

Brookings Barriers to Stable Marriages Panel
September 21, 2005 -Smart Marriages listserv

From: Smartmarriages Mailing List

Sent: Wednesday, September 21, 2005 4:20 PM

To: List

Subject: Brookings "Barriers to Stable Marriage" panel - 9/05

Here is a link to the complete 60-page transcript of the "OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO STABLE MARRIAGE" event at Brookings on Sept 13 that included Ron Mincy, Kathy Edin, Julie Baumgardner, etc:<http://www.brookings.edu/comm/events/20050913.pdf>

Reading this is almost like being there -- you can sense the energy in the room. To whet your appetite, here is just a small clip:

QUESTION to Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton: Hi. I'm Jennifer Grayson from Legal Momentum, which is the new name of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund. I first want to thank you for drawing attention to these issues, both in my professional life and as a constituent. But I do have a question about the (D.C.) marriage development program. As you know, four out of five single parents are women, and we're concerned that the exclusion of single parents from that program discriminates against women. I was wondering if you could address that.

DELEGATE NORTON: It's hard for me to believe that would be your concern. Virtually the only programs out here are for single never-married women. This program is. I don't think you would say, for example, that the tax laws and the way in which they operate sometimes to favor single people, sometimes to favor married people, I don't think anyone has brought a suit, or a successful one, saying that the tax laws are discriminatory. And I believe that if there were that the notion that every program has to address every constituency, even if the constituency has the bulk of the programs, would seem very selfish and one-sided, to be very frank with you. The people who can get TANF more easily, the people who can get food stamps, for very good reason have been single women. We're not saying here's something for men, even. We're saying here's something for men and women. How is it discriminatory if a man and a woman together get this? You'd have a hard time with that one in court or anywhere else. And particularly will you have a hard time in the African American community or in our country. I don't think you will find those, including a person like me, who considers herself a leading feminist in this country, buying into the notion that a program which helps married people, who are men and women, is discriminatory in our country. I don't believe it as a lawyer, I don't believe so and as a policy matter, I think it's one of the things that may give feminism a bad name. People think that we are somehow, we buy into this notion of women and women don't need men. Hey. That's not where, I'm sure, you are. That's not where most feminists are. And I don't believe that a good legal case or a good policy case can be

made that, particularly in light of the tax laws which I think is a preeminent example, an in-your-face example would favor people, and now more and more based on marriage. I don't think that any case can be made that laws to reinforce the family unit by reinforcing marriage and thereby helping children who are often helpless in single-mother homes, I have no doubt that as a policy matter and as a legal matter our country will receive that. Thank you very much.
[Applause.]

Sara McLanahan was sick; Ron Haskins summarized her written remarks:

. . . . A number of the points that Sara wanted to open with have already been covered. The first and most of important of them, and the reason we're here today, is because of the very dramatic changes in family composition. But the one aspect of that that Sara wanted to emphasize is that it's the transitions themselves the children are subjected to that seem, based on the social science research, to really make a big difference. And part of it has to do with something that many people might not think of, and that's cohabitation.

COHABITING relationships are inherently much shorter, and therefore many, both men and women, get involved in cohabiting relationships that last a very brief time, and they go from one relationship to the next, and the children go through this transition after transition after transition. And it could be the transitions themselves that are really a major problem here. So the point is that it's the transitions that make a difference as well as a number of other aspects of dissolving relationships, especially conflict. So by having instability in our family structure, we are subjecting children to factors that we know have a negative impact on their development.

There are a few facts that Sara wanted to mention that are quite surprising to some people. One of them is that the United States, despite all the problems, is really an outlier among Western countries, in the sense that we still seem to have at least a public we place a great value on marriage. The attitudes toward marriage among American citizens, including people who are not married and have never been married, are very positive. Our marriage rates, despite many years of decline

So the American experience with regard to marriage actually stands out from other Western nations. Another thing is that the marriage-family structure and we've already mentioned this before, but it's a crucial point, especially for this audience, because most of us tend to be more interested in the development of low-income children than other children and all of these negative consequences are disproportionately visited upon low-income children. And therefore, as I mentioned in the beginning, if we could do something to increase family structure and make healthy marriages, rather than marriages of high conflict, as Mrs. Norton referred to, it would have a disproportionately positive impact on children. In fact, Belle has done research showing that the two things that probably would have the greatest impact in reducing poverty, which in turn could be expected to have positive effects on children, is to increase work and to increase marriage.

What radical new Ideas we come up with here at Brookings. Work and marriage it's amazing. There are many important questions in the field. One, of course, is why low-income women don't marry. And a number of the people on the panel are going to address those issues. I think maybe there might be some agreement in the field, and Kathy Edin is one probably who knows the most about this, and I'm going to look forward to her comments.

There is one fact here that I think should be put on the table. It's not a fact yet, but it's a matter of opinion and I want to make it clear because some of you may know that I mostly am a little bit right of center and some of my friends in the Republican Party have been a little resistant to this point, and that is that economics does play a major role. And I think Mrs. Norton was correct when she said that males who do not have income and do not have employment are not necessarily the most desirable males to marry. And it's possible that women realize that, and Kathy Edin is here to talk about that a little bit. So the economic part of this picture is probably a very important part of it.

To print and read the full transcript:

<http://www.brookings.edu/comm/events/20050913.pdf>

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