"Ain't Nobody in My Family Married": Social Context and Marital Social Capital

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ABSTRACT

Studies on the barriers to marriage focus on structural and interpersonal factors and largely ignore the influence of social context on marriage beliefs and behaviors. Drawing on social learning and diffusion perspectives, we use qualitative data to examine the ways that families, peers, and communities influence decision-making and behaviors surrounding marriage. The presence and type of relationship role models in the community, family of origin, and among peers influences relationship attitudes and decisions. Respondents are motivated to end the cycle of unhealthy relationships and build marital social capital to provide better role modeling for their children.

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Recent family change such as delayed marriage and the rise in divorce, cohabitation, and non-marital childbearing rates has led to public concern that the social institution of marriage is in decline (e.g., Cherlin 2004). In response to these family trends, and concerns about the well-being of children and parents, the federal government instituted the Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2002 with the goal of encouraging the formation and maintenance of healthy marriages, especially among low-income, disadvantaged populations. The initiative provides federal funding for marriage education programs that teach individuals both relationship and parenting skills (Administration for Children and Families 2007) in an effort to reverse trends for struggling American families. At the same time, family scholars have worked toward explaining the apparent decline in American marriage. Prior research has focused on the structural barriers to marriage and relationship formation, such as poor employment prospects and availability of marriageable men (Wilson 1987; McLaughlin and Lichter 1997; South and Crowder 1999). More recent work has recognized the influence of individual factors on union formation, such as substance abuse, multiple partner fertility, and physical and sexual abuse (Carlson et al. 2004; Cherlin et al. 2004; Lopoo and Carlson 2008).

Despite the high level of policy and research attention to marriage, few studies have attended to the social context of marriage and relationship decisions. The social context of marriage refers to family members, peers, and community organizations and institutions that advance or hinder the efforts of individuals to enter and maintain healthy romantic relationships. Drawing on social learning and diffusion theories, we use qualitative data to examine how the social environment influences the relationship decisions and behaviors among participants in a relationship education program. We focus on how social context offers marital social capital and considers how individuals break away from social influence. The current work moves beyond prior studies in three key ways. First, prior studies have not explicitly examined the importance of social influences. Second, the sample is based on

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participants in a marriage initiative so our findings apply directly to those targeted by federal policy efforts. Third, a qualitative approach uses respondents' own words to describe their views allowing topics to emerge that may not be apparent in a large-scale survey, such as how social contexts influence romantic relationship choices and trajectories.

BACKGROUND

While most Americans want to get married and many agree that it is better to get married than stay single (Martinez et al. 2006; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001), the age at marriage continues to increase and rates have declined (Kreider 2005; U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Yet considerable distinctions exist in marriage patterns with more advantaged Americans more likely to get married than less advantaged (Cherlin 2004; Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Sweeney 2002; US Bureau of the Census 2008).

Much research has focused on the marriage attitudes and beliefs of low-income populations with special attention paid to single mothers. Single mothers are less likely than childless single women to expect to marry or realize their marriage desires, but they are not less likely to value marriage (Lichter et al. 2004). Although marriage is highly valued among unmarried women, the bulk of research findings indicate that there are strong structural and individual factors impeding their efforts to realize the goal of marriage (Carlson et al. 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Reed 2005; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Lopoo and Carlson 2008; Manning 2001; Sassler and Schoen 1999; Waller 2002). Further, socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals are more likely to cohabit than marry and transitions to marriage from cohabiting unions are particularly unlikely for poor women (Lichter et al. 2006; Qian et al. 2005). Most of these studies focus on economic and interpersonal factors, a shortcoming of this literature is the lack of specific attention to the social context for marriage.

In contrast, social influences are a core element of research on how neighborhood disadvantage influences family formation (Wilson 1987). One of the key underlying mechanisms expected to explain why disadvantaged neighborhoods are tied to lower rates of marriage and successful marriages

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is that there are few families which provide "mainstream role models" (Wilson 1987). South (2001) elaborates on Wilson's theory, "Disadvantaged neighborhoods lack successful marital role models and durable social institutions that continuously signal the benefits of marriage and provide the normative expectations to remain married" (p. 756). Few studies have been able to specifically examine this mechanism, and the empirical work on the broader influence of neighborhood disadvantage is mixed (e.g., Cutrona et al. 2003; South and Crowder 1999; South and Crowder 2000; Plotnick and Hoffman 1999; South 2001).

We build on Wilson's (1987, 1996) theory that disadvantaged individuals lack successful marital role models and Coleman's (1988) work on social capital by introducing the concept of "marital social capital;" in other words, social capital specific to the domain of romantic relationships that give individuals the tools to build successful relationships that may result in marriage. Marital social capital implies that individuals are embedded in social networks; within these collective groups, individuals may gain useful information about romantic relationships and are provided with norms and guidelines that they can use to improve their relationships. We define marital social capital as the influences and experiences that respondents bring with them to relationships that either increase or decrease their odds of relationship success. The social context is an important source of influence in that family members, friends, and the community at large have the potential to provide individuals with marital social capital, which may offer individuals advantages in forming and sustaining healthy relationships. These sources of influence are consistent with Bronfennbrenner's (1986) depiction of the role of multiple social contexts (or spheres) as sources of influence. The mechanisms through which social others influence behavior and attitudes may be direct or indirect. Direct influence may be through verbalizing approval or disapproval of relationships (or lack thereof) or withdrawing or extending social capital, social support, or instrumental support. On the other hand, social others may exert more indirect influence when an individual observes the behaviors of others and chooses to emulate or eschew those behaviors. That is, social others serve as role models and behaviors are learned by witnessing their successes and

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mistakes. We expect role models to have both positive and negative influences on marital views and behaviors. Thus, individuals who are not enmeshed in communities and social groups with high marriage rates may be lacking in marital social capital, often because they have few positive role models from whom to learn valuable relationship skills. However, some people may be aware of their lack of martial social capital and actively make decisions to increase it. We must call attention to the fact that disadvantaged individuals often have bundles of disadvantage that act as barriers to marriage; acquiring marital social capital is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the formation and maintenance of healthy romantic relationships. Respondents often face several issues at once, such as poverty, drug and alcohol use, and sexual and physical abuse, among other structural and individual factors that may interfere with their abilities to form and sustain romantic relationships. The accumulation of marital social capital alone is not enough to propel respondents into positive romantic relationships; however, it is an important component of the package that respondents bring with them when seeking new and healthy romantic relationships, attempting to end the cycle of unhealthy relationships. Our results will focus on ways respondents attempt to increase their marital social capital for themselves and their children.

