

## **Marriage Makes Men Better**

W. Bradford Wilcox

**I WANT TO BEGIN, IN TALKING ABOUT MARRIAGE AND MEN,** with a story. It is a story about a guy named Doug. I talked to him awhile ago about his work and his family and his life in general. He said to me, “Prior to getting married, I really didn’t have a care in the world.” At that point, he was living in Ohio in his parents’ basement and working at a minimum wage job at a local factory. After Doug got married and had some kids, his perspective changed. He said, “I had to step up and think about something besides myself and start taking care of them.” So he enrolled in the Army. He was very intentional about maximizing every opportunity that he could get to increase in rank and responsibility and also to increase the income that he could bring in for his family. Then he realized that there might be some opportunities for him in the private sector that would be even more remunerative for his family, and so he has recently joined a dealership as a finance manager. Bear in mind that this is a man who did not get a college degree, but has worked in a very deliberate way to serve his wife and his kids both practically and financially. In his words, “It is my responsibility to work hard once I took the vows of marriage.” I am just quoting him, but I could not have designed a better archetype for this topic. He really is emblematic of the ways in which marriage, even today in America, helps make men better, helps to transform men in ways that on average improve their performance and their perspective in the economic arena.

It is important first to respond directly to the idea that marriage is just a piece of paper. When I was conducting interviews in New York

City back in 2005-2006, I heard over and over again from a lot of young adults, “It is just a piece of paper. It doesn’t really matter.” What they did not realize is that the science is telling us a very different story about how marriage affects women and especially men. Men are transformed in a number of ways. We will focus here primarily on the economic story, but it is also the case that when men get married, they spend less time with their friends, their buddies, and they spend more time with kin. They attend bars and taverns less and they attend church more in the wake of getting married and having a family.

We can begin first by thinking about work effort, and one admittedly crude indicator of effort is work hours. What we see is that married men, both when they are in the 28-30 years old stage and the mid-40s stage, work about 400+ hours more per year than their single peers with a similar educational, racial, and ethnic background.<sup>1</sup> But it is not just that they are working more; they are working more strategically and working smarter when they are married compared to being single. Two indicators of this come from the work of Elizabeth Gorman, a sociologist who did this research when she was at Harvard.<sup>2</sup> What she finds is that married men are much less likely to quit their job until they have lined up a new job to jump to. By contrast, the single guys, if they are not happy with their work, will quit that job and then try to find something new. Of course, the first strategy is much more prudent than the second. Another important point to make here is that married men are much less likely to get fired. There is something about their style of work or maybe the fact that they seem to be more responsible when they are married. What Gorman finds is that these patterns in the data persist even after you control for a lot of background characteristics in the men themselves, things like their educational background, their race, their ethnicity, *etc.* Something about

- 
1. Robert I. Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, *For Richer, for Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America* (Washington, D.C.: AEI and Institute for Family Studies, 2014) 33-5, available at [http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/IFS-ForRicherForPoorer-Final\\_Web.pdf](http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/IFS-ForRicherForPoorer-Final_Web.pdf).
  2. Elizabeth H. Gorman, “Bringing Home the Bacon: Marital Allocation of Income-earning Responsibility, Job Shifts, and Men’s Wages,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 61.1 (1999): 110-22, doi:10.2307/353887.

marriage seems to be making men behave in a more strategic fashion in today's workforce. This all adds up in real dollar terms. What we see is that married men make about \$16,000 more than their single peers personally, both as young adults and as middle-aged adults.<sup>3</sup>

There is a lot of discussion today about this issue of marriage and class in America. One might wonder, "Well, is this story applicable to men who don't have college degrees? There must be something about being college educated and being more affluent connecting nicely with marriage in ways that are helping to drive the story." The answer to that question is still yes. In fact, not only do you see the same story among men who do not have college degrees, but in some ways, the premium is a little bit bigger for the guys who do not have a college degree compared to guys who do have a college degree. Marriage is valuable for men up and down the economic ladder. It is also valuable for men across racial and ethnic lines. There is a marriage premium for African American men, and the report shows the same basic story for Hispanics in America.<sup>4</sup> Marriage benefits men across racial, ethnic, and class lines today in our country.

