

Poverty and the Politics of Marriage in Ernest Mowrer's *Domestic Discord*

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Consider these two quotes:

“Domestic discord, or the conflict between husband and wife, has long been thought to constitute one of the major social problems in American life.”

“Marriage is the foundation of a successful society.”

The statements are analogous, yet they were written 68 years apart. The first is a sentence from the introduction of Ernest R. Mowrer's *Domestic Discord: Its Analysis and Treatment*, published in 1928, which examines how two Chicago-based social work agencies help couples resolve marital conflict. The second quote is found in the opening passage of the landmark U.S. federal law that ushered in a new era of welfare reform and marriage promotion (called the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996). Marriage as a social institution remains just as central to cultural understandings of a stable society today as it did almost 90 years after the publication of Mowrer's book. This essay discusses Mowrer's conceptualization of the family and how this framing informs contemporary academic and popular debates about marriage and poverty.

First, a bit of background about the book. Published in 1928, *Domestic Discord* explores how social workers in Chicago analyze and treat marital strife by studying their case-records. The preface to the book explains that Mowrer was called in as a sociologist to provide an “outsider's” examination of social workers' day-to-day client practices, with the hope that this insight would lead to the development of better treatment for couples in conflict, and by creating more harmony in these families, the treatment would lead to a more stable society. Mowrer analyzed 636 case-records from the Jewish Social Service Bureau of Chicago and 937 records of the United Charities of Chicago.

My understanding is that Mowrer is the first person to bring to bear the sort of deeply contextualized assessments that we associate with the Chicago School to the topic of what he calls “family disorganization.” This book follows from the belief, as Abbott wrote, “that one cannot understand social life without understanding the arrangements of particular social actors in particular social times and places. ... [N]o social fact makes any sense abstracted from its context in social (and often geographic) space and social time. Social facts are *located*” (Abbott 1997:1152). Mowrer tries to understand married couples in conflict not as “units of analysis” but as “actors in social relations” (Abbott 1997:1152). He was principally interested in the study of family “disorganization” as a social problem—similar to other Chicago School studies of mental illness (Faris and Dunham 1939) and crime/delinquency (Shaw and McKay 1942).

Three ideologies about gender, marriage, and poverty undergird Mowrer's assessment of "domestic discord." These beliefs are a product of their times: the book is sexist, heteronormative, classist, and at points xenophobic—both in the excerpts from social workers' case-records, and in Mowrer's writing. Mowrer is uncritical of the case-records from a moral point of view; he criticizes their technique for writing the records and the lack of context they often provided, but doesn't question these ideological claims embedded in the records that today we understand as highly problematic.

Sociologists, of course, didn't always find them deeply problematic. These ideologies cohered as guiding tenets for the field throughout much of the 20th century. Despite their debunking in the intervening decades, these ideologies still guide U.S. welfare policy today. It is their continued relevance for U.S. welfare policy, despite the fact that contemporary sociology has veered strongly away from them, that I want to talk discuss here.

- 1) Biological essentialism: Men are naturally different from and better than women. Men are therefore the inherent leaders of the household.
- 2) Breadwinner/homemaker ideal: Marriage ensures stability for men and women when they enact their proper biological roles. Marriage is therefore fundamentally a good thing for individuals and for society.
- 3) Culture of poverty: Mowrer's starting point seems to be that poor people struggle in their family lives to behave in ways that society deems normal and acceptable.

Let's start with the first one. Contemporary scholars of gender call the ideology that men and women are inherently different from one another "biological essentialism" or the "natural differences schema" (Schilt 2010). This schema attributes "divergent and often unequal outcomes for men and women to innate distinctions in cognitive and physical abilities, reproductive roles, and emotional landscapes" (Schilt 2010:2). In Mowrer's estimation, the problems facing couples are due to their inability or unwillingness to perform their gender-appropriate family roles as breadwinners/heads of household and homemakers. He evaluated 1,573 case-records and identified the main problems that lead to domestic discord for husband and wife:

“The following factors are related to the husband: abuse, drink, irregular habits, laziness, affinity, uncontrolled temper, jealousy, stinginess, evil companions, restlessness, age difference, and sex perversion, each showing a significant higher frequency for the husband as compared to the wife.

