

Gerardo: My name is Gerardo Espinal Franco. I'm the Assistant Director at the Stone Center. I'm very happy to introduce our inaugural book talk event, where the topic of family structure and its link to socioeconomic inequality will be discussed through the lens of a new book by Professor Melissa Kearney. Professor Kearney is the Neil Moskowitz Professor of Economics at the University of Maryland, the director of the Aspen Economic Strategy Group, and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. She is a distinguished and data-driven scholar whose research has made significant contributions to understanding poverty, inequality, and social policies intended to remedy these challenges. Her new book, *The Two-Parent Privilege*, offers an analysis of the decline in marriage that may be linked with a variety of economic difficulties for parents and a host of impediments to opportunity for children. It is reigniting a long debate in the US about the consequences of broad changes in family structure and parenting since the 1970s. Joining Professor Kearney for a discussion this evening are several esteemed colleagues. Steven Durlauf, Director of the Stone Center and Steans Professor in Education Policy; Damon Jones, Associate Director of the Stone Center and a professor here at Harris; Ariel Kalil, a Stone Center Advisor and Daniel Levine Professor of Public Policy here at UChicago. Each brings a unique perspective and wealth of expertise to different dimensions of the topic at hand. Following their remarks, Geoff Wodtke, associate director of the Stone Center and Professor of Sociology, will moderate the discussion between the speakers and facilitate questions from the audience. Please join me in extending a warm welcome to our panelists and moderator for what we hope will be a thought-provoking discussion.

Melissa: Well, thanks so much for having me and for organizing this. It's a treat to be here. I also want to acknowledge that one of the first places I presented the work I was pulling together for this book was at the Harris School; I presented this work before I submitted my manuscript in an academic seminar to Harris School faculty, and so I've really benefited from comments from people at this institution from the beginning of this project. What I want to do with my time at the podium is to give a broad introduction to the themes and the data that I outline in the book, and I want to do that by starting with my motivation for writing it, which is really an interest in inequality and social mobility in America. I want to situate this topic of family structure, or what I have referred to as the two-parent privilege, in this broader conversation. In my experience over the past two-plus decades as somebody studying inequality and poverty and family well-being and social mobility in America, I've been in countless conversations with other social scientists and policymakers about how to address the high level of inequality and threats to social mobility in the US. I kept finding over and over that we would return to the same familiar topics: how to improve the safety net and make it stronger for families; how to improve schools; how to advance affordable housing; criminal justice reform; stronger labor market

institutions; progressive tax reform to pay for some of these initiatives and get more money to people who need it. These are all important topics, and I've written on many of them myself. But I kept coming back to the fact that one of the strongest factors driving inequality, family well-being, and threats to social mobility in this country was what's been going on for the past four decades with families in America. This was really obvious in the data, and most social scientists knew that family and family structure was important, but in my experience, this was typically the elephant in the room in these conversations. It's a lot harder to talk about the role of families and what to do about the increase in kids living in a one-parent home than it is to talk about how to make the tax code more progressive. Why? Well, obviously, when you bring up topics of families it's a lot more personal, there are a lot of sensitivities involved, and it's also harder to know as social scientists or policymakers what to do about it. But I just got to the point where I felt like we really couldn't have an honest or productive conversation about inequality or social mobility in America, and won't really make great headway addressing these things, if we don't deal with the need to strengthen families in this country. So that's what the book is about.

Let me start with just a basic motivating fact, which is that over the past 40 years, the share of kids in the US living with married parents has declined from 77% to 63%. That's a pretty stunning decline. Only 63% of kids in America now, at a snapshot in time according to US Census data, live with married parents. We'd feel very differently about this statistic if 37% of kids were just living with stable cohabiting parents who were essentially committed to the partnership of raising their kids, but just weren't married in name. But in fact, that's not what's happened. Rather, 21% of kids now live with an unpartnered mother: a mother who has neither a spouse nor a second partner of either gender in the home that they consider a partner. Another 4.5% of kids live with an unpartnered father using that same definition. Another 4.5% of kids live with neither parent. And 8% of kids in the US Census live with unmarried parents: one biological parent and that parent's partner; and in about a quarter to 40% of cases, that second partner is not the child's second biological parent. So even that 8% of kids living with unmarried parents somewhat overstates the share of kids growing up with the benefit of their two parents in the home. This puts US kids in a unique position. According to a Pew Research Survey of 130 countries around the globe, US kids are more likely than kids in any other country in the world to live with only one parent in their home. Some countries in Europe or the UK are starting to catch up to the US, but still, the US is an outlier here. My take on this is that this is a form of American exceptionalism that doesn't serve our kids or families well. Now, one might look at this and say, well, American women are the richest women in the world; they're the most likely to be able to financially provide for their kids on their own or to not need a partner to

undertake the project of raising kids or running a household. But this is where the class gap is really critical to all of this. It is not the most economically successful women in America who, in large numbers, find themselves raising children in a home without a partner. Here I'm showing you what's happened over the past 40 years in the share of kids living with married parents by mom's education. Among kids whose moms have a four-year college degree, the share of them living with married parents has fallen only from 90% to 84% in 40 years. That's a pretty small decline, and it's actually quite surprisingly small when you think about how much bigger that group of women is: it used to be only 11% of moms had a four-year college degree, now it's about 30%, and yet still marriage among college-educated moms is holding strong. The really surprising fact here is what's happened in the middle of the education distribution. Over the past 40 years, the share of kids living with married parents among those whose moms have a high school degree or maybe some college but not a four-year college degree shows a 23 percentage point decrease, such that now the share of kids living with married parents among moms who have a high school degree is roughly equivalent to those whose moms don't even have a high school degree. We used to think about, in the 1980s, single motherhood really being tightly associated with teen childbearing and poverty, and the most disadvantaged groups in society. But when you look at the data now, single motherhood has become much more common outside the college-educated class, even among groups that we might have thought of as middle class.

