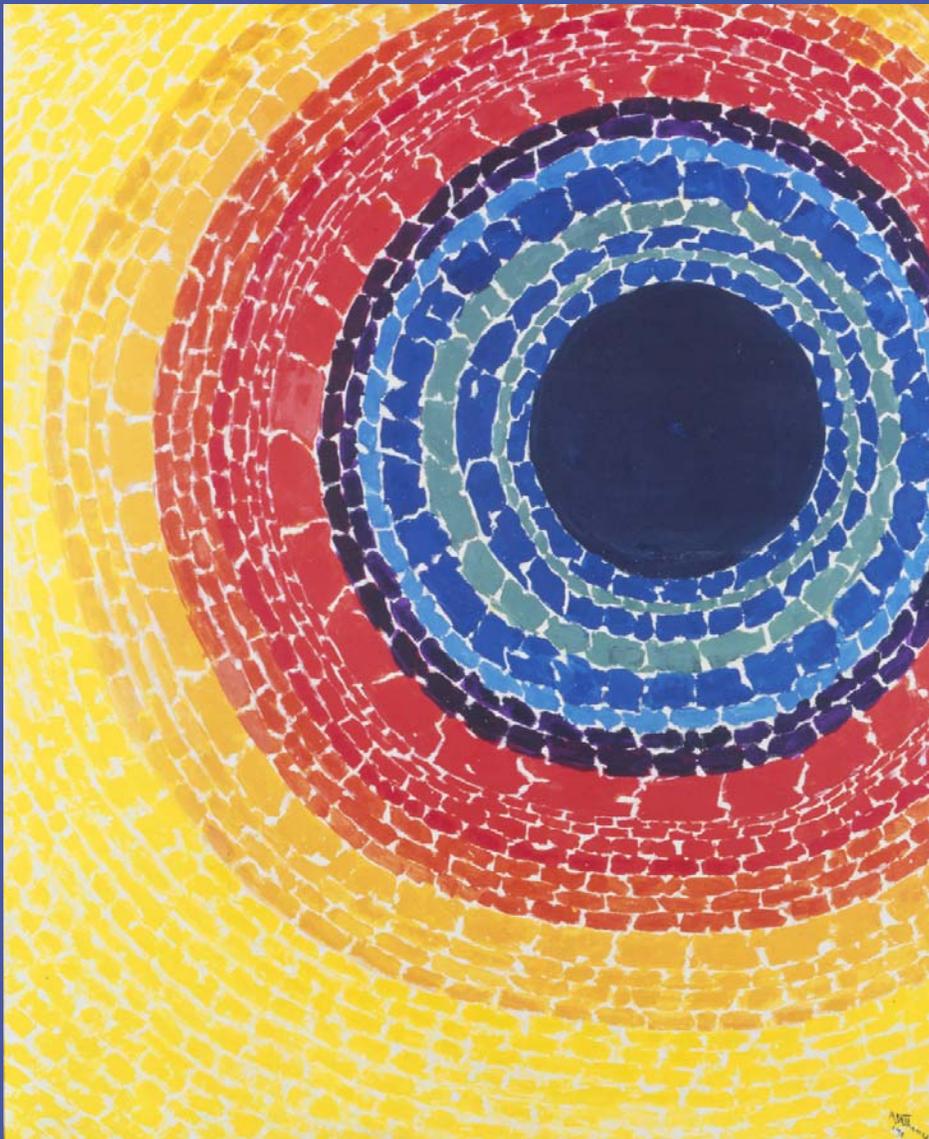


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Linda Malone-Colon, and Alex Roberts

**The Consequences of Marriage
for African Americans**
A Comprehensive Literature Review



Institute for American Values

THIS REPORT comes from a team of five family scholars: Lorraine Blackman of the Indiana University School of Social Work and the African American Family Life Education Institute; Obie Clayton of the Department of Sociology of Morehouse College; Norval Glenn of the Department of Sociology of the University of Texas at Austin; Linda Malone-Colon of the Department of Psychology of Hampton University and the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center; and Alex Roberts of the Institute for American Values.

