

## UNDERSTANDING MARITAL DECLINE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

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In recent years, “family matters” have been thrust into the national limelight as the centerpiece of various public debates. Indeed, with scant scientific evidence, changing family constellations and values have been cited by many (including politicians, media representatives, religious leaders, etc.) as causative in an array of societal concerns, including rising violence, declining educational achievement, increasing nonmarital births, growing numbers of single parent families, and changing moral standards. That patterns of family formation in the U.S. have undergone fairly substantial change in recent decades is quite clear (e.g., Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995a). Although academicians have not tended to view the relationship between family formation patterns and social problems in such simplistic “cause-and-effect” terms, there is a growing body of empirical literature focused on the nature of these changes and their consequences. For the past decade, with primary funding from the National Institute of Mental Health, we have undertaken a program of research that is directed toward understanding changing patterns of family formation and their effects. In this article we will summarize the results of our earlier studies and describe research currently underway.

### Recent Trends

Family organization and living arrangements in the U.S. have undergone remarkable change in recent times. Compared to earlier periods, Americans now marry later, are less likely to stay married, are less likely to marry after divorce and are more likely to live alone or with non-relatives than in previous times. Children are also more likely to be raised in single parent homes. Although American trends in family formation are pervasive, though consistent with developments in many other Western nations, in a number of areas African American changes have been more substantial. Between 1970 and 1990, the proportion of Black women who had married by age 24 decreased by half from 56% to 23%; while the proportion who had ever married declined from 83% to 63% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1971, 1991a, 1991b). Although there was a similar decline in early marriage in the general population (from 64% to 37%), the proportion of women in the general population who had ever married stayed the same (77%). Over the same period, Black divorce rates, as well as that of U.S. women as a whole, nearly quadrupled. However, since divorce was much higher among Blacks even in 1970, the 1990 differential is quite striking—358 divorces per 1000 women among Blacks, compared to 166 among women overall. African American women are also less likely than other groups of women to remarry after divorce or widowhood. The explosion in divorce rates is one factor in the greatly changed living arrangements of children. In 1970, just under one-third of Black children were being raised in single parent homes. By 1990, that figure had increased to 55% (compared to 25% in the general population).

Changes of this magnitude raise questions about the underlying attitudinal components, as well as the structural underpinnings of marriage behavior and marital expectations. What are the attitudinal and perceptual correlates of family formation behaviors and expectations and do they differ among the groups that evidence differential marriage patterns? What features of social context are related to family formation behaviors, expectations and attitudes?

### Causes and Correlates

Theorists and investigators have explored a number of explanations for these recent trends. Declining proportions of men compared to women has been associated with societal changes in marital behavior (Cox, 1940; South, 1986). Guttentag and Secord (1983) argued that male shortage leads to higher rates of singlehood, divorce, nonmarital

births, adultery and transient relationships; less commitment among men to relationships; lower societal value on marriage and the family; and a rise in feminism. In the U.S., the Black sex ratio (i.e., the number of men per 100 women) has been declining steadily since the 1920s, from near parity (100) to the 1990 figure of 88.2. This decline has been due largely to higher male mortality rates, but the current extraordinary incarceration levels of African American men is another critical dimension of nonavailability.

Another explanation for declining African American marriage has been offered by sociologist William Julius Wilson and economists William Darity, Jr. and Samuel Myers, Jr. These theorists assert that the declining economic viability of Black males impairs their ability to provide for families and has therefore reduced their willingness to marry and their desirability as mates (Darity & Myers, 1986/87; Wilson, 1987). Bowman (1995) summarizes the root causes of this economic decline as “the postindustrial displacement of manufacturing jobs by new labor saving technology and related shifts in unskilled jobs from central cities to suburbs, from the rustbelt to the sunbelt, and from the domestic labor market to third world countries” (p. 312).

As we have discussed elsewhere (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995a), the sex ratio and economic viability concepts are interrelated and part of a larger conceptual schema for understanding marriage behavior. Using Dixon’s (1971), framework, we view them in terms of three mediating factors between social structure and marriage behavior: availability of mates, feasibility of marriage, and desirability of marriage. Sex ratio measures one aspect of availability, while a male’s economic wherewithal addresses marital feasibility.