In addition, three other factors may be considered related to the husband, inasmuch as they appear only in connection with him: inadequate income, excessive sex demands, and black sheep” (50).

On the other hand, writes Mowrer, “Five factors show significantly higher proportions for the wife and therefore to be considered characteristic of her part in the domestic conflict: immorality, nagging, family interference, extravagance, and slovenliness.

Two others having reference to her only may be added: bad housekeeping and sex refusal” (50) (discipline of children seems to be a third).

He writes, “[I]ndividual impulses of husbands and wives are not always conducive to the continuance of the marriage relationship and that the intervention of an outsider is needed to prevent breaks” (85). “The diagnostic problem presented,” argues Mowrer, “is to get at the nature of this conflict in order that it may be dissolved, or at least minimized to such an extent that it no longer threatens the continued unity of the family” (64). Domestic discord, in this formulation, stems from men and women incapable of controlling their “impulses”—men toward abusiveness, alcoholism, laziness, bad tempers, and unbridled sex drives, to name a few, and women toward immorality, domestic ineptitude, nagging, a displeasing appearance, and prudishness. Mowrer understood the goal of family welfare agencies as identifying and treating these impulses in order to stabilize families and society.

But only a certain “type” of family turned to welfare agencies for help, according to Mowrer: primarily low-income couples, many of them “foreign-born” (157). He makes no mention of race. These agencies, Mowrer writes, appeal to “one class of the population” (252). Here we see roots of “culture of poverty” arguments that came to dominate sociological work on the urban poor in the 1970s. Mowrer approaches the analysis of domestic discord “in terms of

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TABLE III
DISTRIBUTION OF DIAGNOSTIC FACTORS BY HUSBAND AND WIFE IN
DOMESTIC DISCORD CASES: JEWISH SOCIAL SERVICE
BUREAU, 1925; UNITED CHARITIES, 1924-25

| DIAGNOSTIC FACTORS | PERSON TO WHOM DIAGNOSTIC FACTOR REFERRED | |
|---------------------------------------|---|------|
| | Husband | Wife |
| Abuse | 524 | 61 |
| Drink | 474 | 50 |
| Immorality | 211 | 308 |
| Irregular habits | 263 | 46 |
| Laziness | 259 | 41 |
| Affinity | 215 | 81 |
| Mental deficiency | 142 | 166 |
| Bad housekeeping | | 262 |
| Nagging | 32 | 180 |
| Family interference | 70 | 139 |
| Uncontrolled temper | 139 | 79 |
| Jealousy | 81 | 54 |
| Extravagance | 24 | 101 |
| Physical deficiency | 48 | 68 |
| Stinginess | 91 | 24 |
| Venereal disease | 57 | 36 |
| Sex refusal | | 78 |
| Slovenliness | 13 | 63 |
| Excessive sex demands | 78 | |
| Children by former marriage | 36 | 33 |
| Discipline of children | | 58 |
| Evil companions | 42 | 13 |
| Restlessness | 33 | 4 |
| Age differences | 25 | 11 |
| Sex perversion | 21 | 4 |
| Inadequate income | 37 | |
| Black sheep | 22 | |
| Religious differences | 14 | 10 |
| National differences | 6 | 5 |

the individual as a form of personal maladjustment” (3). Treatment is meant to “reorganize the lives of the maladjusted individuals in such a way as to bring them within the standards and demands of the group”:

If the standard of living is below that which the group considers desirable, then it must be raised. If the conduct of the individual is not in conformity with the customs of the group, then that individual must be made to conduct himself as the group would have him. The final authority, thus, in determining the direction of treatment is the group. It matters not what the individual may want, or think he wants, for if his wants are contrary to the ideals of the group then he must be made to see the efficacy of those ideals and to want them also. Neither is the social therapist the judge of the end, but only of how the end may be obtained. Just as the medical therapist does not ask himself when he is called in to treat a “gangster” for appendicitis, if the person is worth saving, so the social therapist cannot be moved in his attempt to relieve the poverty of an individual by considerations as to whether or not the patient will be happier or less happy in his new situation. Treatment in every case is toward realizing those ends which the group deems desirable. (84)

The solution to domestic discord for Mowrer is not the realization of individual fulfilment, desire, happiness, or security—a modern-day conceptualization of marriage for romantic love rather than practical necessity as it often was at the time of Mowrer’s writing (Coontz 2005)—but rather, conformity to group expectations to ensure a stable nation. Mowrer, as he writes in the conclusion, is interested in the “social control of human behavior.” Social workers in welfare agencies instruct poor men and women how to resolve their “personal maladjustments” (e.g. housekeeping lessons, cooking classes, budget instruction, psychiatric evaluation) in order to achieve marital, and therefore societal, harmony.