Our conceptualization of marital social capital is based on social learning and diffusion theories. We expect the social context to influence relationship attitudes, decision-making processes, and behaviors among respondents. Social learning theory, as developed by Bandura (1976), posits that individuals model the behaviors of others in their social environments rather than experimenting with behaviors and their outcomes on their own in a series of trial and error efforts. Individuals learn vicariously and, as such, are likely to mimic behaviors viewed positively and avoid behaviors viewed negatively. For example, an individual may avoid marriage because she has witnessed the processes and ramifications of divorces experienced by family members or friends. Conversely, an individual with mostly married peers may be motivated to work through marital problems to improve a marriage rather than dissolve it as her friends have in the past. We discuss the specific contexts of social

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learning and accumulation of marital social capital, specifically, families, peers, and community, in the next section.

The notion of diffusion aids in the explanation of the processes by which individuals, families, and communities adopt new behaviors. Diffusion, which is in essence a type of social learning, refers to the process in which information spreads throughout a social system (Strang and Soule 1998). Diffusion theory suggests that decision-making is often influenced by the behaviors of particular others (Banerjee 1992; Bandura 1976; Bikhchandani et al. 1998). Communication between community members is a key element in the diffusion of an idea or innovation, such as a relationship education program. Often, individuals rely on information from others to assess the costs and benefits of adopting the ideas put forth, e.g., presented in a program or even reevaluating choices in light of the behavior of significant others (Palloni 2001). Evidence of social learning is found when a majority of group members adopt the new ideas, beliefs, and practices of others via communication (Ellison and Fudenberg 1995). However, we recognize that diffusion processes may spread beyond tight networks and, as a result, 'weak ties' may become important. "Weak ties" as elaborated by Granovetter (1983) are the more distant ties who most likely do not share the same views as the inner social circles and may bring with them novel ideas and behaviors. Thus, the spread of new ideas occurs largely through modeling in interpersonal networks. Moreover, diffusion of new ideas does not occur in isolation of structural factors, the more traditional predictors of marriage. In addition, living in poor communities often increases social exclusion (Cattell 2001), which can make the diffusion process more difficult.

In Bandura's (1976) view, however, the individual is not without agency, particularly when she reaches adulthood. Heinz (2002) argues that although the individual retains socialization messages from childhood, society is constantly in flux, and the individual engages in self-socialization in changing social contexts to take over where parental socialization left off. Human agency allows for change within the self, such as when individuals decide to be positive role models for their children, or decide to participate in relationship education programs to discover the ways in which to find good

partners and maintain healthy relationships even in contexts where these may be rare. In turn, new behaviors have the potential to feedback and influence change in families and communities, as the individual and environment are interdependent. This is important because it shows one way that the individuals can break out of the experiences in their family of origin and find new ways to acquire marital social capital. We examine how respondents attempt to break out of unhealthy relationship cycles, ultimately deciding to become positive role models for their children.

<div align="center">Family</div>

Consistent with the social learning perspective, the family is one of the most important and proximate influences in the formation of marriage and relationship attitudes with parental preferences strongly influencing individuals' family formation behaviors. For example, during childhood, youths whose mothers prefer early marriages and larger families tend to enter marriage and parenthood earlier compared with their peers (Barber 2000). Some scholars have also speculated that there is an intergenerational transmission of both parental divorce (Amato and Cheadle 2005) and single motherhood (e.g., Lichter et al. 2004; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). While the literature shows that intergenerational transmission is in part due to economic disadvantage, we argue that personal observations and experiences of troubled family relationships in childhood can disrupt the accumulation of marital social capital, which may influence later adult relationships. In sum, familial influence on individuals' relationship behaviors and quality and the development of marital social capital stem in part from direct experiences in the family and on viewing and emulating romantic couples, or role models, in their own families, particularly parents.

Although there is much empirical work on the causes and consequences of divorce and single-parenthood, family socialization theories that draw on the social learning framework fall short in several ways. First, the theories lack a specific mechanism explaining how individuals perceive family role models. Social learning theory, when associated with family behavior, is typically measured by including participants' family background and parental family structure at a particular age (Axinn and

Thornton 1992). Yet individuals may react *against* the indirect form of influence of family role models

or respond negatively to their family circumstances. It remains unclear how individuals may adapt

their own positive views on marriage and relationship attitudes when there are few positive relationship

role models in their lives.

Second, while family socialization often refers to childhood behavior, the strength of childhood

family experiences extends into adulthood (Axinn and Thornton 1992; Cunningham and Thornton

2007). Yet as individuals move into adulthood, their experiences with the family of origin influence

behavior and attitudes, but the family socialization process may weaken. Families can directly

influence adult children by providing instrumental and economic support for romantic relationships

(Eggebeen 2005) to overcome constraints to marriage. We investigate the complex ways families

directly and indirectly influence marriage attitudes and behaviors.

Peers

Much less research has focused on peer influence on adult relationship and family behaviors.

The majority of the research on peer influence focuses on adolescents and dating relationships (e.g.,

Hartup et al. 1993; Sieving et al. 2006; Youniss and Smollar 1985) but does not address the ways adult

peers encourage or hinder the development and maintenance of healthy relationships. Criminology

research addresses marriage and peer influence in adulthood (e.g., Giordano et al. 2003; Sampson and

Laub 1993; Warr 1998) but in the opposite direction—how marriage often influences the dissolution of

delinquent peer relationships and encourages desistance from crime.

We argue that peers may directly influence marriage attitudes. Recent research on family

change directly addresses how peer influence may operate (Rindfuss et al. 2004). These researchers

contend that an individual's knowledge of innovative social behaviors most likely stems from

friendship networks rather than kin or co-worker networks. They empirically show that if an individual

has a friend who has engaged in an innovative behavior, such as nonmarital childbearing or

cohabitation, that individual will more likely hold a less traditional, more accepting view of that

innovative behavior. Moreover, the authors argue that the potential for change in family behavior is expedited through friendship networks. In contexts where marriage is rare, *marriage* is the innovative behavior. Contact with peers who get married and otherwise support the institution of marriage may influence individuals in their relationship behaviors and help individuals build marital social capital. In this paper, we examine the ways that peers encourage or hinder the development and maintenance of healthy relationships.

Community

Social learning perspectives on family do not address the larger structural aspect of higher divorce rates and lower marriage rates that occur in disadvantaged communities. Disadvantaged youth are being raised in communities with disproportionately low marriage and high divorce rates (South and Crowder 1999; Wilson 1987). As argued by Wilson (1987), it may be difficult for disadvantaged youth to directly observe examples of successful relationships, not only in their own families, but in their immediate social environments as well. Certainly, examples of good relationships exist in broader society, but they may seem socially distant and unattainable. The current generation of young adults has grown up with the high divorce rates of the 1980s (Casper and Bianchi 2002), making young adults today especially sensitive to the perils of marriage and the potential of divorce.

