

Explaining Race and Ethnic Variation in Marriage: Directions for Future Research

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Abstract Racial and ethnic differentials in marriage are large and may contribute to maintaining inequalities. Previous research identifies economic factors, particularly low levels of employment stability and earnings, as important contributors to depressed marriage rates among blacks. Yet group differences in employment and earnings do not offer sufficient explanations for race and ethnic variation in marriage patterns—a fact which is not surprising given that marriage represents far more than an economic relationship. Future research in this area should consider other factors that distinguish marriage from other couple relationships, such as commitment, sexual fidelity, and trust. Moreover, it should recognize that marriage is a social institution that shapes social interactions ranging from informal relationships with family members to eligibility for formal benefits such as health insurance. We argue that taking a broader view of marriage will help identify new approaches to understanding race and ethnic variation in marriage patterns.

Keywords Marriage · Race · Ethnicity

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Compared to Non-Hispanic Whites (whites), African Americans (blacks) take longer to establish unions and once formed these unions are less stable. Whites are much more likely than blacks to marry in young adulthood (e.g., Schoen et al. 2009), leading to a younger age at marriage and a higher proportion ever marrying. Projections estimate that whereas 93 percent of white women born in the early 1960s can expect to marry, only 64 percent of black women in this cohort will do so (Goldstein and Kenney 2001). It is thus not surprising that white births are considerably more likely than black births to occur within marriage (Wildsmith and Raley 2006). In contrast, Mexicans marry earlier than whites in the United States, with immigrant Mexicans marrying particularly early (Raley et al. 2004). Differences are less pronounced when we look at the formation of all coresidential unions, including cohabitation as well as marriage (Raley 1996; author’s tabulations). However, cohabiting unions are less stable than marriages (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Even among those who marry, blacks are more likely than whites to divorce: approximately one-half of first marriages among blacks disrupt within 10 years, compared to one-third of first marriages among whites (Phillips and Sweeney 2005; Raley and Bumpass 2003). Mexican American marriages are less likely to disrupt than white marriages, although this differential is driven by the unusually high levels of marital stability experienced by foreign-born Mexican Americans (Bean et al. 1996; Phillips and Sweeney 2005).

Variability in family patterns is not, in itself, a social problem, but it is interesting partly because variation in the formation of stable families may contribute to maintaining racial and ethnic inequalities, as evidence suggests that marriage can have tangible benefits for the health and well-being of adults and children. In this article, we begin by briefly reviewing previous findings on the factors

contributing to race–ethnic variation in stable union formation, focusing particularly on black–white differences for which the most empirical evidence is available. We then suggest directions for future research to more thoroughly investigate both “structural” explanations that point to objective material conditions and “cultural” explanations that anticipate that beliefs and practices vary across racial and ethnic groups (c.f., Wilson 2009b for a thoughtful discussion of the contribution of structure and culture to race inequalities). We organize this discussion around the multiple dimensions that distinguish marriage from other intimate couple relationships. By far the majority of studies attempting to explain race–ethnic variation in family patterns have focused on structural factors that influence the economic dimension of marriage, but recent ethnographic research points to the importance of cultural factors that influence other dimensions as well. These include interpersonal aspects of marriage such as trust and commitment as well as the influence of socially constructed understandings about respectable marriage. In addition, we call for more attention to structural factors beyond employment and income to also consider how institutional arrangements shape the benefits of marriage. Finally, we discuss approaches to more fully explore these multiple dimensions of marriage to better understand race–ethnic variation in family patterns.

Theory and Evidence on Race–Ethnic Variation in Marriage

The most influential explanation for black–white differences in marriage focuses on the availability of marriageable men. Wilson and Neckerman (1987) argue that high levels of unemployment and incarceration among men in poor urban areas reduces the number of “attractive” male marriage partners and contributes to high levels of marital instability among African Americans. This perspective builds on demographic arguments about the influence of sex-ratio imbalances on family patterns (e.g., Guttentag and Secord 1983). When men have difficult transitions into stable employment they have much lower marriage rates, and black men are more likely than white men to experience unstable work histories after leaving school (Oppenheimer et al. 1997). While many studies find that the availability of marriageable men contributes to race differences in patterns of union formation, the estimated magnitude of this effect varies substantially across analyses. Most find its contribution to be relatively modest (Lichter et al. 1992; Lopoo and Western 2005). One recent study, however, suggests that the contribution of shortages in marriageable men may be relatively more important in the transition to marriage among unmarried parents

