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## THE GROWING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVIDE IN U.S. MARRIAGE PATTERNS<sup>1</sup>

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Adapted from “The Growing Racial and Ethnic Divide in U.S. Marriage Patterns” by R. Kelly Raley, Megan M. Sweeney, and Danielle Wondra, in “*The Future of Children*,” Volume 25(2), p. 89. Copyright 2015 by the Center for the Future of Children, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

***“Racial and ethnic differences in marriage are striking” (p. 91).***

1. In 2014, 70 percent of non-Hispanic white children (ages 0-18) and roughly 59 percent of Hispanic children were living with both of their biological parents (p. 90). However, this was true for only about one-third of black children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014, C Table series).
  2. Single-parent families are associated with poorer outcomes for children, including less education and teenage pregnancy (p. 90) (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012; Cherlin, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994;).
3. Children’s development may be negatively impacted by single-parent family structure, due to decreased parental investment, family instability, economic distress and other developmental problems (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

### Black-White Differences in Marriage and Marital Stability Contemporary Differences

1. The median age for a first marriage is 30 years old for black women and 26 for white women (Elliott et al. 2012).
  2. Regardless of age, marriage rates among black Americans are lower than those of other ethnic groups (Raley et al. 2015, p. 106).
  3. Marital instability and divorce are higher among black women (Bean, Berg & Van Hook, 1996).
  4. Divorce rates, on average, are lowest among Asian women and foreign-born Hispanic women (Bean, Berg, & Van Hook, 1996; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005).
  5. The legal process of transition from separation to divorce is faster among white women than among black women (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001; Bumpass & Raley, 2007; Sweeney & Phillips, 2004).
  6. The nature of marital instability varies with race (p. 92).
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7. Among divorced women, black women are more likely to have been married only once, whereas white women are more likely to have married multiple times (p. 93).
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### Historical Trends

1. Between 1890 and 1940, black women were more likely to get married earlier than white women did. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, black and white women married at similar ages (Elliott et al., 2012).
2. In the early 1900s, although the divorce rate was relatively lower, the proportion of divorced black women was twice that of divorced white women (Ruggles, 1997).
3. The divorce rate for all racial and ethnic groups increased between 1940 and 1980. However, for black women this increase happened more rapidly and steeply (Espenshade, 1985).
4. The 1960s saw a rapid decline in marriage rates among black women as compared to white women across age groups, leading to more similarity between the two groups (Mare & Winship, 1991).
5. Racial differences in marriage remained modest as recently as 1970, when 94.8 percent of white women and 92.2 percent of black women had ever been married (Raley, McSweeney & Wondra, 2015, p. 93).
6. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, marriage was common among black families (Wilson & Neckerman, 1987).
7. By 2012, roughly 73 percent of white women in their early 40s who had ever married were still married and living with their spouses, compared with just over half (52.7%) of black women the same age (American Community Survey, 2012).

### Explaining the Black-White Marriage Gap

1. Disparities in the labor market, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, and other disadvantages (i.e. unemployment, lack of education, and higher rates of incarceration faced by black individuals) contribute to the black-white marriage gap. These disparities create an imbalance in the availability of marriageable black men and women (Charles & Luoh, 2010; Dixon, 1971; Farley & Allen, 1987; Guttentag & Secord, 1983; Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Lichter, McLaughlin, Western, 2006; Pettit & Western, 2004; Wilson & Neckerman, 1987).
2. However, it is important to note that black marriage rates fell while racial discrimination was on the decline and black men's wages were growing (p. 95) (Farley, 1984).
3. Women prefer to marry men with same or higher levels of education as themselves. The lack of availability of men who are just as educated or more educated than themselves limits the choice of partners for black women (Kalmijn, 1998; Mare, 1991; Schwartz & Mare, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009).
4. Compared to black women, black men are twice as likely to marry outside their race, further limiting marriage opportunities for black women (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000).
5. According to one of the specialization models of marriage, the potential mutual gains to a marriage are greatest when men's wages are high relative to women's. Compared to whites, the ratio of black men's to black women's wage is smaller, hence decreasing the marriage rates for blacks (Moffitt, 2000).
6. However, other findings such as "marriage rates fell while the female-to-male wage ratio remained similar" (p. 96), suggest that the argument relating to marriage and gender specialization might be outmoded (Moffitt, 2000; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997).