Although stable marriages may be relatively rare in economically disadvantaged communities, positive institutional sources of influence on marriage may exist and be broadly available, such as community relationship education programs and religious organizations. Religion directly promotes norms and values, such as gender traditionalism and sexual fidelity, which are supportive of marital commitment and the institution of marriage (Christiano 2000; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008). Religious institutions serving poor families are important bastions of the norms, behaviors, and social networks that promote and disseminate the importance of marriage in urban America. Community-based relationship education programs can be held in conjunction with religious organizations, although they are not necessarily embedded within a religious program, even if sessions are held in a church. The

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goal of marriage initiatives is to help individuals acquire the skills to form and sustain healthy relationships through programs designed to teach individuals how to select a quality partner and progress through relationships carefully and slowly while utilizing communication skills (Administration for Children and Families 2007). These community sources of both direct and indirect influence may be especially important in disadvantaged communities and provide individuals with the resources, skills, and social networks they need to build marital social capital and form and sustain healthy relationships in low-marriage environments. We examine how participants in a marriage education program view the influence of three community sources: neighborhood, the program, and religion.

DATA AND METHODS

This study draws on a longitudinal qualitative study of participants in a large marriage initiative program in a medium-sized Midwestern city (population 193,627 [U.S. Census Bureau 2007]). Respondents were selected from two primary marriage initiative programs: one aimed toward selecting a quality marriage partner and maintaining a healthy relationship, and the other aimed more generally toward healthy relations within the family. An additional criterion for selection into the study included completing at least three of four classes in the former and four of six classes in the latter. We sampled respondents from each of the ten program sites. Sample participants were selected in an attempt to closely mirror the diversity of individuals from the complete list of participants. The respondents were told about the project by letter and then reminded about the interview opportunity by class leaders. According to the data from the 2006 American Community Survey, our respondents are more disadvantaged in terms of education (27% of Americans have a college degree compared to 12% of our sample) and income (the median US household income is $48,451, and only 20% our sample makes more than $15,000) than the national average. The percentage of our respondents who have never been married (66%) is also higher than national the national average (28%). As these statistics show, our respondents in the sample are disadvantaged.

Interviews were conducted and tape-recorded in private at the program sites. The interviews were semi-structured and relied on open-ended replies, thus allowing participants to use their own words to answer questions. Wave 1 data collection began in July 2006. Fifty-seven participants were interviewed soon after completing one of the programs. On average, wave 1 interviews are 63 single-spaced pages in length and took an average of 90 minutes to complete. Wave 2 data were collected six to eight months after the initial interview, and we retained 84% of the original sample. The participants were re-interviewed to investigate long-term program effectiveness as well as attitudinal and relationship change. We also used the opportunity to pursue and follow-up on themes that emerged in the initial interviews. Wave 2 interviews are shorter in length because demographic and historical information were previously assessed during the first wave of interviews. Therefore, these interviews are 32 single-spaced pages and approximately 30 minutes long, on average. We draw on responses in both interview waves to understand how social context influences their views of marriage, while wave 2 responses are especially important for understanding the role of the program.

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the wave 1 respondents and mirrors the characteristics of all program participants. The original sample of 57 respondents contains mostly females (93%), ranging from 18 to 68 years old, with an average age of 37. The majority of the sample is African-American (47%), followed by White (28%), Hispanic (23%), and Native American (2%). Over two-fifths of sample respondents are single (47%), 30% are dating, 16% are married, and 7% are cohabiting. Ninety-one percent of respondents report the presence of at least one child in their lives; however, these children do not necessarily reside with the respondent nor are they necessarily the respondent's biological child. Eighty-four percent have at least one biological child, and 40 % have children with multiple partners. With respect to childhood family structure, 33% of respondents come from homes where both of their biological parents were present but not necessarily married. Only 28% of respondents come from a married two biological parent home. Fifty-six percent lived in single parent homes as children, and many (24%) have parents who never married. Twenty-two percent of

respondents were in single parent homes because of divorce, 6% separated, and 4% because of death of a parent. Eleven percent of respondents were in foster or other family forms.

On average, respondents' lives are marked by disadvantage. Almost one-fourth of respondents (21%) have less than a high school diploma. The largest portion, 41%, has a high school diploma. While 26% have some college experience, only 12% are college graduates. Sixty-seven percent of respondents are unemployed, and the remaining 33% are employed full- or part-time. Very few (9%) earn more than $20,000 annually. The majority (70%) of respondents report earning $15,000 per year or less, approximately 40% report earning $5,000 per year or less, and 14% report no earnings at all. The majority (77%) report receipt of public assistance, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), food stamps, cash assistance, Medicaid, or subsidized housing.

We asked respondents open-ended questions about the levels of practical, emotional, and economic support they receive from their family and friends. We also asked about family and friends' response to relationships and partners. This measure was used to indicate a level of social context of family and friends that could influence potential relationships. Specific questions were asked about the program as well as the influence of religious beliefs and participation in religion. Following the interviews, we generated a code list that covered most of the themes or topics included in the interviews that speak to the influence of the social surroundings on their marriage and relationship prospects and attitudes. We coded the interviews using Atlas/ti based on our interview guide and research goals as well as sought common themes that were revealed in the data. This process involved considering how multiple themes intersect in an effort to adequately portray the complicated nature of respondents' lives.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Characteristics of Sample Participants

Sex			*Childhood Household Structure*	
Female	93%		Both Biological Parents	33%
Male	7%		Single Parents	56%
			Other	11%
Age				
Mean Age	37		*Educational Attainment*	
			Less than or some High School	21%
Race/Ethnicity			High School Graduate	41%
African American	47%		Some College/Trade School	26%
White	28%		College Graduate	12%
Hispanic	23%			
Native American	2%		*Household Income***	
			Zero dollars	14%
Relationship Status			$1,000 - $5,000	26%
Single	47%		$5,001 - $10,000	18%
Dating	30%		$10,001 - $15,000	12%
Married	16%		More than $15,000	20%
Cohabiting	7%			
			Employment	
Presence of Children			Unemployed	67%
Presence of At Least One Child	91%		Employed (Full- and Part-time)	33%
Biological Children	84%			
One	23%		*Public Assistance*	
Two	14%		Receives Public Assistance	77%
Three or more	47%		No Assistance	7%
No Biological Children	16%		No Information Provided	16%
Multiple Partner Fertility*				
Multiple Partner Fertility	40%			
Single Partner Fertility	60%			

N= 57

*Among those who have children (N=48)

**Ten percent of respondents did not provide information on household income

RESULTS

Family

We find the family can influence adult relationships by providing direct support for marriage. For some respondents, knowing that family members encourage a current romantic relationship can be comforting, while others feel stifled by their families' intrusion into their relationships. When asked how her family affects her marriage, Anita, a 48-year-old married mother of three states,

> Well, it affects it a lot … I mean, if you have, if you have a couple and it's prevalent where one side of the family doesn't like, ahh … like, say, umm, umm, one, one side doesn't like me, you know, maybe his mother didn't like me … Then every time there's an interaction of any kind that just puts friction on … your relationship.