(Harknett and McLanahan 2004). Studies have also examined the influence of other measures of community disadvantage. For example, South and Crowder (1999) find that living in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood contributes modestly to race differences in marriage timing. Economic disadvantage appears to play a role in producing black–white differences in marriage and divorce, but most research suggests that differential exposure to risk factors measured at the individual, couple, and community levels cannot fully explain race differences in marital disruption (Phillips and Sweeney 2006; Tzeng and Mare 1995; but see Ruggles 1997). In all, social scientists are generally unable to explain more than about a fifth of the race gap in marriage using measures of male employment and the availability of marriageable men (Lichter et al. 1991; Mare and Winship 1991; South and Lloyd 1992). Furthermore, black–white differences in family patterns also exist among individuals with relatively high earnings and education (Banks and Gatlin 2005; Farley and Allen 1987; Jencks 1991; Lerman 1989). Together, these findings suggest that factors other than employment and income may be important to consider.

A second influential line of research investigates whether attitudinal and cultural factors might shape race differences in family behaviors. Some analyses of the National Survey of Families and Households suggest that blacks and whites do not differ substantially in expectations for marriage (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993), other findings indicate that black men and women, especially poor black men who live in the inner-city, are less likely than whites to desire marriage (South 1993; Wilson 2009a). Yet quantitative analyses indicate that differences in attitudes explain little of the black–white gap in marriage rates as compared to economic attributes (Sassler and Schoen 1999). Other scholars have argued that black families tend to be organized differently from those of whites, placing more emphasis on extended kin ties and less on affiliations based on marriage (Aschenbrenner 1973; Cherlin 1998; Stack 1974). Quantitative analyses comparing kin relationships among blacks and whites are inconclusive, sometimes showing that exchange networks are actually stronger among whites (Hofferth 1984; Hogan et al. 1993). Moreover, we know little about whether and how involvement with extended kin may be associated with marriage or marital stability, although a handful of studies point to an association between the quality of relationships with parents (or parents in-law) and marital stability (Bryant et al. 2001; Timmer and Veroff 2000). One study suggests that relations with in-laws may be more strongly associated with marital well-being among black than white women (Goodwin 2003).

Theories developed to explain black–white differentials in union formation and stability are not easily extended to

other ethnic groups. For example, although Mexican Americans, like African Americans, experience economic disadvantage, Mexican Americans tend to marry at earlier ages (Oropesa et al. 1994), leading some to hypothesize that cultural factors may be key to understanding Mexican American marriage patterns. Importantly, descriptive results from life table analyses misrepresent true differences in marriage patterns because Latinos leave school at earlier ages than whites and school enrollment depresses marriage rates (e.g., Thornton et al. 1995). A second factor confounding the descriptive results, particularly for Latinas, is migration. Partly because of immigration policies that favor married women and perhaps also because of other selection factors, the marriage rate of Mexican immigrant women is higher than the marriage rates of women in Mexico. Once we take into account age at school leaving and restrict analyses to Mexican women born in the United States, Mexican women marry later than whites (Raley et al. 2004). Moreover, as stated above, levels of marital disruption among US-born Mexicans fall between those of blacks and whites (Phillips and Sweeney 2005), while Puerto Rican marriages have levels of divorce similar to African American marriages (Frisbie 1986). Together, these findings again point to the importance of economic disadvantage for constraining stable union formation, but leave open the possibility that the effects of poor employment opportunities are conditioned by cultural factors.

In sum, leading explanations for race and ethnic variation in marriage focus on group differences in “structural” or “cultural” factors. To date, such perspectives fall short of explaining observed gaps in marriage patterns, and fresh approaches are sorely needed. Wilson (2009b) recently argued for moving away from dichotomizing structural and cultural explanations for low rates of marriage among inner-city blacks, and instead considering how such factors might interact with one another. For example, weaker norms against nonmarital childbearing among African Americans may increase the salience of economic factors in the decision to marry. This approach broadly implies that the factors contributing to race–ethnic variation in marriage patterns may tend to vary across the social class spectrum. Whereas social isolation or multi-partner fertility may be key to race differences among the working class, home ownership and gender roles could be more important for the middle class. Most research on race differences in marriage use economically heterogeneous samples, which may muddle the results. McLaughlin and Lichter (1997) compare the predictors of marriage among poor and non-poor women and find that marriage market conditions (e.g., the sex ratio) are substantially stronger predictors for poor women. Further, their models were less successful in explaining race differences among the non-poor than the poor. This, along with ethnographic research that finds few

race differences among the poor (e.g., Edin), suggests that more research should focus within class groups and perhaps particularly investigate race differences among the middle class. As family sociologists, we argue that still further leverage on these questions can be gained by taking a closer look at the institution of marriage itself, and how marriage tends to differ from other forms of intimate relationships.