Today, we understand these principles as foundational to what sociologists call role theory and structural functionalist theories of families and society. Here, a family is conceptualized as a heterosexual married couple cohabiting in a monogamous relationship, ideally with children. Men and women are thought to be mutually compatible in their enactment of instrumental (rational) and expressive (emotional) roles in family life (Parsons and Bales 1955), and the job of the social worker is to ensure that the “maladjusted individuals” learn to carry out these roles effectively.

Unfortunately, this functionalist, role-oriented conceptualization of the family often meant that women were encouraged to sacrifice their wellbeing for those of their children and their husbands, or to remain with unfaithful or abusive husbands. Take these case-record excerpts:

“Mrs. B is selfish and is always thinking of her own comfort and pleasure. She has permitted her jealousy to overrule her and is constantly doubting her husband’s fidelity. ... Worker tried to make Mrs. B realize her responsibility as a wife and mother. Advised her that she ought to keep her house and children clean if she wishes to command the respect of her husband. Also advised her to have

her husband's meals ready on time when he comes home from a hard day's work" (169).

"He then stated that Mrs. T was very unattractive and he could not introduce her to the friends which he made. ... Explained to Mrs. T that if she cared for her figure and made some attempt to better her English and perhaps go to the cooking classes and developed a more social attitude she would not find it so difficult to get along. On the other hand, told Mr. T that if he did not indulge in self-compassion to such an extent and took more of an interest in his family, he would find some things there he could appreciate" (172).

"Mrs. M in office very much excited. States that her husband told her he has been living with another woman for the past two years. Advised Mrs. M that in view of the fact that the children are all small and she would be unable to go out to work, that it would be best for her to allow things to go on as they are and to do her utmost not to aggravate him by nagging him in any way. It is her duty as a mother to her children to keep the home intact and to consider the welfare of her children" (189).

Sociologists have documented the reality that for many women, marriage is the site of coercion, violence, and patriarchal oppression. Contemporary gender and family scholars recognize the damaging effect of the ideology of the breadwinner/homemaker ideal. Scott Coltrane writes, "Promoting a cultural ideal of fathers as family patriarchs, mothers as natural caregivers, and heterosexual married couples as the only legitimate households in which to raise children will only serve to marginalize and punish the increasing number of families that do not fit this idealized form" (2001:391). Today we recognize the heterosexual two-parent nuclear family as a social construct that is out of touch with the diversity and reality of American families—particularly the country's economic histories and cultural traditions of African Americans and other racial-ethnic minority groups, as well as LGBT couples (Dickerson 1995; Lichter, Graefe, and Brown 2003). This model no longer captures the reality of American families.

Today the vast majority of women work for pay outside the household— at the time of Mowrer's writing this was a sign of acute financial hardship for families (Thistle 2006). This fact suggests a breakdown in the predominance of biological essentialism and the natural differences schema. Yet today we see a resurgence of these beliefs concretized in U.S. family policy. President Trump, for instance, proposed as part of his campaign platform the passage of paid parental leave for mothers only, implying that women are solely responsible for the care of their children while fathers' job is to work for pay. A 2013 Pew Research Center [survey](#) shows that 51% of adults believe that young children are better off when mothers stay home.

We also see evidence of the valorization of heterosexual marriage in welfare policy that suggests a woman's best route out of poverty is marriage—not a living wage job, stable employment, affordable childcare, or a stronger social safety net, to name a few alternatives. In the context of increases in the divorce rate and unwed motherhood in the second half of the 20th century, we now see marriage promotion efforts being championed at the state and federal levels. Our welfare policy (TANF) states that one of its goals is to: "encourage the formation and

maintenance of healthy 2-parent married families.” Scott Coltrane writes, “Because America is seen as having lost its moral compass, marriage is offered up as a morally correct panacea for all social and personal ills” (2001:395). Poverty experts suggest that without changing extant social and economic conditions, marriage promotion efforts are unlikely to be successful among the poor.