To be clear, cohabitation is not closing these class gaps. 12% of children whose moms have a four-year college degree live with an unpartnered mother, as compared to about 30% of everyone else. What we really want to think about is that women who are less economically successful than college-educated women are the ones finding themselves doing the really difficult work of raising a child in an unpartnered household setting. There are also differences across the major race and ethnic groups in the US. The emergence of a Black-white gap in family structure in the 1960s and 1970s is well documented and has been studied at length. What's happened over the past 40 years is this emergence of the education gap I've already emphasized, and so that compounds these issues. So the issue of single-parenthood, or a lack of the two-parent privilege, really shows large race-ethnic and cross-education differences. Among Asian-American families, for instance, there is an exception to this pattern in the sense that we have not seen an emergence of an education gradient among Asian-American families in the US, which I think is quite striking. Children whose mothers identify as Black in the Census and whose moms have a four-year college degree are twice as likely to be living with married parents as those who don't.

Finally, in a very mechanical way, this divergence in family structure by education has amplified household income inequality that differences in the labor market would have delivered without this

additional change. Among households headed by a mom with a four-year college degree, household income went up by 59%, as compared to 8% for the middle group and a decrease of 14% for the bottom group. This is the well-known rise in inequality that's been documented over and over in labor economics: college educated did really well, the middle group was roughly stagnant, and a decrease at the bottom. Now, in the middle panel is the household income for households headed by unpartnered mothers. First, what you're seeing again, not surprisingly is that household income among partnered mother households for every level of income is about half that for the same education level with two parents. Because two parents typically have twice as much income. College-educated unpartnered mothers went up by about 60%; high school-educated by 19%; the bottom group 24%, all unpartnered mothers. All groups of unpartnered mothers are doing better now than they were 40 years ago. But when you put these things together and allow family structure and earnings to move as they actually did in the real world, households headed by college-educated workers, their earnings went up by 55%, because college-educated workers did really well, and they continued to get married and have two adults in the household. The middle group, instead of an 8% or 19% increase in household earnings, now sees their household earnings drop by 4%, because they're 23% more likely to only have one adult in the household. In a very mechanical sense, the rise in one-parent households for that middle-educated group has eroded middle-class economic security and amplified earnings inequality.

What's driving these trends? I spend a lot of time in the book on this. This is really being driven by an increase in the share of kids whose parents are never married. Divorce is down in the US; it's down conditional on marriage, but an increasing share of mothers have never been married. This matters for understanding what's driving these trends, but it also matters for the experience of kids, because kids whose parents were at some point married and later divorced had, for much of their childhood, the benefit of two parents in the household. They're also much more likely to subsequently receive child support or have engagement with the second parent. The overall share of births to unmarried mothers increased from 18% to 40% over 40 years; for high school-educated moms, this doubled from 25% to 52%, meaning more than half of births in the US to moms who have a high school degree are now non-marital births.

My broad sweep of social history: in the 1960s and 1970s, we see the social-cultural revolution and changing expectations about marriage and gender norms, and a reduction in marriage for all three education groups. In the 1980s and 1990s, the percent of college-educated women being married actually stalled out, and college-educated women now are much more likely to be married than other women; you see, for high school-educated women, and men just a straight line down. This is really driven by a reduction in marriage and, more to the point, a separation of the institution of marriage from having and raising kids

among adults without a four-year college degree.

Why? In very broad strokes, we had broad social changes, then in the 1980s and 1990s, a whole bunch of economic shocks hit high-income countries, including the US. Those shocks were generally very good for college-educated workers, not so good for workers without a college degree, especially men. I'm thinking about the loss of manufacturing jobs, the loss of industrial jobs on account of increased import competition from China, and the adoption of industrial robots. We have causal evidence that in communities hit by those shocks, where there was a loss of these well-paying middle-class jobs for men, there was a reduction in marriage and a corresponding rise in the share of kids living in single-mother homes. That compounds with new social norms and establishes new social conventions, such that now there's a decoupling of childbearing and marriage in many communities and many populations; even when communities see positive shocks and jobs have returned, and earnings have increased for non-college-educated men, what we see is that births go up, but marriages don't. My read of this is that we've had a compounding of changing social conventions with economic shocks that disadvantaged non-college-educated men, and now we're in a new social paradigm that will be very hard to turn around.

