceptions and moral judgments of the clients they serve, the beliefs of the actual individuals implementing the policy figure heavily into the day-to-day decisions that allow policy to take shape in the lives of the people for whom the government created them.

In this chapter, I show how one group of street-level bureaucrats—staff and instructors for a healthy marriage program—strategized when their ultimate policy goal was vastly at odds with the lived experience and viewpoints of those they targeted. Fully knowing that parents in poverty often delay or avoid marriage because of economic insecurity, and assuming that poor couples are less likely to value marriage as an end in itself, Thriving Families staff and instructors deliberately avoided talking about marriage. For both parents and policymakers, a healthy marriage has come to represent the same three fundamental concepts—self-sufficiency, a happy family, and a successful future—all embedded within the comforts of financial security. Yet, parents' actual social circumstances were rarely characterized by these concepts; amid poverty and unemployment, talk of marriage instead conjured up notions of risk, insecurity, and fear about intimate relationships that were likely not ready for the next step. The opposite logics of marriage as poverty prevention and marriage as economic achievement point to a stark epistemological contradiction inherent in the implementation of marriage promotion policy. Guided by social scientific findings suggesting a link between marriage and economic well-being and their own experiences with successful marriages, the views of staff and instructors were significantly at odds with those of parents who, based on lived experience, had little reason to believe that marriage would improve their economic situation. Understanding the implementation of federal pro-marriage policy geared to low-income families in light of these contradictions helps explain why the key word “marriage” had disappeared.

Staff and instructors acknowledged the profound deprivation and hardship that characterized parents' lives and shaped their choices about relationships, children, and marriage. In their views, the goal of the classes was to help parents overcome the insecurities they had come to associate with the m-word. To accomplish this, they indirectly promoted marriage by framing parents' commitment to one another as a means to supporting those for whom they cared about most deeply, their children. I found that, on the ground, marriage promotion policy for couples in poverty did not necessarily translate into moral proselytizing about family values with the goal of discouraging having children outside marriage. Instead, in this case, relationship skills educators made a concerted effort to convince couples that strengthening their intimate relationships is paramount to fulfilling their responsibilities as parents who must do whatever they can to bolster their children's life chances. This instance of what I term *street-level strategizing* is akin to other studies that investigate how street-level bureaucrats, in the words of Watkins-Hayes “help bridge the divide between agencies' missions and the needs of constituents” (2009a: 1). However, as I will demonstrate, this case is distinct because the central concern for Thriving Families staff and instructors was not how to best meet the

needs of clients as clients, themselves, understood them. Rather, staff and instructors sought to bring constituents' own understandings of their needs and priorities as unmarried parents raising children in poverty in line with the program's mission, and ultimately the overarching logic of marriage promotion policy embedded in welfare reform. Ultimately, by deliberately avoiding talk of marriage and framing parents' commitment to and communication with one another as critical for children's life chances, staff and instructors attempted to link the goals of the program to parents' priorities. In doing so, they focused more on promoting proper parenting as a means to upward mobility, rather than marriage.

What Children Mean to Parents in Poverty

As children became increasingly sentimentalized throughout the twentieth century (Zelizer, 1994), a dominant cultural norm of childhood arose that encouraged parents to devote all their energy and attention to cultivating happy, healthy, successful children (Lareau, 2003). This norm has been especially strong among women for whom "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996) has become the standard of good parenting and central to female identity (MacMahon, 1995). Though children play a primary role in parents' lives across all classes, bearing children and parenting represent something unique to those in poverty. Edin and Kefalas (2005) found that single mothers viewed marriage as a luxury, something they would never be able to afford given their own socioeconomic circumstances and those of their children's fathers who were just as likely to be poor. On the other hand, single mothers viewed children as central to their own happiness, the one thing that imbued their otherwise difficult lives with joy and a sense of purpose. They therefore chose to have children while unmarried instead of taking the risk of marrying the wrong person and ending up getting a divorce, or worse yet, risking their chance of having children altogether. In an ethnographic study focusing on the culture of teen motherhood, Gregson (2010) also found that unmarried teen mothers, many of whom were economically disadvantaged, believed their pregnancies were the best thing that ever happened to them. They often competed with one another to prove their competence at parenting and believed they were more skilled at caring for their children than older and otherwise more successful women.

As for low-income fathers, although some research (Anderson, 1990, 1993) has found that they actively tried to avoid responsibility for paternity and eschewed parenting, other research has revealed that they readily acknowledged and embraced it (Furstenberg, 1995; Nelson, 2004; Sullivan, 1993; Waller, 2002). Additional ethnographic studies of young, low-income fathers have found that these men were happy to learn about girlfriends' pregnancies and, in some cases, deliberately tried to have children (Nelson, Torres, and Edin, 2002; Nurse 2002). Similar to studies finding that low-income mothers believed children brought a redemptive quality to an otherwise disadvantaged life (Luker, 1996; Edin and Kefalas, 2005), Nelson's (2004) respondents felt that children provided "some evidence that I was on the planet" or a reason to "straighten out" for men in poverty who lived in dangerous neighborhoods and/or were involved in criminal activity. "Still others may see a child as their only chance for a kind of upward mobility; the father may encourage his child to stay in school and not make the same mistakes he did" (Nelson, Clampet-Lunquist, and Edin, 2002, quoted in Nelson

2004: 444). By giving their fathers a chance to be a role models, or even cautionary tales, children may provide low-income men an opportunity to feel valued and to develop a sense that their life has purpose and meaning. Marriage and the upward mobility it represents seem increasingly elusive for those in poverty, but parenting and the hope of raising a child that might be able to escape the same socioeconomic fate offer a sense of redemption for a life lived in poverty.

The literature on frame analysis—examining “perspectives” that allow us to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” our experiences, thereby helping us make sense of them (Goffman, 1974: 21)—can help us understand how and why Thriving Families staff and instructors emphasized children’s best interests to make marriage seem more salient to parents in poverty. They knew that otherwise, these parents would tend to delay or forego marriage altogether for economic reasons. Social scientists often use frame analysis as an analytical tool to understand how ideas shape political discourse, policy-making, and policy implementation (Callaghan and Schnell, 2005; Campbell, 2002; Gamson, 1992; Lakoff, 1997; McAdam et al., 1996; Noy, 2009; Scheff, 2005; Tarrow, 1998). Policy scholars Schon and Rein (1994) use frame analysis specifically to make sense of policy controversies, or “disputes in which the contending parties hold conflicting frames” (23). Frames, according to Schon and Rein, allow policymakers to describe social problems using a compelling narrative, one that goes beyond mere description and includes normative implications about the issue’s cause and solution. Policy frames are often important causal mechanisms that profoundly shape which policies are implemented and how. For example, Block and Somers (2005) argue that national policy debates over welfare that framed government benefits as the cause of poverty rather than the reverse—what the authors call the “the perversity thesis”—directly led to the dramatic curtailment of welfare benefits through the Personal Responsibility Act in 1996.

For frames to resonate with targets of mobilization, Snow and Benford (1988) have argued, they must be perceived as credible, salient, and congruent with everyday lived experiences. The salience of a particular frame depends on its centrality to the audience’s lives and how well it aligns with their pre-existing core beliefs and values, as well as their “cultural narrations” of how their social worlds operate. Framing is a deliberately strategic process, seeking to link the interests of organizations with those of possible constituents. Often, organizational leaders must engage in counter-framing and frame bridging to make their frames more salient to target audiences (Benford and Snow, 2000). Counter-framing involves attempts to challenge or undermine a person’s or group’s existing interpretive framework to bring their views in line with organizational goals, while frame bridging seeks to link two similar, yet distinct, ways of understanding an issue. A third way to make frames more salient to constituents is frame amplification, which is the process of highlighting events, issues, or beliefs that most resonate with constituents’ lived experience and views of the world. Slogans such as “We Shall Overcome” and “Power to the People” serve as powerful ways to amplify movement frames by encapsulating and symbolizing overarching movement goals and narratives.

I will now use these framing concepts to show how Thriving Families staff and instructors attempted to reconcile the contradiction between the anti-poverty logic of marriage promotion policy and poor parents' view of marriage as something they could not afford or as inconsequential for their own socioeconomic circumstances. The staff and instructors used all three strategies—counter framing, frame bridging, and frame amplification—to link the policy frame of marriage as an instrumental anti-poverty strategy with a much more salient dimension of parents' everyday lived experience: profound commitment to their children's wellbeing.

Framing Marriage Promotion around Children's Best Interests

When I asked Thriving Families 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 this, they offered various explanations that converged on a similar theme: they believed economic security should precede marriage and that being financially instable or being with a partner who was a financial risk was incompatible with being ready to make such a commitment. Poor couples' belief that marriage is what you do only once you are more economically secure is completely at odds with the underlying logic of marriage promotion policy that emotional commitment, preferably made official via marriage, is a potential route out of poverty. To these couples, marriage represented a lifelong emotional promise made in the context of financial prosperity, a situation that simply did not characterize their lived experience, at least in the present. Implicitly, what instructors tried to convey to parents was that commitment, if not marriage, to their child's other parent would help enable them to realize all the hopes and dreams they had for themselves and especially their children.

One strategy Thriving Families staff and instructors used in an effort to bring parents' views of marital commitment in line with their organizational mission was teaching couples about the emotional, economic, and health benefits of marriage as revealed by social scientific research. These attempts to counter frame by espousing the benefits of marriage failed to resonate with parents and often provoked resistance. The pro-marriage/anti-poverty message that directly characterized the actual policy was completely out of sync with parents' lived reality and how they understood family, including their own childhoods, their intimate relationships, and their economic situation. The statistics instructors cited in class were based mostly on a Mayo Clinic review of studies examining the relationship between marriage and physical health.²⁴ The mini-lecture contained in The Thriving Families curriculum advised instructors to tell parents that:

While [the benefits of marriage] are clear, it is not clear *why* married people lead healthier lives. Many experts believe that people benefit from living together,

²⁴ "Healthy Marriage: Why Love is Good for You." Mayo Clinic.com Health Library. "Available at: http://www.riversideonline.com/health_reference/Senior-Health/MH00108.cfm. Since the Mayo report does not cite the studies reviewed for the report, it is unclear if these studies reflect outcomes specifically from low-income samples or if the findings are from longitudinal studies that measure changes in relationship stress or the economic effects of low-income couples getting married.

having greater financial stability, and having social support. But the most likely reason has to do with stress management... Researchers believe that married couples work better together as a team to handle stress. For example, they may share the tasks of running a household, earning money, and raising children. With two people, you have two times as many resources. On the other hand, a single parent has to handle these demands on his or her own.²⁵ (Emphasis in original.)

Though instructors never read from the curriculum verbatim, they often paraphrased the mini-lecture by emphasizing that marriage provided health, economic, and social benefits because two parents working together was better than one. They also stressed another main point from the Mayo report that being married encouraged people to make better choices and be more responsible out of respect for their partner.

These research findings neither applied to parents' actual situations nor resonated with their empirical beliefs. First, since many of them were already living together and pooling their meager resources, and avoided getting married in part because one or both of the partners were unemployed, they did not understand how marriage would automatically translate into more resources, much less twice as many. If anything, unemployed or low-wage partners who brought in less than they cost in household expenses posed more of a financial risk, rather than an economic asset. Moreover, since many of them believed that the stresses they faced were largely financial—too little money, the need to find work, and securing everything they needed for the babies—it was lost on them how marriage would help them manage these stressors.

However, as street-level bureaucrats trying to link the logic of the policy with their constituents' lived experience, staff and instructors also employed two much more resonant framing techniques, frame bridging and frame amplification. These strategies involved temporal switching, intended to focus parents' attention away from their immediate economic and relationship circumstances. First, they bridged between frames by talking about committed co-parenting instead of marriage in a way that projected their children's welfare into the future. This allowed them to simultaneously circumvent the resistance to marriage as something that symbolized out-of-reach economic prosperity and instead to focus on children as central to poor parents' priorities and hopes for any kind of upward mobility. Secondly, the instructors amplified particular messages, such as "breaking the chain" of family dysfunction, that deeply resonated with parents' own childhood experiences of pain, poverty, and parental absence. For both, instructors implicitly tried to shift parents' temporal perspectives, from a focus on their stressful present to, respectively, their more secure imagined futures and painful, often impoverished, pasts.

²⁵ *Together We Can: Creating a Healthy Future for our Family—A Curriculum to Improve Co-Parenting Relationships of Single Parents*. Module 5, Part I. "A Healthy Marriage is Good for Your Health," p. 225.

Counter Framing: "It's Just What the Research Says"

One of the main program goals of Thriving Families and the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative that directly funded it was to educate low-income, unmarried parents about the benefits of marriage based on findings from marital research. The Thriving Families curriculum was comprised of five main parts; only the last specifically addressed marriage. Instructors had wide latitude to tailor each class series according to their own teaching preferences and what couples asked to focus on. During my observations, parents never asked for more information about marriage or the benefits thereof. To cover the workbook lesson on the benefits of a healthy marriage, instructors most often used a brief true/false quiz exercise in the class workbook. Instructors sometimes read each question from the "Rate Your Knowledge about Healthy Marriage" quiz aloud and asked the entire class to throw out answers, while others had parents take the quiz on their own and then read the answers to the group to see how many they got correct. Overall, parents got more answers wrong than right, but this seemed to reflect their experience and symbolic understanding of marriage more than their lack of knowledge about marital research or a devaluation of marriage as an institution.

Mark, a white instructor in his early-20s and a college senior majoring in psychology at a local university, always led this particular lesson when he and his teaching partner, Deborah, an African-American social worker in her early-50s, taught classes together. As he gave the quiz, he asked if it was true or false that "a healthy marriage has more benefits for women than men." Many in the class answered "false," which Mark satisfactorily told them was correct. He then quoted a statistic on marriage and heart disease: "Compared to singles, the chances of developing heart disease drop 20 percent for married men, but only 4 percent for married women." Next, Mark asked if it was true or false that "people who are in healthy marriages tend to be happier and have lower stress levels." The 16 parents in the room offered a confident "false" in unison. "No, actually, that one's true," Mark told us. "Three, true or false, married people tend to help each other make healthier choices." Again, and with steady confidence despite getting the wrong answer on the previous question, the whole class offered a resounding "false!" "That one is actually true as well," Mark said sheepishly. One female participant immediately challenged this: "You don't have to be *married* to help each other make healthier choices!" "But what about *compared* to married couples?" Mark responded. She did not understand this as a response to her claim since Mark explained neither the implied correlations nor the specific groups studied for the research that served as the basis of the quiz's statistics. Mark quickly moved on to the fourth question: "Unmarried people who love each other and live together enjoy the same health benefits as married people." Having lost all confidence to answer at all or perhaps as a result of questioning the quiz's validity after the previous questions, only a third of the class chimed in with "true." "Nope, that one's false" said Mark. "Finally, what about this one: Married people tend to weigh more and suffer from obesity more than people who have never gotten married." "Oh, that's definitely true," said one of the male participants. "That's correct," said Mark, "but why, do you think?" He quickly quipped: "Because being married is part of being comfortable." "And, married people have more kids," agreed one of the other fathers. In an alternate version of the quiz, instructors asked parents: "Married couples

make more money than unmarried couples, true or false?” Not surprisingly given their understanding of how marriage should follow financial prosperity, parents were much more likely to get the answer to this question correct by answering true. Parents already believed strongly in the correlation between marriage and couples making more money that instructors tried to promote. This belief pointed to the cause and effect confusion inherent in the opposition between parents’ symbolic understanding of marriage as something you do only after securing a greater degree of prosperity and the instrumental logic instructors promoted on behalf of the policy that marriage results in higher income.

A conflict erupted once when José and Susan, a middle-aged married couple who got involved with marriage education through their church, he Latino and she white, taught this lesson using the quiz. One of the mothers, Christine, irritatingly stood up after the fourth question about “unmarried people who love each other” and complained: “This quiz is wrong because it makes married people sound better than everyone else. My parents weren’t married, and I’m not married. I turned out ok, and my kids are going to turn out ok.” Not knowing quite what to say in response to her impassioned critique of the curriculum’s message, José simply said: “Well, I’m not saying this is true, this is just what the research says about people overall, not one person specifically.” Christine did not seem satisfied with his answer, but she begrudgingly sat down and said nothing more about it. This tension-filled exchange between José and Christine was similar to others that uncomfortably pitted instructors, whose pro-marriage message clearly implied that non-married families were somehow not as good as married families, against parents who understandably interpreted the message as a negative value judgment about their relationships, the quality of their parenting, and in many cases, their own upbringings as children of single parents. Just as José did with Christine, when challenged, staff and instructors often justified their pro-marriage stance by vaguely referring to “science” and “research” that revealed all the ways marriage was good for adults, children, and society. However, instructors, trained to teach the curriculum over a mere two days and motivated to teach for a variety of reasons—including religious values, a belief in the power of psychological approaches to modify human behavior, and a sincere desire to help those they considered less fortunate—were not particularly well-versed in the specificities of marital research, much less equipped to handle the challenges to the claims they were espousing. As these incidents show, attempts to counter parents’ view of marriage by referring to marital research failed miserably. Not only did class exercises such as the true/false quiz not resonate with parents’ family experiences, they often demeaned them. Aware of this disconnect, but hesitant to discuss it openly with parents for fear of sparking conflict, instructors strategically avoided talking about marriage to not risk alienating their audience.

Frame Bridging: The Missing “M-Word”

Rather than “marriage,” instructors tended to use seemingly less inflammatory terms, especially “commitment” and “co-parenting.” There were many instances when instructors accidentally used the infamous m-word, only to quickly correct themselves and replace it with “relationship” or “commitment,” as in the following conversation between the instructor, José, and a white father in his 20s, Michael:

José: “I want to thank you guys for coming out to the Thriving 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 somewhat joking exchange between José and Michael indicated that there was at least some discomfort among parents about how much the classes would focus on encouraging couples to marry. Assuring them that this was not going to be a class that was just about marriage, José added that some of the people who took the classes as unmarried couples eventually got married, and that many couples had that as a goal, though he stopped short of saying that this was the explicit goal of the program. Susan, José’s wife and co-instructor, immediately interjected and said that this was the Thriving Families class, hosted by a larger organization called Healthy Marriages, and that none of the couples who took the classes were married. To emphasize that everyone, even the instructors, were there to learn about relationships, not necessarily marriage, 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.

This deliberate and strategic avoidance of talking about marriage characterized almost all program activities, beginning with recruitment. Recruitment staff intentionally downplayed the marriage message to avoid intimidating couples from signing up to participate. They believed using the m-word would conjure up anxiety about parents’ relationships and, ironically, misrepresent the goals of the Healthy Marriages organization, which, to them, was to encourage and support all healthy relationships, even co-parenting among couples who were no longer romantically involved. Marriage was the ultimate goal in best-case scenarios. Emilio, an Hispanic staff person in his mid-40s, recruited weekly at a local WIC (Women, Infant, Children supplemental nutrition program) office during mandatory nutrition and parenting classes for recipients. Not once did Emilio mention marriage the morning I observed him in these classes. Rather, he stressed that the program was for anyone who cared about their kids and that improving their relationships with their partners, married or not, was one of the best things they could do for their children.²⁶ When I interviewed him after one of these recruitment sessions, I asked how he explained the inclusion of the word “marriage” in all the informational brochures he distributed to parents. He replied:

²⁶ Research on the connection between parental relationship quality and various child outcomes supports this claim. Moore et al. (2011) found that higher quality relationships between parents was associated with fewer child behavioral problems, higher child social competence, children’s greater engagement in school, better parent-child communication, and less parental aggravation. What is particularly notable about this study is that these findings apply to parents and children regardless of race/ethnicity, marital status, income, and education level.

Sometimes in my speech I say ‘This is not a session to get people married, that’s not our job.’ I just make it a little fun so people relax about it. We don’t make people get married, if it happens, it happens after the class, but that’s not our purpose. Our purpose, our main goal, is to help people acquire skills that will help their relationship become a healthy relationship... They don’t like to talk about long term goals because some live one day at a time. They don’t even know if they’re going to make it to the following week. So to talk to them about things for the future, it’s not very appealing to them for themselves, but this is the time for them to think about their baby. ‘If I could not make it, my baby might make it.’ I plant that seed in their mind, to think ‘I couldn’t make it going to college, but maybe my baby will do it, and I’ll do the best I can to support that.’