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The Consequences of Marriage for African Americans

A Comprehensive Literature Review

Executive Summary

IN RECENT DECADES the proportion of African Americans who live in married-couple families has declined sharply. Some argue that this decline has serious negative consequences for the well-being of African Americans. Others argue that marital trends in Black America primarily derive from other, more important trends — such as economic trends and patterns of racism — and therefore are not, in and of themselves, especially alarming or important.

While these debates continue — sometimes heatedly, often controversially, and in most cases passionately — scholars still lack a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of marriage for African Americans specifically. To our knowledge, no systematic scholarly review of the issue has been carried out.

The purpose of this report is to begin to close this knowledge gap. We address four main questions.

Four Major Questions

1. What are the economic, psychosocial, and health-related consequences of marriage for African American men, women, and children?
2. Do the consequences of marriage differ for Blacks and Whites?
3. If racial differences exist, what explains these differences?
4. What are the policy implications of these findings?

To answer these questions, we conducted a comprehensive review of scholarly articles, reports, and books focusing in part on the consequences of marriage for African Americans published from 1990 through 2004. We also conducted new research specifically for this report, using survey data collected from 1973 through 2002 by the American General Social Surveys, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Based on this review of the academic literature and our new research, we present the following ten major findings.

Ten Major Findings

1. ***Marriage clearly appears to promote the economic, social, familial, and psychological well-being of African American men and women.*** Even when studies control for a wide range of variables, they consistently find that married Black adults, compared to those who are unmarried, have more income, are less likely to face poverty, and are more likely to be happy. Marriage also appears to promote better family functioning for African Americans. At the same time, the evidence generally suggests that Black adults derive little benefit from marriage in terms of physical health.
2. ***While both Black men and Black women receive a marriage premium, this premium in most cases appears to be larger for men.*** Put a bit differently, Black women overall seem to receive less benefit from marriage than do Black men. This gender gap is especially pronounced in the areas of family life and physical health. In fact, married Black women actually report *poorer* health than do unmarried Black women. The one exception to this pattern is in the economic domain, where Black men and women appear to benefit comparably from marriage.
3. ***Economically, marriage appears to benefit Blacks more than Whites.*** In part because marriage often means an additional wage earner for the family, and in part because marriage typically increases the income and the economic productivity of individuals, married-couple Black families have far more income, and are far less likely to live in poverty, than other Black families. This economic premium stemming from marriage is comparably larger for Blacks than for Whites. In general, marriage appears to contribute greatly to the economic well-being of African American families.
4. ***Overall, Black women appear to benefit from marriage substantially less than do White women.*** By contrast, the differences in the benefit from marriage between Black men and White men appear in most cases to be minimal.
5. ***Black-White differences in marital quality seem to constitute an important reason why Black adults, and particularly Black women, typically benefit less from marriage than do Whites.*** On average, the marriages of Whites appear to be marked by more happiness and less conflict than those of African Americans. The lower average quality of African American marriages, in turn, seems to reduce the benefits to adults that those marriages might otherwise yield. In our analysis of data from the General Social Surveys, we find that controlling for marital quality significantly reduces the Black-White gap in the estimated benefits of marriage.