Other respondents feel that their families interfere too much in their relationships. Lara, a 28-year-old married mother of three explains how her own mother encouraged her to get romantically involved with an older man when she was a teenager. This encouragement has long-term effects on her life:

> [My mother] encouraged it. She was all about that. 'Oh, you can go over there and he can support you' or whatever. You shouldn't push that on your child. And the other thing is that you shouldn't push your child to become an adult at a young age. Like, don't put more responsibility on the child than what you take care of. That shouldn't happen.

Lara's statement shows that not all family support of romantic relationships is entirely good and may disrupt the construction of marital social capital. Similarly, Melinda, a 51-year-old single mother of one explains how her mother encouraged her to stay married to her husband even though he slept with Melinda's sister. In general, family support of relationships appears to be positive, but family support can also be more intrusive and detrimental.

Some families directly influence respondents by discouraging some relationships. Patsy, 32-years-old and dating, describes her family's reactions to her romantic partners, "my family is stupid and I don't really care about what they think … They don't ever like anybody I'm with … They think they're players, and they sleeping multiple womans at a time." Patsy's family is direct in their negative assessment of the men she dates. Other respondents report that their family disapproves, more specifically, of a current dating partner, which can deter their goal of marriage. For example, when

Nancy, a 48-year-old dating mother of four, was asked if her family encourages marriage to her current partner she says, "… they despise him [because] he's an alcoholic … And lazy." There are many reasons family members may not encourage marriage to a current partner, and some of these reasons may be valid and more impartial.

When embedded in family networks, members may not provide direct support for romantic relationships because they are afraid of losing reciprocal support. Tania, a 24-year-old single mother of three, explains how part of the reason her mother is not supportive of her current relationship is because she no longer lives at home and helps her mother pay the mortgage. For Tania's mother, having her daughter leave the household and pursue a romantic relationship left her in financial distress. Similarly, respondents report that being too close to extended family is not always good for couples and can increase stress. In other words, strong direct influence can hinder growth in a current relationship. Debby, a 56-year-old married mother of four, explains how her husband would leave for his mothers' house when they fought or argued even though she felt it would be better if he stayed and handled the problems with her:

> … and then we would fight. And he would say, well I need to get out of here; I'm going to my mother's. And I said, you go out that door and you go to your mother's and you bring your whole family in it, you leave your key on the counter because you're not coming back. If you won't be a man and stay here and work on this marriage, you get the hell out and you stay out.

When family support is used as an alternative to dealing with couples' dyadic problems, this support is more likely to be viewed as burdensome and unwelcome. We find other respondents mention they put their romantic relationships on hold to care for ill or dying family members. Thus, family networks can compete with relationships for time and attention.

Our interviews include almost no evidence to suggest that families influence relationship decisions by extending or withdrawing financial support. Only one respondent, Sasha, a 25-year-old married mother of six, mentioned direct instrumental support for marriage: "I think my mama probably talked me into it and pressured me and told me it was the right thing to do…Umm, at first it took a

good two years to talk me into getting married…she pushed everything forward…she made the plans, the date, and had the church reserved." It is important to mention that Sasha's mother is married and religious, which means Sasha has a pro-marital role model and source of influence, unlike others in our sample. While this is rare, it demonstrates the potential power of family.

In accordance with the social learning perspective, we find that respondents' family backgrounds and family histories carry over and continue to influence them into adulthood. As indicated in the descriptive results, only one-third of respondents were raised by two biological parents. Observing role models during childhood can indirectly influence adult relationships by exposing youth to relationship dynamics that are both positive and negative. For example, respondents report they are adversely affected by their parents' divorce from childhood. Karen, a 49-year-old dating mother of one, describes how her parents' divorce affects her desire to marry, "'cause I don't want to commit to somebody, and I don't really believe in divorce. Maybe that's 'cause my mom and dad divorced." Clearly, families continue to have a major influence on individuals and their romantic relationships once they have grown. The aftermath of unhealthy relationships serves as a reminder of the fragile bonds of marriage. Darcy, a 33-year-old single mother of one, recognizes the disrupted development of social capital, and describes her experience growing-up in a troubled household, "I'm really jaded right now … I think that how my father treated us affected me … and the life that my mother led because of that affected me. You could say that's why I'm 33 and still single. When I was 22, I was going to get married."

Respondents report being hesitant to marry because they do not want to repeat the mistakes of family members. They speak of the negative consequences of the lack of relationship role models in their families —they are cognizant of the impact that the absence of role models has on their adult romantic relationships. Janice, a 30-year-old dating mother of three explains, "I don't know, 'cause I don't have no successful relationship. So I never experienced it, so I don't know … None of them. Ain't nobody in my family married." Walter, a 40-year-old engaged father of three, mirrors this

sentiment:

> Ahh, number one, when you're growing up, if you do not see a healthy relationship or know that a healthy relationship is possible—and then not being taught the things to maintain a healthy relationship—it just ain't to me, it's not gonna happen—period…you don't know what it consists of…If those, if those qualities or things haven't been taught to you, you don't know what a healthy relationship is.

The lack of positive marriage role models can discourage some individuals from marrying. Laurie, a 31-year-old single mother of three, admits that "all the relationships I know ended up in disaster." This can be a real barrier to marriage, especially if the only marriages that respondents have witnessed are abusive. Thirty-four-year-old Tori, a single mother of six, is marriage-shy after witnessing abuse in her relatives' marriages, "I ain't want to be married, then in no abusive relationship like my mama, my sister, and my friends." Latisha, a 25-year-old single mother of four says,

> Maybe it's just something I'm going through right now, and I don't want to be married 'cause I seen so many bad marriages and so many marriages end up wrong … My mom went through two different marriages. Both of them were abusive. My sister's been trying to get married to whoever will marry her for the last, what, maybe six or seven years now … Everybody I seen been punished by their commitment. I will commit to one person, being with one person, but I won't commit to marriage.