Race, Ethnicity, and the Multiple Dimensions of Marriage

Although many social scientists argue that marriage is an institution in flux (e.g., Cherlin 2004; Sweeney 2002), contemporary marriage continues to be distinct from other couple relationships along at least three dimensions. Identifying the specific aspects of marriage that give it its unique status can assist our search for explanations as to why so many young adults, particularly African Americans, adopt alternative family arrangements. First, marriage is distinct in its *economic* nature, including expectations for economic stability, economic cooperation between partners, and gendered specialization for household production and child rearing. Although many argue that these features of marriage have changed over time, they continue to be stronger in marriage than in other couple relationships. Second, marriage is distinct in its *interpersonal* nature, including the expectation of commitment and trust. Third, marriage is distinct in its *social* nature, including partners’ relationships to other individuals and social institutions. Some suggest that the social understandings that differentiate marriage from other couple relationships are weakening. That is, marriage is becoming “deinstitutionalized” as the social norms guiding how husbands and wives should behave towards one another with respect to such key issues as the division of labor and childrearing have weakened over time (Cherlin 2004). Even if marriage is more weakly institutionalized than in the past, it continues to be a social arrangement that powerfully shapes expectations and social interactions along each of these dimensions.

The Economic Dimension of Marriage: Financial Stability and Gendered Specialization

One way that economic factors differentiate marriage from other couple relationships concerns the greater requirements for economic well-being and long-term stability. As discussed above, a large body of accumulated evidence suggests that unemployment and low earnings constrain marriage. Less work considers the potential role played by group differences in accumulated wealth, however, despite

the fact that wealth contributes importantly to current economic well-being and racial and ethnic gaps in wealth are substantial (Campbell and Kaufman 2006; Conley 1999; Oliver and Shapiro 1995). The importance of economic circumstances for marriage may be especially great for those with fewer employment opportunities. For example, not having a full-time steady job may be less of a hindrance for a young man who recently graduated from college than for a man who had to leave college after only 1 year, because the college graduate has a substantially greater chance of obtaining some economic stability in the near future even if today he does not have a job. Minority status may contribute additional uncertainty among the poor because of the importance of social networks in securing good jobs and/or because of other, more direct, forms of discrimination (Smith 2007; Wilson 2009a). Together, these factors may help explain why blacks are significantly more likely than whites to report that economic supports are important to marriage timing (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993).

Many want to be economically stable before they marry, in part because couples correctly perceive that financial strain can increase their chances of divorce. In a recently published ethnographic study of unmarried mothers, Edin and Reed explained that “Most believed a poor but happy marriage has virtually no chance of survival and that the daily stress of living ‘paycheck to paycheck’ would put undue pressure on a marital relationship (Edin and Reed 2005, p. 122).” This and other research suggest that a long-run view of economic stability seems to be more important in decisions to marry than to cohabit (see also Clarkberg 1999; Oppenheimer 2003; Xie et al. 2003). In other words, for marriage more so than other types of couple relationships, both current economic circumstances and assessments of likely *future* economic circumstances are important. Research attempting to understand race and ethnic variation in marriage has generally focused on current employment and earnings status and opportunities, but additional leverage may be purchased by also estimating the impact of future prospects and economic uncertainty as race differences along these dimensions are at least as great as they are in current employment and earnings of young men and women.