Emilio believed that prospective Thriving Families participants had a mostly day-to-day orientation to living that precluded a focus on long-term goals like marriage. His belief was based both on his experience working with low-income couples and the training he received to be a Thriving Families instructor. As reported by many of the instructors, their two-day training class taught them about how low-income couples’ reluctance to marry was really about economic and emotional insecurity, fear that they had neither met the economic marriage bar nor had a sound enough relationship to make for a happy, lasting marriage. A significant portion of the training session focused on the findings of Edin and Kefalas’ (2005) *Promises I Can Keep*, an ethnographic study of why poor, unmarried women have children outside marriage. Though staff and instructors were themselves pro-marriage and got involved with the organization to promote it, they had been primed to expect the conflicts that emerged in class when their pro-marriage message collided with what they had come to understand as parents’ relational and economic insecurities.

Thirty-year-old Latina, Maria, another staff person responsible for recruitment and working directly with Thriving Families couples, told me she deliberately avoided references to marriage in her communication with parents because most were not ready for it. Maria was a low-income, single mother of two young sons who worked for the Healthy Marriages organization in conjunction with the state’s welfare-to-work program. Though she herself was engaged to be married and supported the organization’s pro-marriage stance, she empathized with the participants’ reluctance to take the next step. In particular, she was sensitive to parents’ potential concern that the classes would seem coercive about getting married. As with Emilio, the very mention of the word, she feared, would likely prevent couples from signing up to participate:

I think it’s the stage where they’re at right now. I don’t think they’re ready for marriage. I think they’re barely struggling with being together for right now, and when you talk about being together forever, they’d probably be like ‘uh, I don’t want that right now.’ It’s not even in their mind. You know, to be honest with you, I don’t even use the word ‘marriage’ because I feel like I might lose them in the recruitment process...because they’re probably thinking ‘marriage, oh no,

I don't want to go to a class that's going to get me married.' They are scared of that word.

Justine, a 40-year-old African-American single mother who had also been on and off welfare for many years, rounded out the Thriving Families recruitment staff. She believed that parents were often in "survival mode," focused on struggling to make ends meet day-by-day, rather than making concerted plans for a deliberate future. In Justine's opinion, marriage, more than anything, represented this kind of future orientation. She praised the program's curriculum for encouraging parents to be goal oriented, but thought that talking about marriage signaled a frame of mind they simply were not prepared for given their daily struggles, both emotional and economic:

I think some of these participants don't even have their goals set. I find that really valuable in our curriculum because it gets you thinking about what you're going to do. Where do you see yourself? And then you talk about marriage. Right now, it's not even in the picture, they're just trying to get to tomorrow. How can they even think about the future if tomorrow is even bigger?

So, how did recruiters encourage parents to sign up and participate? According to Emilio, two strategies were critical for getting people to sign up: emphasizing the financial incentives of the program and appealing to parents' commitment to their children. Himself an immigrant from Puerto Rico, he stressed that the latter was especially important for recruiting Hispanic men:

I appeal through their kids because...their priority is their kids. That's why we work so hard, this is a cultural thing. Hispanics are not known to have a wonderful relationship with their wives. We are family oriented but it's because we care about the kids, that's our main focus. I say 'you came to this country looking for opportunities. You came here for a lot of sacrifices, so don't you want to give them the opportunity of having this great relationship for your kids.' Sometimes I use some research. I say 'you know what, it's been proven that parents who have good communication, their kids have better grades in school. And the better grades they have, the prouder you'll be of them, the less phone calls you're going to get from school because your kid is misbehaving.'

Like Maria and Justine, Emilio strongly emphasized the economic and psychological hardships that characterized parents' lives and prevented them from developing a future orientation that included hopes for a happy marriage. Pessimistic that he could recruit couples with a hopeful message about their own futures, he stressed how the classes "plant a seed" of hope and optimism for their children:

Many of them work pay check to pay check, those that are working. That's why I mention you will learn financial skills that will help you to get through, especially in this economy. Many of them come from very bad neighborhoods, and they don't know if they're going to survive the next day. Some are in gangs; some were molested in the past. They come with a lot of emotional issues. These are people who cannot see a future in their lives. They're just 'I made it another

day, great. I made it to another next week, great.’ They don’t have much hope for the future. When you start planting seeds, they think ‘maybe there’s something here for me.’ Many of them come for the money, but they start realizing this is different, and they feel accomplished, same ages, sharing the same issues. You don’t talk about this in your neighborhood. You don’t get together with your all your friends from the street and talk about what you’re going through at a barbeque.

This strategy is in line with Maynard and Moodie’s (2003) argument that street-level bureaucrats implement policy based on the moral judgments of the clients they serve and Benford and Snow’s (2000) theory of frame bridging as an attempt to link two distinct ways of understanding an issue. Staff and instructors took “marriage” out of marriage promotion as a deliberate tactic to promote marriage in a way they believed was more salient to how unmarried, low-income parents prioritized parenting over marriage. The reasoning behind this approach to promoting marriage and other forms of healthy relationships, namely co-parenting, was that teaching parents how to set goals, communicate more effectively with one another, and better manage their stress would collectively equip them with the confidence necessary to overcome their reluctance to make a greater commitment to their partners.

When I asked the program’s creator and director, Cynthia, a white woman in her late-50s with several decades experience working as a marriage and family therapist, if not including explicit messages about marriage in the Thriving Families 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.

The Thriving Families program coordinator, Sonia, a white woman in her mid-20s, also described the skepticism she often faced regarding the m-word when trying to recruit parents and partnering organizations around the community. Much of her job, she explained, consisted of emphasizing how Thriving Families was more about healthy co-parenting relationships than promoting marriage:

I think when people hear our name, [Healthy Marriages], they’re off guard a little bit because for some reason the connotation seems a little right-wing conservative. They assume we have this agenda that we want people to be married no matter what. So I think part of [my job] is just dispelling the myths

of this program. I like to start it off with the basics by letting people know that two people working together is better than one, and that's the way it is with parents. And two people working well together are much better than two people trying to work together and failing at it. People don't really disagree with something like that...A lot of people can relate to parents leaving for two main reasons. One of them is that parents are scared of their responsibility or think they can't do a very good job providing, and so they think it's better for them to take off...The second is that they're just not getting along with the other parent and so they take off. Our classes address those two issues, showing parents that they can provide for their child, and they can make a huge difference in their lives, and secondly, they don't even have to continue to be in a romantic relationship with the other parent. If they learn to work together for the betterment of the child, then that's okay. It's not about pushing people into loving each other; it's having people work together because they decided to have a child together.

Sonia's remarks suggested that Thriving Families classes focused on teaching couples how to co-parent cooperatively regardless of the parents' relationship status. Yet, with the occasional exception, instructors clearly assumed an on-going romantic relationship between parents and talked a lot about how taking shared responsibility for their children could buoy their commitment to one other. This was understandable given that most couples were involved when they took the classes, but it also indicated that the intentions Cynthia described—building parents' confidence in the relationship so “the marriage will follow”—more accurately captured the program's underlying purpose.

Frame Amplification: “Breaking the Chain” and “Relationships are More Important than Money”

In addition to frame bridging, highlighting committed co-parenting as important for children's wellbeing was also a strategy of frame amplification, the process of underscoring certain events, issues, and beliefs that most resonated with parents' lived experience and views of the world. Instructors often used catchphrases that referred to parents' own childhoods and strategically tapped in to how they desperately wanted something better for their children. For Katherine and Karl, two African-American instructors in their mid-50s and married to one another, the phrase “break the chain” best encapsulated and symbolized the overarching goals of the program as they understood and tried to teach them.

An emphasis on children's opportunities and “breaking the chain” of family dysfunction was the intentional focus of the relationship web exercise, the first activity that initiated each series of Thriving Families classes. In one representative instance of the web activity, Karl and Katherine initiated the exercise with Katherine's enthusiastic promise that “in this class, you'll get to know yourselves better and learn how to create a network of support for your children.” By “network,” she meant a healthy co-parenting relationship for their children, regardless of whether they were romantically involved as a couple or not. “Both of you must be involved in your child's life,” Katherine insisted,

“whether you’re with other people or if only one of you has custody.” She then told everyone to sit in the middle of the room in a close circle. There were various grumbles from some of the parents, especially the men, but everyone soon cooperated.

For the first round, we said our name, then how many children we had, and then for the final round, everyone alternately told their fellow classmates their hopes and dreams for their family. Parents’ expressed wishes for their children ranged from the basic necessities of everyday living, such as 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 said they wanted to raise a happy or successful child, or one that wouldn’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.”

By tossing the ball of yarn around the circle through several rounds, while each individual held their several pieces of yarn taut, we ultimately created a web of yarn that was meant to symbolically represent a collectively held set of hopes that all the parents had for their children. “Look,” Katherine said, “we’ve formed a web, a network of support you’ve created for your children. If you create a strong network through a healthy co-parenting relationship, then it will support your child.” Karl then took out a beach ball, told participants that it represented their children, and threw it into the middle of the circle onto the web of yarn. He then told us to notice how the net supported the ball, and that our relationships worked the same way. “If our relationships with our partners are strong enough,” he said, “it can help keep our children from falling through the cracks and help them acquire all the things we hope for them.”

Katherine then pulled out a pair of scissors and cut one of the strands of yarn. “This,” she told 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.” She continued to cut pieces of the yarn until the web could no longer support the beach ball and it fell to the floor. The message was glaringly clear: the realization of parents’ expressed wishes for their children directly depended on the quality of their relationship. “This is what we’re going to talk about in this class,” she emphasized, “how your child needs a good web of support that is your co-parenting relationship.” Karl quickly interjected: “If you don’t give that to your kids, if you’re not there to shape them, then someone else, society at large, their peers, television, will in your place.” “This is about you, both of you” Katherine added, “for you to break the chain, break the cycle. You don’t have to become the parents you were raised by, you can do things differently, and that means making a commitment to your child every day.” As Karl told me during our interview:

We always tell them ‘break the chain, break the chain.’ We emphasize that a lot, how much they teach their children, and then the children grow up to be like the parents, and it just goes on generation after generation, and it’s sad. It’s getting them to understand, and they all experienced it, they all can relate. That’s why

when we do the yarn network with the beach ball and we say ‘what do you want to change?’ they say ‘I want to be there because my father wasn’t,’ ‘I want to do this because I didn’t have it.’ So I say ‘what are you doing to make that difference?’

For the parents, many of whom had grown up in poverty themselves and been raised by single parents, this message of needing to “break the chain” resonated profoundly.

A second primary frame amplification tactic instructors used to motivate parents was emphasizing that “relationships are more important than money,” and more specifically, that healthy families and relationships are not dependent on what you have, but rather what you do for your partner and your children. “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,” José once told a class. Reading from the instructor’s manual, he explained that research had 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. 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.

Susan followed this comment by emphasizing that being committed was particularly important because of all the stressors couples faced, especially 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.” To wrap up this particular lesson, 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 the room full of 18 struggling parents, most on welfare, many unemployed, a few homeless, and one just weeks out of jail.

Along with highlighting certain issues, frame amplification entailed downplaying other aspects of parents’ lived experience that were not as closely tied to organizational goals and tactics. Though parents often talked 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 shaped the problems more commonly experienced by low-income couples and families were rarely discussed in Thriving Families classes. These types of struggles were incorporated into parts of the curriculum, such as through a story about Mary and John, a fictional poor couple with a new baby who were thinking about marriage, but only to the extent that the problems experienced by these fictitious characters resembled those more commonly faced by the low-income participants, namely unemployment, lack of housing, and never having enough money.

Instructors never talked about how these challenges might undermine romantic commitment or be a cause for delaying marriage. Rather, one of the most important parts of a healthy co-parenting relationship, instructors ultimately explained, 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,²⁷ lessons in Thriving Families classes also focused on money-related topics such as goal-setting, creating a budget, and learning to distinguish between needs, such as food and diapers, and wants, such as cigarettes and alcohol. Instructors also passed 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.

Susan's message to parents that their relationships were an ultimate source of strength in the midst of hardship was amplified even more by the absence of any discussion about how economic and social disadvantage tends to undermine intimate relationships rather than bolster them. Though their economic situation may have been tenuous, instructors stressed, parents' relationships could be stronger, not in spite of this difficulty, but because of it. The message was 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. Beyond framing responsible behavior as what makes a relationship, marriage, or family work, classes highlighted how imperative it was to make them work because they were one of the few advantages these poor couples had, their one hope for giving their children a better life. The following comment from my interview with Katherine captured this message well:

Parents can see it's not the money, it's the happiness that's moving the relationship. It's not about how much money you make, because let's face it, what I've learned and seen and experienced in life is that the people who had the most money had the most problems. And that's not to say that you can't have money and still be happy. There's nothing wrong with having things, but things break down. We have so much materialism and an economic system that's falling. You could have all the money in the world, or you could have nothing. The most important thing in reality is having family, having that love between you. That's what's going to pull you through.

Couples responded very positively to this message because it emphasized the value of something they had, their current partner, rather than what they did not have but

²⁷ 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). PREP developers have recently created a program for low-income couples, *Within Our Reach*, and another for low-income individuals, *Within My Reach*.

desperately needed—jobs, education, and money. This message was particularly salient to parents because, unlike access to jobs, education, and other economic resources that were largely out of their control, Thriving Families classes framed interpersonal relationships as a more secure form of social support over which parents had some power if they were willing to treat partners better, carve out time for the relationship, and communicate more effectively.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how one group of street-level bureaucrats, staff and instructors for a healthy marriage program for low-income couples with children, strategized to circumvent the conflict between poor parents' symbolic understanding of marriage and the instrumental logic of marriage promotion policy. Ironically, to do so, they deliberately avoided talking about marriage and instead talked around it by using concepts that were not fraught with the same connotations of economic security and risk as marriage, such as commitment and co-parenting. In using these seemingly less controversial tropes about relationships and family, they emphasized the value of something parents presumably had within their control—the quality of their relationships—over that which they did not have—money and jobs. To bridge the goals of marriage promotion with the logic of poor parents' lived experience, Thriving Families classes framed the commitment between parents, that which is supposedly even more valuable than money, as the foundation of family wellbeing and especially children's life chances.

Skeptics of marriage promotion policy would likely be pleased to learn that these classes did not promote marriage alone as a route out of poverty. As I have shown, staff and instructors worried more about scaring couples away by talking about marriage, rather than promoting it explicitly. Because of this, they used more indirect framing strategies to encourage couples to think about marriage as part of their future. Thriving Families classes promoted a particular form of commitment, to both partners and children, that framed family wellbeing as a matter of developing skillful co-parenting partnerships, regardless of marital status or socioeconomic position. To do so, instructors deployed a “money can't buy you love/love is all you need” ideology of commitment that directly challenged how couples thought about economic security as a necessary precursor to marriage. In the words of cultural sociologist Eva Illouz (1997), it was an attempt to teach that “not only is love blind to status and wealth, it ultimately transforms poverty into abundance, hunger into satiation, lack into surplus” (247). In an effort to promote individual responsibility within romantic relationships, instructors used the discourse of relationship and financial management skills to give couples a sense of control over an otherwise uncontrollable and often desperate family situation. For largely uneducated and no- or low-income parents who had the least control over job prospects, money, their time, and especially their children's life chances, this was a provocatively compelling and salient message that went straight to the heart of their concerns and priorities. It also gave them hope.

Yet, though this strategy resonated with parents and offered them a greater sense of agency over their families' wellbeing, it did little to address the social and economic

constraints that prevented them from feeling ready for marriage and realizing many of their hopes for their children. I interviewed 45 parents after they graduated from Thriving Families; only one told me the classes influenced her desire to get married, something she was strongly considering well before she and her partner enrolled in the classes. As additional research on the outcomes of healthy marriage and relationship skills programs for poor couples becomes available, we will more fully understand the implications of marriage promotion policy. For now, this research, along with preliminary findings of the Building Strong Families Project, suggest that relationship skills classes do not help accomplish two of the main overarching goal of marriage promotion policy: to encourage marriage and reduce dependence on welfare. More importantly, as relationship education programs of this sort gloss over the material constraints that undermine marriage in poor communities, they seem to do even less to prevent the poverty that is the cause of that dependence.

Chapter Four

Repackaging the ‘Package Deal’: Promoting Responsible Fatherhood by Reframing Marital Masculinity

I came to understand that the hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill... That is why we need fathers to step up, to realize that their job does not end at conception; that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one.

President Barack Obama
100th Anniversary of Father’s Day
June 18, 2009, *Parade Magazine*

Since the mid-1990s, fatherhood, namely *responsible* fatherhood, has become central to U.S. family and welfare politics. Along with \$100 million annually for marriage promotion activities, the Personal Responsibility Act (PRA) of 1996 earmarked \$50 million a year for programs and activities that promote responsible fatherhood, including counseling, mentoring, marriage education, enhancing relationship skills, parenting, and activities to foster economic stability.²⁸ The Personal Responsibility Act clearly affirmed that work, marriage, and responsible fatherhood are mutually constitutive: work encourages marriage, and marriage encourages men to be responsible fathers, which in turn inspires men to work. In *The Package Deal* (2002), Nicholas Townsend argued that men measure their success and evaluate their masculinity in terms of four deeply intertwined elements of fatherhood: children, marriage, employment, and homeownership. This package deal is a dominant cultural norm of fatherhood and marriage that assumes a middle-class standard of living, supported by a man’s secure, high-paying job from which he earns enough to be the main, if not sole, provider for an entire family. But how does a policy intended to promote marriage and responsible fatherhood for poor, unmarried men who do not have the means to become secure financial providers circumvent this middle-class breadwinner norm? Put another way, how do you promote middle-class marital values outside the context of middle-class material advantage?

In this chapter, I show how Thriving Families classes sought to reconcile the tension between the ideology of male breadwinning as a prerequisite for marriage and the economic constraints of poor men who find it increasingly difficult to achieve the package deal. How they did so, I argue, hinged on a fundamental distinction between *marriageability* as what makes a man worthy of marrying and *marriage* as the optimal venue for the accomplishment of masculinity and responsible fatherhood. Under the assumption that commitment and marriage would enable men to become more

²⁸ “Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Home Page, Federal Resource Site.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at: <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>.

responsible and productive providers, classes challenged traditional understandings of male marriageability. Marriage promotion targeted at low-income parents must find another route to promoting marriage and responsible fatherhood that addresses high levels of unemployment and low earnings. Traditional understandings of marriageability and marital masculinity assume that a secure, high(er)-paying job precedes commitment via marriage. Thriving Families classes promoted a distinct, class-specific definition of marriageability that assumed commitment and marriage come *before* financial success and offer men, in particular, the greatest opportunity and incentive to work hard.

The classes I studied redefined marriageability by decoupling what it means to be a “real man” from a middle-class salary, arguing that a good prospective husband and father need not have a consistent track record of breadwinning. As I discussed in detail in Chapter Two, low-income and minority men have recently lost the most ground in educational, labor, and marriage markets, and therefore find it increasingly difficult to live up to the ideal of the traditional family breadwinner. Given these constraints, Thriving Families classes masculinized caregiving by teaching couples that a marriageable man is not one who must necessarily be a stable economic provider, but one who contributes to his family in any significant way, including through housework, childcare, and emotional affection and care. The message was that despite their limited employment prospects, low-income men could initially demonstrate their commitment to their families by substituting unpaid care for paid employment. Once committed, men would presumably be even more invested in seeking and securing a job that allowed them to make significant financial contributions to their families.

In many ways, the Thriving Families classes I studied encouraged gender flexibility as a way to promote marriage, involved fatherhood, and power-sharing within low-income couples’ relationships. However, they stopped short of reinventing a new conception of fatherhood and marriageability that fully dispensed with patriarchal ideals of male providership by promoting an equitable division of family labor. Rather, classes simply repackaged the package deal by positing that children and commitment (if not marriage) are necessary to get poor, unemployed men seriously invested in the male breadwinner ethic. In the end, classes promoted a limited version of gender flexibility in the realms of shared parenting, household labor, and paid work, one that relied on a hetero-normative premise of gendered communication that ultimately served as a diversion from the power differentials and other structural issues that tend to create conflict in intimate relationships. While classes tried to downplay and subvert the gender norms that underlie traditional definitions of marital masculinity, they highlighted seemingly inevitable and innate gendered differences in communication styles as the main challenge to negotiating conflict and sustaining relationships. In doing so, they implied that the ability to manage these gender differences is one of the definitive criteria for relationship stability and marital readiness. Both of these tactics, I argue, were attempts to modify poor couples’ views of the package deal and the economic marriage bar by severing the strong ideological link among male breadwinning, financial security, and marriageability.