These respondents recognize their lack of marital social capital. Some respondents use negative experiences as a springboard to improve their own circumstances, setting higher standards for themselves and their romantic relationships, and seeking out ways to build marital social capital for themselves. Vicky, a 20-year-old dater, explains how she tries to learn from her mother's choices, "I didn't want to be like my mother … I didn't want to be pregnant at seventeen, having a kid at seventeen, not graduating high school, not accomplishing anything with my life. And I want, I want more for myself." Individual agency allows respondents to interpret others' relationship experiences in both positive and negative ways. Some individuals are led to follow in the footsteps of others who have had negative relationship experiences because they have no other basis for reference. Others are persuaded to use the poor relationship experiences of others to alter their own relationship behavior. Role models sometimes serve to remind respondents that they should avoid undesirable relationship

behaviors, decisions, and outcomes and seek positive ones instead.

Peers

These data provide clues about the role of peers in marital and relationship decision-making. We conceptualize peers as same-age others who are friends, co-workers, or family members, such as cousins or siblings, because many respondents claim that their family members are their friends. The distinction between family members and peers is not always clear-cut. We asked respondents how friends have influenced their relationships and contributed to the development of marital social capital. Most respondents contend that they make their own decisions about relationships regardless of peer attempts at influence; others argue that peers influence their relationships greatly and are thankful when friends are supportive because they can enjoy their romantic relationships knowing their partners are accepted by others. Alan, a 26-year-old cohabiting father of two, says that his friends approve of his relationship and it influences his relationship with his partner "'cause it makes me and [my partner] feel good about ourselves … like we can make it last longer." When asked how his friends influence his relationship, Scott, a 48-year-old married father of one, says, "Well, I guess the more support that you have in anything that you ever involve yourself in life, the more successful you are likely to become at it."

Respondents often reject negative assessments from peers and insist that they do not care what others think of their current or past relationships. Lydia, a 22-year-old dating mother of four, says, "It would probably bother me to know why, exactly why they don't like him. But, as far as them accepting him and, and me solving the problem of why, I really wouldn't care." When asked if she is concerned about her friends' input on her relationship, Mae, 36-years-old and single, says,

> Nah. I mean, I do. But, in the end it's still my decision. So, I mean … mean, I, I care what they, you know, their opinions is. Because, you know, they're my friends … They have had relationships where, you know, she make their, they make their comments what they see you or how they feel. And I make mine about their relationships. But still, in the end it's our decision.

Respondents who are currently or have been in abusive relationships often agree with friends' negative

evaluations, yet sometimes elect to remain with their abusive partners. Friends of respondents in abusive relationships sometimes encourage breaking off the relationship, yet remain supportive of the respondent and gently tolerate her relationship. For example, Nancy, a 48-year-old dating mother of four, argues that it is hard for her to have a relationship with her boyfriend because no one supports her relationship, but they are polite to him for the time being, "I can't go and see my friends. It's like she said last night, the couple times you brought him over were fine. And she says, but you know, you bring him over three or four more times, she said, I'm gonna have to put him right in his place." Overall, although many respondents take the time to listen to their friends' advice, they often decline to implement it; yet respondents understand that their friends and peers want the best outcome for them. Respondents are often only receptive to positive peer assessments of their relationships, and even then, they often claim they are indifferent or impervious to influence.

Although the majority of respondents claim they have no or few positive peer role models in their lives, there are a few who do. For example, Lara, a 28-year-old married mother of three, says that her friends are good marital role models for her relationship because she watches them work through their marital problems rather than dissolve their unions. Her peers contribute to the development of her marital social capital; observing others' relationship strategies encourages her to work through her own problems and remain married. Lara explains, "a couple other of my friends, they're married. Not that they have a perfect life. Nobody is perfect. So, just to have that to encourage you … you might have issues or problems with your kids, or problems with your husband. But, you still can get through it." Respondents like Lara demonstrate the positive effect that the exposure to good role models can have on relationship behaviors and decision-making processes. Tania, a 24-year-old cohabiting mother of three, severed a relationship with her friend whom she feels is a bad role model and negative influence on how to handle jealousy in the relationship,

> Me and him have a relationship that we're not gonna be so jealous of each other. 'Cause my friend, she's so jealous about her husband. Even if they tell each other, she gets mad. I don't want to be like that ever. 'Cause I don't want to be like that either. So I haven't talked to her

for a while, 'cause she's trying to get me mad at him. And I'm like, no. I'm not gonna let nobody ruin our relationship.

Tania represents respondents who may end friendships that do not help to support their relationships. Indeed, peers have the power to influence respondents and help them build marital social capital; however, several respondents argue that they are indifferent to peer opinion and resist attempts at influence. On the other hand, there are also some respondents who are eager to change their romantic relationship courses by seeking like-minded, pro-marital peers and rejecting peers deemed negatively.

Community Neighborhoods

Using U.S. Census data (2000), we find that over two-fifths (44%) of respondents live in high-poverty neighborhoods. Our study sample also generally resides in neighborhoods with low marriage rates. Linking census data to the addresses of our sample, we find that nearly one-half (45%) of the respondents live in census tracts where less than 38% of the population is married. Forty-one percent of our sample lives in census tracts where 38% to 52% are married. Only 14% of sample respondents live in census tracts where 63% to 76% of the population is married. There are no sample respondents living in tracts where more than 77% of residents are married, yet more than half (55%) of the focal county population is married. Thus, our sample resides in neighborhoods with low marriage rates.

However, our qualitative interviews do not yield strong findings about the influence of the neighborhood. We do not directly query about neighborhoods; however, at the same time, respondents do not speak about their neighborhood but rather people in their family and peer networks. Their comments about the environment were more broadly based on the economy and claim there are no good men in the entire state. Our sample is quite mobile (27% moved within a 6-month period), and their social networks extend beyond neighborhood boundaries. Thus, the notion of neighborhood may not strongly resonate with a disadvantaged, mobile population.

Relationship Education Programs

Respondents claim they participate in relationship education programs because they recognize

that they need new strategies for forming and maintaining healthy romantic relationships. Respondents want to learn skills they can apply to their romantic relationships. Alan, a 26-year-old cohabiting father of two, wants to learn how to analyze problems that arise in his relationship. Alan explains, "we're gonna attend it, and we're gonna figure out what's going on and where we are getting into a sticky situation in our relationship and why it's going so rough." For respondents, the program serves as a first step in finding new sources of influence that have pro-marital attitudes and might be able to help them develop positive relationship skills and build marital social capital. Debby, a 56-year-old married mother of four, says that she took her class because she was desperate to save her relationship: "my relationship was not going like I thought it would and I knew we weren't gonna be able to communicate and do it on our own. We needed help." Additionally, participation in marriage classes provides new opportunities to break the cycle of unhealthy relationships. Mae, 36-years-old and single, explains, "I guess [I attended the class to] understand the cycle. I should call it a cycle. The cycle of relationships between men and women. Umm…you know, me and, who I choose, I guess, the same type of men over and over…I was really wondering why I was choosing the wrong kind of men."

