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Marriage — It Can't Be Normative If it Isn't the Norm

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A major study published today in Britain offers clear evidence — again — that marriage is the best context for bringing up children. The study is noteworthy because of the widespread respect that it has already attracted and for the fact that it, in a very real sense, merely states the obvious (or what certainly should be obvious).



As *The Telegraph* [London] reports today:

Marriage is the best environment to raise children and offers the greatest chance of a stable upbringing, an independent study commissioned by the Tories reveals today.

Unmarried parents are up to five times more likely to experience family breakdown, according to the survey of 15,000 families carried out for the social justice policy review group headed by Iain Duncan Smith, the former Tory leader.

Here is the rub:

The findings will put intense pressure on David Cameron to offer voters a cast-iron guarantee that he will put marriage at the heart of Tory policies on the family.

Some of the Conservative leader's advisers want him to tone down the party's support for marriage because they fear the party risks alienating support from unmarried families.

In other words, politicians fear a backlash from unmarried parents if the study's research becomes widely known. The political animal is always predictable. Meanwhile, *The Telegraph* offered an editorial comment on the study — a comment that affirmed the fact that marriage is the best context for bringing up children, but then offers the nonsensical argument that this finding does no mean that other arrangements such as co-habitation or single-parenthood are necessarily any less conducive. Note this wording carefully: *The point of marriage is that it is a public declaration of commitment, with attendant legal obligations. So it is hardly surprising that unmarried people should be up to five times more likely to break up. It also makes a compelling case for the Conservative Party's policies to reflect that reality: a vigorous support for marriage as the most stable and successful family unit, and the best environment in which to raise children, ought to be a natural position for the state to take.* So far, so good. But the editors go on to assert:

To offer support to marriage is not to ignore the social changes that have occurred, nor to rule out the possibility that unmarried, or single, parents can do well by their children. And single mothers are, for the most part, the victims of feckless men.

To say that marriage is the best option is not to dismiss the value of many other parents who do an exceptionally difficult job in exceptionally difficult circumstances. It is just to say that it would be better if they were the exception.

By the time the editors finish assuring non-married parents that they and their children are not necessarily any worse off than married parents the argument runs out of steam. After all that has been said, why would it be better if alternatives to marriage “were the exception?”

You cannot argue for the normativity of marriage while simultaneously denying that there is no basic reason why other arrangements should be less than normative. Once again, the cult of sensitivity trumps a simple affirmation of the obvious. If marriage is to be seen as normative, cohabitation and other non-marital arrangements must be seen as, well, less than normative — at the very least. This cannot be accomplished without some stigma attaching itself to cohabitation and giving birth out of wedlock. The main purpose of this stigma is to teach, not to punish. But violations of social norms always involve some social cost. If not, the norm is no longer normative.

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