Those who focus on the economic dimension in their explanations for racial and ethnic variation in marriage are typically making the structural argument that lower marriage rates for blacks occur because of a rational response to lower earnings and less secure employment. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the material requirements for marriage are socially constructed. When discussing the financial constraints to marriage, some couples explain that they are unwilling to marry until they have enough to afford a “real” wedding and to maintain a

“respectable” household (Edin et al. 2004; Smock et al. 2005). As previously discussed, spouses are generally expected to support themselves economically both in the present and the future. At minimum, couples expect to live on their own and not with friends or relatives after marriage. Yet these requirements for marriage vary across time and place. For example, it seems likely that immigrant groups from less wealthy nations may have a lower material standard for marriage. Moreover, in Mexico as well as many parts of Asia, newly wed couples often co-reside with the groom’s parents after marriage (Fussell and Palloni 2004). Different beliefs about the requirements for marriage may contribute to a relatively early age at marriage for some groups despite economic disadvantage.

A second way that economic factors distinguish marriage from other couple relationships concerns economic cooperation and gendered specialization. According to traditional economic theory, marriage confers greater benefits when husbands and wives specialize (Becker 1991). All else equal, men have greater earning power than women and thus the typical division of labor has men specializing in market work. Gender specialization may be less emphasized today than it once was, but these features continue to differentiate marriage from other couple relationships and are particularly salient for parents. Although women’s earnings are positively associated with marriage formation for recent cohorts (Sweeney 2002), and low-income women emphasize the requirement that they be financially stable themselves before marriage so that they are not dependent on a man who might control them (Osborne and McLanahan 2004), both qualitative and quantitative studies generally find that men’s earnings are more important than women’s earnings in determining the transition to marriage (Smock and Manning 1997; Smock et al. 2005; Xie et al. 2003). Other studies suggest that the more a wife earns and the more hours she works relative to her husband, the greater her risk of divorce (e.g., Brines and Joyner 1999; Tzeng and Mare 1995).

Compared to whites, the gender gap in earning power is much smaller for blacks. Thus, the benefits to gender specialization—and consequently, the benefits of marriage that derive from gender specialization—may tend to be smaller for blacks than for whites. This structural argument leads to the hypothesis that the gender gap in earnings is strongly linked to racial or ethnic variation in marriage. Empirical tests using area-level data show that controlling for men’s earnings, female earnings are negatively associated with the proportion of women married, which suggests that the gender gap in earnings may contribute to lower rates of marriage among black women compared to white. Nonetheless, race differences in marriage are still large with both men’s and women’s earnings controlled (Lichter et al. 1991).

Just as the economic requirements for marriage vary across social contexts, so too do the gender roles of husbands and wives. For example, research suggests that blacks tend to be more supportive than whites of married women's and mothers' labor force participation (Kane 2000). It could be that whereas white marriages tend to be based on gender specialization, black marriages are more often based on gender-neutral economic cooperation, partly because of married black women's longer history of wage-earning. If so, then we would expect women's earnings to be stronger determinants of marriage among blacks than whites. Alternatively, it is important to keep in mind that romantic partners do not always share the same set of gender role expectations, and differences between men's and women's gender role expectations could undermine both marriage formation and stability. At least one study suggests that whereas black men tend to be more supportive than white men of women's labor force participation, they tend to be less egalitarian with regard to views about housework and child care (Blee and Tickameyer 1995).

The Interpersonal Dimension of Marriage: Love, Sex, Commitment, and Trust

The interpersonal dimension of marriage includes the sexual tie, long-term commitment, trust, and emotional closeness of two people. Despite increases in marital instability in the United States, the vast majority of Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds still believe that marriage should last a lifetime, and this expectation of long-term commitment still tends to be greater for marriage than for other types of couple relationships (Bumpass 1990; Edin et al. 2003; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005; Oropesa and Gorman 2000). Although cohabiting couples tend to report lower relationship quality than do married couples, engaged cohabiters are almost indistinguishable from married couples along this interpersonal dimension and relationship quality tends to change little when cohabiters marry (Brown 2004; Brown and Booth 1996). Sexual exclusivity is expected in the vast majority of intimate coresidential relationships, (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Treas and Giesen 2000), and may be particularly salient in the decision to enter the long-term commitment of marriage. Yet here we find a potentially meaningful source of variation across groups, as Patterson (1998) reports greater gender disparities in views and experiences of marital infidelity among blacks than whites. Whereas 84 percent of black female respondents in the National Health and Social Life Survey endorsed the view that extramarital sex is always wrong, only 70 percent of black male respondents said the same. Furthermore, whereas only 17 percent of black women reported having been unfaithful to their

spouse, a figure similar to levels of marital infidelity reported among white women, fully 43 percent of black men reported having been unfaithful to their spouse. Such findings led Patterson to conclude that the "chronic pattern of male infidelity...is without a doubt a major reason for the high divorce rate among Afro-Americans (p. 130)." Patterson notes that rates of self-reported infidelity are high both among the poorest and the most prosperous black men, but somewhat lower among the middle class. Treas and Giesen (2000) similarly find race differences in the experience of marital infidelity, which persist even once adjusting for group differences in education, values, and opportunities to meet partners.