One way the program directly influences respondents is through the instructor who is frequently cited as the respondent's only source of relationship support. We conceptualize instructors of relationship education programs as Granovetter's (1983) "weak ties" who introduce novel behavior and ideas—in this case, marriage and healthy relationships—into communities. They are often the greatest sources of positive influence in a context where marriage is rare. These individuals provide emotional support for respondents and give them advice and tools for relationship success, helping them make better choices in their relationships. Instructors often share their personal marital ups and downs with their students, which gives them a new vision for the possibility of a positive marriage. Janice, a 30-year-old mother of three, explains how her instructor helped her repair and sustain her existing relationship, "umm, well one of the teachers … some of the things I was going through one of the teachers had been through. And she had gave me some advice of the things she had did-about the

problems that I was going through with my boyfriend." Patsy, a 32-year-old respondent, contends, "the couple that taught it were phenomenal … they talked about the real issues in relationships, and how even in a loving relationship they, they have those issues themselves. So … it was very, umm, good to see that you can solve problems just by the way that you talk to someone else."

Program instructors are also sources of indirect influence, in that their successful relationships are positive models for participants. For many of our respondents, healthy relationship program instructors are often the only examples of positive relationships available to them. Jill, a 21-year-old dating mother, explains how her instructors' enduring relationship influences her willingness to work out problems in her relationship:

> [The instructors are an interracial couple]. They've been married since before…this whole segregation thing…The racism, everything like that. And they lived through that. Come on, that's something big for you all to stick through. And that was the main thing in their relationship—the love that they have for each other. And that basically caught it. Like, if you all can get through that, I can get through the [minor problems like the] glass being on the counter.

The program also offers a network or set of peers who are similarly minded. Program participants sometimes build and express a sense of camaraderie with classmates due to similarities with problems in life and the desire to better themselves and acquire marital social capital. For example, Carol, a 54-year-old cohabiting mother of three, says, " 'cause you coming to a class, you know, you, you, you build, umm, like a closeness—like, a friendship sometimes in your life." Micky, a 41-year-old dating mother of two, says she enjoyed the class because:

> It was just the people, the girls that were in there, and what we achieved, you know, together. Umm, having different needs but still wanting the same things out life…And, umm, just by being there when you think nobody else is there…I mean, you can go up and they got pictures of our whole class. And you can see how happy we were. You know? It was like, it was like our little family at that point.

The relationship classes also equip respondents with information to help their social network and are often eager to share their new relationship knowledge with family members, peers, and others in the community. For example, Dahlia, a 28-year-old dating mother of four, shared the skills she learned to

help prevent her brother's marriage break-up, " So I got in there and I tried to let them know…You have to try to work things out. You have to go with your feelings…You have to express yourself…But I learned how to help other couples…I have helped some people if they listened." Here, Dahlia is diffusing the lessons learned in the class to others to help them build marital social capital.

Religious Organizations

Religious organizations contribute to the development of marital social capital by structuring the courtship process and providing search criteria for partners. Approximately sixty-eight percent of respondents report having faith in God, while only about two-fifths (39%) actually attend church. Interviews suggest that religion influences many respondents' romantic lives; yet others view religious mandates as unattainable and restrictive and tend to feel like failures when they do not order their lives in the 'right' way as prescribed by the Church.

Participation in religious organizations or religiosity is an important characteristic for potential partners. Religious partners are viewed as being more committed, family-focused, and avoidant of negative temptations.   Tanisha, a 37-year-old single mother of four notes, "well what I'm looking for is a man that's in church right now … He don't have to go to my church; as long as he is going to church." Tanisha, and others, believe that attending church and maintaining certain beliefs implies a level of devotion and attractiveness that non-religious men cannot offer. Denise, a 48-year-old single mother of three, wants a man who is "spirit-filled" because she too is "spirit-filled." Some respondents find the religious beliefs of their dating partners to be a hindrance. A difference in religious beliefs or a difference in the intensity of beliefs can create problems. Gail, a 23-year-old single mother of one, details her experience,

> … it ended because … he wanted me to go to church, and I was like, 'no. If I want to, I will. But you can't make me do something that I don't want to do'. So … I accepted him … for the way that he was. But, he didn't accept me for the way that I was.

Respondents believe that religion influences their relationship decisions by providing an underlying structure and guide for romantic relationships. Holly, a 53-year-old single mother of one, explains the problem with cohabiting based on her understanding of religious beliefs, "I would never live with a man … 'cause the Bible says so … my pastor always says that, umm, a man and woman shouldn't live together unless they married … Because if they are together living in a house, then they living in sin." For some, marriage comes with certain restrictions on behavior that is dictated by religious doctrine. Lydia, a 22-year-old cohabiting and engaged mother of four, considers how her relationship will change when she marries,

> When you with somebody you just can leave at any given time…When you married and you go say your vows and you promising to this person and to God that you gonna commit, you can't do that … once I go in front of a church and I say my vows and I put that ring on his finger and we sign that paper … I'm promising to God, the Lord above, that I will not [cheat on him or leave] him.

Some respondents "find" religion later in life, which can be a positive influence toward good relationships and help respondents manage past relationship mistakes. For example, Lara, a 28-year-old married mother of three, notes that with age comes the wisdom to understand, "how I did my family was backwards." According to Lara, "it's more faith wise, is what pushed me more into getting married … I do more stuff with my faith than what I did when I was younger. And I'm older now and more understanding." Having made the mistake of rushing into sex with a dating partner, Alma, a 34-year-old single mother of one, cites the influence of religious beliefs in her new relationship: "The way that I'm trying to aim my relationship with [my partner] is on the path of the light of religion … I wouldn't want to go the way I went with [my ex-partner] for a month … I saw him … he called me. The next thing you know we're sleeping together. And then, like, a month later, [he's] gone." The religious basis to marriage can provide behavioral guidelines about how to manage relationships.