Men, Masculinity, and Marriage

In America, there is a growing Fatherhood Responsibility Movement (Gavanas, 2004). Comprised of numerous political and religious organizations, the movement is founded on the idea that fathers have been marginalized in American family life since *family* is increasingly defined by the ties among mothers and children, with fathers playing an ancillary role in a largely feminized institution. Claiming that fathers play a role that only men can fulfill, advocates often refer to biological, biblical, or psychoanalytic theories to argue that fathers, with their specifically male orientation to parenting, are uniquely important for child well-being, family prosperity, and social order (Gavanas, 2004: 4). When applied specifically to low-income and minority fathers, the trope of *responsible fatherhood* has classist connotations, characterizing men as “dead beat dads” whose marginalization in family life results from their failure to financially support and be involved in the day-to-day lives of their children. The implication is that irresponsible fathers are those who do not step up to fulfill their traditional breadwinning responsibility.

The Personal Responsibility Act’s emphasis on marriage and work as key components of responsible fatherhood is a response to the dominant explanations for the poor’s retreat from marriage during the latter part of the 20th century. One explanation was that a more generous welfare state encouraged poor parents to forego marriage to not risk losing their benefits (Murray, 1984). Policymakers sought to counter this “marriage penalty” through the PRA’s time limits and marriage and fatherhood promotion provisions. In critical response to the welfare-state hypothesis, Wilson (1987) argued that the decline in marriage and the rise in non-marital childbearing were consequences of major economic restructuring in urban areas and the long-term joblessness that ensued among poor, inner-city black men. This “male marriageable pool hypothesis” posited that it was the lack of stable employment, not the welfare state, that rendered these economically disadvantaged men “unmarriageable.” Others have critiqued the marriageability argument for assuming “that employment, even at a menial job, pays enough to make a man marriageable” and for discounting cultural changes in family life that have decoupled sex, cohabitation, and childbearing from marriage, especially among poor couples (Edin and Kefalas, 2005: 199).

According to a report prepared on behalf of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which administers the federal responsible fatherhood grants: “responsible fathering means establishing paternity, being present in the child's life (even if divorced or unmarried), sharing economic support, and being personally involved in the child's life in collaboration with the mother” preferably within “a caring, committed, and collaborative marriage,” which is the “optimal environment in contemporary U.S. society for the father/child relationship” (Doherty, et al., 1996). In essence, responsible fatherhood policy seeks to encourage fathers’ emotional, practical, and financial involvement in their children’s lives by promoting paternity establishment, parenting and relationship skills, work, and marriage.

Legislators’ testimonies in support of including marriage promotion and responsible fatherhood provisions in welfare legislation clearly affirmed traditional

breadwinning roles for men and caretaking roles for women (Gring-Pemble, 2005). In one representative passage from Congressional hearings, Stephen Martin, state senator from Virginia testifying at a meeting of the House Committee on Ways and Means in January 1995, argued: “Work is essential to achieve financial security and move upward, but having a job provides a person more than just a paycheck. It gives *him* a sense of purpose and responsibility. It makes *him* a role model for his family and compels *him* to contribute in their enhancement and their success” (quoted in Gring-Pemble, 2005: 14, emphasis mine).

The PRA’s marriage and responsible fatherhood provisions point to a gendered understanding of parental responsibility for poverty, one that assumes a particular relationship between masculinity and marriage. Gender is not just an individual attribute, a social role, or a personal identity; it is an accomplishment, an emergent feature of social interaction (West and Zimmerman, 1987). As a component of gender, masculinity is not static, but rather an identity that must be constantly reclaimed and enacted (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1995; and West and Zimmerman, 1987). Marriage is a “gender factory,” or an ideal context in which to enact gender (Berk, 1985). Nock (1998) argues that marriage is a socially valuable gender factory because it provides a “template of masculinity,” a social context in which the precarious accomplishment of adult masculinity is developed, sustained, and continuously reinforced through work and providing. Marriage turns boys into responsible men by moving them “toward productivity and away from dependence, toward the acceptance of work and responsibility” (Nock: 47). According to Nock, neither fatherhood nor work alone can have this effect; only within marriage do men fully and legitimately accept enduring financial, legal, and social responsibility for women and children. As such, married men work harder and longer, earn more, and take greater responsibility for the families they create. In addition to “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987), being married in this theoretical framework is a primary way that men “do class” in a gendered way by accepting and enacting middle-class values of male breadwinning and achievement on behalf of their wives and children. In this framework, marriage is perhaps the most important part of the package deal, as it fundamentally changes men in a way that enables them to achieve all the other components.

Many have criticized marriage and responsible fatherhood promotion policy for endorsing these patriarchal values at the expense of addressing the socioeconomic and gendered roots of poverty, namely educational and occupational stratification and the gendered beliefs that render mothers more responsible than fathers for raising children in low-income, unmarried families (Hardisty, 2008; Heath, 2009; Moon and Whitehead, 2006; Solot and Miller, 2007). Davis (2002) calls this strategy “legislating patriarchy,” and characterizes it as an attempt to privatize the social safety net for poor families and encourage the dependence of women and children on men through marriage, rather than dependence on the state through welfare.

Studies have found that poor parents delay or forego marriage because couples largely believe that, other than children, the rest of the package deal should remain intact. Empirical assessments of what it takes for poor and low-income couples to marry show that employment is a key component of meeting a certain economic threshold that also

includes completing school, getting off all forms of public assistance, and affording a home (Gibson-Davis, 2007). Difficulty reaching this economic marriage bar prevents marriage among many poor and low-income couples, though it does not have the same effect on their decisions to have children (Anderson, 1999; Edin and Kefalas, 2005; McLanahan and Percheski, 2008). Given the rising cost of living and falling real wages among poor and working- and middle-class people, employment, and more specifically stable, high-earning employment, has become increasingly central to the marriageability of both men and women. However, this requirement is stronger for men than for women, since men must still contend with gendered family norms of male breadwinning and the social expectations that underlie the package deal and marriage as a template of masculinity. Basically, there does not seem to be an economic bar for childbearing among poor and low-income families similar to the one that exists for marriage. However, economic constraints, especially poor employment prospects for men, keep the rest of the package, which remains economically and cultural intact, out of their reach.

In the remainder of this chapter, I show and analyze how, in an effort to get Thriving Families couples to re-conceptualize what is necessary for marriage, the classes I studied partially challenged traditional understandings of gendered divisions of family labor, fatherhood, and masculinity. Rather than suggesting that successful (and therefore marriageable) men must be secure financial providers before marriage, classes focused on low-income men's capacities to be good communicators and caring co-parents and partners, qualities that do not depend on men bringing in money. This is an attempt at reframing masculinity and a "real man" as one who plays with and cares for his children, is emotionally expressive with his partner and children, and provide support, no matter what kind of support that is—financial or otherwise.

Reframing Marital Masculinity

Real Men are Daddies, Not just Fathers

This conceptual shift away from employment as the sine qua non of fatherhood entailed not only masculinizing the traditionally feminized task of caring for children, but emasculating those men who believed that breadwinning alone was synonymous with being a good man, husband, or father. Deborah, an African-American instructor in her 50s, once began a class by insisting that we should "think of fathering differently, that a man doesn't need to bring home a big paycheck to be a worthy partner and father. As long as he's pitching in somehow, whether it's by keeping the house clean or taking care of the kids while she's at work, that's being a real man." According to instructors and many of the parents, the best fathers (and men) are those who do more than *just* provide a paycheck; they recognize that being a good dad and a "real man" means being present, not merely a provider. One of the fathers, Clark, 32 and African American, discussed in his interview with me how the classes reinforced his changing viewpoint about what he called the misguided "male role belief system":

It's the belief that the man is in control, he's the man of the house, he's the dad instead of being a partner...Me not helping around the house came up in [the classes] too. I only want to do this or I only want to do that. I even started

helping out around the house more. I help cook more, clean up more, all of that, just so she doesn't have to do as much...I'm learning that paying all the bills ain't enough. No matter how much money you make, because I've made a ton of money. But I felt that as long as I paid the bills, you don't have to work, you got a new car, that's enough. I should be able to go out and drink with the buddies or do what I want. I felt like as long as I keep money in the pocket, everything was fine. What I learned was that don't matter, that that ain't love. I want finances to be comfortable and not have to worry about it, but I learned over time that I didn't know how to love...I used to feel like if I pay all the bills, I love you, that's it.

To Clark, learning to truly love his girlfriend and children meant dispensing with the idea that all a man needed to do for his family was be a provider.

When instructors did admonish fathers for not doing enough as parents, it was almost always in reference to fathers of previous generations who were either absent or just breadwinners. Though they most strongly criticized fathers who did not stick around for their kids at all, instructors also disparaged fathers who simply worked and paid the bills without playing a significant emotional role in their children's lives. For Katherine and Karl, two married African American instructors in their 50s, becoming the fathers most of the men themselves did not have as they grew up had little, if anything, to do with money. It had everything to do with sticking in there with moms and kids, especially when things got tough, learning to love and talk through the hard times, and using the challenges to strengthen relationships, not fracture them. Karl often referenced the famous "Cat's in the Cradle" song by Harry Chapin as a cautionary tale about a father so preoccupied with working and paying bills that he misses watching his son grow into a man. "Anyone can be a father," Karl told us, "but it takes a real man to be a daddy."

This message resonated with parents, especially the men, who talked about growing up and knowing who their fathers were, but the fathers "weren't around." As one male participant said, "I know who my father is, but he's not really 'Daddy' to me." Instructors, and especially fathers, were quick to distinguish between a *father*, who literally fathered a child in the biological sense, and a *daddy* or *dad*, someone who, regardless of biological relationship, loved their children and proved that love by being an on-going part of their lives. Though David, 28 and African American, reversed the dad/father terminology, he too made a clear distinction between a guy who simply fathers a child and a "true man" who accepts his responsibilities:

My father was around maybe twice a year until I was seven and then he disappeared...I really had no father, and I know a lot of my disappointment is not having one...[Being a father means] I have to provide for it, I have to care for it...Anybody can be a dad. It's easy to be a dad, all you have to do is get someone pregnant, and you're a dad. But to be a father, to handle responsibility and your actions for that child, that's amazing. I can never call myself a true man until I have that responsibility.

Mothers also often distinguished between real dads, those who are actually involved in their children's lives, and fathers, who might as well have been no more than mere sperm donors and a name on a birth certificate. As Gwen, 24 and African American, told me about her son's father Isaiah, also 24 and African American:

He used the class as an opportunity to talk about his father [who wasn't really around] and his childhood. I can see opportunity for him to be an amazing father to Joshua and for him to really know him. You know anybody can be his father on a piece of paper, but [it's another thing] to really spend time with him and know that he can shape and mold him.

According to David, Gwen, and many other parents I spoke with, a bona fide father was a man who accepted and fulfilled his parenting responsibilities through unremitting involvement in his children's daily lives. A biological link and a legal proclamation of paternity via a birth certificate were both meaningless without this kind of involvement.

Nevertheless, the message that "real men" were ones who were there for kids and partners in non-financial ways did not necessarily entail promoting *equal* responsibility for childcare and housework. Instructors praised men for merely contributing at all and often chided mothers for not letting them do more. Men's very presence in class was regarded as proof of commitment to their children and partners. Instructors often congratulated and expressed a special thank you to the male participants for showing up to and sticking through a day-long class on relationships and parenting, especially since men are more reluctant to talk about "touchy, feely" stuff like relationships. For one class, we all had to unexpectedly caravan to a different location because the site manager did not show up to unlock the door for us. Cynthia, the Executive Director, white and in her 50s, showed up exasperated about an hour after the class began, thanking everyone, but especially the men, for showing up to a class on communication, a clear indication of responsibility and being committed to their children. Before she left, she emphasized that it was important for men to stay involved in families, especially given the high rate of family breakdown; she really wanted to congratulate the fathers for taking the time to attend a class like this and "hanging in there" with their children and partners.

Many instructors even went as far as to critique mothers for "gatekeeping," being overly critical, and not letting men help out with the kids unless they were under constant surveillance. Katherine told couples that it "doesn't matter what the diaper looks like if dad changes it; as long as it stays on, don't criticize him, or he might never want to do it again." When encouraging participants to rethink fathers' appropriate responsibilities, instructors often directed their message more at women than men, suggesting that it was primarily women who held on to and perpetuated the idea that men needed to bring home a lot of money to be worthy fathers and husbands. Much of the problem, they implied, was that men's wage-earning activities were being more highly valued than their parenting and partnering. Mark, an instructor, white and 23, told me:

We tell them, 'women, you know you really need to be kind to your husband, or to your partner, when he's out of work because that is a tough time for him

because he really doesn't feel as manly.'...A lot of them have to define themselves in other ways than just employment...for instance, this one father, he's defined himself as someone who is helping out around the house. He could care for a child...The message is two-fold. Dad has needs, too. Dad needs to be communicated with, too. Both mom and dad need to talk to each other and they're both equally important...Dad needs to realize he's important to the kids so he feels valued in the relationship and he feels like he should be there, he's contributing, he's a good person. And mom needs to feel that he's contributing something because all of media tells us that Dad isn't contributing. Dad is a lot of jokes on sitcoms; dad is the guy who doesn't know how to take care of kids, and that is something they warn us about in the [curriculum], that dad can be secluded from childrearing sometimes, and mom needs to realize he's important for the children's academic, social, self-esteem, and all sort of successes in life.

As described by Mark, the classes went to great lengths to warn against relegating "Dad" to the backburner of family life, especially when he was not able to contribute much financially to the household because of employment or low-wage work. Rather, instructors conveyed a message to women that good male partners, though they might be unemployed, at least do what they can to pitch in by listening to you at the end of a hard day, picking up things around the house, and watching the kids when they can while you work. Women, according to this educational directive, needed to take steps to ensure they were not complicit in fathers' low involvement with children. This mainly entailed helping dads feel manly and valued as fathers and supportive partners by recognizing and explicitly praising any contribution they made.

Many staff and instructors also couched this message that fathers should be valued regardless of the level of their financial contributions within larger conversations about the strengths and challenges faced by particular racial and ethnic groups. Reflecting on a presentation she gave to an African American organization in the community, Cynthia, the Executive Director, recounted that she challenged the assumption that:

Men need to provide in order to be ok. I said, you know when I do a survey of the women in my [Thriving Families] classes, I ask, if you went to work and you're the one who had the job and the house was clean and the groceries had been shopped for and the kids had been taken really good care of all day long, would that be enough? And they said 'you better believe it.' And one of the things we know about, and I had to say this very carefully, I said one of the things we know the research shows about black families is that they have more flexibilities in their roles than most families do and this is one of those strengths that we can build on. Men do not have to be superstars and make super amounts of money; what they need to be is a loving presence for their woman on a day-in, day-out basis and they can have a great family. And gradually over time they will figure out how to make an income and it might not be clear from the start but there are ways they can contribute and be a valuable part of their family.

However, what Cynthia saw as a strength of African American families, many others saw as a particular challenge for Hispanic men. Lourdes, one of the instructors for the Spanish-language classes, Hispanic and in her mid-30s, talked at length about how Hispanic men were especially affected by the male breadwinner ethic. She believed their exaggerated sense of machismo interfered with their ability to feel like men if they were not making a good living. Emilio, Hispanic and in his 40s, was a recruiter for most of the Spanish-language classes. He expressed a similar opinion: “Many Hispanic men did not grow up with their dad. And they don’t know how to be a real man. For many Hispanic guys, being a real man means making a bunch of kids and having sex with a bunch of girls, go and drink and spend time with their buddies, you know.” There was a strong sense that different social groups had more or less flexibility in the kinds of family roles²⁹ that men and women could acceptably perform.

Many fathers appeared to accept the idea that they could define their masculinity in ways other than through breadwinning. However, those who were bringing in at least some money and their partners stressed how working hard and providing financially was the ultimate sign of commitment to their families, especially since the men could always spend their money elsewhere. This was especially pronounced for couples in which at least one of the mothers’ children was not the biological child of the father. One example was Ashley, white and 24, and her fiancé Saul, Hispanic and 35. They were raising their daughter and her son, Garrett, from a previous relationship:

Thank god I have this man who takes care of my son, who treats him like his own. He’s never put his hand on my child, he’s never yelled, he’s never done anything bad to that boy. He’s been like a father to him... When I had Garrett in diapers and his [biological] dad wouldn’t buy diapers, Saul would bring me diapers and I didn’t have to ask him. He’d be like ‘oh, we have to buy diapers this paycheck. Because he is like, as soon as payday, what does my baby need?’ If she needs diapers, if she needs wipes, he’s on it... If it wasn’t for him, we would... who knows where we would be. He works, he brings the money home, the food, he’s our everything.

In Ashley’s view, Saul best demonstrated his commitment to her by working hard, earning a decent living as a landscaper, and making both children’s material needs his ultimate priority. Even though they rarely had any money left at the end of each month and lived in what Ashley called “the ghetto,” she felt rich because she had a man who loved her and her children enough to work so hard for them.

Many of the dads who were doing their fair share or even more of the housework and childcare felt inadequate if they were not bringing in a certain amount of money, especially if the brunt of the providing fell on the shoulders of their female partners. Even though Matthew, white and 38, was bringing in some money via his disability check and

²⁹ Following Connell’s (1983) critique of role theory that the concept of “role” is a static “theoretical ideology” that does not account for power and change, I use the term “role” throughout this chapter specifically when referring to gendered expectations associated with a biologically deterministic understanding of family responsibilities.

struggling with debilitating health issues, he still felt guilty that he could not find some way to get more money into the house to support Elise, his fiancée, and her two young children from other relationships. Elise, white and 34, brought in only slightly more money per month through her welfare check. She described how much of a psychological and emasculating toll this took on Michael:

That is [my daughter's] father. In my eyes that is her father. He takes care of her, he buys diapers for her, formula. He gets up at night so I can sleep. He helps out so much. He beats himself up a lot because he wants to be able to provide more. He wants to be able to have a job to provide for the family. He tells me, 'it should be me working, not you...at this point, I don't care what I do as long as I can make some money and provide for my family with more than I make now.'

According to many of the parents, regardless of whether or not fathers had a biological connection to their children, being a "real" or good dad meant finding some way to provide for their children financially. Similarly, being a good partner and prospective husband entailed being able to take at least some of the financial burden off their female partners. Brooks, a 51-year-old, African American father of four, perhaps best summed it up when he told me that it does not matter whether a parent is a man or a woman, that both usually need to work out of economic necessity to make ends meet. "People don't live like Ward and June Cleaver anymore. As far as economics are concerned, you can't live that ways nowadays. You got to get every single penny you can into the house." Others, such as Gina, a 36-year-old African American mother of three, believed that everyone, men and women alike, should protect themselves and "be prepared to always be the number one provider" because relationships and even "marriages were never a guarantee" of emotional or financial support.

Masculinizing caregiving and housework as activities that "real men" do as real fathers or daddies was part of an overall attempt by the Thriving Families program to valorize any and all contributions men could make to their households. Even though this strategy did not seem to assuage deep-seated feelings of guilt or insecurity on the part of some of the men who felt inferior as partners and parents when they were unemployed, many parents, including several moms, noticed the classes did have a positive influence on men's willingness to "help out" or "chip in" more around the house. No one said that taking the classes had a huge impact on how much housework or childcare fathers did. Many, however, such as Pedro, a 35-year-old Hispanic father, told me that the classes taught him that he could show love to his fiancée, Diane, 29 and Hispanic, by helping her more with dishes and laundry. Diane cared much less about how the classes implored men to merely pitch in than she did about how Pedro was finally willing to do anything around the house at all. Both agreed the change had significantly improved their relationship and emotional connection.

In sum, classes strongly emphasized the importance of fathers' varied contributions to their families. This approach decoupled masculinity from breadwinning, undermining the norm that men's value as partners and parents depended exclusively on their ability to bring home a sizeable paycheck. Instead of encouraging men's equitable

contributions to housework and childcare, classes emphasized housework and childcare as manly tasks and ways to enact a masculine identity, especially until the male partner could find a good-paying job. This did not, however, translate into a call to de-gender childcare and parenting. If anything, the classes' emphasis on the specific parenting role that fathers played tended to reinforce particular gendered parenting norms, specifically the idea that fathers play an irreplaceable role in children's lives by sheer virtue of their maleness.

Dad as a "Big Toy" and Role Model of Masculinity

Beyond encouraging men to become more actively involved fathers because that is what "real" men or daddies do, Thriving Families classes masculinized childcare in two fundamental ways. Instructors told parents that fathers play a unique role in children's lives because of their greater tendency to play with children in ways that encourage independence and self-confidence. The classes also promoted the idea that only fathers, as men, could teach their sons how to be men and their daughters how to feel secure and demand self-respect in relationships with other men.