When you make this claim in the public square today, if you read about it on *Slate* or in the *Washington Post* or some other venue, you are going to get a lot of pushback. This is not a story people want to hear in some sectors of our society. One of the arguments that they will respond with is, "You know what? This is all about selection. There is something about these guys, the marrying kind (if you will), that makes them better men. They are better husbands, they are better fathers, they are better workers, and it is these underlying traits, not marriage *per se*, that help to account for these findings."

There are problems with this idea, and two empirical examples suggest that it is not only about selection. The first example is the longitudinal research done by Steven Nock at the University of Virginia. Nock tracked men over time and found that they increase their hours and increase their income in the wake of getting married and that they do better compared

---

3. Lerman and Wilcox, 35.

4. *Ibid.*, 16.

to their peers who are not getting married.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, he also found that getting divorced reduces men's hours and reduces men's income. Moving into marriage and moving out of marriage for men is linked to economic changes. A second example is a study which looked at trends in Minnesota and found that married male identical twins earned about 26% more compared to their twins who had not married.<sup>6</sup> Once again, this evidence pushes back against the suggestion that the wage premium is all about selection.

Now when you are talking about men, money, and marriage, it is also important to address how this all plays out for women. I am not going to focus on this because it is not the topic of this article, but I do want to make the point that today, women do not pay a marriage penalty in their personal income. That is different from the way it used to be, back in the 1970s, for instance. There is a motherhood penalty, but that penalty now today is lowest for moms who are married. That, of course, is because they have a partner in their household who is helping them to juggle the tasks associated with work and family life. However, there is really no individual penalty for marriage for women today. Consequently, when a woman who is not penalized from marriage marries a man who will benefit economically from being married, they as a family are going to have a lot more economic resources on average.

The bottom line here is that for the average male, marriage deepens his connection to work, making him work harder, smarter, and more successfully. What accounts for this? How do we explain why it is that marriage matters for men in today's economy? George Akerlof, the Nobel Laureate economist at Berkeley and husband to Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen, wrote a very interesting piece on men and families in 1998. One of the things that he said was that "Men settle down when they get married: if they fail to get married, they fail to settle down."<sup>7</sup> This thinking about marriage today can seem anachronistic. Is it really the case that

---

5. Steven L. Nock, *Marriage in Men's Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 66.

6. Kate Antonovics and Robert Town, "Are All the Good Men Married? Uncovering the Sources of the Marital Wage Premium," *The American Economic Review* 94.2 (2004): 317–21.

7. "Janet Yellen's Husband on Men, Marriage, and Family," *Family Studies* (blog), October 10, 2013, available at <http://ifstudies.org/janet-yellen-george-akerlof-men-family/>.

marriage matters in this way for men? In many respects, this argument still has some real purchase and understanding of what happens to men in the wake of marriage. The *New York Times* profile of Janet Yellen before she assumed her chairmanship of the Fed highlights her influence on her husband's academic life.<sup>8</sup> Even in the case of George Akerlof, who won a Nobel Prize for economics, it is very clear that his thinking, his approach to his work, was shaped in important ways by his wife, Dr. Janet Yellen.

There are several different factors that help us to understand why marriage matters for men in the economic arena. One idea is that getting married tempers men's taste for risk. As George Gilder says,

It is a traumatic act of giving up his most profound yearning, his bent for the hunt and the chase, the motorbike and the open road, the male group escape to a primal mode of predatory and immediate excitement. His most powerful impulse, the theme of every male song and story, this combination of lust and wellness . . .<sup>9</sup>

Gilder goes on to talk about the ways in which getting married tempers men's taste for risk. What is happening? What is it that is tempering that taste for risk? Part of the story is that men are embracing an ethical responsibility around their families. In particular, Steven Nock argues that we can think about marriage as a rite of passage for men today in American life.<sup>10</sup> In many civilizations and many cultures, there were real organized efforts to move boys into manhood with major rites of passage that were organized by key institutions. Nock's argument is that in some important respects, marriage still serves that function and helps to usher men into the world of adult responsibilities as they assume new roles of husband and father.

Part of the story here is about men shifting focus, both romantically and sexually. When men marry, they move in a more monogamous direction; in the words of Emile Durkheim, one of the classic sociologists, "by

---

8. Binyamin Appelbaum, "Possible Fed Successor Has Admirers and Foes," *New York Times*, April 24, 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/25/business/janet-l-yellen-possible-fed-successor-has-admirers-and-foes.html>.