Why does this all matter for kids? I take a resource-perspective approach to this. The very basic fact is that household resources are greater in homes where there are two parents as opposed to one, and that's part of the privilege. This isn't a value-laden statement; this doesn't take anything away from the millions of single parents who are working tirelessly to do everything they can to provide for their kids. It's just a simple statement of reality: that raising kids is really hard, but when there are two adults in the household, there are more combined resources, and that is an advantageous situation for children. The first obvious resource advantage is income: children being raised in single-mother homes are five times more likely to live in poverty as compared to married-parent homes; single-father homes, three times more likely. Median household income is basically twice as high if there are married parents versus one parent. Income is very protective, especially in the US; it's the difference in what kind of neighborhood and schools kids can live in and go to. But it's not just income: households with two parents also have more collective parental time to invest in their children, and there's more emotional energy. Ariel Kalil, of course, has produced seminal work in this field; generally, the way to think about this is that more resources lead to more parental inputs. We see that higher-resource homes spend much more on kids; this is another way that the college-educated class is pulling away from everyone else. We also see that married parents spend more time with their kids than unmarried parents; put them together, those kids are getting a lot more time of parents reading to them, driving to their activities, talking to them, all things that we think are beneficial for their outcomes.

We have lots of evidence that this translates into better outcomes for children. We do not, nor will we ever, nor should we ever have a randomized control trial that randomly assigns some kids to live with married parents and others not to. The preponderance of evidence suggests that kids growing up with the benefit of two parents in the household have all these additional resources, and what do we see? They're less likely to get in trouble in school, they're more likely to graduate high school and college, and then they go on to have higher levels of earnings and are more likely to be married themselves as adults. Controlling for income and time spent helps us understand the mechanisms through which two parents confer these privileges to their kids: once you adjust for income differences, the gaps in kids' outcomes are smaller. But in the real world, we don't equalize income between single and married parent households; that's one of the biggest differences. We also see that kids living with only a mom who are spending more time with their dads seem to be less likely to have behavioral trouble or get in trouble in school.

The context and situation matters. What a mother brings herself to the household, plus what her partner brings, plus how those resources translate into kids' outcomes, really determine what my colleague and I refer to as the marriage premium for kids. As single mothers have become less disadvantaged over time, they bring more to themselves; so whether marriage would benefit an individual child or household depends on what that second parent would bring. We have evidence from the economic literature showing that, for instance, when the second parent is a convicted criminal, random assignment to judges that are more likely to put that parent in prison looks like it's actually beneficial for kids. This underscores the point that thinking about what the partner would bring, and how we shore up the economic position and preparedness of millions of dads to be positive contributors to the household, really is at the heart of what we need to do.

I'll conclude with rapid-fire takeaways. The most controversial position I take in this book is that I think we need to be honest about the benefits and advantages of a two-parent home and foster a norm of two-parent homes for children. I do not think we should accept a reality where the two-parent family is becoming increasingly a thing of the past for adults without a college degree. I don't think we should just run marriage promotion programs. I do think we should put a lot more funding and research energy into figuring out how to strengthen families and meeting them where they are. Thank you.

Steven: First of all, thank you, Melissa, for coming. It's an important book, it's a controversial book, and it's important to think about the issues. For anybody who's an egalitarian or concerned about inequality, the questions you raise have to be part of the conversation. I want to make three points: one will be a point of agreement, one will be a point of partial agreement, and one will be a

disagreement.

First: you are surely correct that family structure matters. One of the things I found bizarre in the public reaction to the book, at least in social media and some book reviews, was questioning this fact. Any vision we have of the developmental trajectories of children recognizes that family income every year matters, family structure every year matters, neighborhoods matter, schools matter, and so on. It is really impossible, from the perspective either of conventional social science theories of development or of the facts on the table about how different trajectories influence children, to disagree with the proposition that changes in family structure are going to have some consequence for the eventual outcomes children have in adulthood. So I think you need to be applauded for putting these facts on the table in an unabashed and unapologetic fashion.

Where I have a partial agreement has to do with the policy recommendations. First thing I want to say is that I largely endorse every policy recommendation you make in one dimension: one way to think about what you've identified in the book is a co-evolution of family structure and incomes in a society that we think has had consequences for the distribution of income and consequences for intergenerational mobility. The dimension where I would fully agree with you is policies whose objective is to diminish the effects of disparities in family backgrounds on future outcomes. What you've identified in the book are trajectories of family resources, broadly defined, which are diverging in certain important respects and, as a result, are causing divergence in the outcomes of children in the next generation. The obvious policy answer to that would be to ask: how do we render the accident of birth, the accident of family structure or family income, less important in terms of those disparities? When a recommendation is made in the book, such as the enhancement of early childhood investments or education, I certainly think that's a very appropriate argument. What I would emphasize is that in doing this, this has really nothing to do with family structure per se; it has to do with equality of opportunity considerations. In thinking about the injustice of inequality, a natural dimension, which is due, of course, to John Roemer and others, is to focus on responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism. It's a triviality to say children are not responsible for the accidents of birth or the accidents of family structure. On that sense, I think the justifications for many of the policies that Melissa advocates aren't really coupled to the issue of family structure; they're coupled to the consequences of having disparities in resources.