Classes and instructors emphasized repeatedly that fathers play a unique and irreplaceable role in their children's lives for which no one else can fully compensate. Every series of Thriving Families classes included a lesson on the "Importance of Fathers." One set of instructors, Deborah and Mark, always showed a video from John Gottman's "Bringing Baby Home," a relationship skills training curriculum for couples with newborns. In a video appropriate for a college class in social psychology or family development, Gottman cites several social scientific studies on the importance of fathers to childhood outcomes such as academic achievement and avoiding juvenile crime. In particular, he stresses findings from studies about how fathers and mothers play with children differently. Fathers, he says, encourage independence in children because they are less likely than mothers to be overbearing and overly gentle in play for fear of their children getting hurt. Finally, in the video, Gottman, a family researcher and therapist, bemoans how our society, and mothers in particular, disregard fathers and fathering, make fun of them (as in diarrhea commercials), and do not view fathers as true co-parents, only secondary helpers who occasionally babysit but are not equipped to provide primary childcare. This video about the importance of fathers elicited a positive response from many of the dads. When I asked Caleb, a 23-year-old Hispanic father, what he found most helpful about the classes, he replied:

We watched this video on why dads are so important, and I never thought about it that way. I figured a dad's place was he's just there, he works, and then he comes home. You know that's pretty much how my stepdad was. I had a stepdad growing up. He was the protector, the provider, and the disciplinarian. Then Mom was the one you had fun with. In that video it talked about how kids enjoy playing with their dads more than their mothers because dads are more spontaneous and we're more worried about fun, where mom's worried about what's beneficial to the kid's learning. Ever since then I look at the kids and it's cool. Junior does come to me more than her because I play with him a lot...Dads

are really important when they're involved. They're not just off in the background. It actually has a major effect on the kid's psyche, which is weird.

Fathers appreciated how the video and other lessons on the importance of fatherhood specifically validated their contributions and characterized their relationships with their children as exceptional and uniquely valuable as a means to the end of raising happy and successful children.

However, as with the Gottman video discussing fathers' play style, many of the lessons on the importance of fathers implicitly encouraged, rather than challenged, a gendered division of child care, both in degree and kind. As Cynthia, the Executive Director, told me, dads are particularly important as "big toys" for their children. By this, she meant that because they played with children in distinctly masculine, rough-and-tumble ways that encourage risk-taking and physical exertion, fathers, in particular, encouraged children to develop self-confidence and autonomy. More than anything, classes urged the fathers to have fun and play with their children rather than do an equal share of the more laborious tasks such as cleaning up after, feeding, or changing them. Overall, couples in the classes already seemed to adhere to this pattern. Similar to what Linnenberg (2007) found in her study of fragile families, the actual parenting that took place during class time reflected a less-than-equitable division of labor. Fathers were much more likely to take on a playmate role with children, whereas mothers tended to do a much greater portion of the less fun tasks of childcare. Though fathers held and played with babies as often as mothers, mothers were more likely to feed babies, whether by nursing or bottle-feeding, change diapers, soothe them when they were fussy, or leave the room with them when they were crying disruptively. When playcare providers came into the classroom to ask about children who were crying or otherwise uncomfortable, it was almost always mothers who left to attend to the children in the nursery.

In addition to the characterization of dads as "big toys," instructors underscored how fathers, and only fathers, could teach their sons how to be men and their daughters how to have self-respect in their relationships with men. According to the instructor José, fathers are indispensable as role models of masculinity because:

There are certain things that a father brings and certain things that a mother brings. [JR: What does a father bring?] Self-esteem for a young girl especially; I think a father makes a little girl understand who she is. For a boy, it's rough-and-tumble, just going to the games, just learning how to be a man, how to treat a lady because you know the man should be teaching their children all these things throughout life.

Renee, another instructor, African American and in her 50s, described in even greater detail all the negative ramifications she understood to be directly related to the fallout of absentee fatherhood:

Self-esteem has to be learned early on when you're a kid. This is why you get a lot of women who get into abusive relationships, they don't feel good about

themselves, and then if they didn't have a great foundation of two parents, co-parenting whether they're married or not, and they don't get the love and attention they didn't get from a dad, they'll take any type of relationship because they don't understand first and foremost that they're important. If you don't have that you'll just go into a destructive relationship, and it doesn't matter, you'll stay in that relationship... If you want to have a strong society with a strong family unit, married or not, then the government has to have a hand in that because the government is ultimately going to get the problems that we have now, like that a lot of African American men are in prison. If you talk to a lot of them, they didn't have a father in the home, they didn't have a person to model and they had a hole in their heart... when you talk to them you can still see that little boy in their eyes, that little sad boy who longs for their parent... It's very difficult to make changes in a person if they came from a family where there's no dad, and their self-esteem and self-confidence are low, and it's going to take a lot of work.

Other instructors and staff, along with many of the parents, strongly echoed this belief that having a father around during childhood to model strength, respect, and responsibility protected children from many of the most catastrophic life and relationships outcomes. Based on a strikingly essentialist understanding of masculinity and fatherhood, these messages were intended to convey that fathers, and only fathers, could bequeath a sense of security and certain emotional skills and advantageous life chances to their children.

This connection was often expressed most explicitly in discussions of what the fathers themselves had missed by not having constant, reliable father figures in their lives as children. By their own accounts and those of the instructors, fathers in the classes were disadvantaged, as men, as fathers, and as future husbands, because they did not have adequate role models to teach and model what being a good father and partner really involved. This was a huge obstacle for "breaking the chain" of family dysfunction that instructors Katherine and Karl often encouraged. Breaking the chain of absentee fatherhood and deadbeat dads entailed stepping up for their kids to be real men and daddies, despite, not only a lack of role models, but also the hurt and insecurity they inherited from their own childhoods lived largely in a vacuum of fatherhood.

Mothers specifically extolled the men who stuck around to teach their sons to be men, even more so when those men were filling a void left by the children's biological fathers. This was the main reason Marcy, a 21-year-old white mother of two young sons, tried to remain amicable with her eldest son's father. "I wanted my son to have a male figure to look up to instead of me having to play both roles, which isn't fair to the child. It's not fair to me either because I have to take 100 percent responsibility. I have to show him what it's like to grow up and be a man... and that's not fair because he should be getting that from his father." Her current boyfriend and father of her youngest son, Thomas, 20 and African American, had become, according to both of them "more his father than his real father." When I asked why, Marcy answered, because "he has that man connection with him... It's so funny, he'll come over and play a [video] game and

he'll sleep right next to him playing the game next to him... Even if his dad isn't good enough, he still has someone to be a man." In this instance, as in the classes, fathering and demonstrating manliness were synonymous with playing and simply being around, as if the mere presence of a man, any man, would suffice to trigger the osmotic process of masculine socialization.

In addition to teaching masculinity, several parents commented on how fathers of a particular racial background were necessary to teach a racialized form of masculinity. Lewis, a 57-year-old African American father, had 25 biological children from almost as many previous relationships, but he spoke of being proudest of being actively involved as a social father to his girlfriend Veronica's, two young sons, each by a different biological father. Saying that he "met his responsibility" when he met and fell in love with Veronica, African American and 30, Lewis stressed how he teaches *his* sons "as young black men that the first and only thing we have is our word and there's nothing wrong with being a strong, honest individual." In my interview with her, Veronica talked at length about this as one of the many things that most endeared her to Lewis:

He's the only one that has been a solid father figure to either one of them... He listens to them, he talks to them, and he takes them through the stages of being young boys going to manhood. He talks to him about stuff like that, things I can't give them. He opens their mind to the manly things you know, and they open up to him about things they never talk to me about. I think that's a very positive thing.

Neither parents nor instructors ever defined specifically what exclusively enabled a man to teach boys about being men or girls how to have healthy relationships with them. Nevertheless, there was an unspoken and unequivocal consensus that some essential quality of men as mere men was necessary to socialize and raise well-adjusted and successful children of either gender. This was a powerfully persuasive message given the goals of the program, since it validated fathers for their sheer presence without resorting to definitions of masculinity and responsible fatherhood that were contingent on employment, breadwinning, or even doing an equitable share of housework and childcare. In this framework, all men needed to do to be good fathers was be there and simply be, perhaps as a *big toy*, but essentially just be.

Repackaging the Package Deal

Of course, the overarching goal of the program was to do more than encourage fathers to just stick around and be minimally involved. A cursory assessment of the classes revealed an appeal to fathers to pitch in a bit more around the house and an implicit plea to mothers to value them more for doing so, despite low or no earnings. However, this message was a means to the greater end of subverting the gendered, middle-class expectations that require men to be stable providers *prior to* commitment and marriage. In line with Nock's (1998) theory that marriage is one of the primary social contexts for the enactment and reinforcement of middle-class masculinity, an assumption that marriage will enable low-income men to embrace interrelated commitments to

family, work, and the male breadwinner ethic of responsibility motivated this message. The sequential logic of promoting greater fatherhood involvement to encourage marriage and prevent poverty is that commitment to family life is the ultimate inspiration for men's commitment to work and other responsible behaviors. As Cynthia, the Thriving Families Executive Director, reasoned:

We know that marriage has a civilizing influence on men. This is a really strange way to put it, but the research shows that men do not commit to being faithful until they propose. Women make that decision much earlier on, but men don't make that decision until they commit. And once they commit they do all kinds of things differently. It's as if they make a decision to grow up. They go out, they make more money, they're healthier. What marriage does is that it gives meaning to a man's life. I mean why are you going to work? Why are you doing something you don't really want to do all day long?... Now why on earth would a man do that? He would do it for his family. Would a single man do that? Not on your life. He would just do what he needed to do to get along. But men are willing to do things like this to take care of their family and that's what comes out of this.

According to Cynthia, marriage has the power to help alleviate poverty because it imbues a man's—and ultimately a dutiful employee's—life with meaning and purpose, the inspiration he needs to work hard day after day. In committing to his family, a man adopts a particular worldview that empowers him to work harder, earn more money, and most importantly, brings his behavior and values in line with the middle-class breadwinner ethic of responsibility. Hence, the power of marriage to improve the economic situation of poor families depends on marriage's ability to socialize and masculinize men in the ways of responsible work behavior. But prior to making that kind of commitment, masculinizing caregiving serves the twin goals of encouraging fathers to become more invested in their children's lives and to have happier relationships with their children's mothers, which help ensure that fathers will continue to stay invested en route to marriage.

Cynthia, well-read and versed in the literature on fragile families, also told me that if we, as a society, want to ensure that fathers are connected to and remain involved in the lives of their children, we need to focus on improving their relationships with their children's mothers. Too often, she claimed, fathers are not active dads even when they genuinely want to be because they do not get along with moms. As the glue of family life, women are the medium through which men's connections to and responsibilities for their children must be negotiated and maintained. Mark, an instructor, clearly articulated this concept when he described his view of the main purpose of the Thriving Families classes:

I think the whole point [of the classes] is to get the dad involved. I mean scientifically they say the father has voluntary investment in the children where the mother has obligatory investment. She has to carry the child for nine months; she has to keep the child alive. That's how they explain it in evolutionary

psychology. The whole point is to keep them in a relationship; that's the whole point of the class.

In its presumed ability to enable fathers to work harder and sustain committed relationships with mothers, marriage is therefore particularly well-suited to help solve the problems both of “dead broke” and “dead beat” dads. In this view, fatherhood, much like masculinity, is a precarious social role. Marriage, with its attendant social expectations and responsibilities, represents and provides the social context in which fathers constantly reinforce their voluntary investment in children and partners. Institutionally, marriage converts this voluntary investment into a legal, social, and economic obligation.

Townsend's (2002) metaphor of the package deal can help us understand the logic of this strategy of promoting healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood as two sides of the same anti-poverty policy coin. Staff and instructors went to great lengths, I argue, to masculinize caregiving and subvert the male breadwinner ethic for poor men because low-earning prospects render these men ineligible for the rest of the marriage/children/homeownership package. Hence the need to redefine marital masculinity and marriageability for poor and low-income men by initially taking earning power out of the marriageability equation and replacing it with something that men can do regardless of employment status, something that also has the benefit of improving and solidifying their relationships with their children's mothers. Once committed, marriage presumably enables men to realize the rest of the package. En route to that commitment, relationship skills classes offered couples a way to manage their differences and conflict.

Gender Difference as the Scapegoat of Relationship Trouble

Based on her ethnographic fieldwork in state-sponsored marriage promotion classes in Oklahoma, Melanie Heath (2009) argues that marriage workshops focus on gender differences within marriage and how to manage them.³⁰ Not only did the classes she studied teach that managing gender differences is central to creating a happy marriage, but that gender differences are the “glue that keeps two people of the opposite sex together” (Heath, 2009:38). Learning to recognize, embrace, and negotiate these *natural* differences is therefore the route to a healthy marriage. However, Heath argues, during the two instances when lesbian couples attended the workshops, they discussed relationship struggles similar to those of the opposite-sex couples, which could not as easily be explained as a marker of innate gender differences.

Similarly, Thriving Families classes assumed that couples were heterosexual and that their relationship problems boiled down to differences in gendered communication styles. As indicated by language (use of she/he and her/his pronouns), pictures (all the

³⁰ Heath's study of the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative in 2004 is the only other ethnographic study of government-sponsored marriage promotion. At the time, Oklahoma was one of the few states that made use of the marriage promotion provisions of the Personal Responsibility Act by devoting \$10 million of its federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grant to state-based marriage education. It was also the first state to create a state-wide marriage initiative. The Thriving Families parent organization, Healthy Marriages, was part of another statewide marriage initiative created in 2006 using funds directly from the federal Healthy Marriage Initiative.

couples portrayed in curricular materials were heterosexual), and hypothetical conflict situations (he's watching a football game and she wants to talk about his habit of leaving the toilet seat up), the classes were clearly founded on a hetero-normative assumption about the sexual and relationship orientation of couples. Staff and instructors told me they welcomed same-sex couples, but that gay men and lesbians really needed their own classes because their relationship challenges were unique, and they would likely encounter resistance from the heterosexual couples. As Executive Director Cynthia told me:

The problem is, I can't guarantee the behavior of the other members of the class. And I know that gays and lesbians would prefer to be in a class where they're all the same, one where they get to address the particular issues that come up in the gay and lesbian community. So I have been continually working to train someone, find someone to lead classes in the gay and lesbian community so they can have classes that more suit them. Not that they are not welcome. They are welcome, but we need to make it safer for them.

Cynthia's goal to create a class specifically for same-sex couples that would focus on their "particular issues" indicated she understood their relationship challenges very differently than those of opposite-sex couples. Couples comprised of two individuals of the same gender clearly fell outside the hetero-normative framework that lent itself to automatically explaining couples' relationship problems as the result of innate gender differences and the proverbial battle of the sexes.

Instructors frequently mentioned gendered communication styles by referring to well-known pop psychology books such as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992), a book that popularized the idea that many arguments among men and women are the result of gendered responses to relationship problems—so different in fact that men and women are analogous to different species from different planets. Martian men need to go into their caves when stressed or after an argument, and are natural problem solvers, not listeners. Conversely, Venutian women want to talk incessantly about every problem and want men to simply listen, not immediately jump into "Mr. Fix-It" mode.³¹ Rochelle, African American and in her 50s, one of the instructors who frequently used the *Mars/Venus* idea in her classes with husband, John, also African American and in his 50s, described how they taught couples about the significant role of gender differences in couple conflicts: "Sometimes we'll role play, and sometimes we'll just verbally tell them how men and women are different. I tell them how women feel and how men think." Instructors often referred to this starkly dichotomous understanding of women as intuitive feelers and men as rational thinkers to explain relationship dilemmas,

³¹ This dichotomous gender differences framework has also gained significant traction in academic circles. Akin to Gray's metaphorical claim that men's and women's affective and communication styles are so distinct they might as well be from different planets, noted sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1990) characterizes male-female conversation as *cross-cultural* communication in which distinctly gendered emotive styles threaten to undermine intimate relationships between men and women. Social scientists have extensively critiqued this binary argument, also known as "genderlect theory." For example, see Troemel-Ploetz (1991).

suggesting that most problems were a matter of two people with oppositional emotional orientations trying to make intimacy and daily life work.

However, in contrast to Heath's (2009) finding that classes in Oklahoma taught couples to negotiate inevitable and innate gendered communication styles and conflict patterns, the Thriving Families classes I observed taught couples that they should adopt the same style of communication. The style they advocated was the one typically associated with women and feminized communication. Instructors urged both men and women to listen to their partners' concerns without first rushing to conflict resolution, to take time away from the conversation if it gets too heated to avoid aggression, and then, and only then, to use a particular series of steps involving cooperative and empathic communication about potential solutions to the problem. All along the way, instructors strongly emphasized, couples should lovingly compliment their partners, be as honest as possible about their emotional desires, and strive to get at the deep feelings that underlie recurring relationship conflicts. Parents often agreed with the gender differences rationale, especially when they could use it to point accusatory fingers at their partners to make sense of common irritations and conflict patterns. Even without the instructors' prompting, gender easily became a familiar scapegoat for much of what complicated the couples' relationships.

Class exercises, however, often served to highlight the flawed deterministic logic of the gender differences explanatory framework. Similar to Heath's (2000) findings, the one instance in my fieldwork when a lesbian couple attended a Thriving Families class illuminated how easily the gender differences logic could be disrupted. In a class led by Deborah and Mark with 16 parents, including a lesbian couple, we did a group exercise called "the fishbowl." Deborah first told all the men to pull their chairs into the center of the room, while she instructed all the women to sit at the edge of the room and remain quiet, to simply just listen. All eight men, including Mark, formed a circle between the tables. "As you were growing up," Deborah asked, "what did you learn from fathers, male family members, or other adults in your life about trusting women?" Immediately, some of the women wanted to jump in and comment on Deborah's question, but she firmly reminded them that they would get their chance to talk about this next, and that the purpose of the fishbowl was to listen to the men on the inside. Most of the men jumped at the chance to comment on this question. Many of the initial responses were along the lines of "never trust one," "watch out for them," and "they'll just try to take what they can get." One man said his father was a pimp while he was growing up and that he always taught him "to get your bread from a woman, but don't trust her with your heart." Deborah next asked: "have you ever trusted a woman? If so, what happened?" The responses were overwhelmingly negative and pointed to deep senses of insecurity shared among the men, ones founded on frequent experiences with infidelity and broken hearts. Only Mark said anything positive about trusting women when he told us about the example his father set in deeply respecting and loving his mother throughout their decades-long marriage. The women were often quick to retaliate against what they understandingly perceived to be personal criticism from their boyfriends. All the men spoke, and for many, it was the first time throughout the entire five-hour class that they did. Talking about distrust obviously struck a deep emotional cord.

Of particular note about the men's turn inside the fishbowl was that one of the "men," as Deborah kept referring to them, was actually a young woman named Delia. She came to class as the partner of another female participant, Shantelle, who had just given birth to a baby two days prior to class. Earlier that morning, Deborah asked them to stand up so they could congratulate them on the very recent birth of their daughter. "How much did the baby weigh? How long was she?" Deborah excitedly inquired, looking at Shantelle, the birth mother. Shantelle looked quizzically to Delia who quickly proclaimed that "*our* baby girl was a healthy seven pounds and 21 inches long." Faintly, but still loud enough for me to hear on the other side of the room, two of the men in the class said, "*Our* baby?!" Deborah did not acknowledge their comments, but simply moved on in the class workbook and very consciously used words such as *partner* instead of *boyfriend*, at least for a few minutes. However, the women's same-sex status could not be avoided when it came time for the fishbowl exercise. When Deborah told all the fathers to make a circle near the middle of the room, she also motioned for Delia to join them, indicating that Deborah conceptualized Delia's role in this class, at least for the purposes of gendered activities, not as a woman, but as a *co-parent*, specifically a *father*. "As men and fathers," Deborah said, "it's important we talk about trust." One of the male participants quickly corrected her as he sat up in his chair: "Come on now, we ain't all men and fathers here!" To which Delia immediately, yet sheepishly replied with a definitive wave of her hand "Come on man, you know I'm with you guys in all this." "A'right, then!" the man simply said as he sat back down.

Deborah did not feel the need to say anymore, perhaps because it was uncomfortable, but more likely because Delia's retort that she was a partner and parent, too, regardless of her gender and biological relationship to the baby, immediately diffused the palpable tension in the room. Until, that is, Deborah asked "Why do you all distrust women so much?" After a few comments by fathers in the circle, Delia sneered and said "Well, it ain't about that. I couldn't trust men so I switched to women, and then now I can't always trust them. Trust ain't about being a man or a woman, it's about freakin relationships, man!" "Uh-huhs" and "umms" resonated throughout the entire room among both the men and the women. Delia quickly rationalized and became a legitimate member of the men's group by referring to her role as a co-parent, rendering her, if not a man, at least a legitimate participant in the men's group as a "father" based on her commitment to her partner's child. More importantly, her comments provocatively suggested that intimate trust has little to do with being a man versus a woman.

