

“What’s Missing From Our Middle Class Debate?”

— BARBARA DAFOE WHITEHEAD

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead has written widely on marriage, divorce, contemporary courtship, and child well-being for such publications as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*. She is the author of *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitments to Marriage and the Family* (1997) and *Why There Are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman* (2003). Her 1993 *Atlantic Monthly* article, “Dan Quayle Was Right” was featured in the 150-year retrospective, *The American Idea: The Best of the Atlantic Monthly* (2007). A co-director of Rutgers’ National Marriage Project for nine years, Whitehead is currently the director of the John Templeton Center for Thrift and Generosity at the Institute for American Values.

Propositions

OCTOBER 2012

The Decline in Marriage

THIS IS THE YEAR OF WORRYING ABOUT THE MIDDLE CLASS

and debating its future. For some time, there's been growing attention to the struggles of the middle class, but the focus has intensified in the wake of the Great Recession and the sluggish recovery. In this presidential season, the plight of the middle class ranks as the top domestic concern in the nation.

There is a current analysis of middle class troubles. It focuses on a number of economic factors: stagnating wages, high unemployment, high levels of household and college debt, and the transformations wrought by globalization and technological innovation.

All of these factors figure in to the declining fortunes of the middle class, but something crucial is missing from the analysis. It is the decline in marriage.

The Story of Two Mothers

TO EXPLAIN, LET ME TURN TO A STORY THAT DOES A GOOD JOB

of describing how the decline of marriage is pushing more Americans out of the middle class and shortchanging their children's chances of achieving the American Dream.

Last summer, the Sunday *New York Times* ran a front-page piece by Jason DeParle, a highly respected social policy reporter. The story was a well-researched and evocative piece on the family lives of two white mothers who work together at an Ann Arbor, Michigan day care center.

DeParle describes the many similarities in the two women's lives. Both are from "modest Midwestern backgrounds." Both grew up in intact families. Both were born into the large middle class of the first several decades of post-war America. Both went off to college with similar dreams of "marriage, motherhood, and career."

It was in college that their look-alike lives diverged.

One, a woman named Chris Faulkner, followed a standard middle class path. She went to college, earned a degree, got married, and had two sons, in that order.

The other woman, Jessica Schairer, took a different path. She got pregnant her first year in college, left school, and stayed in a troubled relationship with her boyfriend for six years, long enough to have three children before they broke up. At twenty-five, she was single and raising a family with no child support and no college degree. Eventually, she went back to get more education at a community college.

Today, the two friends lead very different family lives.

Chris Faulkner and her family enjoy a comfortable middle class life, a home in a nice subdivision, and a high five-figure income from two paychecks.

Jessica Schairer and her family find themselves falling out of the middle class. She struggles on annual earnings of \$25,000, stretches to make her rent, which consumes more than half of her paycheck, and relies on food stamps and budget brands to feed her family.

And she is hard-pressed to provide the same enrichment opportunities for her kids as her friend, Chris Faulkner. The two Faulkner boys play several sports, swim, attend summer camp, and are active in Boy Scouts. The three Schairer kids have few extracurricular activities beyond church and one sports activity per year.

“Family patterns once linked to the mean streets of the inner city are now showing up in the cul de sacs of suburban America.”

According to University of Chicago economist and Nobel laureate James Heckman, nurture in the early childhood years plays a disproportionately large role—for good or ill—in determining future life outcomes. Children who get a lot of maternal time, attention, and stimulating cognitive and social experiences early in life have a nurturing advantage that puts them on a trajectory for future career and family achievement. “These advantages are especially pronounced for children of two parent stable marriage,” Heckman writes.

By that measure, the Faulkner sons are on track to do well in school, go to college, and form stable marriages. If they do so, they are likely to land securely in the middle class. The Schairer children are likely to face a harder time achieving these goals.

Dropping Out of Marriage and Falling Out of the Middle Class

MARRIAGE IN AMERICA BEGAN TO FOUNDER DECADES AGO, with the signs first showing up among the poor. But today the same signs are appearing in the middle class. Family patterns once linked to the

mean streets of the inner city are now showing up in the cul de sacs of suburban America.

In his essay in the 2010 *State of Our Unions* report, University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox looks at the weakening of marriage among the large majority of adults who fall in the middle of the educational ranks. These middle Americans have graduated from high school, and may have additional post-secondary training, but they do not hold a four-year college degree. This “moderately educated” group represents close to 60 percent of the U.S. adult population aged twenty-five to sixty.