The second thing, which is the partial disagreement, is that I think there needs to be more attention on disparities in adolescence. It has become commonplace to advocate early childhood investment, and I think for good reasons; there's obviously powerful evidence about its efficacy. However, I think it's important also to step back and think

about the issue of trajectories. Children have experiences of family structure, family income, the occupations of the parents, and the educational levels of the parents, all of this which are influential at different ages. For that reason, I think the public discourse on inequality and intergenerational mobility has neglected the adolescent years. I'll give you an example. This is recent research I've conducted with Yoosoon Chang, Seunghee Lee, and Joon Park. We take a standard dataset in the United States and ask: can I identify sensitivity to adult permanent income, that is, average income in adulthood, with reference to sensitivities of income at different ages? What shows up in the American data is an increasing sensitivity of child outcomes to parental income all through adolescence; it drops at age 18, and you can guess why: that's an American social norm in terms of the obligations of parents to children. The interpretation I would put on the table is that in thinking about the consequences of family resources for children, you have to ask what the resources are going to and what does the social safety net in America represent at different ages. Whatever view one takes of that safety net, it is better for young children than it is for teenagers. As children get older, the primary object that family resources are controlling is memberships in schools and neighborhoods; the reason income is turning out to be important in the adolescent years is that it's telling us something about what the parent's income does for the children, not as a direct investment in the children in the early-childhood investment sense, but as children develop and social influences become more important, the inequalities are emerging because of the disparities in the capacity of parents to locate their children in particular neighborhoods and particular schools. All of that speaks to a different set of policies I would recommend to diminish the importance of disparities due to the accident of birth. I put this in the broad category of what I'm going to call the memberships theory of inequality. In early childhood, the direct focus is on the family in isolation: what the parents are doing in the context of the home. As children develop and social influences become more important, other memberships matter: peers, neighborhood, schools. Those are the disparities that are particularly salient in the data analyses suggested by using more powerful statistical techniques. As a result, the upshot is that it is the segregation of neighborhoods and schools by income and by race that is the exacerbation of the differences in family backgrounds, and that's where I think there needs to be more policy attention.

The final thing, where I said we have some disagreement, has to do with how to think about this issue of improving norms. I think it's correct that one cannot use conventional economic explanations alone to understand the trends in family structure. Two things I want to add: one is to actually look at the incarceration rates by race in the United States. A paper that literally just appeared in *Demography* demonstrated a remarkable decline of incarceration rates among African Americans: the famous statistic that one third of African American men

will eventually be in prison at some point in their life is now down to 20%. That's a dramatic change. We don't see associated changes in marital structure associated with it, which suggests that the conventional explanation about a shortage of marriageable men is not a sufficient one. The second thing is a recent paper by Andrew Cherlin, your neighbor down the road, which demonstrates that if you look at changes in non-marital single motherhood, there are dramatic changes among college graduates; so something that's underappreciated is the extent to which women who are college graduates are unmarried at the time of their first child. I put those two on the table as reinforcement of the importance of social factors.

Now, of course, Melissa mentioned dynamics: you have to be very careful about non-linearities going on, and I think there's partially a reversibility issue. Whatever happens in society, if you change behaviors, social attitudes change, and it's not a matter that you can necessarily move back. That's really your evidence on the fracking example: when you found the reversal of the economics, it didn't have the effect that would be predicted by the standard model. However, this is the point of disagreement: I'm not sure I want to focus on norms as a thing to strengthen. Consider the following thought experiment: suppose there are cases where somebody is an unkind husband but an excellent father. It may be good for them and good for the children if their parents do not get divorced. We would all be in complete agreement: we never tell those people not to get divorced. That's the point I want to put on the table: in thinking about norms and an argument in favor of norms, you have to make a judgment about what is unsatisfactory about the existing norms. It has to be a statement that we believe there's something about the decisions that mothers and fathers are making that does not fulfill some prior moral commitments that we think ought to be made. In my judgment, it is extraordinarily hard to make that argument in this context. The obvious argument in favor of strengthening social norms is spillover effects, externalities, the notion that parents are not internalizing the effects of their choices on the children. But I think of all the cases where we think about externalities and spillover effects, this may be the least persuasive. The evidence on the universality of care about children really is a universal construct. Marriage is essentially a human universal: there's literally only one society in the planet that's been identified as a contemporary exception to the existence of marriage. Furthermore, romantic love appears to be a possible universal, and there's no evidence that people are less interested in having committed two-partnered families. All that suggests to me something different, which is that it's not clear we want to say the norms are worse now than they were before. You have to have an explanation of how norms changed; perhaps it's merely a statement that patriarchal attitudes declined and self-realization as a value for women improved across time. I don't want to say the norms are bad, because norms by definition have a moral content to them, which I am unprepared to assert is applicable here.

To wrap up: I quote James Coleman, who famously said that social norms are actually a form of unfreedom, a statement that my choices are constrained by others other than myself. John Stuart Mill, of course, had many things to say about the cases where social norms can be inhibiting. I'm not saying Melissa thinks any of that. What I am saying seriously is that we have to be extremely careful in talking about strengthening norms, because there's an implicit moral judgment in that statement, and I don't think the case can be made. For me, the empirical policy recommendation is the amelioration of unjust inequalities through the accident of birth, and that's where we have full agreement on the next step.

Damon: Good evening, everyone, and welcome again. We're on a roll at the Stone Center: packed house, lively debate, so thanks to everyone for joining us. This is a great topic of discussion for the Stone Center; we're interested in inequality, and we know what happens during childhood matters a lot for lifetime outcomes and inequality. At a policy school, this is also a very relevant topic, in part because there's an important question about what to do, since children are not selecting the family that they're born into or the situation that they're born into, and these things are very consequential for them. Very excited to have this discussion. First thing I want to talk about: in reading the book, there's a good correlation of empirical results from Melissa's research and from other people's research that I found very interesting. Something that a lot of people have an intuition for that was really highlighted in the book is how economic trends have affected marital structure and child well-being. There's some very clean evidence there when you look at different communities that have been hit hard by different economic trends, and what then happens to family structure. That's pointed to as a robust body of evidence. Another interesting thing is an asymmetry: when those things start to improve again. In the book, there's a discussion of when there was a fracking boom in certain communities, you had a re-emergence of good jobs, in particular for men, and what the researchers found was an increase in births but not necessarily an increase in marriage or births within a marriage. So while both of those things sort of retreated during poor economic times, during the rebound, they both didn't equally rebound, which is interesting. Another interesting discussion I appreciated was on welfare reform and so-called welfare programs and what role those played in family structure. The evidence discussed in the book points to the fact that these welfare programs don't seem to be the key thing driving this change in family structure.