Next, it was the women's turn to be inside the fishbowl and the men's turn to sit around the perimeter. Deborah asked them the same questions about trusting men. "What did you learn from female role models about trusting men?" All the answers cohered around the same theme: "NEVER trust a man!" "They're not really good for anything." "Men will just hurt you if you trust them." Yet, unlike the men's answers, the women's conversation progressed into talking about how women shouldn't really trust other women either because they will try to steal your men. One woman even said that she makes sure to stay home with her man because she needs to know he's there, and watching him is the only way to ensure that. "If I trusted him more," she said, "I wouldn't have to stay around him ALL the time." When it was my turn, I said that my female role

models taught me to trust and respect men, but not to assume that they were responsible for taking care of me, that I need to be independent and learn to take care of myself. I got two enthusiastic “Amen!”s to that.

The only difference between the men’s and women’s responses to the questions about trust was that men were talking about women and women were referring to men. The reasons why women or men should not be trusted did not seem to be gendered at all, and this is especially true for the women, since they said they couldn’t even trust *other* women. Delia reaffirmed this by describing how she could trust neither men nor women. Rather than innate gender differences, she implicitly argued, the inherent difficulty of romantic relationships renders trust a rare currency in love. Despite the earlier vitriolic finger pointing in the fishbowl, all her classmates agreed.

The story of Delia and the fishbowl points to a fundamental issue about the gender differences framework. In her insistence that the violation of trust in relationships is neither gendered, nor unique to heterosexual couples, she ruptured the hetero-normative premise that relationship challenges are the result of Martians and Venutians trying to live on the same planet, so to speak. Neither the participants nor the instructors, however, seemed to notice this inconsistency; they certainly did not acknowledge it. Perhaps this was because relying on a gender essentialist approach conforms to the dominant and familiar trope of American therapeutic relationship culture, the proverbial battle of the sexes. However, this exclusive focus on gender left little room for an innovative discussion of how economic disadvantage undermines intimate relationships and marriage, as sociological research consistently shows.

This gender differences approach also belies the research comparing same-sex and heterosexual couples, which has consistently found that there are few significant differences in overall relationship satisfaction or quality (Biblarz and Savci, 2010; Gottman et al., 2003, Kurdek, 2005), the issues couples fight about (Carrington, 1999), or how much they fight (Solomon et al., 2005). Overall, the main difference between heterosexual and same-sex couples is the power dynamic of their relationships. The relationships of gay and lesbian couples’ tend to be characterized by egalitarianism, a non-gendered division of family labor, and power-sharing, while heterosexual couples are more likely to divide housework, childcare, and breadwinning along traditionally gendered lines and maintain a gendered hierarchy of power (Peplau and Spalding, 2000; Stacey, 2004).

Just as with heterosexual couples, conflict increases for same-sex couples when children come along (Goldberg and Sayer, 2006), but same-sex couples tend to engage in “degendered parenting” (Silverstein et al., 2002) with personal choice, aptitude and equality shaping divisions of parental labor, rather than gender norms. When conflict does arise, same-sex couples tend to resolve it more quickly and constructively by using more affection and humor and less domineering and fearful language (Gottman et al., 2003). These findings suggest that the tendency of gay men and lesbians to fight more fairly and productively is directly related to the more equitable power-sharing dynamic common to both men and women in same-sex relationships. That is, this strength seems

to emerge, neither from being women versus men nor sharing a gender, but rather from the tendency of same-sex couples to more equitably share power and family responsibilities.³²

Coontz (1997) argues that, more than natural communication differences, patterned experiences of social inequality shape seemingly individual-level problems between men and women. Overall, men and women have unequal access to economic, political, and social resources and these “social differences limit how fair or equal a personal relationship between two individuals from different groups can really be” (Coontz, 1997: 18). This concept, known as “situated social power” (Wartenberg, 1988), suggests that men’s and women’s different opportunities outside their intimate relationships profoundly shape their behavior and communication styles within them. Coontz critiques Gray of the *Mars/Venus* books for dispensing the kind of advice offered by instructors in Thriving Families classes, such as that women should keep their criticisms of men to a minimum and men should occasionally help out around the house. This approach, she argues, does not acknowledge the underlying problems that often hinder greater relationship satisfaction and better communication between men and women. Gender differences in communication styles often mask gender differences in bargaining power, social support systems, and work and care responsibilities. Couples are happiest and have less stress and fewer relationship conflicts when they believe that the division of household chores, paid work, and childcare is fair (Voydanoff and Donnelly, 1999). As Coontz warns: “If we’re going to think of men and women as being from different planets, they need more than guidebooks and language translations; we must make sure that the social, economic, and political treaties they operate under are fair to both parties” (1997: 21). This is particularly important as modern couples face the challenge of negotiating family and work responsibilities that are no longer clearly defined by gender.

This is certainly not to suggest that instruction in kinder, less aggressive communication strategies is of little use. As I will discuss in the following chapter, parents who took Thriving Families classes often found the skills helpful, mainly because the classes encouraged couples to cooperate, rather than become adversaries, as they struggled with life stressors. Just as modern couples look to their intimate relationships as a refuge from economic and psychological pressures, there is a greater tendency to expect them to absorb the personal shocks of structural strain and change (Coontz, 2005; Cowan and Cowan, 1998). But just teaching couples to communicate more nicely without also addressing the larger social and economic trends that underlie common relationship problems, such as inequitable divisions of family labor, merely treats the symptoms without tackling the root causes of the problem.

Some of the staff and instructors recognized this, at least in theory. When I first spoke with the Executive Director, Cynthia, she told me that marriage education should try to challenge the idea that there are essential difference between men and women.

³² Though same-sex couples tend to resolve conflict more effectively, suggesting that they should be even happier than heterosexual couples, they also struggle with unique challenges, namely the stress of being members of a highly disenfranchised and stigmatized group (Otis et al., 2006).

Because, she claimed, gender arrangements tend to become more traditionally polarized in *unhealthy* relationships, promoting gender differences in emotional dynamics or in the responsibilities of men and women within families would be at cross purposes with their main goals of promoting healthy marriages. Instead, Cynthia stressed, marriage education should teach exclusively about communication and conflict resolution skills. To a certain extent, what actually happened in the classes aligned with Cynthia's goal of focusing on gender-neutral communication strategies. Yet, as with the classes' attempts to reframe marital masculinity, the insistence that men and women should both adopt an empathic, active listener, feelings-focused communication style promoted a limited version of gender flexibility in couples' relationships. In solely trying to de-gender communication styles that supposedly thwart heterosexual relationship satisfaction, classes glossed over the opportunity to address head on the larger gender inequities that are often muffled by an exclusive focus on a biologically deterministic, gender essentialist understanding of men's and women's communication styles. As I have argued in the preceding sections about the classes' attempts to reframe marital masculinity, the program ultimately reinforced many of these inequities by merely repacking the package deal, rather than fully dismantling the gender norms that support it.

Conclusion

My goal in this chapter was to describe and analyze how Thriving Families, a marriage promotion program with a significant responsible fatherhood component, subverted some traditional gender norms, while reinforcing others. Given current economic conditions, low-income men find it increasingly difficult to live up to the ideal of the traditional family breadwinner. Thriving Families staff and instructors recognized that promoting anything akin to traditional views of masculinity and gendered family roles was not going to be effective given the socioeconomic circumstances of the poor, unmarried couples targeted by the program. Therefore, they attempted to redefine marital masculinity by reframing what it means to be a good partner and husband outside the bounds of male breadwinning. This nuanced approach was based on the assumption that the institution of marriage will ultimately provide the necessary context to allow men to become occupationally and financially successful because it encourages spouses, especially men, to be more responsible, work harder, and save more money.

The classes promoted dependence on men and marriage by rearranging the paradigms of responsible fatherhood and the package deal in ways that directly undermined, at least in part, the socioeconomic class assumptions of patriarchy. When responsible fatherhood policy targets low-income men who, by virtue of their economic constraints, cannot live up to the male breadwinner norm, it must necessarily subvert those gendered norms of marriage and parental responsibility that are predicated on middle-class assumptions of secure employment and male providership. At one level, this strategy challenged the patriarchal ideology of breadwinning fatherhood and traditional marriage as central to responsible fatherhood and children's best interests. On another, however, it represented an attempt to gain leverage with poor fathers and their partners to reinforce a male breadwinner ethic of responsibility. Ultimately, though marriage and responsible fatherhood promotion policy implemented in this way may not directly "legislate patriarchy" (Davis, 2002), it is based on an assumption that marriage is the

optimal social context for the realization and continuous enactment of masculinity, proper fatherhood, and a strong work ethic. As such, it remains a highly gendered, if not fully patriarchal, understanding of the role men and marriage play in pulling families out of poverty.

Chapter Five

Talk is Cheap:

Communication Skills, Fragile Families, and the Costs of Commitment

On tax day, April 15th, 2008, the Center for Marriage and Family of the Institute for American Values released a controversial report claiming that high rates of divorce and non-marital childbearing were costing taxpayers \$112 billion annually (Weber, 2008.) The report was released strategically on the day of the year when millions of Americans were anxiously scrambling to make their contributions to the collective coffers. Putting a public price tag on what it called “family fragmentation,” it sent a powerful message that other people’s domestic problems come at a great social—and especially economic—cost to us all. According to the report, “these costs arise from increased taxpayer expenditures for antipoverty, criminal justice, and education programs, and through lower levels of taxes paid by individuals who, as adults, earn less because of reduced opportunities as a result of having been more likely to grow up in poverty.” The report’s conclusion: because adults and children in non-married families are more likely to be poor and therefore need costly social services, promoting and strengthening marriage has become a legitimate policy concern, for both moral and economic reasons.

The report made a strong case for the public value of relatively cheap government programs that seek to strengthen marriage, even if their overall effectiveness is low: “If the federal marriage initiative, for example, succeeds in reducing family fragmentation by just 1 percent, U.S. taxpayers will save an estimated \$1.1 billion each and every year” (Ibid.) This report was the first to explicitly quantify the fiscal impacts of non-marital childbearing and divorce; its underlying purpose was to justify government spending that, it claimed, would save taxpayers ten-fold in the long run, not to mention lessening human suffering that defies cost-benefit analysis. This was the same policy logic the Department of Health and Human Services used to justify its expenditures on the Healthy Marriage Initiative, a program explicitly intended to reduce welfare expenditures. Congress has continuously renewed funding for relationships skills programs as a “proactive approach...services that support families by making them stronger before they break down.”³³

On December 8, 2010, President Obama signed the Claims Resolution Act of 2010. Through this Act, Congress reapproved \$75 million in federal funding each for healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs for fiscal year 2011. The National Association of Relationship and Marriage Educators (NARME), the professional association that lobbies Congress for the continuation of public funding for healthy marriage programs, was especially pleased about this one-year extension. They saw it as an opportunity to galvanize more political support for their efforts and amass research showing that marriage programs are: “cost-effective programs that help families stay together which reduces the poverty that can result from divorce and family breakdown.

³³ Healthy Marriage Initiative Handbook. Department of Health and Human Services.

Taxpayers benefit from lowering the drain on [welfare] funding.”³⁴ Ultimately, they hope to use the additional time and money to make a stronger case that healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood funding should become a permanent provision of welfare policy.

In this chapter, I use the Thriving Families case to shed light on this claim that relationship skills programs for low-income, unmarried couples can reduce poverty and the need for welfare. Thus far, demographic simulations (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan, 2003) and preliminary results of healthy marriage evaluations (Wood et al., 2010) have not shown this to be the case. I illuminate how Thriving Families parents struggled to implement the financial management and relationship skills techniques advocated by the program. In doing so, I also highlight the usefulness of these programs to parents trying to raise children in poverty. Ultimately, I argue that these findings suggest a useful reframing of the healthy marriage/poverty prevention debate.

My study shows that, overall, couples found the classes useful, but not in ways that will reduce poverty or the need for welfare. Consistent with preliminary results from government-funded evaluation research of marriage promotion programs (Wood et al., 2010), I found that Thriving Families classes failed to influence parents’ views of marital readiness. This was not because the classes were ineffective at encouraging a positive view of marriage; rather, most participants already held a positive view of marriage that depended on first reaching a higher economic threshold, a view I discuss at length in Chapter Two. What the classes were ineffective at doing was getting couples to reverse their equation of marriage with already-attained economic security. Put another way, the classes did not persuade couples to adopt the instrumental logic of the policy, the idea that marriage precedes financial stability. Moreover, the financial management techniques included in the curricula with the goal of helping couples meet the economic threshold for marriage were good in theory, but virtually useless in practice given how little money Thriving Families couples had to manage. Simply put, the overarching goals of marriage promotion—that better communication and more effective money-management techniques will encourage marriage, which will, in turn, encourage economic self-sufficiency—did not resonate with Thriving Families parents.

However, I also found that parents did appreciate and greatly benefit from the classes for two main reasons. They felt classes offered a rare opportunity to communicate free of the material constraints that overwhelmingly characterized their daily lives. In addition, classes provided a unique forum for discussion, allowing parents to interpret much of their emotional stress and, in many cases, their unfulfilled hopes for marriage, as the result of trying to sustain romantic relationships amid significant material constraints. Meeting in groups with other couples who shared similar socioeconomic and family circumstances enabled parents to understand that many of the challenges they faced were not simply the result of personal shortcomings, but rather part of the inherent difficulties that many parents trying to raise a family in poverty encounter. This all made for an

³⁴ “Congress Makes Key Vote for Marriage Education.” National Association for Relationship and Marriage Educators, Press Release. December 1, 2010. Available at: <http://www.narme.org/=documents/12-2010/NARME-Press%20Release-%20TANF%20Reauth%20FY2011-Final.doc>.

ironic and compelling finding: though the classes were designed to help disadvantaged couples commit to one another and thereby improve their economic situation, they actually helped them better understand why living in poverty makes sustaining relationships and commitment more difficult.

Feelings and Finances: Relationship Skills Curricula for Low-Income Families

Numerous meta-analytic reviews have found strong empirical evidence that interventions to strengthen couple and family relationships (Cowan et al., 2010) and relationship and marriage education programs (Butler and Wampler, 1999; Carroll and Doherty, 2003; Dion, 2005; Fagan et al., 2002; Guernsey and Maxson, 1990; Reardon-Anderson, et al., 2005) can improve relationship satisfaction and communication for romantically-involved couples. However, two issues limit the applicability of many of these findings to the literature on marriage promotion policy and the value of relationship education for low-income families.³⁵ As Dion (2005) and Cowan et al. (2010) have argued, prior evaluation research that has tested the effectiveness of relationship education programs focused almost exclusively on programs that primarily served white, middle-class, well-educated couples who were already married or planning to marry in the near future.³⁶

Therefore, most of what empirical research has shown about the effectiveness of relationship skills programs, and hence much of the evidence used to make a case for continued government support of such programs (Fagan et al., 2002), is based on the experiences and outcomes of a social group that was significantly more socially and economically advantaged than parents who are most likely to be living in poverty and in need of welfare (Teitler et al., 2007). Moreover, by their very nature as *pre-marital* and *marital* enrichment classes, many of the programs evaluated in these studies targeted couples who had already decided to marry. Therefore, those who comprised the samples for most of these studies consisted of select groups of couples who demonstrated a positive assessment of marriage and an already high level of commitment to their romantic relationships via marriage.³⁷

In recent years, largely in response to the marriage promotion provisions of the Personal Responsibility Act and the grants made available through the Healthy Marriage

³⁵ Since Thriving Families used a relationships skills-based approach to promoting marriage, my critique in this section focuses on similar skills-based programs.

³⁶ Cowan et al. (2010) also point out that relatively few couples' and fatherhood programs have been systematically evaluated, and of those that have, few have assessed child outcomes.

³⁷ As discussed earlier, there are several studies currently underway that evaluate relationship skills programs for low-income, unmarried families, namely the Building Strong Families project (Wood et al, 2010). Moreover, Cowan et al. (2009) found that low-income, unmarried couples who participated in a relationship strengthening intervention showed positive effects in terms of fathers' engagement, couple relationship quality, and children's behavioral problems. These findings applied to families regardless of structure, income, and ethnicity. Though Cowan et al. (2009) was not a marriage promotion/skills-based program, it does suggest that certain kinds of relationship strengthening interventions can have significant positive relationship and child outcomes for low-income, unmarried families.

Initiative, curriculum developers have designed several relationship skills programs specifically for low-income couples. Guided by the premise that the communication skills taught in existing programs were universally applicable and useful, marriage experts set out to create new curricula that would promote marriage among low-income couples. Many of these newer, targeted curricula have been used in large-scale, government-funded evaluations studies. They differ from the older curricula in three key ways (Dion, 2005). First, they use more role-play, discussion, and couples exercises in lieu of lecture-style teaching, a change intended to reflect a consensus among experts that “didactic instruction [is] inappropriate for the literacy levels and learning styles prevalent among lower-income populations” (Dion, 2005: 145). Second, given that a significant portion of low-income couples are racial and ethnic minorities, developers have tried to make curricula more “culturally relevant” by including references to African-American or Hispanic culture, choosing more ethnic-sounding names for characters in class exercises, and varying the pictures of couples in course workbooks to include more people of color. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these curricula specifically address relationship issues that marriage educators believe are especially challenging for low-income couples, such as multiple-partner fertility, how to create and sustain trust, fidelity, abuse, negotiating child support, father involvement, goal-setting, and “lack of accurate information on and positive role models for marriage” (Dion, 2005: 148). In particular, unlike most relationship skills curricula intended for a general audience that focus almost exclusively on communication and conflict-resolution skills, lessons on how to cooperatively manage money, set financial goals, and budget play a central role in these targeted curricula.

These changes signal that developers are aware of both the social and economic barriers to marriage among low-income couples. However, though somewhat different in content, these targeted programs do not diverge from the conventional form, method, or guiding logic of previous relationship skills/marriage education programs. That guiding logic is that creating and sustaining a healthy relationship is largely a knowledge- and skill-based endeavor, that everyone can learn the skills, and that relationship education can get to the root of most problems that lead to “broken” families (Howell, 2008). The Healthy Marriage Initiative codifies this idea that relationship and marriage education programs are a preventative, lower-cost alternative to expensive government programs, such as welfare, that merely address the consequences of family “dysfunction” without doing much to tackle their source.

“We’re Here for the Money”

The futility of the healthy marriage policy logic that communication skills training is a cost-effective public program that can somehow ameliorate poverty became apparent even before parents even stepped foot in the classroom. The Thriving Families program had to offer an array of inducements to merely enable parents to get to class. Thriving Families was in its third year of federal funding when I started my fieldwork in 2008. Classes met for seven consecutive weeks for two hours on weekday nights, for a combined 14 hours of class time. Recognizing that having to pay for bus fare or the rising cost of gas to get to classes and arrange and/or pay for someone else to watch their children when they were in class would likely be prohibitively expensive for very low-

income couples, the program provided a variety of what they called “incentives” to defray any costs associated with going to the classes. The program paid each couple \$10 per class for a transportation stipend, offered free on-site “playcare” for an unlimited number of children of any age, and catered a hot meal from a local mid-price restaurant for each class meeting. Initially, even with these inducements, classes were small, some with only one couple. The program staff were constantly troubled about low attendance and retention problems, since it was common for couples to show up to one or two classes, never to return, or to attend sporadically throughout the seven weeks. Program coordinators experimented with several modifications to the program to increase attendance, including offering longer classes on Saturdays for fewer weeks and expanding their outreach efforts in the community. Yet, nothing substantially increased attendance and retention until, in an effort to recruit more couples, program coordinators implemented a “graduation stipend,” whereby, if both partners attended 14 hours of class time, they received a \$100 stipend in cash or gift certificates to local businesses. Before the program implemented the graduation stipend, some classes would have as few as one couple participating, and usually no more than three or four, with many attending only sporadically. Once the program began to pay parents to come and stay, instructors, staff, and I often had to rearrange chairs and tables before the beginning of class just to have room for the 10 to 20 couples who would show up for each class.