Long-term commitments between individuals require some basis of trust, particularly in the context of uncertain future outcomes (Kollock 1994), as one might view marriage in an era of high divorce. Sociologist Shirley Hill (2005) argues that distrust and conflict between men and women is prevalent among black men and women throughout the class spectrum. Some point to multi-partner fertility as a source of women's distrust of men among low-income populations (Edin et al. 2003; Furstenberg 2007). Indeed, in one recent study, nearly 40 percent of unmarried mothers reported fearing or believing that the father of their child had been unfaithful to them (Edin et al. 2003). A small but growing literature documents growth in the frequency of having children by more than one partner, and multi-partnered fertility tends to be more common among African Americans than most other racial/ethnic groups (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006). Another source of distrust among low-income groups may arise from experiences of domestic violence and from women's fears that men will try to exert increased control over their wives (Edin 2000). Low-income men, on the other hand, report difficulties dealing with women's suspicions about their behavior and intentions, feeling "harshly judged," and fearful that women will not be supportive of a partner with poor economic prospects (Furstenberg 2007; Wilson 2009a). Women's distrust of men is associated with a reduction in the formation of coresidential unions—particularly marriages—1 year after a nonmarital birth, but interestingly men's distrust of women is not associated with patterns of union formation (Carlson et al. 2004). Given that the bulk of existing evidence relates to low-income populations, it will be especially important to consider how gender distrust interacts with "structural" factors such as poor labor market opportunities in contributing to race and ethnic differences in marriage patterns.

The Social Dimension of Marriage

In addition to the economic and interpersonal dimensions of marriage, a social dimension also distinguishes marriage

from other types of couple relationships. The social dimension of marriage involves changes in formal and informal relations with other individuals and institutions that marriage brings. Some argue that while the practical importance of marriage has declined over time, its symbolic importance has increased. Indeed, Cherlin (2004, p. 857) suggests that “people marry now less for the social benefits that marriage provides than for the personal achievement it represents.” Today one can be a fully respectable adult without marriage, and clearly the social sanctions for non-marriage are weak, especially in young adulthood. Yet we argue that marriage continues to have a social meaning; at minimum it is a public display of personal achievement. More likely, the formal and informal social benefits of marriage are part of the reason why marriage is associated with greater well-being than other couple relationships for both adults and children.

Marriage is a favored arrangement in the United States today. Some of the advantages of marriages are formalized in the legal code or in organizational rules. For example, the Family and Medical Leave Act (1993) states that an “employee shall be entitled to a total of 12 workweeks of leave during any 12-month period ... to care for the **spouse**, or a son, daughter, or parent, of the employee” (emphasis added). Additionally, legal marriage changes inheritance rights and men married to the mother of a newborn are assumed paternal privileges. Some of these benefits are not formalized in the legal code, but nonetheless result in tangible advantages, for example receiving health insurance through a spouse’s employment and lower insurance rates for the married.

Other benefits of marriage are less tangible and possibly more variable, derived from changes marriage brings in informal social interactions. Through marriage one may garner greater respect from others, where cohabitation does not likely confer any social status. Marriage can also bring support from family, friends, and other participants in social networks which enhance the stability of a union. For example, a mother may not help her daughter and her boyfriend with a down-payment for a home together even if she would be quick to help the young couple if they were married. Married adults are more likely than cohabiting adults to receive support from their parents even when characteristics such as the child’s age and the parent’s health status are controlled (Eggebeen 2005). In addition, although cohabiting men enjoy a modest wage premium, it is not as large as the wage premium for married men (Cohen 2002). To some degree, however, such social benefits may not flow simply from the status of being married, but rather may be more likely when partners meet normative expectations for a “respectable” marriage. As previously described, we argue that with respect to its economic and interpersonal dimensions, marriage differs

from other couple relationships particularly with respect to expectations for economic stability, enduring commitment, and sexual exclusivity. These socially defined requirements shape whether an “appropriate” marriage is viewed as attainable by individuals and married couples who do not meet these standards risk the negative evaluations of others. These pressures may undermine relationship quality and some couples may feel they are protecting their relationship by not subjecting it to the social pressures associated with marriage (Edin and Reed 2005).