Now there's a question of the effect of family structure on inequality and income inequality and resources for children, and here I'm going to be a little more skeptical than Steven. When we think about a causal channel or mechanism, we usually want to think about: let's hold everything fixed, and let's flip a switch and just change one

thing in your life and see how that affects everything else. With cash or economic conditions, those things are a little easier to think about; the ideal experiment might be: let's just give people more cash and see what happens. It's a little harder for me to think about what even is the ideal experiment for family structure. The challenge is that your family structure, your income, things like your race, and child outcomes are all moving together over time. There are different causes of changes in family structure, so to me it's not completely clear that I want to hold everything fixed and just change your family structure; the things that caused your family structure to change may matter in terms of how a change in family structure results in downstream outcomes for children. If it's a slow change in social norms over time, is the ideal experiment to undo those social norms? If it's about a declining economy for certain types of men, is the ideal experiment to change those economic outcomes and then see what happens both for family structure and child outcomes?

Some of the evidence we do have in terms of looking at different family structures and outcomes faces difficulty in identifying what even the ideal comparison is. One example: there is some evidence in the book using something that causes family structure to change somewhat randomly. One of the studies looks at the gender of the firstborn child; when it's a daughter, there's a higher likelihood of divorce. Whether your firstborn child is a son or a daughter is largely out of your control, and so you can compare kids whose firstborn sibling is a son or a daughter and see what happens to child outcomes. But then it's hard to disentangle from why the gender of a daughter would cause a divorce, and what else does the gender of your child affect in terms of ultimate outcomes?

There's also just the question of the causal effect of family structure because it's so intertwined with other things. Another key question: among unmarried parents with less than a college education, if they were married, would they look like their married counterparts? You can think maybe there's a fixed pool of eligible partners; the ones who are married have found the partners that will contribute more income, and the ones who aren't married, there's none left that can. So what would happen if those people got married? That's a complicated question to answer.

A couple of things about some of the empirical evidence, just questions for clarification. In the key graph at the beginning, among all children, 77% were in married households, and it went down to 63%, but the ones with single mothers went from 17% up to 21%, so there wasn't as much of a growth in single-mother households as there was a decline in married households. My question there is: where are most of the kids transitioning to? Are they transitioning to cohabiting households? I couldn't completely tell from that graph. The second thing: a lot of the statistics in the book are about college-educated mothers and the rate of unmarried parents at their child's birth, and

those are very interesting. But another question is: among all children, where are the children of unmarried parents increasingly being found? The problem is that more and more children are being born into educated households, so those two things can go in opposite directions. If you look at the share of infants among unmarried homes in a Pew study, a majority of them are in households where parents have some college or more, which I think is another important question to raise.

Time for me to wrap up. I do share concern with Steven about the normative conclusions of the book. There has been a change in norms about whether people want to be married or not. There are other norms that we could equally think about changing: norms about cohabitation, norms about gender roles. So the question I have is: why just the norm of marriage? Why don't we focus on other norms that could be equally or more tractable to change? But overall, I enjoyed reading the book and look forward to our continued discussion.

Ariel: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. Welcome, Melissa; Melissa's a longtime friend of mine, and I'm a big admirer of her work. I especially appreciate her generous characterization of some of my work in her terrific book. I'm going to build on a couple of things that I think both Steven and Damon alluded to, which is really taking off from a fact that I think we all agree on: at a descriptive level, children who grew up outside of a stable two-parent married household have worse outcomes on lots and lots of measures that we find in the data. But the big question before us is, what shall we do about that? I am also going to reference some Pew data, which has been a big theme of the evening, and I'd like to talk about a household arrangement that I have been studying for my entire academic career: multigenerational households, typically three generations living together, grandparents and a parent generation and the children of those parents. I'm a big booster of this family arrangement, and I must say, in the 25 years I've been studying family structure, I am perpetually puzzled about why a promotion of social norms, if you want to call it that, or a set of public conversations about multigenerational households, is not more common.

The reason I'm puzzled is that if we look descriptively at the data, this household arrangement offers many of the attributes we've been talking about. Multigenerational households are more common among the very populations we're talking about tonight: those who are the least likely to be married. The things that drive the formation of multigenerational households include both financial considerations and caregiving needs. At a descriptive level, living in this family formation seems to reduce poverty. It is, by almost by definition, a site for caregiving, and caregiving can go in both directions across the generations. And if we just look at survey data from Pew, for those who choose this arrangement, it is mostly reported to be a positive experience.