Though this ultimately worked out to less than \$4.00 per hour, per person, this was a significant amount of money for many of the parents who signed up for Thriving Families, many of whom were unemployed, in substantial debt, and struggling with adding another member to their families. When I interviewed her, Diane, 29 and Latina, said she was only taking in \$90 every two weeks through her unemployment checks and that her fiancé, Pedro, 35 and Latino, was out of work and making nothing. Thus, the money they got for going to the classes was more than half a month’s income. Moreover, because only unmarried couples who were already pregnant or had infants qualified for the program’s federal funding grant category, discovery of a married couple’s marital status disqualified them from getting the cash incentives. Married couples, however, were still welcome to stay for the class, put their children in playcare, and eat with the rest of the group. I observed two occasions when married couples decided not to stay once they realized they would not get any money for gas or graduation.

In my interviews with them, and even when instructors asked at the beginning of a new class series why they decided to attend the classes, parents were often candid and quick to say they were there, in large part, because of the money. This was especially the case for men, while women were much more likely to emphasize that the money was a good incentive in addition to the other benefits, especially learning communication skills that they hoped would improve their relationships. In an interview with one couple, Jennifer, 26, and Peter, 35, both white, Peter said he feared that such a class would mostly blame men for relationship problems:

I feel like a lot of times those classes are biased in one way or another...I thought those classes were out to get the men...just like, the woman is always right and you’re always wrong and you have to check yourself...But after I took

the class I realized it wasn't like that, but before then that was a big reason why I was so reluctant.

The money was a powerful incentive for Peter to overcome that reluctance to get his foot in the door for the first class. Jennifer said: "it was a good incentive for me and Lila [a female friend who also took the classes with her partner], but we wanted to have the other benefits, you know. [The money] was good to get the guys in there, and the girls were helping pull them in."

Money was a powerful incentive especially when one member of the couple wanted to check out of the class. In one case, a program coordinator discovered that one of the fathers was sitting out in the car for most of the class, but the mother was actively participating and clearly seemed like she wanted to be there. The program coordinator told the mother that they would not get the stipend if her boyfriend did not actually attend the class as well, so the mom went out to the car to get him. The father said nothing and appeared annoyed the entire time he was in the classroom, but not wanting to jeopardize getting their stipend, he stayed.

The importance of the money and other incentives Thriving Families couples received for attending the classes should not be underestimated. For some, the money was extra cash they planned to use to take their family out for a nice dinner or to buy baby toys or new clothing they otherwise would not have been able to afford. For others, the \$10 transportation stipend they received after class was the only way they could afford food or diapers for the very next day; the \$100 graduation stipend was necessary to cover that month's electric bill or rent. As the Thriving Families program coordinator told me, most of these couples were simply trying to survive on a day-to-day basis, both relationally and economically:

I call them [to confirm they're coming to class.] If we have a list of 20 couples who have enrolled in the class, five of those phone numbers are now disconnected because they can no longer pay the bill, four of the couples have broken up in the last five days, but half of those couples will probably be back together next week in the class, and they love each other. And some people can't come because of the health care situation; there are a lot of sick babies, and people have problems with their pregnancies... We've had people in the classroom who are homeless. They're just going from place to place, and one of the reasons they come to our class is because it's safe, it's a good place for their kids to play because there's nothing dangerous going on, and they're able to get a warm meal... It's just a lot of people in survival mode.

For many couples who attended the classes, the possibility of learning some helpful communication or parenting skills was, at best, a pleasant afterthought. The most meaningful benefits of the classes to some were much more basic. They showed up because for two or so hours, they and their children were off the streets and could count on a hot meal or maybe even two meals if there were leftovers, which the instructors and staff always highly encouraged them to take. Their kids got to eat, and for at least a little

while, could play or watch videos in the company of other children in a heated room if it was cold outside or in air-conditioning if it was hot. Parents and kids had unlimited access to unlocked bathrooms with ample space to wash babies and paper towels to help clean up themselves, if necessary. Thus, for many of these parents, the classes offered something that was immediately much more important for their families' future than communication skills: help to make it to the next day.

For a small number of couples, attending the classes fulfilled a Child Protective Services court-mandated requirement for them to keep custody of their children. Tim and Louisa, both Latino and in their early 20s, were at one of the first classes I attended, and their demeanor signaled they were not happy to be there. He did not speak at all, and she was constantly disruptive, reluctant to answer instructors' questions, and rolled her eyes often during class discussion. Later, during a focus group, I found out they were there because, as Louisa simply and bluntly told me, "I want to keep my son." Tim was incarcerated during much of Louisa's pregnancy, and Louisa had been arrested at least once for disruptive conduct. The judge told her that she had to take an anger management class, or the court was going to put their son with a foster family. Because of the program's focus on communication and conflict resolution skills, the court approved Thriving Families to fulfill Louisa's requirement. Though she was not thrilled to be in the Thriving Families program because she thought many of the activities were "stupid and gay...anger management classes cost \$100 an hour, and at least here they give you money and food and take care of your kids." Plus, she said, in one of the activities on being honest and affectionate with your partner, Tim actually told her that he loved her, "and I can't remember the last time he said that. It really meant a lot to me." Louisa likely would not have heard that in a \$100-per-hour anger management session.

These cases, however, were more the exception than the rule, since almost all of the other parents found out about Thriving Families through their obstetrician or through the local Women/Infant/Children (WIC) government supplemental nutrition program. Staff and instructors were aware that many participants were only or primarily there for the money, but they were confident that once the money got them to the classes, the information they received in them would keep them there for the full 14 hours. Instructors would even talk about this at the beginning of a new series of classes. For example, at one point, José, a Latino instructor in his 50s, asked a new group why they were here. Two of the male participants quickly and without irony responded in unison, "for the money." José quickly replied, "The money is good, but hopefully we'll learn something here, too."

"Money's Easy to Manage When You Have Some"

As with many relationship skills and marriage education curricula for poor and low-income families, Thriving Families classes included several lessons and tips about how to "manage" household money more effectively. At best, couples viewed instructors' money management advice as hypothetically useful; at worst, they interpreted it as condescending and judgmental. As instructed by the pre-set curriculum, instructors distributed plastic boxes and calculators to couples, encouraging them to save

receipts, file important papers, and keep diligent track of expenses. Though the class notebooks had specific lessons on money-saving tips, such as how to figure a monthly budget, set financial goals, and how to distinguish between needs (e.g., food, a place to live) and wants (e.g., beer, designer jeans), it was left to the instructors' discretion how and how much they would focus on this topic. One set of instructors, Rochelle and John Wade, a married African-American couple in their 50s, usually spent a lot of time talking about how they saved money and how to prioritize the "right" expenses. Rochelle made a habit of putting all her change in a jar at the end of the day, and encouraged participants to do the same. "It's change you won't even miss, and you'll be surprised how much you can save after a month." She also emphasized saving all receipts to find needless expenses that could be cut. She used the example of her favorite frivolous expense, a daily cup of coffee from Starbucks, to show how such expenses could add up quickly and be converted into savings if, say, she would opt to make coffee at home. Rochelle and John also strongly promoted the concept of "paying yourself first," which meant putting at least a little money away, perhaps as little as \$10, from each paycheck in a savings account as a way to "invest in yourself and your family, a way to *value* yourself." Handing out plastic receipt boxes and calculators implied that, if only parents had the proper tools to calculate and keep track of expenses, they would understand where their money was going and could subsequently eliminate all frivolity in their spending habits. The "pay yourself first" message, which Rochelle and John encouraged above all else, was intended to convince parents that learning to save was an important exercise in self-respect and a way to show love for your children.

Amber, a 24-year-old white woman, took the Wades' classes with her 35-year-old Latino partner, Saul, though she often referred to him as her husband. She told me that she was extremely offended by how Rochelle and John talked about money and saving:

They talked about how they put money away in a savings jar because they have lots of money to do that. I'm sorry, but I live check to check, and I can't afford to put money away like that. I have rent, children, bills, and they're like if you have money, you'll find a way to put it away. No we can't! We need our money to save for our bills and our children... Then, the last day of class, this is something I really remember. [Rochelle] had all these gifts, and everybody is answering questions from what they remember about what goals mean... Then [Rochelle] said that job means 'just over broke,' that's what a job is. That's what they were telling us. J.O.B. means just over broke... So my husband's job is nothing? How did I feel? I felt like they were putting me down all the time... How can you say that to people?! We're in this class, we're not rich people. I just couldn't believe I was sitting in this class and they were telling me what I don't have and why I'm this way and you're that way. That's the whole class.

According to Amber, the Wades' financial tips signaled that they had little understanding of just how much some of the couples in the classes were struggling. Some couples' budgets were so tight that even the pocket change at the end of the day was a meaningful amount of money they couldn't afford to let sit in a jar until the end of the month.

Katherine and Karl Rogers, another married African American couple in their 50s who taught the classes, took a different approach. For their lesson on financial management, Katherine and Karl had the class collectively create a monthly budget based on an income of about \$1,500 a month, complete with typical expenses for a couple with young children. They relied on the class participants to suggest the amounts and encouraged them to create a rainy day fund for unanticipated expenses, such as car repairs. But there was always much disagreement about how much certain things cost. One time during this exercise, one female participant suggested that she could grocery shop for a family of four for the entire month for just \$100. “I don’t know where you shop,” another participant quickly exclaimed, “but I’ve never been to that store!”

Though some of the participants told me that knowing how much they spent on certain things each month was helpful, none of the financial management tips were effective at putting money into their pockets. Josh, an 18-year-old white participant who took the Rogers’ classes, had this reaction: “the stuff on money would have been much more helpful if we had any...if we had money, I could walk into a store, go down the aisles, put everything in the cart I need, and calculate right there.” Josh boasted that he had always been good at math and had been doing his mother’s taxes since he was 11. He also described in great detail how he was able to save his family \$200 one month. He taught them how to buy in bulk, what could easily stay frozen for longer, and how to not overspend before the next paycheck by keeping track of fixed expenses such as rent and utilities. The problem, he argued, was not that he and his pregnant fiancée, Sarah, 17 and white, were ignorant about how to stretch money as far as possible. The problem was that the little money they did have could only be stretched so far.

A third set of frequent instructors, Susan and José Alvarez, she white and in her 40s, he Latino, and in his 50s, used yet another tactic to teach financial management skills. Instead of talking directly about money, they asked participants to list all the values that were most important to them. Family, love, and honesty were the themes that always topped the list. José would next ask participants to brainstorm on how they aligned their spending and saving habits with those values. This approach was much more amenable to parents who tended to think that other approaches, especially the Wades’ “look where you can cut expenses” tactic, was moralistic and nonsensical.

Though not married to one another, Deborah, an African-American in her 50s, and Mark, a white 23-year-old, had been paired up by Thriving Families to teach the classes together and took another approach to discussing finances. They also briefly spoke of the importance of carefully calculating and keeping track of expenses. However, they used most of their time allotted for lessons on money to encourage parents how to spend time together as a family for free. They encouraged parents to rethink the common assumptions that family time has to be about consumption and that spending quality time together necessitated buying things or spending money on activities. In one class we 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. Deborah and Mark asked us to write down as many free family activities as we could think of on a piece of paper. We then 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. In the end, he claimed, the time is free and ultimately more valuable anyway.

Diane, the woman who was bringing in and trying to live off \$180 a month from unemployment, took Deborah and Mark's class with her fiancé, Pedro. When I asked her if any of the information on money was helpful, she simply said: "the financial tips were helpful, but at the time, what was \$90 [every other week going] to do?...Now we do what we can do to get by each month." Reactions to my questions about lessons on money ranged from offense at what parents took to be instructors' elitist moralizing, as in Amber's case, to resignation, as in that of Diane's, that one simply cannot "financially manage" poverty-level income that is already being stretched to its limits month after month.

Communication Skills and Poverty's Perpetual Problems

Along with financial management skills, Thriving Families classes, in line with the mission of the Healthy Marriage Initiative, taught that learning communication and conflict management skills was the most essential thing couples could do to strengthen their relationships and be good partners and parents. According to the Thriving Families curriculum, learning to be an active listener—someone who is attentive to their partner's comments and perspective, resists defensiveness, and seeks the underlying meaning of spoken words—is the hallmark of being a good communicator. Moreover, instructors emphasized that it was not the problems themselves that undermined relationships, but how couples communicated about them that really mattered for relationship success. Instructors and staff frequently cited a statistic from John Gottman's (1999) research on communication within stable marriages: 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.³⁸

The following class discussion about the frequently-experienced toilet seat dilemma is a case in point. This conversation, recounted from a lesson on active and

³⁸ 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 wrote: "Our research has revealed that an overwhelming majority (69%) of 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" (p. 96).

empathic listening, is a good illustration of how instructors taught participants about “perpetual problems.” The instructors, Karl and Katherine, illustrated a lesson on defensive listening and non-verbal communication by pretending that Katherine was 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 pretended 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 responded by sweetly acknowledging Katherine’s upset, apologizing for Katherine getting hurt because of his inconsideration, and telling her gently that he would be more mindful of putting down the toilet seat in the future. Yet, instead of understanding this as an exercise in different communication techniques, the participants used this as an opportunity to vent their own frustrations about the ubiquitous toilet seat problem that was 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!

Instructors tried to convey with this and other group exercises that the emotional tone of couples' conversations mattered more for the efficacy of conflict resolution than the topic of conversation. As this vignette conveyed, however, the topic of conversation is exactly what many of the participants seized upon most readily, making it difficult for instructors to make their case for the value of this type of communication.

In another common class lesson, instructors urged participants to use "I" and "me" rather than "you" statements and to talk how about their partners' actions made them feel, rather than striking out and personally criticizing their partners with ad hominem attacks. Similar to the toilet seat exercise on active listening, the point of this lesson was to get couples to talk about the personal feelings underlying their conflicts, rather than just the topic of the conflicts. It was specifically an exercise in minimizing defensiveness. The reasoning behind this was that if one partner spoke from their own experience of the situation, instead of attacking the other, the couple could talk about the problem from an emotional place of empathy, honesty, and compassion, rather than defensiveness, anger, and blame. For example, instead of saying, "He never looks for a job," or "She's always spending money we don't have," couples were supposed to rephrase these statements to give primacy to the difficult feelings underling them, as in "I feel insecure about our financial future since neither of us has a job," or "It worries *me* that we spend more money than we bring in." Parents often expressed skepticism in classes and in interviews about how realistic these types of skills were, especially in the heat of an argument. How, parents asked instructors, were they really supposed to calmly

remember to use their “I” and “me” statements when they were most upset and the conversation most heated? Moreover, didn’t this implicitly absolve the other person of any wrongdoing in the conflict? To many participants, this way of communicating seemed nice in theory, but simply unrealistic. To others, it seemed a rather silly semantic tactic that would have no bearing on the real meaning of their communication, as in the case of one female participant who, when asked by an instructor to convert her claim that “My boyfriend is an asshole sometimes,” into an “I” or “me” statement, said pointedly, “Ok, *I* feel like my boyfriend is an asshole sometimes, and that pisses *me* off.”

For the most part, couples appeared to listen cooperatively to the instructors when they described and demonstrated communication techniques devised to turn them all into active listeners and skilled conflict resolvers. Yet, as with the financial tips, applying the skills to hypothetical relationship scenarios or conversations tended to be much more effective than when instructors asked couples to apply them to their real-life problems, as illustrated by the toilet seat discussion and the woman’s comments about her asinine boyfriend. Lessons on communication frequently turned into finger-pointing exercises between partners and among the women and men in the classes. Though instructors did not encourage the he said/she said disputes that often emerged in the room, they often just as easily pointed to gendered communication styles as a primary explanation for why some couples so often disagreed and fought.

I observed my first Thriving Families lesson on active listening in a class taught by Joseph, a Latino in his early 30s. Addressing the four couples in the small classroom, he said: “Let’s talk about your last argument and how you might have applied the active listening techniques we’ve just discussed to prevent those fights.” Joseph segued into this topic rather abruptly, as the usually laconic group, all in their late teens or early 20s, had just launched into an impassioned discussion about how men and women communicate in fundamentally different ways. The couples had seized onto a passing reference Joseph had just made to one of the most renowned relationship experts, John Gray of the well-known *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus* series. Gray (1992) argued that most communication problems are due to different communication styles between men and women, with “Martian” men being more likely to withdraw and “Venetian” women being more likely to henpeck and strike out.

Ben, one of the male participants in the class, white and in his mid- to late-20s, quickly chimed in with “yeah, and some women are so crazy, they’re from Saturn.” As the whole class erupted into laughter, another one of the fathers, Cody, there with his partner, Mindy, responded to Joseph’s request to share information about one of their recent arguments with the group. Both 18-years-old and white, Cody and Mindy were living together and raising their eight-month-old daughter, struggling to make ends meet on the money Cody earned from construction work and other part-time gigs he could pick up now and then. He told us they had recently had an argument over how to spend the last \$5 they had between them before Cody’s next payday. Mindy needed the money to buy formula for the baby, while Cody needed the money for bus fare to get to work.

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!

To Cody, what instigated the argument was neither that they were about to run out of money, nor that they were facing a difficult choice between food for their daughter or getting Cody to work. Rather, the real problem, in his view, was Mindy's inability to communicate clearly, part of the "Venetian" tendency to be convoluted and not say exactly what she means. As Mindy stared into space, visibly annoyed at Cody's explicit blame, Joseph thanked Cody for sharing and said, "Yep, there you go, that's a good example of why it's so important to communicate clearly with your partner."

One of the most notable things about this exchange, as with many others in Thriving Families classes, is that though much of what couples fought about was money-related conflict and stress, financial problems were rarely, if ever, discussed as the reason *why* these struggling parents often argued. Topically, economic struggle frequently came up in both the curriculum and in class discussions of couples' actual problems. In the workbook lesson on "Managing My Stress," for example, the curriculum asked participants to rate from 1-5 how stressful various sources of stress were for them and their relationship. Among others, stressors listed in the workbook included: "detention in jail," "no health insurance," "finding transportation," "feeling unsafe in neighborhood due to crime," "can't find a job," "not having enough money to pay bills," and "finding and paying for childcare." During the few times I observed classes do this exercise, unemployment and not having enough money rated at the top of parents' list. Yet, regardless of which stressors came up, instructors generically encouraged parents to find ways to manage their stress for the health of their relationship and family, such as by setting and working towards achievable goals, doing breathing exercises, and finding a relaxing place to spend down time, especially with a supportive partner. Instructors certainly did not fault participants for these problems and often explicitly acknowledged the larger economic and political nature of their stressors, such as high levels of unemployment in the midst of recession and the prohibitively high cost of health and child care for those on an extremely limited income. What neither the curriculum nor instructors did acknowledge, however, was how the content of couples' stressors or communication problems *did* often drastically limit the applicability or effectiveness of the solutions they were proposing. For example, how compromise and negotiation might differ depending on the class circumstances of the couple was not acknowledged at all. Instructors framed skilled communication similarly whether a couple, real or hypothetical, was talking about where to take a vacation or whose turn it was to take out the trash, versus when they had to negotiate how to stretch a welfare check or the food stamps for the month.

A narrow focus on the idea that it was not *what* a couple talked about, but rather *how* they talked about it that really mattered framed communication skills in a particular way, one that did not address head-on the relationship stressors unique to poor couples. In this sense, though the curriculum and instructors acknowledged couples' economic constraints, they effectively glossed over them by proposing generic, individual-level solutions, such as active listening and breathing exercises, that did not meaningfully address them. Similar to Gottman's theory of perpetual problems—that it is not what a couple fights about that matters, but rather how they fight about it—the curriculum and instructors adhered strongly to the ideology that almost all of couples' concerns and stressors could be significantly ameliorated if only couples could learn to adopt more effective individual-level solutions to what often stood out as structural problems.

Moreover, the practices of romance and relationship skills these classes promoted assumed a lot about the material circumstances of the couples. Specifically, they assumed a distance from material necessity and control over time, two luxuries that Thriving Families parents were 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 these couples, it was more a matter of space, time, and energy. Another story about Joseph, Cody, and Mindy powerfully illustrates this point. During a later class, Joseph gave the group 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 lived in a small studio apartment with his father, their infant daughter, and occasionally another friend who crashed at their place because he was homeless, they had no privacy and thus no opportunity to talk when the baby, the dad, and the friend were 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. Joseph, the instructor, empathically nodded that he understood their predicament, but simply responded by saying that they should still try to do what they could do keep their relationship strong. "Ok, but just try for those few minutes a day when you can; they really matter." Cody and Mindy promised they would.