These issues come into play in recent debates regarding the potential influence of perceptions of marital instability on patterns of marriage. A number of scholars argue that a high perceived risk of divorce poses a barrier to marriage, particularly among low-income populations (e.g., Bumpass 1990; Edin and Reed 2005; Gibson-Davis et al. 2005). Fear of divorce arguably makes marriage seem irrelevant, since the union may be viewed as unlikely to last anyway, or may make marriage seem risky, exposing men and women to embarrassment or stigma if the relationship does not work out. Notably, disrupted cohabiting unions do not bear the same social stigma associated with divorce (Avellar and Smock 2005). These aspects of fear of divorce, however, are not found to affect attitudes toward marriage—at least among low-income women (Cherlin et al. 2008). Yet attention to the social dimension of marriage raises the further possibility that individual marriages which are perceived to have a high probability of failure (for example, because a couple is not economically secure or sexually exclusive) are not judged to be socially respectable. Such marriages may not generate the same social benefits such as prestige or social support for the relationship.

Finally, the rituals surrounding getting engaged and married are a public acknowledgement of a couple’s connection to this institution, which although it is always changing, has deep roots. For example, although displaying a wedding ring on the fourth finger of the left hand is common practice among spouses, no similar public display signifies cohabitating status among the unmarried. We are particularly intrigued by ethnographic research demonstrating the importance of weddings to couples contemplating marriage. Although it is not a universal sentiment, many cohabiters claim that an important barrier to marriage is the cost of the actual ceremony. In at least one study, cohabiters derided couples who “go downtown” for a city hall marriage as doing it the “poor people way” (Smock et al. 2005, p. 689). This illustrates the social dimension of marriage, as it is not honeymoons (private) but weddings (public) that constitute the sticking point. Cherlin (2004, 2009) argues that the public commitment associated with marriage provides greater “enforceable trust” than other couple relationships. But another function of weddings may be to publicly display that one is entering into a

“respectable” marriage, one which satisfies social expectations such as economic stability and fidelity. A large or elaborate wedding is a display of economic security, and wedding ceremonies also often explicitly include a couple’s public pledge of life-long commitment and fidelity as well as pledges by attendees to help support and maintain the new marital relationship (Cherlin 2009). Although causal linkages are undoubtedly complex and related also to broader shifts in marriage timing, it is worth noting that wedding celebrations have become more elaborate and expensive, and more often funded by couples themselves rather than parents, during a period of growth in the acceptability of nonmarital cohabitation (Cherlin 2009).

New Approaches to Explaining Racial and Ethnic Variation in Marriage

Our examination of the multiple dimensions of marriage uncovers the potential for improving old approaches to explaining racial and ethnic variation in marriage as well as opportunities for developing new avenues of exploration. Our discussion of the economic dimension of marriage reveals that economic uncertainty and future prospects should matter at least as much as current circumstances. Our data sources and models need to collect and incorporate information on employment stability, wealth, and anticipated earnings trajectories, based on education, occupation, and industrial sector. A key distinguishing feature of marriage may be the expectation of a long-term commitment, which requires not just economic stability in the present but also the expectation that a desired standard of living will be maintainable into the future (Hughes 2003; Oppenheimer et al. 1997). Thus, it may be at least as important to measure expectations regarding future economic trajectories as to measure past and present economic conditions (Oppenheimer 1988; Sweeney and Cancian 2004; Xie et al. 2003). Average income is 38 percent greater for white than black households while average household wealth is almost 12 times greater among white households (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). Most analyses of race differences in family patterns, however, do not account for group differences in wealth, employment instability, or income trajectories. Other evidence suggests that the nature of the relationship between economic standing and patterns of marriage may tend to be nonlinear for some groups, such as black men (Banks and Gatlin 2005; Patterson 1998). Importantly, race–ethnic differences in marriage appear throughout the economic spectrum. For example, black–white differences in marriage in early adulthood are large for all education levels (Schoen et al. 2009). The size of these differentials lead us to expect that race differences in marriage will not be completely

explained by differences in individuals’ economic assets, current, and/or prospective.