Let me show you one of the very first papers I published as an assistant professor with my economist colleague Tom DeLeire. The title of the paper was "Good Things Come in 3s," so I'm not burying the lead. What I'm going to show you is a variety of outcomes in adolescence: the usual suspects that most demographers care about, kids' academic achievement, problem behavior, and sexual activity. If we look at children who, at the moment we find them in a cross-section, are living with their two biological parents who have been married for that child's entire childhood, those children have the best outcomes. But I want you to look at those same outcomes for children who, at the time of the survey, are living with their single mother who has never been married in a multigenerational household, and a comparable sample of children who is living with their mother who has formerly been married and who is also living with their grandparent. Descriptively, those children have just as good outcomes on almost all dimensions as their counterparts who are living with their two always-married parents.

Getting to what Damon just told you about the right counterfactual: those are very young mothers, never married, with very limited education, and very poor. The way you want to think about this thought experiment is what would happen if you substituted the potential marriage partner that that young woman would choose, and does that potential hypothetical marriage partner add to these child outcomes more than what that young woman's own mother does? And the answer is no: for a young woman who fits that demographic profile, her own mother is just as good a second caregiver as is the prospective man she would be married to. This is really trying to think about who is the right counterfactual.

The last bit of data I'm going to show is something I worked on more recently with some time-diary data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. We looked at time investments in children, an important theme that Melissa describes at length in her book. What I want you to imagine is: it's not just the expenditure of time that adults in the household are making on a child; from the perspective of children's development, you have to flip that around and say, who is investing in that child, and what is the sum total of time investments that that child is getting? When you do that, you get a very different portrait. The total number of minutes of daily caregiving that children in multigenerational households receive does not statistically differ from that of children in married-parent households. Children in multigenerational households receive the exact same share of caregiving minutes from their grandparents as children in married-parent households receive from their biological fathers. This may be one reason why those children appear to have equally positive outcomes. If you're going to talk about children's development, you have to take a child's perspective; there may be equally good substitutes for what a single mother is unable to do.

Very briefly: I do not think it's implausible to imagine that public policy can incentivize or support grandparents in their caregiving activities. Many of the same phrases and concepts we've been using to argue for why we should think about marriage as a solution to the developmental challenges children in single-parent households face, we might want to think about multigenerational households and what they can provide too.

Geoff: Thank you, Melissa, for that comprehensive summary of the data and trends in family structure and child outcomes, and to our panelists for their very thoughtful and incisive comments. As a sociologist as moderator, I'm going to inject some sociology into the discussion. I wanted to revisit a point that Damon made very quickly, which I'd be interested to hear more of all your reactions about, and that has to do with the intersection between norms about family structure and gender norms, gender role expectations. There's a now-classic book by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild called *The Second Shift*, which is about the revolution in gender norms you described in your slides: how norms around the role of women in work changed such that they became expected to work for pay, often full time, while also shouldering a disproportionate amount of child care and household labor, and she documents how this generates a great deal of stress on relationships and on mothers in particular. My question comes in two parts: first, how should we think about considering shifting norms around family structure without also considering current gender norms? And second, when considering the possibility of strengthening the norm of marriage or two-parent households, how should we weigh concerns about the well-being of parents, mothers in particular, against the potential benefits to children?

Melissa: This brings together a lot of the themes that came up. One of the negative reactions to my book is: hey, have you figured out how to break the patriarchy? Because if not, marriage isn't coming back. I'm here because I have the privilege of a co-parent at home who's driving the girls to their soccer practices. Fundamentally, I don't think it's the case that women's economic progress is fundamentally at odds with the institution of two parents in a household, and I keep coming back to the fact that the most economically successful group of women in our society, the college-educated, are still the ones who are doing this task of raising kids primarily with someone else in the household. A question worth asking is whether college-educated men, or at least the men who are partnering with college-educated women, are more accepting of shared household and childbearing responsibilities, and that's part of the reason why marriage is still a more stable institution among that group. We can ask that question. Clearly, norms around who shares household and childbearing responsibilities affect the formation and sustenance of healthy egalitarian relationships. I agree that norms restrict people's freedom; I do not think we should foster a norm where dads have to share the responsibilities for kids

only in a traditional way. If part of the reason why marriage isn't working or two-parent households aren't forming as much is the rigidity of traditional gender norms, I don't know that that's necessarily true, but I think it's worth asking whether there are differences in gender norms between college-educated groups and everyone else that contribute to this gap. On the question of how we compare parents' well-being and kids' well-being: everything we do in this country is about adult or elderly well-being; we do very little for kids' well-being, and I think this is one of the areas where an emphasis on individual freedom has actually resulted in a situation where kids are not getting the input and commitment from two parents that I would say kids deserve. To the extent there's tension between kids' well-being and what feels like welfare-enhancing freedom for adults at any given time, I will push on a norm that prioritizes children.

Steven: I was going to articulate some norms that I was more comfortable with. One of them would be a norm, simply saying that children deserve more priority in our society. My view on norms is they're essentially moral claims, and so if you ask me what norms we want society to cultivate, the number one is equal treatment and equal respect for people. Another one would be solidarity: that we internalize other people in our decision-making. I want to distinguish that from norms that focus on particular behaviors. The reason is that I think there are very strong reasons to believe that overall parents are deeply committed to their children, and individuals are deeply desirous of committed relationships. The specific statement about two parents, to me, implies that the trade-offs people are making are not ones that I think an impartial observer would find appropriate. I would rather say: cultivate the general issue of altruism toward children and toward each other. The point is that if you say society is cultivating that type of altruism, that seems admirable. And equal respect has manifestations for the issues you brought up about males doing housework and treating their wives as equals. Where I was uncomfortable was having to do with the fact that we do worry about gender inequities in society, and so it's hard for me to focus on a particular type of behavior as opposed to more general Kantian moral commitments to treat each other equally and to internalize each other's well-being.

