Title: Economic Disadvantage and Relationship Outcomes among Married Couples

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The strong association between economic disadvantage and marital dissolution risks is well documented, but there has been practically no research on why poverty makes it more difficult to sustain marital relationships. In this paper, we use longitudinal data on 4,000 married couples from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to measure the effects of economic disadvantage on two broad sets of risk factors previous research has found to be related to marital quality and stability.

Our conceptual framework distinguishes extrinsic and intrinsic risk factors and posits an important relationship between the two. Extrinsic factors include individual-level characteristics (e.g., growing up with two biological parents, values and beliefs, health and mental health, employment and education); family-level characteristics (e.g., number and ages of biological and step-children); and community-level characteristics (e.g., marriage market, norms concerning alternatives to marriage). We hypothesize that extrinsic factors affect marital quality and stability by changing intrinsic dyadic processes; that is, the elements of interaction that constitute couples' relationships (e.g., communication, support, understanding). Intrinsic processes are fundamentally important for theory as the proximate determinants of marital satisfaction and stability and they are central in emerging federal marriage policy as the primary change objects for marriage education.

Our analytic approach utilizes a regression decomposition method that assesses the contributions of each extrinsic and intrinsic factor to the overall difference in means between economically disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged couples. The technique provides estimates of the contributions of differences in mean levels and slopes for each explanatory factor. To measure better the central concept of "economic disadvantage," we create two indices using factor analysis: a couple-level measure based on education, occupational prestige, and recent employment history; and a neighborhood-level measure based on per capita income, poverty, education and unemployment. This study is the first, to our knowledge, to explore formally the connections between economic disadvantage and marriage outcomes.