

Response to Elizabeth Ananat’s review “OF MARKETS AND MARRIAGES: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY, MULTIBOOK REVIEW ESSAY OF RECENT WORK ON THE CAUSES OF U.S. POVERTY”

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I welcome discussion and disagreement about the claims and conclusions of my 2023 book published by the University of Chicago Press, *The Two-Parent Privilege*. However, for such discussion and disagreement to be productive, it should be based around the main thesis and claims of my book. The point of this response is not to engage point by point with observations in Ananat’s (2024) review, but rather to correct the record about what the main thesis and position of my book is and to point out the most important ways that I believe this review misrepresents my book.

First, the review gets my thesis wrong. It claims that “to address U.S. poverty,” I recommend “that parents make the best of whatever their current economic situation is by marrying and raising children together.” But my book unequivocally disavows this naïve prescription, focusing instead on the many economic challenges that have led to a decline in marriage, especially among non-college-educated Americans. On p. 16, I write: *“The answer is not nearly as straightforward as simply declaring that more parents should get married. We need to first understand why so many parents are not getting married and why so many dads are not living with their children. One important set of factors behind these trends are the same economic changes that have made it harder for people without a college degree, especially men, to be economically successful. These forces have contributed to the erosion of the two-parent family for a large segment of the population.”*

Second, the review suggests that *The Two-Parent Privilege* does not grapple with the reason *why* people have moved away from marriage. This claim conspicuously misses that the book has an entire chapter – “Marriageable Men (or Not)” – describing how the economic challenges facing non-college educated men have eroded the economic attractiveness of marriage for non-college educated adults and directly led to a reduction in marriage. I repeatedly come back to this line of argument throughout the book, and I emphasize the need to improve the economic position of non-college educated men as a key policy take-away.

Third, the review accurately suggests that I extol the potential benefits of marriage (see Chapter 3), but the review does not acknowledge that I also make it clear that the benefits from marriage depend crucially on what each partner would bring to the household. This is the key point of Kearney and Levine (*Annual Review of Economics*, 2017) and I emphasize it throughout *The Two Parent Privilege*. The review suggests that I somehow miss that whole point. In fact, I cite work by Cross (2020) and explain how it fits with the resource perspective on marriage that I put forward: *“The key takeaway from this discussion is that the so-called marriage premium for children depends crucially on resource context...Related to the point of varied effects depending on context, a 2020 study by sociologist Christina Cross [...] documents that the negative association between spending a higher share of one’s childhood without two biological parents in the home and the likelihood of graduating high school is stronger for White and Hispanic children than it is for Black children. She shows that part of this difference appears to be statistically explained by differences*

in maternal education and age of single mothers across racial and ethnic groups. This interpretation would be consistent with the model and results I described above, showing that the size of the “marriage premium” depends on maternal characteristics and on the level of resources that a second parent would bring into the home.” (pp. 34-35)

My view is unequivocally that we need to address the root causes for the decline in the attractiveness of marriage as an institution, not simply try to get more people to get married whatever their economic situation. The excerpt from page 34-35 continues as follows:

“These observations bring us to a key point: A naïve conclusion to the challenges described above would be that more parents should simply get married. Perhaps. Or perhaps not. It depends crucially on why so many parents have been choosing not to get married in recent decades. Insofar as the reduction in marriage and the rise in nonmarital childbearing reflects an erosion of men’s (and father’s) economic standing, then dads in more recent decades would bring lower resources into the home than they would have in previous decades. As a preview to the discussion in chapter 4, this does seem to be at least part of the problem— to put it in stark (coldhearted) terms: the economic attractiveness of non-college- educated men has been diminished. This diminishment is part of the underlying problem...

It means that even if there were a magic wand that one could wave to increase rates of marriage, class gaps in household resources would remain. Of course, most of us would never want to wave such a magic wand anyway. The ideal would be to address the underlying causes of the marriage decline, so that more parents choose to marry, and their marriages (i.e., their long- term contracts to pool resources and share the responsibilities of running a household and raising children) would then confer benefits to their children.”

Finally, the review’s discussion of my book’s recommendations narrowly focuses on one – the suggestion that we should restore a norm of two-parent families for children. The review does not emphasize that this is only one of many suggestions, nor does it explain that the book explains that the promotion of a two-parent norm needs to be paired with an improved economic attractiveness of marriage. Here is the actual outline of policy suggestions (pp. 170-171):

In summary, here are the things we should do to address the challenges I have laid out in this book: Work to restore and foster a norm of two-parent homes for children; Work to improve the economic position of men without a college level of education so they are more reliable marriage partners and fathers; Scale up government and community programs that show promise in strengthening families and improving outcomes for parents and children from disadvantaged backgrounds; Have a stronger safety net for families, regardless of family structure.

I look forward to continued conversation – including disagreement – about the claims and positions that I put forward in *The Two-Parent Privilege*. Ananat’s (2024) review makes many interesting observations, including many that I agree with and include in my book, though the review could leave a reader with the opposite impression.