9. George Gilder, *Men and Marriage* (Gretna: Pelican, 1986), 171.

10. Nock, *Marriage in Men's Lives*.

forcing a man to attach himself forever to the same woman it assigns a strictly definite object to the need for love, and closes the horizon.”<sup>11</sup> This means that they are not looking for a new partner, which can be a time- and energy-intensive process. It also means that the man is being more intentional about treating one particular woman with a level of respect and affection and regard, such that he is making it his duty to find his happiness in this one woman and in her welfare, including her economic welfare. Just the capacity to focus in on one person and on her well-being can concentrate a man’s mind in ways that redound to his benefit in the workplace.

Another point, also made by Steven Nock, is that we have this idea of men as breadwinners.<sup>12</sup> Of course, a lot has changed in the last 50 years, and many women are playing an important financial role in the lives of their families. But the reality is that about two-thirds of married family income still comes from the husband in the average family.<sup>13</sup> A Pew poll conducted in 2014 showed that as women think about marriage, one of the big concerns in their minds is, “Does he have the wherewithal to earn a decent income for us and our family?” If he does not, they are hesitant to get married.<sup>14</sup> There is a clear connection both symbolically and practically between breadwinning and marriage, and that motivates men to work harder once they get married.

The final point about how marriage affects men is that when men get married, they gain the support and the counsel of a trusted advisor who is there to give them a different perspective on both their personal life and their work life. That is quite valuable for many men as they navigate the challenges of office politics and the like. It is also the case that wives encourage their husbands, as Akerlof said, to settle down in a variety of

---

11. Durkheim quoted in Leslie David Blustone, *Max Weber’s Theory of the Family* (New York: Associated Faculty Press, Inc., 1987), 175.

12. Nock, *Marriage in Men’s Lives*.

13. Cf. W. Bradford Wilcox, “Surprisingly, Most Married Families Today Tilt Neo-Traditional,” *Family Studies*, February 26, 2014, available at <http://family-studies.org/the-real-modern-family-surprisingly-most-married-families-today-tilt-neo-traditional/>.

14. “Never-Married Women Want a Spouse with a Steady Job,” Pew Research Center, September 23, 2014, available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/st-2014-09-24-never-married-03/>.

ways. We see that men tend to drink less, tend to engage in less risky behavior more generally, and tend to go to the doctor more often when they have the counsel and support of a wife. These behaviors all benefit their performance in the workplace. The bottom line is that marriage is an institution that encourages men to settle down by engendering a responsibility ethic, by fostering monogamy, and by connecting them to a partner with a stake in their personal well-being and their professional success. Yes, women are transformed by marriage as well, but when you think about life in the arc of the family, you see that women are transformed more by parenthood than by marriage, and men are transformed more by marriage than by parenthood. This is something to think about when we think about both marriage and parenthood and how women and men experience family life.

What does all this mean at a broader societal level? Of course, what we see today is that there are more and more men who are not getting married or who are postponing marriage into their 30s and 40s. Today, unmarried men are the subject of 1,000 movies, books, and ballads in our culture. And this is consequential. Doug, the man I opened this essay with, says that prior to getting married, he did not have a care in the world. He was living in his parents' basement, working a minimum-wage job, hanging out and having a good time, but he was not necessarily maximizing his potential, or maximizing the impact he could have on his community more generally and in the marketplace in particular.

What we are seeing at the macro level is that despite these benefits, marriage is in retreat, and this retreat is stratified. In America, those with means are getting and staying married, and those without means are much less likely to do so. That is impacting, for instance, the growing pattern of economic inequality in this country. Men are much less likely to be married today versus back in 1980, for example, and of course even more so than in 1950. This is important when you think about the economy and men's engagement in work. Although there are ebbs and flows related to recessions in particular, for men who are married with children, their connection to the workplace from 1980 to the present is pretty stable over time. The men who are unmarried with no kids are much less connected. Something in marriage and family life connects men to the workplace, and one of the reasons we are seeing fewer and

fewer men employed today is that they are not married with children. This is connected as well to the growing class divide in American life. In the last two decades or so, it is the college graduates who are more likely to be married. That is one more reason why they are so connected and integrated in today's labor force. By contrast, their less-educated peers are getting married less, and that is one reason why they are less likely to be stably employed today in the United States. The standard line about this is that it is all about changes in technology and the temporary economy and that these men are having much more difficulty finding decent, stable, paying jobs. That is a big part of the story, but it is not the whole story. It is also the case today that these men are much less likely to be stably married, so they have less motivation to find and keep a job than their better-educated peers, who are more likely to be married.