In a recently completed book (*The Decline of Marriage Among African Americans: Causes, Consequences and Policy Implications*), we reviewed the empirical evidence on these perspectives and others, and presented representative studies using these approaches (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995b). Although the results of studies in general have been somewhat inconsistent, we concluded that there is fairly strong evidence, at both individual and aggregate levels, implicating both sex ratios and male employment as factors in African American family formation. There was also evidence that the effects of sex ratio and employment on Black family structure are more pronounced under conditions of impoverishment—i.e., the lower the sex ratio and the lower the male employment rate, the higher the rate of female-headed families with children and in poverty (Sampson, 1995). One of the studies included in our book examined the marital *process*, and found that provider role anxiety was a major contributor to marital instability among Blacks (Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, 1995). It seems likely that the historically unstable economic situation of Black couples, within a culture that exalts male economic dominance, has placed special strains on Black marriage, thereby contributing to the very high divorce rate noted above.

Our early work was focused chiefly on African Americans. Using a variety of methods, including focus group discussions, analysis of Census data and the National Survey of Black Americans (NSBA), as well as new survey data collected from a probability sample of southern Californians, we made a number of observations, including the following: Among the five major ethnic groups in Los Angeles County, lower sex ratios were associated with higher levels of divorce and separation, greater percentages of single women aged 25 to 34 (peak marital ages), and greater percentages of households with female heads and no husbands (Tucker, 1987). In the general Black American population, marriage (as opposed to nonmarital romantic involvement) was associated with Black male economic readiness (Tucker & Taylor, 1989). When controlling for age, income and education, Southern California ethnic groups had highly similar marital and family values, with one of the few exceptions being that Blacks viewed adequate income as more critical for a successful marriage (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995c). Overall, our findings have suggested that considerations of mate availability and marital feasibility, and the context of such considerations, are significantly related to marriage and family formation attitudes and behavior and psychological well-being. More specifically, they suggest that the more striking decline in marriage entry among Blacks has not been accompanied by a devaluing of marriage as an institution, but rather a recognition of constraints on the ability to marry.

We eventually expanded our studies to reflect the fact that virtually all segments of American society have experienced some degree of change in family formation behavior. In fact, the current nonmarital birthrate among U.S. whites (25%) is precisely what the proportion among African Americans was in the mid 1960s, when the now-notorious Moynihan Report (Moynihan, 1967) was prepared. Nevertheless, similarity in consequence does not necessarily connote similarity in the conditions supporting these changes. We decided to examine the conditions related to these changes in different populations in the U.S.

### **Family Formation Behavior and Attitudes in Context: A 21-City Study**

We are presently conducting a telephone survey in 21 cities across the U.S., interviewing African Americans and Whites in all cities, and Mexican Americans in three cities. The cities vary on the basis of size, geographic region, ethnic proportions, general economic conditions, and ethnic-specific sex ratios. A final sample size of approximately 3,600 is anticipated. The study's overall objective is to examine the social context and social and psychological correlates of current family formation behaviors and attitudes, focusing in particular on mate availability and economic concerns as marital inhibitors and facilitators. Using a multi-level analytical strategy, the study examines linkages between macro perspectives on family formation and micro theories of relationship formation. The use of cities, as opposed to a more typical widely dispersed national sample, will allow us to examine the relationships between selected environmental characteristics (e.g., unemployment levels, sex ratio, incarceration rates) and individual attitudes and behavior.

The survey, conducted out of the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center, was the beneficiary of a new procedure in which telephone interviewers based in locations throughout the nation used laptop computers for direct-entry of responses. This direct-data entry feature, coupled with the use of e-mail for data transport, has allowed us to conduct preliminary analyses much earlier than what has been ordinarily possible. Examination of the first 2600 cases suggests that marriage and family values across groups are extremely consistent when controlling for age, income, and education. These preliminary runs also suggest that contextual variables, as well as mate availability indicators, are significant contributors to family formation behavior and attitudes.

We hope that the results of this study will contribute to redirecting the increasingly polemical debate about the welfare of American families. The preliminary results suggests that these data will confront some of the prevailing misperceptions about what influences marital and childbearing behavior today. We sorely need social policy based on empirical evidence rather than myth.

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