Finally, we see an alarming revival of culture of poverty and “tangle of pathology” arguments that individualize blame for the plight of poor families despite what sociologists today recognize as stark structural inequalities such as institutional racism, a stratified labor market, and a remarkably unjust criminal justice system. Christine Williams writes: [E]valuating the family behavior of the poor—either to condemn them or to celebrate their resourcefulness—transforms into moral issues what are desperate responses to Dickensian social arrangements” (2012:439).

Scholars might reflect on why these beliefs that undergirded Mowrer’s work nearly 90 years ago—that of biological essentialism, the breadwinner/homemaker ideal, and the culture of poverty—remain so tenacious in the 21st century United States. Mowrer’s writings were emblematic of hegemonic ideologies about gender, marriage, and poverty at the time of their publication in the 1920s. Since then, sociologists have thoroughly discredited these discourses with a wealth of empirical data. Yet the majority of social policy enacted in the United States today runs counter to what sociologists know to be good for women, children, and families. We might ask ourselves: why the disconnect? Now what? The yawning gap between U.S. social welfare policy and empirical sociological evidence about what families need to survive and thrive couldn’t be wider. I suggest two lessons we can glean from Mowrer’s work that are insightful for scholars today.

First, a methodological lesson. If we want to understand the tenacity of traditional beliefs that we now identify with religious and political conservatives (embodied by the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency in 2016), we need careful sociological research that aims to understand the genesis, growth, and popularity of these narratives amongst the individuals who espouse them. *Domestic Discord* is instructive in this regard. He suggests that social workers often oversimplify couples’ problems, identifying and treating discrete instances of discord without understanding how they connect to deeper, underlying issues embedded in a broader social context. Mowrer calls for a sociology that takes into account this messy complexity of people’s daily lived experiences. He points to the importance of research that examines interpersonal relations, cultural meanings, and social processes. This is a job for qualitative sociologists. We need creative, detailed, comprehensive studies to understand a society in which these ideas from the 1920s predominate in our welfare policy. We need these studies now: at a time when we have never seen greater economic inequality—a trend that is wreaking devastation on American families, particularly those who are already in positions of greatest disadvantage.

The second is a sort of policy lesson, or a moral lesson, depending on how you look at it. Evident in Mowrer’s writing and indicative of U.S. society in the 1920s is the social value placed on caring labor—the domestic work necessary to keep families fed, clothed, and cared for. Women have been responsible for caring labor throughout United States history (Thistle 2006). When *Domestic Discord* was published, this caring labor was given public recognition and

support through federal policies like family wage laws, protective labor legislation, and mothers' pensions that ensured that women had the time needed to provide this familial care. We see in these case-records and Mowrer's analysis of them a recognition that caring labor matters, and it deserves social, structural supports. A series of events during and after World War II caused the dismantling of support for women's caring labor and increasing value was placed on women's participation in the paid labor force. The result is that families today are considered a private matter, and the U.S. has no federal policy to support caregiving (e.g. no paid parental leave, no guaranteed income, no universal childcare or universal social insurance entitlement, and no minimum standard for vacation and sick days). Americans no longer feel a sense of individual right to familial supports, or a sense of communal obligation to ensure that all families have the time and resources necessary to care for their members. Again, we see devastating consequences for families. Rather than a preoccupation with marriage, it is time for our country to focus once again on supporting the caring labor all families need, married or not.

The main contribution I see from Mowrer's book is the idea that we need to pay close attention to the *context* in which families' struggles play out—intersections as it relates to the labor market, availability of jobs, family structure, economic context, cultural context, healthcare options, etc. Only then can we try to devise ways to study and help the families who need it. Today, Americans tend to blame the poor for their poverty and their marital strife. This highly individualized understanding of marital conflict absolves responsibility for structural inequalities that cause some families to struggle more than others. But contextualizing these struggles helps us understand how what Americans might perceive to be highly personal problems are in fact pressing social issues.

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