### Social Class and the Racial Gap in Marriage

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*“Increase in divorce preceded declines in marriage, beginning first among the most disadvantaged blacks” (p. 98).*

1. A marriage gap exists across different levels of educational attainment. This gap is more profound among black women as the education gap is larger among blacks (Raley, McSweeney & Wondra, 2015).
2. The retreat from marriage has been greater among white women with a high school diploma (or less) as compared to white women with college degrees (Raley, McSweeney & Wondra, 2015).
3. Marriage rates for college-educated white women in their late 20s and early 30s are higher than those for white women with less education at any age (p. 98). This pattern continues until their mid-40s.
4. Compared to college-educated white women, the rate of marriage for white women without a college degree may fall even more in the future (Martin, Astone & Peters, 2014).
5. Whites and blacks of all classes have experienced delays in marriage, but the reduction in the likelihood of being married by age 40-44 appeared first for blacks with low levels of education (p. 98).
6. In the third generation and beyond, Hispanic women’s family patterns increasingly resemble those of black Americans (p. 102).

*“Educational gaps in marriage will continue to widen over time” (p. 103).*

### Explanations for the Black-White Marriage Gap: Education

1. “Both middle-class black men and middle-class black women have more trouble finding spouses because their social worlds consist mostly of [white] people who are not likely to connect them to potential mates” (p. 101) (Lee & Bean, 2010; McClendon, Kuo & Raley, 2014; Raley, Sweeney & Wondra, 2015).
2. It is comparatively more difficult for black men to find stable full-time employment than white men. This is true for both college-educated and less educated black men (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn & Lim, 1997). These career differences might explain black men’s slower entry to marriage than white men.
3. Accumulation of wealth is less likely among black men than white men, further hindering black men’s potential entry to a marital union (Schneider, 2015).
4. Hispanic and black Americans experience similar economic and social disadvantages. However, Hispanic marriage patterns more closely resemble those of whites than those of blacks (p. 102) (Oropesa, Lichter & Anderson, 1994). This could be because a large majority of America’s Hispanic population consists of first- or second-generation Americans who may more strongly value collectivism and the importance of marriage (Oropesa & Landale, 2004).
5. Third-generation (and beyond) Latino women are increasingly exposed to economic disadvantages and the American ethos of individualism. This overturns the “pro-marriage disposition” that Hispanic families initially had (Oropesa & Landale, 2004).

### The Growing Importance of Economic Status for Marriage

1. Over the past century, “the age of marriage rose, non-marital cohabitation became common, and divorce rates skyrocketed” for families across the United States and most of Europe (p. 102).
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2. These broad changes in patterns of family life and marriage have been referred to by some demographers as the Second Demographic Transition.
  3. Changes in patterns of marriage have occurred in both strong and weak economic times and have affected people of all socioeconomic groups (Lesthaeghe, 2014).
  4. “Shifts in labor force likely also contributed to the Second Demographic Transition’s changes in family life” (p. 103). More women started to attain higher education in order to enter the labor force, which delayed their entry to marriage (Fischer & Hout, 2006; Mare & Winship, 1991).
  5. Urbanization and other social and labor market shifts of the 20th century contributed to increased divorce rates, especially among black Americans.

*For women, “marriage has become increasingly linked to employment and earnings” (p. 104).*

### Inequality and the Continuing Significance of Race

1. Compared to white women, “black women are less likely to marry and to remain married” (Raley, McSweeney & Wondra, 2015, p. 104).
2. Racial gaps in marriage exist across all levels of the educational distribution. However, this gap is largest among people with lower levels of education (p. 104).
3. Marriage rates have fallen among both black and white women with education no higher than a high school diploma (p. 104).
4. “For both black and white women, marital instability rose before marriage formation fell” (p. 104).
5. “Educational gradients in marital instability emerged before educational gradients in marriage formed” (p. 104).

*“There may be meaningful linkages between broad trends in marriage formation and marital stability and the differences we see by race” (p. 104).*

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