Examples similar to Cody and Mindy's predicament were common among other Thriving Families couples. Since the majority lived with parents, friends, or other couples, many parents were hard-pressed to find a quiet, private space to talk without interruption from numerous other household members living in the same one- or two-bedroom living space. This was especially the case for couples who already had children, since the unemployment of one or both partners made it likely that parents were caring for their children (and sometimes others') around the clock. Unless they were school-age,

very few Thriving Families children spent a significant amount of their time outside the home due to the fact that daycare was unaffordable for most of the parents. Since many parents neither owned a car nor could afford to go out together for entertainment as a couple, finding quality alone time was a rarity. This was compounded by the reality that most couples were adjusting to having a new baby and the fatigue that ensued. Since I did the majority of the interviews with parents at their residences, I experienced first-hand how the frequent traffic of children and other household members would render it difficult for many of these couples to find a quiet space for uninterrupted conversation.

Ultimately, though, unlike the financial management skills, parents rarely found the communication techniques patronizing or pointless. In interviews, many of the parents told me they really liked and appreciated the reasoning behind the communication skills techniques. They thought the lessons on empathic and active listening were a great way to approach talking with partners and children, so sensible, in fact, that several parents referred to them as “common sense.” As one parent said, “this is the way we should all communicate with everyone anyway. It’s just a good reminder.” In addition to the money, most participants were in the classes to get help with reducing conflict and connecting more with their partners. Many parents generally agreed that the communication skills were helpful for these purposes. Some parents told me that they would even jokingly or seriously refer to the classes during arguments, by, for example, telling an angry partner that he or she was not using “I” statements. But, as with Cody and Mindy, what was most challenging to parents was employing the skills outside the context of the classroom after the class series had ended, when they did not have a group full of other couples and instructors to support their efforts.

“We’re Not on Our Own”

Though the social and economic constraints faced by Thriving Families couples rendered the financial management and communication skills instruction minimally useful, according to parents, the classes did have one significant benefit: they offered them a free and safe collective space to discuss romantic and parenting challenges with other couples experiencing the same relationship and financial difficulties. This helped normalize their relationship conflicts, most of which were the result of financial strain. The social context provided by the classes allowed parents to understand that many of their struggles were not theirs alone, nor the result of personal or psychological shortcomings, but rather often the direct result of trying to raise a family and keep a relationship intact in the midst of poverty.

In their classic study of married couples’ groups focusing on the transition to first-time parenthood, Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip Cowan (2000) found that one of the main benefits of such groups is that they can help normalize the inevitable conflict that ensues as partners become parents. There is unique value to the group context; watching and listening as other couples struggle with similar issues shows parents that they are not alone and allows them to reinterpret their couple conflicts as a normal and shared experience of the transition to first-time parenthood. A similar process played out in several different ways in Thriving Families classes. Sometimes, as in the Cowan and

Cowan intervention, it normalized couples' conflicts. Parents often told me they saw their own experiences reflected back to them in the relationship stories of others. They felt less alone in their struggles with partners, parenting, and especially poverty. Ironically, in a program that largely promoted individual responsibility in matters of love and money, their participation allowed many to understand how larger social and economic circumstances created many of the difficulties they faced. Thus, what parents tended to find most useful was that the classes strongly encouraged them not to take out their stress—with unemployment, with kids, with in-laws, and especially with never having enough money—on one another. It was this message, rather than the idea that the content of their problems were irrelevant, that most resonated with parents. It validated their unique struggles and gave them a social context within which to interpret them.

David, a 28-year-old African American, attended the classes with his girlfriend of five years, Mikalea, 27-years-old and white. She had a five-year-old daughter from a previous relationship, and they were expecting a son together when they took the classes. When I asked David if he liked the classes, he told me absolutely because:

It made her understand that we're not the only ones going through these problems. I mean almost everyone in the class had the exact same problems and it made her feel better because she doesn't get that. She thinks it's all about her. If we have a problem, [she thinks] she's the only one going through it. She doesn't think that I'm going through it with her or that other people in this world have the same problems or worse...It doesn't matter where you're from, what race, religion, every house has it. It's how you stand up to it. Are you going to overcome it or are you going to let it take you down.

When I asked him what problems he was referring to, he immediately added:

Money issues. I would say that was about 50 to 75 percent of every relationship. If you have no finances, you're struggling. You constantly snap at each other, it's always a headache, a frustration. Probably 75 percent of people's relationship problems are money. If their finances were good, they'd be more open and happy, but it's not like that...We didn't argue when we didn't have to worry about money.

David's partner, Mikalea, who enjoyed the classes so much that she was planning to train to become an instructor, agreed: "I would recommend the class to others because...it really helps out. It shares everybody's lives. It shows people they're not on their own."

Hearing about other couples' relationship stories, especially those that involved severe financial and interpersonal distress, was often an inspiration for those who interpreted their struggles as easier in comparison. Marcy, 21 and white, attended classes with her son's father, Thomas, 21 and African-American. When I asked her what she most appreciated about the classes, she told me:

I met a couple that had been together for 12 years and they had a couple of kids. They had been in [Child Protective Services], but they were finally allowed to

keep them, like the newborn they just had. They were telling me their relationship has hit rock bottom to the point where they had to stay on the street with their kids. They were in class trying to keep things together for the family. That was one of the best things about the class. It kind of hurt me, but it was the best thing. I thought, ‘okay, your kids got taken away, but you guys are still trying to make things work,’ which is pretty awesome.

Participants also responded most favorably to instructors who were married, but had themselves overcome challenges of previous relationships and economic problems. They did not want to hear from social scientific “experts” about relationship trends and child development theories; they wanted to know how “real” couples had fought, worked things out, interacted with their kids, blended families with children from previous relationships, and made ends meet when money was tight.

In commenting on what they liked about Katherine and Karl’s teaching style, one couple, Giovana and Mason, both 24, she Greek American, and he German American, talked at length about how important it was for instructors to relate to the couples taking the classes and how this was key for creating a sense of empathy in the classes. Giovana told me:

They were good because they could actually relate to how couples were... They would also say that they would always fight, and she said she needed to work on her problems with herself and her issues before they could work on them. You’ve got to know what your problems are, know what your issues are before you can address them together... and even with the people in the classes, it was like you’re not the only one going through it. Everyone has the same problems. It’s not just that they’ve already been through it, it’s easier to relate to what they’re teaching in class as opposed to someone who just reads a book and starts saying ‘you need to do this’ like it’s scripted. It’s easier and better when someone has gone through the same thing, learns from it, and then teaches it.

Mason, Giovana’s partner, quickly added:

Yeah, they were people who actually lived through some of the stuff they’re talking about in that class... It was helpful to see that you’re not the only couple that fights... even the ones that looked like goodie two shoes. It puts your own relationship in perspective, that it’s not just your relationship that’s messed up or has problems. Everybody goes through it.

Another couple, Jessica, 22, and Mitch, 26, both white, found out about the class through her Child Protective Services (CPS) case worker. They, too, especially appreciated the real-life perspective of the instructors. Jessica was eight-months pregnant when they took the classes and had just given birth to a daughter three days before I interviewed them. She also had a four-year-old son who no longer lived with her due to a series of arrests for drug use and possession. The judge overseeing her case ruled that she had to take a parenting class to retain custody of the new baby and to have any hope of

regaining custody of her son who was now living with relatives several hundred miles away. She told me:

Mitch wasn't required to go but I couldn't go unless he went. I would have had to go to one of those boring parenting classes sponsored by CPS. So our CPS worker said if both of us went to that, it would count. I told him 'look we get paid.' I didn't tell him we have to go, but I did tell him if you don't go I have to go to a really boring class. I've been to one of the really boring lecture-type classes, where there's an old bald guy talking to you for six hours who doesn't even have children. He just has a Master's degree in raising kids, but no kids. He says 'Do this, and don't do that, and this is proven.' Oh my god! If you don't even know what you're doing, then why are you up there talking. [Thriving Families] was different. It took me about a day to get the feel for it, but it was really interactive and nice."

In the Thriving Families classroom, legitimate knowledge was not something you could learn from handbooks on marital therapy, but rather something you acquired only through real life experience in the trenches of emotional heartbreak and financial difficulty. Many of the instructors had struggled with both, and parents responded most favorably to those instructors who shared the intimate details of how they had come back from the brink of relationship strife and hardship. It encouraged them to share stories of their struggles as well, creating a sense of empathy and hope that they, too, could stick it out in the long run. Despite their difficulty implementing them outside the classroom, parents often still found the communication skills meaningful, especially in the context of group discussions that did not shy away from talking about the hard stuff—such as unemployment, substance abuse, noncommittal partners, and struggles with depression.

When talked about in relation to these struggles, rather than as a generic solution to solving them, they understood the communication techniques as tools that could make bearing these burdens a bit easier as a unified team, rather than as adversarial individuals. This was in distinct contrast to the financial management tips that were often portrayed as techniques that could somehow solve or fix couples' financial problems by manipulating their spending and budgeting habits.

Conclusion

Advocates of healthy marriage programs support publicly-funded relationship skills training as a low-cost alternative to funding welfare programs that are presumably overburdened due to the fallout of family "dysfunction" and the poverty that policymakers assume results from non-marital childbearing. There is a strong neoliberal logic to marriage promotion policy that if only couples would modify their behavior and simply "learn" to talk through problems more effectively, it would prevent the family "breakdown" that often thrusts families into financial ruin and costs taxpayers billions of dollars. Both in the political discourse surrounding the policy, as well as in Thriving Families classes, relationships skills were framed as something that can bolster parents' relationship quality and chances of escaping poverty, if only they are willing to devote the necessary time and effort to develop them. However, concerns that arose in the

classes and in in-depth interviews with parents revealed that what instructors recommended for developing relationship skills assumed a great deal of economic advantage, namely parental control over time, living space, and finances. As one father poignantly revealed in a Thriving Families class, it is prohibitively difficult to find just 15 minutes a day to talk with your partner when you are trying to hold down multiple jobs, are constantly stressed about money, share a studio apartment with five people, and do not feel safe talking outside in your crime-ridden neighborhood. Hence, truly having the means to practice such skills is anything but cheap or low-cost for the families who are the main targets of marriage promotion policies.

Many previous critiques of relationship skills approaches to marriage promotion rightly point out that such methods do not address the root causes of the poverty that such programs try to prevent (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Hardisty, 2008; Solot and Miller, 2007). Based on the case of Thriving Families, I take this critique further by arguing that the very “skills” such programs promote assume a great deal of material privilege. What marriage promotion policies do not address are the material constraints that, not only characterize poor and low-income families’ entire social existence, but significantly inhibit their abilities to practice financial management and communication skills. Even if one accepts the questionable premise that having and sustaining a healthy relationship is a skills-based proposition, “learning” does not take place in a material vacuum. People can only “manage” the money they have, and they can only practice communication skills with adequate energy, time, and space in which to do so. The many costly incentives offered by the Thriving Families program, which a recruiter once told a group of parents costs \$4,000 *per couple*, suggests that those who have actual experience working with poor and low-income couples recognize this to be the case. According to those who took Thriving Families classes, the program was mostly valuable because it brought together couples who were similarly constrained and because it went to great lengths to overcome obstacles that inhibited couples’ abilities to focus on their relationships. It did not, however, enable them to address these constraints outside the context of the classroom.

Ironically, although the program was created by a policy intended to promote individual responsibility, the communal nature of the classes—what Cowan and Cowan (2000) refer to as the “we’re all in the same boat” effect—revealed to parents how many of their most significant relationship challenges are socioeconomic, not necessarily personal or psychological. This does not suggest that if couples only had more money, they would never fight or break up. Financial stability alone does not make or break a relationship. However, what parents really took away from this program did pose a significant challenge to claims that these types of interventions can help prevent poverty. Couples found the classes useful because they temporarily suspend their socioeconomic constraints, not because they, in any way, provide the means to escape them. It is therefore misguided to portray programs such as Thriving Families as a poverty-prevention strategy.

Parents’ views of the program challenged the neoliberal logic of healthy marriage policy that if only couples would “learn” to talk through their problems more effectively

and spend their money more prudently, they would avoid the family “breakdown” that might thrust them into financial ruin and leave them dependent on an expensive welfare system. Research has yet to show that marriage-focused relationship skills programs are as effective for disadvantaged as for more privileged families (Wood et al., 2010). This is likely not because developers have yet to find the methods by which to best tailor curricula, but rather because unmarried couples in poverty and more economically advantaged middle-class couples live in different contexts in which they would implement the skills. Their relationship challenges also tend to be significantly different. Any policy that seeks to improve the relationship quality of poor and low-income families cannot, as relationship experts such as John Gottman claim, be based on the assumption that it does not matter what a couple disagrees about, but rather *how* they talk about it that matters. Poverty is a unique “perpetual problem,” and it is a mistake to assume that arguments over toilet seats affect relationship quality in the same way that fighting over whether to spend the last \$5 on getting to work or feeding your child does. The logic that learning communication skills can help keep a relationship intact en route to a marriage that will prevent poverty ignores the significant role that economic constraints play in shaping marital decisions and, in Gottman’s terminology, the emotional affect of a relationship. Only when couples have a significant distance from material necessity does developing and practicing relationship skills seem cheap.

Chapter Six

Conclusion: Feelings, Finances, and the Future of Marriage Promotion Policy

Since 1996, marriage promotion policy has become a political touchstone for a variety of issues central to the culture wars over family values, poverty, and collective responsibility for addressing social inequality. Marriage promotion is much more than a moral statement about how our government thinks we, as families, should live (Cherlin, 2003). It also reflects sharply divergent and fundamental beliefs about the relationship between family and social inequality, especially the influence of marriage on who falls below the poverty line and who financially prospers. It is no legislative coincidence that public funding for marriage promotion activities emerged as part of welfare policy. Marriage promotion is as symbolic of American legislators' views about why some Americans are poor and others are not, as it is of their moral views of family life. According to the Personal Responsibility Act and the Healthy Marriage Initiative, marriage is an act of individual agency that can overcome structural constraint.

Marriage promoters and family pluralists³⁹ 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 personal relationship status and economic stability; and 3) the government should encourage family stability to support the best interests of children, adults, and society. Despite this common ground, marriage promoters and family pluralists diverge most when it comes to what exactly the government should do to encourage family stability and poverty amelioration—and the relationship between the two. The findings from this case study should give both hope and pause to each side in this debate about marriage and responsible fatherhood promotion as one strategy to encourage family stability. Pro-marriage policy advocates would likely be pleased to learn that parents who took the classes responded positively to many of the messages promote by the program. However, as with evaluation studies of healthy marriage programs (Wood, et al., 2010), Thriving Families classes did not encourage participants to marry, nor did they enable them to improve their socioeconomic situation in any meaningful way. At least in this case, family pluralists' fears that classes would promote marriage at all costs as a golden stepping stone out of poverty were unfounded. But, it is also true that, as pluralists predicted, the classes did not acknowledge the socioeconomic constraints that family pluralists have argued underlie the marriage gap. Thriving Families classes also implicitly promoted an anti-welfare dependence agenda by encouraging parents to think of their intimate relationships as their private social safety net.

This study offers a unique empirical lens into the politics of commitment since I traced the ways in which parents accepted, contested, and transformed the government's pro-marriage messages. Much of the academic debate, especially among critics of

³⁹ Taking a cue from Cherlin (2003) I use the label *marriage promoters* to refer to people who are committed to conserving and strengthening the institution of marriage using political means. By *family pluralists*, I refer to people who want to use political resources to strengthen all family types, regardless of marital status.

marriage promotion, has framed those who participate in these classes as passive receptacles of the government's pro-marriage message without seriously considering the possibility that participants would easily and directly challenge such messages based on their lived experience. Those who claim that marriage promotion policies would effectively push poor women to the altar assume that poor women would exercise little to no agency in asserting their marital preferences when faced with the government's pro-marriage message—despite the well-documented fact that women, poor and non-poor alike, almost universally aspire, if not to marriage, then to a committed, loving, long-term partnership.

We can learn more about the potential pitfalls and promises of this policy by focusing our questions about its efficacy less on the debates over marriage promotion embedded in the larger culture wars over family values, and more on the agency parents assert as they grapple with the government's pro-marriage messages. Thriving Families couples did not disagree with the classes' basic pro-marriage message. They wanted to get married; they just did not feel ready. What they rejected was the part of that message that suggested marriage could prevent poverty. What emerged from conversations in Thriving Families classes and in interviews with the parents who participated in them is the logic of lived experience. Thriving Families couples believed that marriage is what you do only *after* you get out of poverty and off welfare. Parents did not blithely or blindly accept the government's pro-marriage messages; they often challenged and contested them in humorously, poignantly, and sociologically telling ways. Ironically, the classes provided a social forum for low-income couples to challenge the instrumental anti-poverty logic of marriage promotion policy. Instructors who came armed with a manual and statistics correlating marriage with lower poverty rates were simply no match for a room full of parents who were more than equipped with the fodder of lived experience to challenge such claims.

The Thriving Families case revealed a deliberate strategy by one group of street-level bureaucrats to bridge the vast chasm separating poor parents' symbolic understanding of the relationship between economic security and marriage and the instrumental goals of marriage promotion policy. How staff and instructors reinterpreted and implemented marriage promotion policy in this case, with an ultimate focus on co-parenting despite marital status, might help dispel the critiques by family pluralists who think the government should validate and support all families. Nevertheless, despite its emphasis on the value of co-parenting outside marriage, the case of Thriving Families also shows how relationship skills education of this sort can also be understood as an attempt to gain leverage with poor parents to promote what is ultimately an anti-welfare dependence agenda. Encouraging parents to think of love, family, and their interpersonal commitments in this way entailed using a framework that all but ignored the impoverished and often hopeless social and economic context of those commitments.

Learning and Legislating to Love: The Problem with Marriage Promotion

Though they ultimately resulted in disparate implementation strategies, the work and marriage promotion components of the 1996 overhaul of welfare policy relied on similar logics of individual responsibility. Underlying both was the neo-liberal message

that sustained effort in the respective realms of labor and love will ultimately have positive economic consequences. The message is clear: though relationships take hard work, hard work will be rewarded, and those rewards will come in the form of a better life and future for one's self and especially one's children. Marriage promotion via relationship skills education does not necessarily involve telling poor women to get off of welfare by marrying their way out of poverty, as some critics have feared. In this case, what government-sponsored marriage educators actually tried to convey to parents in poverty was a more nuanced, though no less explicit, message about the relationship between marriage, poverty, and child wellbeing. Marriage promotion in the Thriving Families classroom became less about promoting a particular relationship status than a specific state of mind about romantic and parental commitment and the social and economic benefits it supposedly confers. Instructors framed 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.

Defining a healthy marriage as one founded solely on empathic intimacy and strong communication and conflict resolution skills ignores how socioeconomic circumstances undermine or support couples' abilities to focus on the interpersonal and emotional components of their relationships. This framing of healthy relationships notably erases any reference to larger social forces that affect individuals' abilities to create and thrive in romantic relationships; thus, the Thriving Families program ignored issues like economic insecurity, stratified access to material and cultural resources, and the shortage of economically-secure marriage partners. The instrumental logic of marriage promotion 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 the government's responsibility in promoting the welfare of American families is to *teach* struggling families to help themselves. These messages are extremely problematic—not only because they indirectly disparage any family form other than the nuclear married family—but because they promote the idea that marital success and happiness are largely dependent on individual behavior without giving due regard to social circumstance.

To be clear, Thriving Families classes did not promote marriage, *per se*, as a route out of poverty. What they did promote was that the idea that marriage—defined as a committed, skillful partnership—is a socioeconomic good, one that should be of particular value to poor parents who have less access to other resources. What was not addressed in the classes I observed was the reality that poverty tends to undermine poor couples' efforts to marry. 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, as marriage promotion policy suggests.

There is much more at stake in the marriage promotion as anti-poverty policy controversy than whether or not the government spends \$150 million a year on

relationship skills education classes. The marriage promotion policy debate speaks to the metaphorical heart of social inequality. Fundamentally, in addition to meeting basic human needs for attachment, affection, and security, marriage is and has always been about the pooling of economic and social resources. In a society where jobs, educational access, and other social ties are becoming increasingly insecure, marriage still represents the highest form of love, care, commitment, and security. Marital success is increasingly becoming stratified according to levels of socioeconomic privilege. This is happening in a political context where growing social inequality is curtailing private commitments among poor families, just as recent changes in welfare policies have curtailed public commitments to poor families. Framing relationship skills classes as a low-cost solution for various social problems like poverty completely ignores this reality, specifically how economic disadvantage undermines intimate relationships and leads to curtailed commitment. Trying to counteract these growing trends by promoting the idea that emotional commitment is the foundation of socioeconomic security is misguided.

A More Inclusive Healthy Relationship Policy

There is an extensive literature on how welfare policies have been used as a powerful arm of a punitive government, controlling 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). Thriving Families classes did privilege marriage, even if only implicitly in some cases, as the best family form for adult happiness, children's well-being, family economic security, and societal prosperity. From this perspective, classes indeed promoted a monolithic view of healthy families as nuclear, heterosexual, married, and middle-class.