“Today, unwed childbearing among moderately educated women is fast approaching the high levels that have long been present among the poorest and least-well-educated Americans.”

Four decades ago, these moderately educated Americans led the kind of family lives that looked much like the family lives of the more highly educated. They were just as likely to be happily married, and just as likely to be in first marriages. Today, however, they are significantly less likely to achieve a stable marriage, or even to form one in the first place. As a result, those moderately educated Americans who grew up in the middle class are at risk of falling out of it.

In earlier decades, moderately educated women typically had children within marriage. But today, unwed childbearing among moderately educated women is fast approaching the high levels that have long been present among the poorest and least-well-educated Americans.

The change in unwed motherhood happened very quickly. As recently as the 1980s, only 13 percent of the children of moderately educated mothers were born outside of marriage. By the late 2000s, that figure had risen to 44 percent, an increase of 31 percentage points! Among the least-well-educated mothers, the comparable figures for the same time period show a 21 percentage-point increase, from 33 percent to 54 percent.

As fewer moderately educated Americans are able to form lasting marriages, their family lives become more difficult. They are increasingly likely to suffer the cascade of problems associated with the least-well-educated. As Wilcox writes, “their family patterns are more likely to resemble those of high school drop-outs, with all the attendant problems of economic stress, partner conflict, single parenting, and troubled children.”

In another recent study, the Pew Research Center produced data suggesting that the decline of marriage has contributed to a decline in the middle class. From 1971 to 2011, Pew found, the proportion of middle-income households dropped from 61 percent to 51 percent. During the same period, the proportion of middle-income households headed by married couples dropped dramatically, from 74 to 55 percent. In short, the proportion of middle-income Americans is dropping and the proportion of married couple households within the middle is dropping even faster. This is what researchers commonly call the “hollowing out” of the middle class.

What Is Missing From the Middle Class Agenda?

THE STRUGGLES OF MIDDLE CLASS FAMILIES HAVE INSPIRED policy ideas for helping people enter and stay in the middle class. Two goals consistently top the agenda: more education and more and better jobs. Indeed, the two goals are closely linked. Finishing high school is the bare essential for almost any job today and education beyond high school is increasingly necessary for a decent job. So public investment in post-secondary educational opportunities—through community college, specialized vocational training, or in the military—aims at giving high school graduates a foothold in the work world. For lower-income earners, there are also more targeted forms of assistance, including most notably the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Leaders from both sides of the political aisle also regularly remind us that there is a limit to what public policies can do. People also have to take personal responsibility. As we so often hear these days, people who aspire to the American mainstream have to “work hard and play by the rules.”

All of which makes a lot of sense. But how far do these ideas go? The answer is: Not far enough! Let’s return to the *New York Times* profile of Jessica Schairer as a case in point. High school graduation? Yes. She has a high school diploma. Post-secondary education? Yes. She has gone on to community college. Full-time work? Yes. She has a full-time job. Targeted assistance? Yes. She qualifies for, and takes

advantage of, the Earned Income Tax Credit which does indeed help. It boosted her income by \$7,000 last year. Playing by the rules? Absolutely. She is a model of personal responsibility and hard work. She has had two job promotions. She makes sacrifices for her children and strives to give them a good life. And she blames no one but herself for past mistakes.

Despite all of this hard work and rule-obeying, Jessica is mired in working poverty. Her life is hard. As DeParle tells it, she worries a lot about her kids' lack of opportunities to participate in the school and sports activities that so many of their peers enjoy. She had a live-in boyfriend for a brief time, but he left—after a call to the police. Her son, who adored the boyfriend, misses him. And there are other disruptions. She is contemplating a move to a cheaper place where the schools are not as good.

No one who reads Jessica's story can come away with doubts about her work ethic or sense of responsibility or her resolve to give her children all that she can. Yet it is not hard to see, or unfeeling to say, that Jessica's life prospects and the future of her children might have been far brighter had she followed the path of her friend Chris and married before she had children. And this story is not Jessica's alone. It is an increasingly common story for millions of Americans who are doing most things right but messing up on marriage.