6. ***Parental marriage produces important benefits for African American children.*** Black children of married parents typically receive better parenting, are less delinquent, have fewer behavioral problems, have higher self-esteem, are more likely to delay sexual activity, and have moderately better educational outcomes. Because many of the relevant studies on child outcomes employ comprehensive controls, there is strong reason to believe that these findings reflect more than mere correlations. *Marriage itself* appears to be generating strong positive results for African American children. At the same time, marriage may have little or no impact on school dropout and drug use among Black adolescents.
7. ***Parental marriage appears to be especially important for the well-being of young African American males.*** In areas including parental support, delinquency, self-esteem, and school performance, having one's father in the home, and particularly one's *married* father, appears to be a crucial determinant of better outcomes for young Black males. When viewed alongside our other finding regarding the larger marriage premium for Black men, as compared to Black women, this finding suggests that marriage is particularly important for African American males at all stages of the life cycle.
8. ***In some areas, Black children seem to benefit more from parental marriage than do White children, whereas in other areas, the reverse is true.*** Regarding both levels of parental support and the risks of delinquency, African American children seem to benefit more from parental marriage than do White children. Yet regarding educational performance, early sexual activity, substance use, and possibly high school completion, White children appear to derive greater benefits from parental marriage than do their African American peers.
9. ***The reasons for some apparent racial differences in the consequences of marriage for children are not clear, and further research in this area is needed.*** One possibility is that studies need more carefully to distinguish the effects of parental non-marriage on Black sons as compared to Black daughters, since the impact on boys appears to be greater than the impact on girls. Another, related possibility is that the institutional contexts and cultural norms affecting African American children are in some respects distinctive, thus making it harder for researchers to tease out the specific effects of marriage and non-marriage when it comes to Black-White differences in child outcomes.
10. ***For policy makers who care about Black America, marriage matters.*** Public and private sector policies aimed at increasing marriage rates among African Americans, and particularly policies aimed at increasing the number and proportion of high quality Black marriages, are important strategies for improving the well-being of African Americans and for strengthening civil society.

Introduction

A **SUBSTANTIAL BODY** of evidence suggests that marriage brings a wide range of benefits to men, women, and children. On average, married adults are happier, healthier, and wealthier than their unmarried peers.¹ Those in high quality marriages exhibit particularly high levels of well-being. The largest gap in the well-being of American adults is between those who are in high quality marriages and everyone else — this gap is greater than the one between rich and poor, the one between those in good health and those in poor health, and the one between Blacks and Whites.² Marriage also brings substantial benefits to children, who are more likely to do well in school, avoid drugs, and be psychologically healthy when they live with their own married parents.³ These advantages are not merely the results of “selection effects.”⁴ Rather, to a significant degree, they appear to be genuine products of the institution of marriage.⁵

Clearly, marriage is a major determinant of well-being in American society.

Growing awareness of this fact has generated renewed political and social interest in the institution of marriage. The federal government, which has long provided economic incentives for couples to marry and stay married,⁶ has in recent years established a “Healthy Marriage Initiative” to fund marriage education programs for couples who desire these services.⁷ The previous decade also witnessed the rise of what some have called a “marriage movement” in civil society.⁸ Collectively, these efforts have sought to strengthen marriage as a social institution and promote marital quality, both as ends in themselves and as ways to increase the well-being of all Americans.

-
1. Waite and Gallagher (2000); Doherty et al. (2005); Wilson (2002); Berger (2002); Amato and Booth (1997); McLanahan and Sandefur (1994).
 2. Of course, the average quality of American marriages is high enough that most married persons derive substantial benefits from the institution. Ibid.
 3. Manning and Lamb (2003).
 4. Here is an example of a selection effect: Since healthy people are more likely to marry in the first place, it may be that some of the observed higher levels of well-being among married people are due not to marriage but instead to traits (in this case better health or other characteristics that promote health) associated with these individuals *prior* to their entry into marriage.
 5. See Hofferth and Anderson (2003); After controlling for an assortment of background variables — including race, father’s age, child’s gender and age, number of children, months lived with father, father’s work hours per week and earnings, and father’s payment of child support — Hofferth and Anderson analyzed the quality of fathers’ parenting across several family forms and concluded that marriage itself made fathers spend more time with their children and display more paternal warmth. In the words of the authors, “Marriage per se confers advantage in terms of father involvement above and beyond the characteristics of the fathers themselves, whereas biology does not.” Data were for 2,531 children and their parents. See also: Manning and Lamb (2003). After controlling for parent’s relationship with the child, family stability, income, and mother’s education, the study found that children living in stepfamilies were significantly less likely to be delinquent than children living with one cohabiting parent. Data are from interviews administered to 18,924 students as part of the 1995 wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.
 6. Bernstein (2003).
 7. The “Healthy Marriage Initiative” is administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. See <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>.
 8. See Aird et al. (2000); Allen et al. (2004).

