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Setting the record straight on marriage

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WASHINGTON — Late spring is upon us, and with it comes wedding season, the time of year that inspires a peculiar mix of sentimental stories about chance meetings leading to love alongside gloomy commentaries about the chances of marital happiness. Both the sentiment and the gloom are based on misguided ideas about the history and evolution of marriage — myths that, from this day forward, we should divorce from our notion of wedded bliss.

1. People don't value marriage the way they used to.

Modern Americans do put less emphasis on marriage as an institution that should organize everyone's life, but they put much more value on it as a relationship based on fairness, intimacy and fidelity. That is, paradoxically, one reason they have become more tolerant of divorce. For example, a May 2010 Gallup poll found that while only 23 percent of Americans believe divorce to be morally wrong, 92 percent believe it is immoral for a married man or woman to have an affair — the highest disapproval of any topic in the survey.

The value placed on fidelity — especially male fidelity — has arguably never been higher. In the late 19th century in the United States, an epidemic of venereal disease plagued respectable middle-class wives because so many of their husbands frequented prostitutes. In the 1920s, Somerset Maugham's play "The Constant Wife" raised eyebrows because its heroine rejects the urging of friends and family to follow convention and ignore her husband's affair. And as late as the 1950s and early 1960s, marriage counselors routinely responded to a woman's complaints about her husband's infidelity by asking whether she had provoked it by not keeping herself "well groomed."

2. Married women who work put in a "second shift" at home.

Employed wives with young children do, on average, spend 2.3 hours more per week on housework and paid work than their husbands do. But that comes out to an extra 20 minutes a day, hardly a full second shift. And once the early months of child-rearing are over, the average total workload of most husbands and wives (time spent in paid and unpaid work combined) is now virtually identical, according

to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Wives spend more time on unpaid household work than their husbands, but husbands spend more time on paid work.

The real gender inequality in marriage stems from the tendency to regard women as the default parent, the one who, in the absence of family-friendly work policies, is expected to adjust her paid work to shoulder the brunt of domestic responsibilities. Women who quit their jobs or cut their hours suffer a wage penalty that widens over the years, even if they return to the job market and work continuously for two more decades. Over a lifetime, even a temporary absence from the workforce can cost a woman hundreds of thousands of dollars, making her more economically vulnerable in case of divorce or the death of her spouse.

3. Divorce is harmful for women and children.

Divorce rates have been falling for 30 years, but the freedom to leave a dysfunctional marriage can be a lifesaver for women, who initiate two-thirds of divorces. Economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers found that every state that adopted no-fault divorce, beginning with California in 1970, experienced an 8 to 13 percent decline in wives' suicide rates and a 30 percent decline in domestic violence in the next five years.

On average, children of divorce exhibit more behavioral problems and do more poorly in school than children of intact marriages. But in many cases, the problems blamed on divorce can be seen in children many years before their parents split up and are actually a result of the dysfunctional family relations that eventually led to divorce.

One large survey found that experiencing their parents' divorce lowered the well-being of 55 to 60 percent of children but improved the well-being of 40 to 45 percent. And when demographer Allen Li controlled for problematic characteristics in children that pre-existed their parents' separation, he found no average negative impact of divorce itself.

Children of divorced parents are themselves more likely to divorce. But a recent study using data from the National Survey of Families and Households found that people who grew up in houses where their parents fought frequently were more likely to divorce if their parents remained together.

4. Married parents spend less time with their kids than they used to.

In 1965, according to data from the federal study of how people use their time, mothers spent 10 hours each week, on average, focused on their children. Since that time, all moms have increased the time they spend with their kids, even as they have also increased their work hours. But college-educated mothers, the people most likely to

have careers and to return to work in the first year after childbirth, increased time with their kids at more than twice the rate of less-educated mothers.

By 2007, according to economists Garey Ramey and Valerie Ramey, college-educated women were, on average, spending 21.2 hours a week focused on their kids, while moms with less education were doing 15.9 hours a week.

In 1965, fathers averaged barely three hours a week doing primary child care. By 2007, economists Betsey Stevenson and Dan Sacks report, that had risen to almost 7 hours a week for less-educated dads, and almost 10 hours for those with a college degree.

5. Married couples are the building blocks of community life.

All that time couples invest in their children comes at the expense of being involved in the world beyond the family's front door.

Sociologists Naomi Gerstel and Natalia Sarkisian report that married women and men are less likely to visit and give practical assistance to their extended families than are the unmarried. Men without wives are much more likely to call their parents than their married peers.

Economically as well as emotionally, marriage has become like an affluent gated community. It is now harder for low-income Americans to enter and sustain. But for the educated, two-income families whose divorce rates have been falling and who spend more time with their children than they used to, marriage brings more relative advantages than in the past.

The notion that marriage is an impediment to commitments to the larger community is a long-standing one — and one reason early Christians did not place the institution at the top of their moral hierarchy, complaining that married couples cared more about pleasing each other than doing the Lord's work. It wasn't until 1215 that marriage became a sacrament.

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