Damon: I would just add that the thing I'd push back on that comes up in the book is this framing of marriage as a production function for child-raising. That's a little too limited in terms of thinking about why people get married; in addition to that, there's the well-being of the two parents: is this a good idea for the two parents? And the well-being of the parents spills over to the children. In my household, my parents were married when I was born; then they were still cohabiting, and their marriage had fizzled, and actually once they moved out of the household things, in my subjective view, had improved. I had less exposure to tension and actually had improved

interactions with my father after he moved out because there was less of some of the other problems present. So I think for some families, you have to take that into account. Also, even as economists, we want to think about: two parents marrying together increases the resources, but there are also costs involved with two people living together. When you add someone else and want to stay married, there are increased resources and potentially increased costs for some families.

Geoff: So, if I might just continue briefly on the topic of norms: sociologists make this distinction between injunctive versus descriptive norms. Injunctive norms are what ought to be, or what people collectively perceive as being approved or disapproved of, and descriptive norms are what people collectively perceive as what actually is, or how people act in a situation. I wonder: when you talk about strengthening norms or changing norms, the descriptive norm around marriage has clearly changed, but has the injunctive norm really changed much at all? There's quite a lot of qualitative evidence: if you ask low-income single-parent families, do you want to get married? Yes, they revere the institution; they treat it as an ideal; they just have a hard time envisioning how to realize that prescriptive ideal, given the constraints they face. In that setting, what would be the consequences of further strengthening injunctive norms around marriage? One potential side effect would be that it just stigmatizes the people who aren't able to live up to it or makes the ideal seem even further out of reach.

Melissa: I think this survey and qualitative evidence show that a lot of these low-income, primarily unmarried couples want what highly educated parents have, which is stable, healthy relationships, and they have a lot of barriers to achieving that. What you hear from a lot of these people is that they weren't raised in married-parent homes, they're not surrounded by married people, that's not something very familiar to them. So even if they say they want this, there are a lot of real barriers: mental health challenges, instability, intermittent incarceration, and intimate partner violence. Here's where I think it matters that, as thought leaders or policymakers, we don't want to come across as prescribing norms. Instead we keep leaning into government and schools to solve a lot of these problems, as opposed to saying: we understand that two-parent households are advantageous, and in the same way that we think college is advantageous and work to set a norm of college-going and promote programs that help more people go to college, we are going to throw a lot of public, community, philanthropic, and research energy toward helping low-income couples achieve safe, stable, healthy relationships. But we don't do it because it's not a policy priority, it's not something we want to name. There's a well-meaning intention: we don't want to stigmatize single parents. But what does that practically mean? It means there's no federal agency funding research into strengthening marriages or families. There's 1% of the Administration for Children and Families budget going to programs

aimed at strengthening families: 1%. It's not a priority because we don't want to sound like we as a society are prioritizing one family form over another. The truth is a lot of these couples want that, and they have real barriers, and so my point is: I'm not trying to get anyone to do something that's against their interests or to tell people with a bad relationship that they should stay together for the sake of the kids. I think back to the language of welfare reform and how explicit it was in saying that marital childbearing is a policy goal. In 2008, President Obama gave a speech on Father's Day lamenting the millions of dads that were missing from houses; I don't think a Democratic president would give that speech today. And all of this trickles down into a policy agenda that doesn't sufficiently help vulnerable families achieve the family structure that they themselves indicate wanting to achieve.

Ariel: In your book, you describe, but haven't mentioned yet this evening, that there have been large-scale randomized controlled trials of exactly this sort of thing: strengthening families, promoting marriage, trying to encourage better couple communication, especially among the low-income population, who as Melissa says and as these data and studies by Kathryn Edin show, would like to be married as their ideal. But my reading of those data is that they have been very unsuccessful. What might you say to that?

Melissa: What is there? There's like sixty-five million dollars a year in grants toward responsible fatherhood and strengthening families programs, compared to ten billion on Head Start, which I think is wildly underfunded by the way. But the government evaluated some marriage promotion programs; they didn't work. To the government's credit and community groups' credit, those have shifted; they're not marriage promotion programs anymore, they're responsible fatherhood programs, they're strengthening families programs. They operate on shoestring budgets, and they have, as Ariel would agree, I think, gems of promise when you read them: dads want to be engaged, there's maybe a reduction in maternal stress, but there's no real increase in relationship stability or child engagement. Why? Because these men have real barriers: they're not employed, they have other barriers. So what do we do? We just keep saying those programs don't work, let's keep innovating on schools and early childhood and child care, as opposed to saying let's try more comprehensive programs to help families. How many education interventions have been run with very weak results? How many training programs have been run with very weak results? We still invest in those things. And so this seems to be the one area of policy intervention where we got some weak RCT results and then sort of gave up and retreated to let's go back to schools and the safety net and see what government can do.

Steven: To follow up: where Jeff said I agree with him about the injunctive norms, my judgment overall is that our society's injunctive norms are appropriate, and that's why I emphasized exchange norms.