Another way we can further examine structural factors that contribute to racial variation is by examining how legal and other institutionalized practices condition the benefits of marriage, sometimes limiting them to already advantaged groups. For example, some workplaces offer benefits such as childcare and health insurance. To what extent is access to these benefits limited by formal marital status or differentiated by race and ethnicity? How are more informal social relationships shaped by an individual’s marital status? To what extent do employers use marriage as a signal for dependability and productivity and does this vary by race or ethnicity? More information about variability by race and gender in availability of and access to such benefits associated with marriage could provide new insights into why groups differ in their propensity to marry.

Structural factors not only potentially alter the incentives for marriage, they also can directly facilitate marriage. For example, it is the dominant perspective to view the workplace as an institution that competes with families for individuals’ time and attention. Stress, non-standard work schedules, and negative social interactions at work are associated with poorer marital interaction after work and lower marital quality (Story and Repetti 2006; Lavee and Ben-Ari 2007; Presser 2000). Yet the workplace and other institutionally based involvements not only compete with families, but can also assist in their formation and stability. For example, employment can broaden social networks and improve social integration. Contrary to some popular notions of poverty populations that view these communities as socially rich if materially poor, the poor are actually remarkably socially isolated (Patterson 1998). Lack of embeddedness in social institutions may hinder the development of friendships as well as the search for spouses. Work may also be a positive influence on family life when it provides resources for personal development, through autonomy, learning opportunities, and prestige (Voydanoff 2004). We know little about race differences in aspects of work such as autonomy, learning opportunities, and negative social interactions at work, but levels of workplace segregation continue to be high (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006) and the relative balance of work demands and rewards that impact family life could vary by race. This is one way that an institutional context may contribute to race differences in family life.

Cultural explanations can be further developed through detailed investigations of racial variation in social contexts, beyond the sex ratio, employment rates, and levels of marriage and/or non-marital fertility. Marriage requires the development of trust. Importantly, this is influenced by social context. Couples in communities with low levels of

social capital, that is where there is little social integration and few overlapping relationships, may have more difficulty developing trust because others do not monitor the relationship and the social costs for infidelity are low. Along similar lines, socially integrated communities can make a search for a compatible spouse more efficient through expanding social networks and providing information about potential mates. Notably, recent research points to extreme rigidities in the intergenerational transmission of social contexts represented by disadvantaged neighborhood environments, particularly among black families (Sharkey 2008). Thus, in some communities, a lack of social integration across generations may contribute to a culture supporting infidelity and gender mistrust.

Our understanding of racial and ethnic variation in family outcomes would be enhanced by gathering richer data on the institutional settings in which families form and dissolve, such as workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and religious institutions. Do members of different racial and ethnic groups tend to vary in where and how they meet partners? Does this affect the quality of the match? As Kalmijn and Flap (2001) argue, it seems likely that “assortative mating is fostered by assortative meeting.” Beyond facilitating a good match, are partnerships situated within these settings characterized by higher levels of trust and greater social and economic support from the broader community? Could this support include monitoring of one’s partner, as Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007) suggest may be one function served by religious congregations? Moreover, are the messages of the black church as strongly supportive of marriage as those heard from white pulpits? (Franklin 2004). One study suggests that the effects of church attendance on the transition to marriage among single mothers are similar for whites and blacks (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007), but more research these and other institutional influences could prove useful.

We also need to know more about how expectations for marriage, cohabitation, and childbearing are socially constructed. Ethnographic research strongly suggests that the perceived resources necessary for marriage are high relative to those available even to the lower middle class. In addition to being able to set up an independent household, young couples in some social contexts believe that they must be able to afford a “real” wedding, which at minimum may cost thousands of dollars. Expectations along other dimensions such as relationship quality and parenting are also formed through social experiences. From what experiences and observations are these beliefs formed? One source might be the experiences of parents, other kin, and close friends. Another might be the messages of religious institutions. Both kin networks and religious institutions are strongly racially segregated and provide opportunity for the expectations for marriage to vary across

ethnic groups. A third source for the development of expectations could be the media. One possibility is that youth in some contexts have few real-life examples of successful marriages (Manning et al. 2009) and rely on media depictions for developing ideas about what marriage is and what it requires. If young people rely on media representations, fueled by commercial interests, it is no surprise that their perceived material requirements for marriage are high. Knowing more about the perceived requirements for marriage and how these vary across social groups could provide an important step towards understanding race–ethnic variation in marriage because these perceptions interact with the objective situation to shape decisions.