Why Marriage Matters for the American Middle Class

BECAUSE A LARGE MAJORITY OF AMERICANS VIEW THEMSELVES as middle class, it is easy to take the existence of the middle class for granted. But the truth is that a middle class society is hard to achieve and even harder to sustain over long periods of time. Its continued success requires widespread participation in certain prudential institutions that encourage mutual aid, foster a future orientation, and inculcate habits of resilience, persistence, thrift, and self-control.

When it comes to family life, marriage is that prudential institution. Throughout our history, marriage is the means by which individuals who are not born to great fortune or favor can form a cooperative union to share the responsibilities of a family household and especially the tasks of nurturing and educating children.

From our nation's very beginnings, marriage has been central to thinking about a society of "middling" people. It was a matter of deep interest and debate among the founders. The family letters of John and Abigail Adams, in particular, are full of practical and philosophical exchanges on marriage. Indeed, the Adamses believed

in, and practiced, a meritocratic form of marriage that was not very different from the marriages of today's high achieving meritocrats—suggesting that the achievement of a “best friends” marriage has been a persistent aspiration in American life.

However, over the centuries, most Americans did not have to be meritocrats to marry and to have stable and often very happy marriages. Marriage was achievable for the large majority who wanted to marry—with the notable exception of African Americans before the Civil War. And for nearly a century after the Civil War, African Americans married at higher rates than white Americans.

Participation in marriage reached a high point in post-World War II America. Married parent families made up the overwhelming majority of households in the expanding suburbs. Their sheer demographic weight ensured that a marriage-and-childrearing culture dominated the broad middle class. Today a marriage-and-childrearing culture still exists—arguably with even more intensive child nurture and father involvement than in past decades—but participation in this marriage culture is moving up the educational scale. It is becoming another form of privilege, beyond the grasp of millions of Americans who either are, or want to be, in the middle class.

The Next Marriage Debate

OVER THE PAST HALF CENTURY OR SO, WE'VE HAD SEVERAL great American debates on marriage. In the 1960s, we debated marriage among African Americans and the poor. In the 1990s, we debated whether the two-parent home was generally better for children than the alternatives. And in recent years, we've been fiercely debating gay marriage.

All of these older discussions still matter. But it's time for a new marriage debate. We must bring marriage into the discussion of how to strengthen the middle class. The new question before us is simple but fundamental. Can we realistically hope to rebuild the middle class while accepting the continuing decline of marriage, the very institution on which our middle class most clearly depends? Can we Americans realistically hope for a middle class majority if we no longer hope and strive for a married majority? 

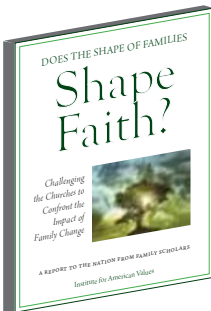
Published by the Institute for American Values, Propositions is a free, quarterly publication that continues and deepens conversations originating from our Center for Public Conversation.

TO SUBSCRIBE TO PROPOSITIONS OR TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE INSTITUTE, please visit our website at www.americanvalues.org, email us at info@americanvalues.org, or phone us at 212.246.3942. We are located at 1841 Broadway, Suite 211, New York, NY 10023. We are a non-partisan, 501(c)3 organization whose mission is to study and strengthen civil society.



TO ORDER, VISIT: WWW.AMERICANVALUES.ORG/BOOKSTORE

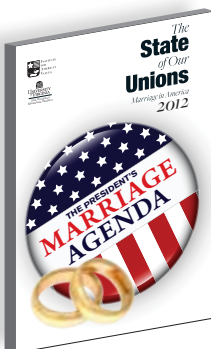
PUBLICATIONS *from the* INSTITUTE



Does the Shape of Families Shape Faith? Challenging the Churches to Confront the Impact of Family Change

Edited by Elizabeth Marquardt and Amy Zietlow (Broadway Publications 2012). Available as a free PDF download November 15, 2012 at www.FamilyScholars.org.

Social scientists, psychologists, and practical theologians come together to offer new findings on how growing up in a divorced family impacts religious formation, with implications for the churches.



The State of Our Unions 2012: **The President's Marriage Agenda** An Annual Report on Marriage in America.

Edited by W. Bradford Wilcox and Elizabeth Marquardt (Broadway Publications 2012). Available as a free PDF download December 2012 at www.StateofOurUnions.org.

Leading scholars of marriage and family come together to offer a fresh set of family recommendations to whomever the nation next elects president of the United States.