Here's a place where I think we do have agreement: I could have a norm of saying that people should be better parents, that they should be more vested in their children. That's not a statement about family structure per se; it's a statement about what I call the altruism or solidarity that matters. To the extent one wants to make an argument that collectively as a society, that norm should be improved, I'm very sympathetic to that. That also leads to broader conceptions of obligations: Ariel brought up the whole issue of grandparents. My wife was born in the Soviet Union; she came here years ago to follow her daughter, who had moved here, and she described her obligations as a grandparent: she was going to be in charge of teaching the Russian language, the music training, and gymnastics. And I was dumbfounded, because I never would have conceived of these as obligations of grandparents. The serious point, of course, is that that's a norm that actually should be strengthened. If we think of this as a collective obligation, a broad kinship obligation, it gets away from the idea that if somebody did something, there's going to be an associated social sanction. I think it's inevitable that norms come with components of sanctions in the form of guilt or shame or stigma, and that's why, for me, the word norm evokes certain costs. My preference is to focus these normative arguments on general ethical principles that emphasize the solidarity we all have in terms of improving the outcomes of children.

Melissa: Can I just add one thing on the grandparent point? Ariel had me doing this hypothetical: I was like, would I swap out my husband for my mom, and would my kids be better off? Grandmas are awesome; I'm all for them. I was actually surprised in the data that 67% of single moms don't have an adult in their house; something like 20% do have a grandma living in the house. I actually expected to see single moms leaning into grandparents more. But the other interesting thing this raises is: you do have a lot of grandmas now making up for the absence of dads. That raises interesting questions about elderly well-being and women's well-being, because now we have generations of women who are raising kids without a dad in their house, and then they're doing it as grandmas too. Is it really beneficial for women to be raising teenagers into their 70s because they may have done this without a husband, and their daughters are doing it without a husband? And am I comfortable with men really just being on the sidelines of family life in America, largely in response to some of their economic struggles? I'm not sure it's ultimately as welfare-enhancing as we might initially think.

Ariel: Just to be super clear, the question isn't whether you would swap out your husband for your mom.

Melissa: I know.

Ariel: But I mean, this is an important point you raise. We talk about the welfare of the parents and how this joint parenting arrangement is

being shared by the parents and their own parents. Is that grandparent getting anything out of that? Is that a site where they can also be supported? Are there economic benefits to those households living together? Those are all exactly the right questions, and I don't know any research I can cite tonight that can help answer them.

Geoff: I've got lots more questions, but we do want to give the audience an opportunity.

Audience member 1: It's been about 25 years since I worked in this area, but at that time Sara McLanahan and Irv Garfinkel were in the middle of the Fragile Families study, and the way they would have discussed the possibility of maybe a good norm that was lost was that the silver lining in having a norm of shotgun marriage was that it was understood that if you were a man and you created a child, you were supposed to contribute to the welfare of the child and not put the burden on other people. They were very interested in what could be done; there were programs in Scandinavia where, if you established paternity, the government stepped in and collected child support automatically. They were very interested in strengthening child support laws: even if the couple couldn't get along, at least there was this norm that the dad should contribute to the well-being of their children. My memory was that they found it was very tough to design that policy to get what you wanted, because trying to enforce these orders on people who were struggling economically created a lot of stress within the relationship, and sometimes backfired. So I wanted to know if anyone had thoughts about whether we can agree on a norm that if men create children, they should contribute to the child's welfare, but then what do we do about it when a lot of people are struggling economically and judgment-proof?

Melissa: Two things I conspicuously don't suggest changes to in the book because I think they're really complicated are child support enforcement and divorce laws. When you look at the studies of these things, seemingly obvious changes wind up having unintended effects. Studies on increasing child support enforcement actually show it can lead to less engagement of the kid with the dad, because it becomes a bargaining tool and a point of contention. I was literally at a webinar this morning on responsible fatherhood programs, and burdensome child support enforcement is a real drain on a lot of low-income dads who are trying to reestablish economic stability and have their money taxed away. While at first blush it might seem obvious that we need to increase child support enforcement, when you take a more holistic view, granting a norm that we want dads involved in their kids' lives, increasing child support enforcement isn't an obvious way, in my reading of the evidence, to do that.

Audience member 2: In your data on married women with college degrees who do have marriages, are you assuming those women maintain successful careers?

Melissa: I actually don't distinguish between how different couples make it work, whether you have two parents working or only one parent working, full-time or part-time. I'm deliberate about that because the way I think about this is: if you have two parents in the household, you have more choices. At any given time, you can optimize as a couple whether one of you is going to stay home full-time or part-time or through the kids' childhood; whereas if there's only one parent in the household responsible for everything, they're more likely to have limited choices.

Audience member 2: And then, as a follow-up: for two-parent households, what are the behaviors that are present that contribute to child success?

Melissa: The three buckets: more income coming into the household, more time spent with the children, and more emotional bandwidth or lower levels of stress. All of that allows parents to parent the way they want to in ways that are beneficial to the kids.

Damon: One thing I found interesting about that is there was a reference to the "rugrat race," the things parents do for kids that have grown exponentially in terms of driving kids here and there, and I think that links to what Steven was talking about in terms of memberships. One question that's interesting for future research is: are these exclusive memberships, and do they have negative spillovers on other kids? When you are investing and building a castle around your kid and their opportunities, are some of these things a little more zero-sum? For selective schools or selective opportunities, does the individual investment in your children versus children in general come with some trade-offs? I thought that was interesting to think about.

Geoff: Okay, well, thank you everyone, for a very productive discussion, and to you all for coming out to our inaugural book talk series at the Stone Center.

This transcript has been prepared with the assistance of AI.