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# Religion and marital quality among low-income couples <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the question of whether religion—affiliation, beliefs, and practice—provides a source of marital strength and stability in the lives of American couples. Unlike most previous studies, we focus on religion and marital quality among 433 low-income married couples with co-residential minor children, using recently collected survey data on both spouses sampled in the *Marital and Relationship Survey (MARS)*. Our working hypothesis is that religiosity is a positive force for marital quality among low-income couples, and that a practicing faith can buffer the negative effects of economic stress on marital quality. The results indicate that most low-income couples have unexpectedly high scores on the various dimensions of marital quality (e.g., commitment, emotional support, etc.). Religious affiliation and personal religious beliefs are less important for marital quality than if couples share similar beliefs about God's divine plans for them and their relationship, if they pray together, or if they attend religious services together. On the other hand, the stress-buffering hypothesis received little support in our analysis. At a minimum, the results clearly highlight the potential role of religion in the marital lives of low-income couples. The implication is that faith-based organizations (including churches and synagogues) may have a particularly strong role to play in nurturing the spiritual lives and enhancing the quality of the intimate marital relationships of their flocks.

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## 1. Introduction

Religion has been on obvious display in recent debates over poverty and welfare reform, especially as new federally funded, faith-based initiatives and programs have moved forward to promote “healthy marriages” (Nock, 2005; Reingold et al., 2007). Indeed, a recent front-page story in the *New York Times* reported more than 450 congressional earmarks for religious groups during the last two years of President Bush's first term, compared with less than 60 at the end of the Clinton Administration in the late 1990s (Henriques and Lehren, 2007). New legislation, including the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform bill, has greatly expanded the federal government's role in strengthening marriage, promoting fatherhood, and steering positive economic and developmental trajectories for America's children (Dion, 2005; Kane and Lichter, 2006). Faith-based organizations have played an unprecedented role in this initiative (Dion, 2005; Reingold et al., 2007). For many if not most Americans, marriage between a man and a woman is a sacred institution that is shaped by religious

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teachings, values and beliefs, and practices (e.g., attendance or prayer) (Bartkowski, 2001; Browning and Rodriguez, 2002; Wilcox, 2004) and children are often regarded as a blessing or gift from God. Under the circumstances, the growing role of religion in the public policy arena is both controversial and understandable (Blank and McGurn, 2004).

To be sure, religiosity is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a successful relationship or marriage. It is nonetheless true that religion or spirituality can no longer be relegated to the backwaters of scholarship on marriage and family life, which has typically emphasized the economic underpinnings and changing gender roles reshaping patterns of family formation (including cohabitation), fertility, and marital stability in America (for recent reviews, see Burstein, 2007; Ellwood and Jencks, 2004; Lichter and Qian, 2004). Yet, recent polls indicate that religion is a guiding force in the lives—including married lives—of average Americans; most Americans believe in God, belong to a church, synagogue, or house of worship, and believe in the power of prayer.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, religious leaders and clergy are often troubled by the putative “break-down” of the traditional family, changing sexual mores, cohabitation, and marital instability. Christian organizations, such as *Focus on the Family* and the *Family Research Council*, are strong advocates for traditional family values, strengthening marital relationships, and helping parents nurture positive relationships with their children and develop good parenting skills. The Catholic Church provides “sacramental preparation” for engaged couples and encourages cohabiting couples to live alone before marriage. Moreover, there are literally hundreds of faith-based “how-to” books and counseling resources devoted to strengthening marital relationships—with the help of God—through better communication, greater commitment, and more emotional and sexual intimacy. The implication is clear: The reinvigoration of religion—Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices—can steer a positive route for young couples over the marital life course.

In this paper, we examine the question of whether religion—affiliation, beliefs, and practices—provides a source of marital strength and stability in the lives of American couples. Unlike most previous studies, we focus on religiosity and marital quality among low-income married couples with co-residential minor children, using recently collected survey data on both spouses sampled in the *Marital and Relationship Survey* (MARS). The instrument, described later, takes as its starting point the measurement framework described in “What is ‘Healthy Marriage’? Defining the Concept” (Moore et al., 2004). Specifically, we collect information on several dimensions of relationship quality, including intimacy, commitment, satisfaction, and conflict, as well as other constructs. A reading of the social science literature provides surprisingly few empirical insights about the basic parameters of marital quality in the low-income population (Dion et al., 2003; Fein, 2003; Fein et al., 2003). Our fundamental or overriding goal therefore is to identify “healthy” or well-functioning marriages among the low-income population (see Ellwood and Jencks, 2004). Our working hypothesis is that religion is a positive force for marital quality among low-income couples, and that a practicing faith can buffer the negative effects of economic stress on marital quality.

## 2. Public policy and healthy marriage

By the fall of 2004, over 40 states had launched new public and community-based initiatives that support marriage and couple relationships (Dion, 2005). Faith-based organizations have been actively involved in this effort, in part because the government’s “charitable choice” provisions now give them equal footing in bidding against other organizations in the private-sector provision of government services. These programs often take the form of providing marriage education services, such as pre-marital counseling or a curriculum-guided approach that gives couples new skills in conflict resolution or effective communication to resolve their problems and strengthen their relationships. Others have introduced new courses in the high school classroom to educate teenage students about the benefits of marriage. To date, however, it is far from certain whether these programs will be successful, especially among groups that arguably matter most from a policy standpoint, i.e., low-income populations, where a demonstrated track record of effective marital interventions and evaluations is lacking. Most such programs in the past have attracted a largely white, middle-class clientele (Ooms, 2007).

The implication seems straightforward: religious values and practices may have something to offer in helping disadvantaged couples achieve healthy and stable marriages. Religion may be one of the few institutions that low-income couples can readily access, yet the empirical evidence suggests that low-income couples often participate less in congregations than do middle-class couples (Edgell, 2006). This means that the poor may gain less from the putative benefits of religious beliefs and expression, which may foster personal growth and self discovery while strengthening relationships with others, including their intimate partners (Wilcox and Bartkowski, 2005). Indeed, even a cursory examination of the literature shows that religiosity is strongly associated with transitions into marriage among single and cohabiting couples, higher marital quality or satisfaction, and lower rates of marital conflict, infidelity, physical and emotional abuse, and divorce (see review by Fagan, 2006), as well as a variety of other outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Traditional gender roles are often rooted in patriarchy and a conservative reading of biblical scripture, but are positively associated with marital satisfaction (Wilcox and Nock, 2006). A recent study by Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007) is illustrative of this genre. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, they found

<sup>1</sup> Some additional analyses of data from the 1972–2004 General Social Survey indicated that 72% of adults responded “Yes” to the question “Do you believe there is a life after death?” (Davis et al., 2006).

<sup>2</sup> In his review of the economics of religion, Iannaccone (1998, p. 1478) sums up the literature thusly: “[R]eligion seems to matter, but its impact is far from uniform. It affects some behavioral outcomes (such as earnings, education, and economic attitudes) much less than others; many effects vary across denominations (and are often strongest in sectarian groups); and some effects, such as life satisfaction, relate most strongly to levels of belief, whereas others, such as physical health and most forms of deviance, relate more strongly to levels of involvement.”

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