But does marriage bring the same benefits to all groups? Despite our increased understanding of the importance of marriage, we still know relatively little about whether African Americans in particular derive the same benefits from marriage that the average, largely White population does. Some studies suggest that they do not. For example, one study finds that single-parent Black families may actually provide *greater* protection against drug use than the two-biological-parent Black family.⁹ If it is the case that marriage provides no or dramatically reduced benefits to African Americans, efforts to promote marriage in the Black community may be misguided. National marriage initiatives might even be discriminatory.

It is to this important issue that we turn in this report.

Marriage in Black America: The Demographic Context

The topic of marriage in the African American community has been surrounded by an amazing amount of controversy and contention over the years. At one end of the intellectual spectrum, some thinkers have portrayed marriage as both the main cause of and also the potential solution to problems faced by Black Americans. At the other end, some have argued that marriage and father presence are neither necessary nor necessarily important for Black Americans because they have developed other normative family structures that suit their conditions. Given this legacy of controversy, perhaps the best place to begin our discussion is with some basic facts about marriage and race in America.

Some of the earliest good data on racial household composition show that, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were some notable racial differences in family structure, with Blacks being more likely than Whites to live in extended, fragmented, or foster families.¹⁰ But overall, family formation patterns were relatively similar for Blacks and Whites, with marriage occupying a paramount place in family life. For example, in 1880 and 1910 about 56.3 percent of Black and 66.9 percent of White households were nuclear households, about 23.5 percent of Black and 19.7 percent of White households were extended family households, and 20.3 percent of Black and 13.4 percent of White households were fragmented or “broken” homes.¹¹

But the twentieth century saw a dramatic reduction in marriage rates among African Americans. Between 1950 and 1996, the percentage of Black families headed by married

9. Amey and Albrecht (1998). Another study found that family structure is not related to psychosocial outcomes among African American youths with low GPA's; D.A. Salem et al. (1998).

10. Morgan et al. (1993); Miller (1998).

11. Ruggles (1994). It should be noted that the “extended family” category includes married-couple households with coresiding kin, grandchildren, etc. Thus, there were more married-couple families than those represented in the “nuclear households” category. Data from another study show that marriage rates increased among Blacks and decreased among Whites in Philadelphia after slavery, and were relatively similar in 1880 and 1890; Haines (1996).

couples declined from 78 percent to 34 percent.¹² This trend was created by a growing divorce rate¹³ and, increasingly over time, by a growing number of households headed by never-married Black women. Between 1950 and 1980, the proportion of Black households headed by never-married Black women increased from 3.87 to 69.77 per 1,000.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, the decline in marriage rates among Black Americans produced dramatic changes in the living arrangements of Black children. Between 1940 and 1990, the percentage of Black children living with both parents dropped from 75.8 percent to 33.2 percent — largely a result of marked increases in the number of never-married Black mothers.¹⁵

Although Whites experienced similar trends in family formation, these trends were less dramatic. For example, between 1940 and 1990, the percentage of White children living with both parents dropped from 92.6 percent to 78.7 percent — considerably less than the 42.6 percent drop experienced by Black children.¹⁶ Throughout the twentieth century, Black family diversification steadily outstripped White family diversification and Black and White families have become more and more statistically dissimilar.¹⁷ According to the latest data, only 35 percent of Black children live with married parents whereas 76 percent of White children do.¹⁸ Fifty-five percent of Black children and 20 percent of White children live with a single parent; 11 percent of Black children and 4 percent of White children live with neither parent.

Meanwhile the desire to marry has remained high. In 1988, 77.35 percent of Black and 83.36 percent of White single adults aged 19-35 said in a national survey that they wished to get married.¹⁹ This fact means that not only have there been precipitous declines in marriage rates for Blacks, but also that there are large numbers of Black Americans who desire marriage but are unable to achieve it. Reflecting on the decline of marriage among Black Americans, and on the sheer volume of unrealized marital hopes, it is hard to imagine another issue with such potentially profound implications for African American individuals and communities.