On the other hand, religious groups may be a negative source of influence by preventing individuals from having good relationships that are not in accordance with religious mandates. Several respondents mention that their religion denounces cohabitation—a realistic alternative for many in this

population—and rejects divorce, which may force people to remain in bad relationships. These mandates are expressed by pastors and fellow parishioners, though they are sometimes difficult to incorporate into various relationships contexts. As noted above, respondents in non-traditional relationships sometimes speak of the negative influence of religious doctrine. This influence may lead to feelings of guilt and restrict their relationships because their relationship patterns conflict with religious mandates. Laurie reflected upon "living in sin" with her last romantic partner, and says, "in the back of my head I always feel bad about it." Laurie's church withdrew instrumental support after she repeatedly went back to the abusive father of her child born out-of-wedlock. Forced to make a decision, Laurie decided that her relationship was more important than her involvement in the church.

At the same time, religious organizations in the community may be the *only* source respondents have to help guide them toward positive relationships and behavior by providing models for healthy marriages. Scott, a 48-year-old married father of one, explains, "I seen a sign the other day … it's posted at this church, and it says … 'Lead by Example' … It's not so much your words or what you say, but it's always by what you do … By them giving examples through their lifestyles and their marriages." Scott also mentions that a fellow parishioner knew of his desire to improve his relationship skills, so the parishioner gave Scott a relationship education program flyer, and he subsequently attended. Thus, members of the church community can be positive role models and sources of influence contributing to the development of marital social capital, but we find relatively few respondents view their religious community in this manner.

Ending the Cycle of Unhealthy Relationships

While most respondents have not experienced positive relationship role models, they recognize the importance of finding new sources of influence and ending the cycle of unhealthy relationships. Respondents often achieve this by setting a good example for others and sharing new skills they learn in their relationship classes with children, partners, friends, extended family, and co-workers. They seek new ways to build marital social capital—to find lasting and successful relationships, to partner

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with someone of quality, to sustain existing relationships, and to become good sources of influence. This may not be surprising given they all decided to enroll in a healthy relationship program.

As noted earlier, we define marital capital as the influences and experiences that respondents bring with them to relationships that either increase or decrease their odds of relationship success. Some respondents try to increase their marital social capital by trying to reach their marriage ideals. Many program participants seem to have a clear picture of the kind of person with whom they want to have a relationship, and they seek to find people who will match these characteristics. For example, Jill explains the importance of coupling with a like-minded partner who challenges her to change and grow in positive ways. She states,

> My whole thing was, is that I want somebody that wants what I want. And maybe not wanting want I want, but at a certain extent have, see what I want and what he wants and then we combine what we have and grow from there … It's just someone, the basic things-loving, caring, you know, intelligent, someone that I can learn from. You know, even teach and let him learn from me. Someone I can just grow with and not just be stuck at a certain level. I want to grow.

This quote illustrates how Jill is trying to find someone who will improve her chances of making the relationship a success. She recognizes how relationships can become stagnant and wants to find a partner who can grow and improve along with her.

Single respondents often speak of hypothetical partners, or 'ideal' partners, that they anticipate dating and marrying in the future. Interestingly, these partners, though not currently in the lives of respondents, act as guiding forces that influence respondents in concrete, albeit indirect ways. Respondents change things about themselves in an effort to please an ideal partner or meet the expectations of someone they would like to date in the future. Marie, mentioned earlier, recognizes that she has to change things about herself in accordance with values she believes her future ideal partner will require of her, "umm, just basically trying to get myself in order so I can become somebody's wife … I don't want to [drink and] I don't want to date anybody that drinks." The influence of hypothetical partners is exclusively indirect as these partners are not yet involved in

respondents' lives. This ideal acts as a guide for improving Marie's marital social capital.

Recognizing how marital social capital limitations shaped their own lives, some parents try to compensate for lack of capital in their children's lives. Parents mention trying to set good examples for their children and live in such a way as to be good relationship role models. Some respondents are willing to change their bad habits in order to set a better example for their children, thus increasing their children's marital social capital. While most marriage initiatives focus primarily on relationships between men and women, we found that some respondents attended with the main goal of learning how to interact with their children. Latisha admits that she wanted the program to teach her how to be a better role model for her children, "… like, to me [the program] should have been about us as role models and us seeking … to do new and good things with our children."

In addition, parents seek suitable role models in the people they date so they too can be a positive influence on children's lives. In so doing, they are increasing the marital social capital of their children and ending the cycle of unhealthy relationships, preventing their children from experiencing the same lack of relationship success. Debbie, a 56-year-old married mother of four, was hesitant to let her boyfriend at the time (now her husband) move in with her and her son, "… you know, because I wasn't setting a good example. I mean, in my mind, in my moral, the way, well not the way I was raised but in my belief that wasn't right." Parents do not want their children to learn it is acceptable to move in and out of relationships. Mary, a single, 31-year-old mother of two states that she,

> … don't really want to step into no relationship, because I don't want nobody to come into my life and get out my life again because of his mistakes or whatever. And my kids keep seeing that, and then they think its okay to keep on hopping into relationships. I want my boys to grow up and have just one woman, one wife.

We asked Krystal, a 29-year-old mother of three, what would have to be in place before she would consider marrying her boyfriend. She replied, "… stability. Both of us in a job, both of us … having all of our kids in the proper daycare or proper schools that would fit the needs of our kids. I mean, making sure that if he is the perfect role model for my kids."

Finding good role models for their children is often necessary to undo the damage done by their children's biological fathers. Some women discuss how ex-husbands or the fathers of their children fall short as positive role models. Gail, a 23-year-old mother of one, is in the middle of divorcing her husband. When asked what she is looking for in an ideal partner, she stated, "… this person's gonna be in, in my son's life. And I want to make sure that they got their head on straight and can set a good example for my son. And my ex-husband is not, or soon to be ex-husband is not a good example for him." Gail goes on to say that she is looking for,

> …someone that will have to be a role model. Someone that can set a good example for my son. 'Cause it doesn't make sense if I'm working so hard and then he comes home slacking … then [my son] thinks he can do the same thing. And that's not the way that you're supposed to live life. And his dad is a prime example of that.

While most respondents have not had good examples of successful marriages and relationships, they recognize the importance that role models have played in their lives in the development of their marital social capital. Their lack of marital social capital has made them work at improving themselves and find a mate who possibly has good marital social capital, thus increasing their chances of success. Moreover, they want their children to have better lives in general and positive romantic relationship trajectories specifically. One way to ensure this is to try to set good examples for their children and increase their marital social capital by exposing them to good role models. Sometimes this means putting their own lives on hold and waiting until after the children have left home before dating again.

DISCUSSION

We address the importance of social context as a potential challenge to forming healthy relationships and marriages. Even though most program participants are supportive of marriage and would eventually like to marry, we find that the lack of positive marriage role models, as well as family, peer, and community influences, shape respondents' relationship beliefs and behaviors. Examples of successful, happy marriages are scarce in respondents' communities. Moreover, most respondents were raised in unstable family forms and lacked marital social capital development

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opportunities. Coupled with the absence of role models among extended family and in the community, respondents are left without guidance on how to make a marriage work; moreover, they have learned to avoid bad marriages at all costs.