Finally, a discussion of social contextual and institutional influences makes clear that the factors shaping race–ethnic differentials in marriage likely vary by class status, at least partially because individuals’ connections to institutions are strongly conditioned by their economic position. At the lowest end of the class spectrum, individuals generally have weak connections to any social institutions and fewer economic and social resources to establish stable families. Minority status likely exacerbates the isolation associated with lower socioeconomic status. The barriers that minorities face for establishing stable family life are probably much different among the middle class, although race–ethnic differentials appear throughout the class spectrum. Most research has focused on poor and near poor families, but an analysis of the middle class is likely to lead to a richer understanding of race–ethnic variation in the family. For example, our analyses to date provide no explanation for why highly educated black men have lower marriage rates than white men. One might expect college-educated African American men to have especially high marriage rates given the substantial benefits married men enjoy and the fact that such men are scarce relative to the number of highly educated African American women (Jencks 1991). The institutional influences on marriage vary substantially across class status, and we should not expect that the explanations for race differentials that suffice for the poor will work for the middle class.

Conclusion

Decades of research have produced a wealth of knowledge about variation and change in American families and the causes and consequences of this variation. In addition to tracking variation in marriage and divorce we have developed tools to better measure emerging family forms such as cohabitating and visiting relationships. Understanding these new family forms allows us to more accurately characterize the family lives of children and adults.

For example, a non-marital birth creates a single parent family only sometimes. Studying cohabitation and other similar relationships also provides insight into what continues to be unique to marriage and how this varies across race–ethnic groups.

If we are to develop further understanding about the barriers to the creation of stable families, and how these vary by race and ethnicity, we first need a clear understanding of *what* these group differences are. Given the rapid pace of family change in recent years, information on past trends and differentials across racial and ethnic groups may not accurately depict contemporary family patterns. Updated data resources are needed. It is also important that we consider key axes of potential heterogeneity within race and ethnic groups when documenting family patterns, for example with respect to social class and nativity status. In addition, we need more information about how marriage is maintained as an institution. Marriage continues to be highly revered (Cherlin 2009). So much so, in fact, that it may have been elevated to a plane out of reach of the poor and the working class. We need to know more about the social forces that produced this development and how they vary by race-ethnicity. One explanation could be that marriage does not serve to increase couple's material well-being as it once did, limiting its usefulness to the generation of social prestige. Yet there is mounting evidence that stable relationships do bring material benefits and marriage continues to be the only institutionalized form of stable couple relationships, so this is not an entirely satisfactory answer. It may be that for unknown and unexplored reasons, for African Americans marriages tend to come with fewer benefits. In support of this idea, some evidence suggests that the negative effects of parental divorce on children's well-being are weaker for blacks than for whites (e.g., Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002; Fomby and Cherlin 2007).

To date, social scientists have leaned heavily upon economic explanations to answer questions about the sources of family change and variation. There are clearly economic barriers to the formation of stable relationships and more research is needed in this area, particularly on the importance of long-term financial stability. A job with a non-poverty wage is likely not to be a sufficient economic foundation to support marriage in an era of high job turnover. Even though economic factors are important, they may not provide a complete explanation for race–ethnic variation in marriage. Often our theorizing about and measurement of economic concepts has been far more advanced than research on more subjective influences, such as attitudes, expectations, and beliefs. Some studies merely assign variation unexplained by economic measures as evidence of a (lack of) familistic orientation among groups with a lower prevalence of marriage. We must develop

more sophisticated tools to identify how ideas about the family are socially constructed and how these ideas vary across communities. We also wholeheartedly agree with Wilson's (2009b) call for greater attention to the ways in which structural and cultural factors interact in their influence on marriage patterns. Yet new approaches to understanding race and ethnic variation in marital patterns will benefit from recognizing that marriage is at once an economic, personal, and social relationship. Indeed, marriage is a legal contract that provides couples access to formal benefits and also a bundle of expectations and beliefs about economic cooperation, caretaking, emotional commitment, social relationships, and sexual fidelity.

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