The Scholarly Discussion

Some scholars argue that declining marriage rates have contributed to the hardships faced by Black Americans. They argue that father absence tends to create and perpetuate poverty and generally leaves children with a less than ideal starting point in life. There is

12. Census data cited in Mandara and Murray (2000).

13. Between 1960 and 1990, the divorce rate for Black women jumped from 78 in 1,000 marriages to 358 per 1,000; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1995).

14. Wojtkiewicz et al. (1990).

15. In 1940, .8 percent of Black mothers were never-married, but by 1990, 35.17 percent were never-married; Tolnay (1997).

16. Ibid.

17. Ruggles (1994).

18. Lugaila and Overturf (2004).

19. Statistics were for unmarried, non-cohabiting adults. All race differences were significant; South (1993).

an empirical basis for these claims. A study of approximately 57,000 households with children finds that marital status is a major determinant of poverty for African Americans.²⁰ Another study finds that increased marriage rates would substantially reduce child poverty among African Americans in theory, and actually did significantly reduce child poverty during the 1990s.²¹

Some scholars have focused on understanding why marriage rates are low among African Americans. They have noted that the practices of slavery, as well as subsequent poverty and discrimination, have cultivated conflictual gender relations and undermined the formation of stable, married-couple families in the African American community.²² A lack of economic opportunities for Black men has steadily reduced the number of marriageable Black men over the course of the twentieth century.²³

Other thinkers have combined these approaches, arguing that African American family structure represents a critical link in the chain between the structural disadvantage Blacks face and the generally poorer outcomes they experience. First articulated by W.E.B. Dubois in *The Negro American Family* (1908), this theory became both famous and infamous in 1965 as a result of the Moynihan Report, which argued that father absenteeism in the African American community — along with racism and unemployment — drives a “tangle of pathology” that conspires to keep Blacks from improving their circumstances.

Still other scholars have contested this position. They have argued that the single-parent, extended, and foster families more common among Black Americans are not necessarily negative, and are in many ways positive: They reflect African cultural-familial norms²⁴ and have allowed Blacks to cope with the hardships they have faced in America.²⁵ Many of the same scholars argue that it is not so much family structure that is important for African Americans’ well-being as it is the quality of family interaction, socioeconomic status, and other factors.

The discussion about marriage in the African American community has undoubtedly advanced our knowledge. It has pointed out that marriage and marriage rates have some serious implications for the well-being of African Americans. It has also underscored the importance of understanding African American family formation within the context of the African American historical experience.

Surprisingly, the discussion has not been anchored by a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of marriage for Black Americans. To our knowledge, no academic work has systematically investigated this issue.

20. Lerman (2002).

21. Lichter and Crowley (2004).

22. Pinderhughes (2002); Frazier (1966).

23. R. Taylor et al. (1990).

24. Ruggles, (1994); Miller (1998).

25. Jayakody and Chatters (1997).

The purpose of this report is to begin to close this knowledge gap. We address four main questions.

Four Major Questions

1. What are the economic, psychosocial, and health-related consequences of marriage for African American men, women, and children?
2. Do the consequences of marriage differ for Blacks and Whites?
3. If racial differences exist, what explains these differences?
4. What are the policy implications of these findings?

ANSWERING THESE QUESTIONS is all the more important today because, after more than three decades of steep declines, the proportion of African American children living in married-couple homes, while still low, appears to be modestly increasing. This encouraging change shows that Black family fragmentation is not irreversible and suggests that strengthening marriage may be both a legitimate and feasible goal for U.S. public policy.

Methodology

To ANSWER our research questions, we gathered academic journal articles, reports, and books on the consequences of marriage for African Americans and Whites. Sources were identified and acquired using bibliography reviews and online databases such as PsycINFO, Sociological Abstracts, and JSTOR.

We restricted our research in two ways. First, we chose to use mainly sources from 1990 and later. This limited our field of information to a reasonable size and helped ensure that our data were more recent and relevant. Second, we excluded articles that included data for Whites only — our data for Whites had to come from the same articles that examined the consequences of marriage for African Americans. The point of this restriction was to ensure that the data we used for racial comparisons were drawn from a standardized pool. Using these research methods and conditions, we accumulated approximately 300 sources dealing with marriage in the African American²⁶ community. About 80 contained information directly relevant to our research questions.