Throughout, we refer to the influence of role models. By observing role models who engage in unproductive relationship behaviors, or perhaps observing the lack of marital relationships in the social context, respondents may seek to avoid marriage. Only a few respondents in our sample directly know someone or live in communities with "good" marriages. We find that there is not a lack of relationship role models in the social context, but there is specifically a lack of *positive* role models. Lack of positive relationship role models, however, can be a source of motivation for change. As a result, our respondents often seek to improve themselves and acquire the skills they need to build marital social capital and become positive role models in order to interrupt the cycle of bad and broken relationships for the sake of their children.

Our work contributes to prior studies on family socialization by showcasing the ways that families influence adults and how childhood family experiences play a role in adult relationships. We find that family influences are not uniformly positive and may act to deter positive relationship progression. Contrary to our expectations, we found little evidence to suggest that families in disadvantaged social contexts influence relationship decisions by providing or withdrawing financial support for marriage. Negative family experiences are often a motivation to change and end the cycle of unhealthy relationships. These findings suggest that childhood family experiences may not have a straightforward influence on adult union formation and speak to some explanations about how family experiences matter in adulthood.

Results indicate that few respondents are susceptible to direct peer influence on romantic relationships. This finding is consistent with other research findings that suggest that susceptibility to peer influence diminishes over the life course as adults gain a greater capacity for self-reflection, self-socialization, and assert a greater degree of agency compared to younger individuals (e.g., Giordano,

Cernkovich and Holland 2003). Some respondents, however, appreciate friends' approval of relationships, which makes it easier to integrate their partners into their wider social networks and potentially lessens tensions in their romantic relationships. Respondents consider and evaluate the relationship behaviors and decision-making processes of their peers, but respondents do not act in accordance with example alone.

The community influence seems to operate in terms of the program and cultural supports in the neighborhood rather than just a direct influence of the neighborhood, per se. The high mobility of members in disadvantaged neighborhoods suggests that neighborhoods may not have a direct influence. Similarly, we find religion is not a strong influence in terms of establishing role models. Instead, religious communities serve as an important source of support and guidance in the development of marital social capital. We find that relationship education programs may represent "weak ties." It appears that the program instructors have a strong influence even greater than their own family or friends. Even though some disadvantaged men and women may lack of family or friend role modeling of healthy relationships, some individuals may adopt new attitudes, practices, and beliefs by observing or hearing about the experiences of others who have learned positive relationship skills from other sources, such as a relationship education program (i.e., weak ties). Furthermore, program participants may become the source and transmit their knowledge back to members of their community. Relationship programs provide respondents with relationship skills and new sources of influence. Though programs and participants are a potential new source of influence in the development of marital social capital, it is important to remember that there are barriers to diffusion of new ideas. Specifically, others may be unreceptive to respondents' advice or may be leery of governmental programs. These findings suggest that new relationship role models may emerge from these programs and become potential positive sources of influences on others.

In this paper, we refer the concept of marital social capital. Marital social capital can be thought of as enmeshment in a network of people who individuals may draw on for the support, norms,

and values to help them in their steps toward marriage and marital stability. Many respondents are entering into relationships without good examples upon which to base their decisions and behaviors or weak marital social capital. Additionally, many participants are in family and peer groups that are unable to provide different kinds of support to help foster healthy romantic relationships. Perhaps it is no wonder so few succeed in the marriage market – they are lacking marital social capital. It does not appear, however, that respondents are oblivious to the lack of marital social capital or the effect that it had on their lives. Respondents seem to be aware of how the lack of good role models shaped their own lives and work at improving upon their marital social capital. We find that respondents are interested in taking their lives in new directions by changing their relationship decisions and behaviors. They recognize the need to work on themselves in order to be better prepared for relationships. Some respondents make rational and observable decisions regarding themselves and the people they date in an attempt to try and increase their chances of finding a lasting and successful relationship, to partner with someone of quality, and to sustain existing relationships. Some parents are sensitive to their own lack of marital social capital and attempt to build capital to enhance the lives of their children. Parents build marital social capital for their children by setting good relationship examples and seeking suitable role models in the people they date. In sum, despite the fact that many respondents do not have positive marriage role models to emulate, they recognize the importance of being good role models for their children, as well as partnering with a good role model so that their children may have better lives and maintain better relationships with their future partners. In other words, they seek to end the transmission of negative and unhealthy relationship dynamics.

Our results suggest that future relationship education programs can be improved by recognizing that the social context of participants' lives influences marriage and relationship decisions prior to and beyond the program. These findings may not be generalized to all marriage initiative program participants because they are based on in-depth interviews with 57 respondents who participated in specific programs. Certainly, there is some potential selection bias in those who were willing to

participate in the study; for example, we had very few male respondents. Furthermore, respondents with extremely negative experiences may be reluctant to participate; however, our sample discussed quite distressing family circumstances. Even though our findings are limited to relatively disadvantaged respondents' experiences in one metropolitan area, we expect that the importance of social influence may be similar in other cities and among more advantaged populations.

Our qualitative data provide both theoretical and measurement contributions to further research marriage and family. As articulated by Wilson (1987), we demonstrate that disadvantaged respondents do lack 'mainstream role models' and have limited access to marital social capital. This shows one mechanism through which disadvantage may influence behavior and attitudes. Wilson (1996) argues that in environments with weak social norms, economic factors matter more for family behavior than in environments with strong social norms. Thus, the influence of disadvantage may vary depending upon the social context. Our work also suggests extensions of social learning and diffusion theories by recognizing that individuals are not totally passive when embedded in these networks. For example, many respondents realized that not all role models in their life are positive. Some participants even took the initiative to stop unhealthy relationship cycles and become positive role models themselves in order to help their children build marital social capital. These represent feedback loops and should be incorporated into approaches aimed at studying individual change in family formation behavior. What still needs to be addressed in the literature is if agency in socialization is enough to overcome structural barriers.

As discussed in this paper, prior empirical studies on the barriers and challenges to marriage rarely consider the social context. Our findings along with other studies on social influence suggest that large-scale surveys should incorporate new measures of social context influences and roles. Fore example, surveys may include items that query about the extent of marriage in social networks to more direct measurement of how others influenced beliefs and behavior. Our results indicate that these social processes are complex and should incorporate positive and negative role models as well as a variety of

sources of influence in disadvantaged social contexts. This paper showcases the value of considering social context in analysis of marriage processes and will hopefully generate further research on this topic.

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