To connect the dots a bit, at the macro level, the story is that changes in marriage, particularly changes in marriage among less educated Americans, are contributing to making fewer men stably employed and disconnecting those men from directly providing for their families. That, in turn, leads to more economic inequality and lower median family incomes, and more broadly it means that our economic performance in the country as a whole is not as good as it could be.

Another question is, how does this transition affect children?

A growing number of children are being raised in single-parent families. We have seen this growing family instability. What is striking is that this instability is really concentrated today among Americans who do not have a college degree. This is an important point, because kids who are raised in intact families are more likely to flourish educationally; less likely to be dropouts; and less likely to fall foul of things like teen pregnancy or, for guys, ending up in prison or in jail.<sup>15</sup>

Given how this instability is impacting children, it is no surprise that today boys are paying a particularly heavy price. Boys in low-income communities and low-income homes, who are most likely to be separated from their fathers, are doing poorly on educational outcomes, on criminal outcomes, and in ways that affect their economic future. David

---

15. Cf. Wilcox and Lerman.

Autor, an MIT economist, puts it like this: “male children born into low-income, single-parent headed households—which, in the vast majority of cases are female-headed households—appear to fare particularly poorly on numerous social and educational outcomes. A vicious cycle may ensue.”<sup>16</sup> Men’s growing disconnect to marriage and work is one reason why the American dream is increasingly elusive to working-class and poor families and to their children, especially their boys. Our society is bearing serious economic and social costs for this state of affairs.

What is to be done? First, there are a couple things that we should *not* do that are currently offered in our public conversation as ways to address these family challenges. One of the ideas that we are hearing about more and more is that we should encourage women to delay parenthood even more than they already have. The median age at first birth continues to climb upwards, and the idea here is that you can push this up even higher, particularly for less-educated women. If these women are going to become single parents, delaying childbirth allows them to gain the education and the means to be decent single parents. The problem with this idea is that it fails to take into account the fact that men, particularly the working-class and poor men, really benefit from the stabilizing power of marriage and family life. Women delaying childbirth does nothing for the men—nothing to help them navigate their twenties in ways that will enable them to establish a decent family that would redound to their benefit and the benefit of their communities.

A second idea that we are hearing is that we need to get more and more young adults into college, and this will then boost their income and prospects in ways that will make them more marriageable. The problem with that perspective is that it does not recognize the reality that today, no matter how many programs exist to help them do so, the vast majority of Americans will not get a college degree. And in fact, many Americans who are attending college are dropping out, and they are not getting much from their experience. We need to recognize that there are different types of people in our country who have different types of talents. Our educational system should recognize that for those who are

---

16. David Autor and Melanie Wasserman, “Wayward Sons: The Emerging Gender Gap in Labor Markets and Education,” *Third Way*, March 2013, 50.

not college oriented, there are still important avenues.

Finally, we should not view the twenties as the decade just for fun and exploration, but rather as an opportunity to get established in a relationship, maybe in a marriage, and also educationally and professionally. By doing so, we will connect people, particularly a lot of men, to the benefits of marriage and family life.

To think more positively, there are three things in particular that we can do to strengthen marriage and connect men more successfully to family life in America. One is a reform of welfare policy. More specifically, our politicians in Washington should be more intentional about making sure that our welfare policies are not unintentionally encouraging couples to either cohabit or not get married in the first place. A second idea is to strengthen vocational education and apprenticeships. We have seen some great results from work done with Career Academies, which give kids really good vocational training. These kids are seeing much better economic prospects in their twenties and thirties, and they are much more willing to get married because of their economic opportunities. A third idea is to be very honest about the reality on the ground right now. We must try to give people some ways to navigate relationships in their social milieu and move on to marriage and stay married. We must encourage folks to embrace marriage and fatherhood but also be realistic about recognizing the challenges to moving in that direction, and offer hints as to how to navigate those challenges successfully.

Given the benefits of marriage for men, not to mention women, children, and the country as a whole, we must think seriously about economic measures—including education and public policy, and particularly those targeting our lower income families—and cultural measures that can be combined to collectively strengthen the foundations of marriage in real life for twenty-first-century America. Doing so will be of great benefit to women and children, and also to the men in their lives.

*W. Bradford Wilcox, Ph.D., is director of the National Marriage Project and associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, senior fellow for the Institute for Family Studies, and a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.*