However, I argue that there was a surprisingly progressive potential for reframing the marriage promotion debate embedded in these classes and the perspectives of parents who took them. I spoke with parent after parent who told me about how the classes helped improve their relationships with their partners, even though in very few cases did it ultimately influence their decisions to get married. Only one of the 45 parents I interviewed told me the classes had any impact on her decision to marry, and she was already planning to marry prior to taking the classes. Several more told me that taking the classes helped them decide to break off their current relationship with their child(ren)'s other parent and helped them negotiate the challenges of co-parenting without being romantically involved. For almost all the parents, the classes served as a form of free counseling they would not have been able to afford otherwise, offering participants a collective forum for discussing relationships, one that characterized relationship and communication problems as common and normal for all relationships. This approach reduced the tendency of partners to see one another as adversaries, and it encouraged cooperative problem-solving. Framing this as *education* rather than *therapy* also destigmatized talking through relationship problems, especially for those who believed that seeking counseling or therapy indicated that their relationships were troubled.

A healthy relationship policy focused on relationship skills training could be quite progressive if, instead of focusing on promoting marriage, it was more inclusive of other

non-marital relationships—both in theory and in practice. By defining a healthy relationship as one founded on respect, empathy, and healthy communication, relationship skills classes could ultimately promote diverse family forms in unintended ways, including single-parent and same-sex families. This definition of healthy relationships lends strong ideological support to family diversity, since what counts as a healthy marriage, relationship, or family is not presupposed only on hetero-normative assumptions about one man and one woman as legislated in other policies such as the Defense of Marriage Act. The Healthy Marriage Initiative, with its emphasis on communication and conflict resolution skills, could implicitly challenge the idea that adults and children thrive best when they live in a heterosexual, two-parent, married home. Instead, a healthy family policy founded on the notion that children thrive best when two (or more) primary caregivers are committed to their emotional well-being and the well-being of one another could partially legitimate same-sex families and other non-traditional family forms, such as single parents who rely on extended family networks. As an instructor in one of the classes I observed said when a lesbian couple showed up to attend the class: “We all may have our own unique struggles as families, but we’re all here for the same reason, and that’s because we care about our children and want to give them the best life possible.” As part of a healthy relationship policy agenda not solely focused on marriage, defining *family* by patterns of empathy and care, rather than merely form, could go a long way in politically recognizing the diversity of American family life, especially that of low-income families who are significantly less likely to be married.

Family scholars and policymakers all along the political spectrum tend to agree that, in general, anti-poverty policy should support family-formation goals that allow parents to create secure and loving families for children. Prior to the Personal Responsibility Act of 1996 and the subsequent creation of the Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2002, the government had rarely provided financial support to programs that could help strengthen family relationships. Before then, poverty programs had focused on more punitive approaches to securing additional support for poor children from parents, such as child support enforcement programs. Programs such as Thriving Families represent a positive step in a new direction. Though they neglected to address the socioeconomic underpinnings of marital success, many of the lessons in Thriving Families classes furthered the goal of strengthening family relationships, for example by encouraging parents to communicate more kindly with one another and their children.

Yet, 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. 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. That is, publicly-supported relationship skills education could be a

valuable social service in a society in which long-term marriage is increasingly becoming a privilege of the most highly educated, those who are more economically secure, and those who can already easily access relationships support services.

Limitations

Given this project's in-depth ethnographic focus on the perspectives of staff, instructors, and parents who participated in one government-funded healthy marriage relationship skills program, my analysis necessarily has several limitations. First, the federal government has funded hundreds of government-sponsored relationship skills programs; my findings reflect the implementation of only one. I describe in Chapter One how the federal government considered Thriving Families to be an exemplary healthy marriage relationship skills program for low-income, non-married families. This suggests that Thriving Families closely reflected the goals of healthy marriage policy. However, it is very likely that programs with different staff and instructors, using different curricula and implemented in different geographical locations, vary at least somewhat in terms of pedagogical approach, class size, and other program features. Second, since I did not observe or interview parents who participated in the Spanish-language classes, I do not know whether or how they experienced the Thriving Families program differently than those who attended the English-language classes. Forty percent of program participants identified as Latino/a, while only 18 percent of my respondents did; thus, their perspective is underrepresented in my analysis.

Third, my ethnographic data from class observations and in-depth interviews with parents emphasizes, respectively, my own interpretations of class activities and a retrospective experiential viewpoint of parents. Though I think this perspective is uniquely valuable to complement larger-scale evaluation studies, it does exclude other kinds of data that are crucial for understanding the value of these types of programs, such as specific outcome measures, pre- and post-treatment differences, and differences between control and treatment groups. The Thriving Families program staff distributed pre- and post-class surveys, as well as one-, three-, and six-month follow-up surveys asking couples to rate the quality of their communication. I do not have access to this data, but these measures, along with others related to program and policy goals, such as financial outcomes and children's outcomes, would be extremely helpful for determining which strategies are best-suited for improving the relationships of low-income, unmarried couples and their children's lives.

Finally, the findings from this case study, especially parents' belief that the classes helped them understand the larger social and economic forces that negatively influenced their relationships, suggests that relationship strengthening programs could better help parents if they directly address poverty-related stressors, such as tensions and anxiety related to unemployment and scrambling to make ends meet. These problems add to and compound the challenges of creating high-quality relationships, such as communication conflicts, psychological distress, and the transition to parenthood. However, much like a sole focus on marriage, communication skills, or money management techniques is likely insufficient to strengthen couples' relationships or improve childhood outcomes, it is unlikely that attention to couples' economic

constraints would automatically improve those relationships. Therefore, my recommendation that relationship skills programs for low-income couples should also address the social and economic forces that influence low-income couples' relationships is not meant to suggest that targeting economic factors, such as income or employment, is alone sufficient to support healthy relationships. As Thriving Families parents clearly described to me, their relationship challenges are multifarious—a result of numerous and overlapping personal, psychological, financial, and social issues.

Moreover, even if future evaluation studies reveal that relationship skills programs have no measurable impact on poverty rates or welfare rolls, it does not mean that they cannot be an incredibly valuable social service for disadvantaged families who may, because of this disadvantage, be in even greater need of low- or no-cost relationship and family support services. We already know that some relationship strengthening and relationship skills programs have had measurable, positive causal effects on parents (Cowan et al., 2009; Wood et al., 2010) and children (Cowan et al., 2009) in low-income families. As more evaluation research becomes available from different types of government-sponsored, relationship-focused programs, we will be able to gauge which types of interventions are most helpful for poor and low-income American families.

The Future of Marriage Promotion: Challenges and Contradictions

Responsible fatherhood policies and programs, especially for low-income men, are gaining political traction and may come to play a larger role in family welfare policies than programs specifically focused on marriage. Despite projections that healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood policies would lose funding and political support with the expiration of the George W. Bush Administration, President Obama's 2011 federal budget proposal included a \$500 million annual earmark for a new fatherhood and marriage initiative entitled The Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund (FMFIF). Obama's intention in proposing the new FMFIF policy as part of the federal Child Support Enforcement Office was to require federal grantees to take a more comprehensive approach to promoting family well-being by "addressing the employment and self-sufficiency needs of parents...[to] help individuals with the tools they need to be better financial providers and parents".⁴⁰ Though Congress did not approve Obama's proposal, they reapproved \$150 million for healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood funding for an additional year in December of 2010. Notably, for the first year since 1996, they chose to evenly divide the money among marriage and responsible fatherhood promotion, with \$75 million dollars for each earmark.

Although numerous programs promoting fatherhood involvement exist, very few have been systematically evaluated (as is the case with relationship skills programs) or have specifically targeted low-income fathers (Cowan et al., 2010). In a systematic evaluation of the government-sponsored Supporting Fatherhood Involvement program that included low-income families, Cowan et al. (2009) found that compared to a control group, families who participated in the full intervention program (26-week groups for

⁴⁰ "Questions and Answers on the Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund." Office of Child Support Enforcement, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2010/Fatherhood_Marriage_and_Families_Innovation_Fund_QA.html.

couples or fathers only) showed positive effects in terms of father engagement, parents' relationship quality, parenting stress, and children's behavioral problems. These results are hopeful. Subsequent findings from this and similar evaluations will reveal whether and how relationship skills programs can help disadvantaged families.

As these policies evolve, there are many lingering questions about how best to address the relationship challenges specific to low-income, unmarried couples who typically consist of partners with similarly low educational attainment and high unemployment rates. These are the Americans who are losing the most ground as a result of the new economics of marriage I described in Chapter Two. Marriage promotion policies as they are currently conceptualized harken back to a time when economic constraints did not strongly shape ideas of marital readiness and marriageability. This has huge implications for how we think about marriage promotion policy and the messages embedded in marriage education, especially for poor couples. Since the 1950s, social and economic privilege (defined in terms of race/ethnicity, education, employment, income, and wealth) has become the strongest sociological predictor of who gets married, stays married, and is happy within marriage. Changing cultural and economic factors, especially growing social inequality, are converging to undermine marriage, especially for those who cannot live up to middle-class ideals of family life, despite shared aspirations of marriage across all classes. While marriage was once considered a companionate economic partnership, it is now thought of as a primarily emotional relationship—but it is one that is most likely to survive and thrive among all the advantages of middle-class affluence. Significantly higher marriage rates and lower divorce rates among socially- advantaged couples reveal that, much like many other resources in post-industrial society, American marriage is quickly becoming a luxury reserved for the heterosexual, white, college-educated, middle-class. For this reason, using strategies such as the gender differences framework as a diversionary tactic to gloss over class-based differences in marriage rates is a disservice to poor and low-income couples.

The growing research on low-income fathers and couples points to many of the issues that must be addressed for relationship education to be more useful for disadvantaged families. Two dominant theories are used to explain overall lower levels of father involvement among unmarried, low-income men—the deficit model and the ecological or family systems model (Cowan et al., 2009). The deficit model (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997), most widely propagated in political discussions of family decline and responsible fatherhood, attributes “fatherlessness” to bad family values and men's deliberate unwillingness to sustain relationships with their children and partners (Blankenhorn, 1996; Popenoe, 1996). The ecological or family systems model posits that a combination of social, economic, and psychological factors, including social supports outside the immediate family, economic stressors, and mental health, significantly influence the degree to which fathers are involved in their children's lives (Cowan et al., 2009). Though much of the political commentary about absent fathers reflects the deficit model, research on low-income, unmarried fathers increasingly supports the ecological/family systems model that stresses the importance of social and economic factors and the quality of family relationships. Men's employment and earnings have

been shown to be essential for couples to reach the economic marriage bar (Gibson-Davis, 2007), and employment status is the biggest predictor of fatherhood involvement for low-income, cohabiting couples (Carlson and McLanahan, 2001). Moreover, in two-parent, low-income families, being poor and on welfare diminished fathers' behavioral and emotional involvement with their children (Harris and Marmer, 1996). Though fathers tended to paint their contributions in a more positive light, both mothers and fathers cited incarceration, unemployment, and lack of resources as the main reasons low-income, unmarried men did not provide more economic support for their children from previous relationships (Magnuson and Gibson-Davis, 2007). Rather than "dead beat" dads who deliberately choose not to take responsibility for their children as the political invective suggests, many low-income and minority fathers are simply "dead broke."

Cowan et al. (2008) found that the strongest predictor of how much low-income fathers were involved in their children's lives was the quality of the relationship with their children's mother(s). Often referred to as the *spillover theory*, much social scientific research on white, middle-class, married couples with children has found that the quality of the parents' relationship significantly affected their parenting (Erel and Burman, 1995). This was especially the case for men, as a father's involvement with his children was often mediated largely through his relationship with their mother(s) (Belsky et al., 1991; Lindahl and Malik, 1999). Carlson and McLanahan (2006) found this to hold true for racial minorities and for unmarried, lower-income couples. If the parents' relationship was cold, angry, or distant, men especially were likely to emotionally withdraw from the children. In the words of Cowan and Cowan (2000), our experiences as parents are largely shaped by our experiences as partners. This seems to be particularly true for low-income fathers.

Low-income, unmarried couples must contend with a unique version of the *stalled revolution* in gender norms. In *The Second Shift*, Hochschild (1989) argued that "the influx of women into the [paid] economy has not been accompanied by a cultural understanding of marriage and work that would make this transition smooth" (12). Despite men's rising contributions to family labor and their greater propensity to make fathering central to their identities, changes in gender ideologies and men's contributions to household labor and childcare have yet to keep pace with changes in women's tasks and identities. Although Hochschild's study exclusively focused on dual-career, married couples, none of whom were poor, her theory of the stalled revolution can also be applied to low-income, unmarried couples who delay marriage because of the stubborn persistence of ideologies that dichotomize housework/childcare and paid employment along gender lines.

Brines (1994) found that the men who did the least housework were those who were unemployed and low-paid, and thus more economically dependent on their female partners. Her explanation for this trend was that men seek to reclaim their masculinity by refusing to do housework, a traditionally gender-typed activity associated with women's work. Linnenberg's (2007) more recent study of fragile families found the reverse to be true for many low-income, unmarried fathers. Fathers in what Linnenberg categorized as "happy but problematic relationships" tended to be highly involved and were more likely

to evenly divide care work with mothers, despite lower relationship quality, when they were unemployed. A common strategy for making ends meet was to have the father assume a greater role in childcare so parents could avoid costly daycare they could not afford. Linnengerg, like Waller (2002), found that in many cases “fathers also voice a compensatory motivation—that is, they see high levels of father involvement as a way to compensate for poor labor market performance” (2007:165).

For fragile families, although the least happy relationships have tended to involve the least involved fathers, it has not been the case that the happiest relationships included the most involved fathers; employment seems to have had a greater effect. Though men who have fewer job prospects often compensated for breadwinning with caregiving, women involved with employed men tended to be happier in their partner relationships than those who were with unemployed men who were highly involved with their children. That is, “mothers’ satisfaction with the couple relationship is more tied to breadwinning than fathering” (Linnenberg, 2007: 166). Because dual-employment is often necessary for low-income couples to feel ready for marriage by reaching the economic marriage bar (Gibson-Davis, 2007), involved fatherhood might be at odds with a greater likelihood of marriage. When fathers were only minimally involved, they tended to be more engaged in playing with their children than performing physical care. This happened in large part, according to Linnenberg (2007), because mothers in happy, stable couples were more likely to trust fathers with the day-to-day care of their children. Referred to as “gatekeeping,” mothers in more distrustful, unstable relationships micro-managed and closely supervised fathers’ interactions with their children. Similar to how trust in a romantic partnership must be earned, mothers “tested” fathers’ ability to be involved in the daily care of children.

In addition to having greater difficulty reaching the marriage bar because of high unemployment rates among low-income fathers, low-income unmarried couples are more likely to have children with more than one partner (McLanahan et al., 2003), which often leads to conflict in on-going relationships. In Monte’s (2007) study of non-marital step-parenting among fragile families, those couples most likely to ultimately marry after the birth of a new child were those in which the woman’s previous partner was no longer active in their children’s lives and the man was no longer involved with any of his children from previous relationships. Jealousy was often a problem, as was what is colloquially referred to as “baby mama drama.” Moreover, while the exclusivity of the current couple relationship tended to work well for custodial children, since a father’s time and money are finite, what residential children gained often came with a reciprocal loss for non-residential children. Unfortunately, blending low-income, non-married families tended to involve numerous tradeoffs: “in the most successful couples mothers replace other fathers with stepfathers and fathers replace other children with stepchildren, and the cost of their success is that virtually all relationships outside the nuclear family are severed” (Monte, 2007: 199). Despite the increasing diversification of family forms, especially among low-income families, there is also a stalled revolution in ideologies and practices that continue to privilege the exclusivity of the nuclear family. Promoting marriage may therefore work at cross purposes with promoting greater fatherhood involvement with multiple children shared with multiple partners.

All these findings about low-income fathers and couples point to the complexities and challenges of promoting marriage, work, and greater fatherhood involvement for low-income, and often unemployed, men and their partners. Some low-income fathers are doing their fair share of childcare and housework, though many are not. An inequitable division of labor can put a huge strain on relationships, as can unemployment. This is problematic because existing research suggests that, in most cases, low-income fathers' relationships to their children are negotiated through the children's mother(s). Since it seems that employment has a tendency to inhibit father involvement but increase mothers' relationship satisfaction and the chances of marriage, on what should programs focus: promoting involved dads or employed dads? Second, given the tradeoffs often involved in solidifying relationships with one co-parent at the expense of children from former pairings, does promoting marriage for one relationship also unintentionally promote uninvolved fathering for others?

This connection between fatherhood involvement and the quality of the mothers' and fathers' relationships undergirds one of the main goals of both marriage and fatherhood promotion policy: to get unmarried men securely and emotionally attached to their children's mothers, preferably via marriage. Yet, among other challenges, the persistence of economic conceptions of the marriage bar and the male breadwinner ethic make this increasingly difficult. Ironically, the Thriving Families classes I studied ultimately promoted both by reinforcing, respectively, the idea that marriage is synonymous with economic prosperity and that marriage is an ideal context within which to enact middle-class masculinity.

Thriving Families staff and instructors seemed to recognize that promoting anything akin to traditional views of masculinity and gendered family roles was not going to be effective given the socioeconomic circumstances of the low-income couples targeted by the program. However, the Thriving Families couples I interviewed believed that men should be, if not economically secure, at least employed. Therefore, such attempts at promoting different views of marriageability and masculinity for poor couples will likely be ineffective given the already strong and growing cultural norm that economic security is a prerequisite for marriage. This does not bode well for the political goal of promoting marriage as a route to economic security or the attempt to revive marriage in poor communities by reframing marital masculinity.

In an effort to get poor and low-income couples to re-conceptualize what is necessary for marriage, the Thriving Families classes I observed promoted a slightly more equitable division of family labor, one that challenged traditional understandings of masculinity and gendered family responsibilities—but only to a limited degree. Based on the challenges faced by low-income couples, I argue that the most important idea healthy relationship classes can promote is a truly equitable sense of gender flexibility when it comes to paid employment and family labor. In her ethnographic study of a rural community devastated by large-scale job loss, Sherman (2009) found that “gender flexibility allows families to avoid many of the negative outcomes normally associated with unemployment,” such as divorce, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Many of the rural families she studied stayed together by calling “upon different conceptions of

fatherhood and masculinity that better fit their new circumstances and roles” (600). They eschewed the traditional gendered division of labor that depended on men’s abilities to live up to the ideal of the family breadwinner. The couples who were able to reframe husbands’ masculinity in terms of involved fathering experienced less conflict and more long-term stability. Sherman’s work is a cautionary tale about what can happen when gender arrangements remain rigid in the face of structural change and hardship. It also suggests that couples who can renegotiate family roles, even despite, or perhaps because of, significant socioeconomic disadvantage, are capable of breaking through the stalled revolution towards more equality between men and women (Hochschild, 1989). Programs that promote greater gender flexibility—especially a truly equitable division of family labor based on a degendered understanding of men’s and women’s expected contributions to their families—could be an effective way to promote marriage and long-term relationship stability. But first, policies must dispense with the long-standing social norm that work, marriage, and fatherhood are the trifecta of modern manhood. Focusing primarily on teaching couples how to communicate differently without also acknowledging the outdated gender ideologies and new economic trends that comprise the tenuous macro-social context of their often equally tenuous intimate relationships is problematic. That approach merely props up notions of self-sufficiency, marital prosperity, and male providership that seem to undermine, rather than support, marriage in poor and low-income communities.

On a concluding note, I again evoke the yarn network activity I described in Chapter Three, a group activity used to initiate every series of Thriving Families classes. In this exercise, the web of yarn we collectively created was meant to symbolically represent parents’ hopes for their children and how couples’ co-parenting relationships’ would allow parents to realize those aspirations. More often than not, during the activity either the beach ball was partially deflated or there were gaps in our web large enough for the ball to easily fall through. When this happened and the instructor threw the ball onto the web, it slipped through and fell to the floor. Despite repeated attempts by the class to hold our yarn more tightly, the web could rarely support the ball without one of the instructors holding it in place. These botched attempts at the yarn network activity served as a poignant symbol of the social reality of many American families, especially those living in poverty for whom these relationship skills programs were primarily 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 limited access to the economic and social resources that allow them to ultimately accomplish all that their parents wish for them. Just as the ball fell through our web, the 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 have. 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 supports. Relationship skills

classes can be part of that support, but only if they realistically and directly address the economic constraints low-income couples and their children face.

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