Our basic review procedure was straightforward: We categorized the studies into demographic groups (men, women, children) and investigated how marriage was related to various outcomes (e.g., mental health, economic well-being) for those groups.

To ascertain the consequences of marriage, we began by examining bivariate data on the effects of marital status. Are married people on average more or less healthy? Wealthy? And so on. These data gave us a preliminary sense of what the total effect of marriage on an outcome might be (i.e., positive or negative, significant or insignificant, and large or small). We then turned to multivariate data and asked several additional questions. First, to what extent does marriage affect an outcome indirectly? (For example, do higher levels of income and parental support associated with marriage help children's test scores?) We paid particularly close attention to the strength of the intercorrelations among variables in an effort to avoid under- or overestimating the indirect effects of marriage. Second, we asked, to what extent does marriage affect an outcome even after other variables are controlled for? If studies find that marriage promotes happiness even after potential mediating variables are controlled for, then marriage likely promotes happiness in ways that other phenomena cannot. Alternatively, unexplained marriage effects might be due to selection. For example, if studies cannot explain why married people are happier, it might be because happy people are more likely to get married in the first place. In that case, one could not properly draw the conclusion that marriage is improving happiness.

26. Unfortunately, because a number of studies categorized their samples into "Black" and "White," we could not always be sure that the sample was entirely ethnically African American (as opposed to Caribbean American, recent immigrant, and so on).

In this report, we seek to explain why marriage affects a given outcome because establishing causal mechanisms allows one to be more confident that the observed consequences of marriage are true consequences of marriage.

We also paid close attention to marital status categories. One cannot simply compare married individuals to unmarried individuals because such a dichotomy would conflate the characteristics of divorced and never-married people. For example, White children who live in single-parent households are more likely to be living with a divorced parent rather than a never-married parent. Thus, the differences between White children living in married versus unmarried households may be due to the effects of divorce, not marriage.

By remaining sensitive to these issues and using the analytical procedure outlined above, we were able to produce reasonably good estimates of the consequences of marriage.

A Note on Family Classification in the Scholarly Research

One problem we encountered in our investigation of marriage and Black children is that many studies do not classify family structure as specifically as we would have liked. For example, some articles use categories such as “married-couple home,” or “two-parent home.” These categories conflate children living with married-biological-parents, cohabiting-biological-parents, stepparents, and so on. Lumping these family forms together is problematic because they have important differences and are associated with different outcomes. For example, studies have shown that Black biological parents who cohabit rather than marry are more likely to live in poverty.²⁷ Stepfamilies are generally less organized than married-biological-parent families.²⁸ Moreover, children living in step-families have often lived through a divorce.

The use of overly-broad family categorizations makes it very difficult to isolate and study the effects of a particular family structure. This issue is particularly relevant for studying African American children, who live in an especially diverse range of family forms.

To the extent possible, scholars should use more precise family structure categories in future research.

Because focusing solely on traditional nuclear families would have made an investigation of marriage and the well-being of Black children nearly impossible, we chose not to exclude studies with less than perfect family structure categories. We acknowledge that this decision likely makes our findings less precise. Nevertheless, we believe that the studies under review still provide a very good estimate of the effect of parental marriage on the well-being of Black children.

27. Lerman (2002).

28. Hofferth and Anderson (2003).

The studies under review fall into four groups of varying quality and relevance. The first group of studies consists of those that examine the consequences of living with one's two, *married, biological parents* on Black children's well-being. These studies are of course the most relevant. The second category of studies includes those of Black children living with both *biological parents*, although some of the couples are not married. In the vast majority of these families — upwards of 90 percent — the parents are married.²⁹ *For convenience, we refer in this report to all two-biological-parent families (including those who are not married) as “intact families.”*

The third group of studies focuses on the children of *married parents*. Among Black children living with married parents, roughly 78 percent live with two biological parents, 15 percent live in stepfamilies, and 7 percent in kin or foster families.³⁰ The fourth, and least relevant, group of studies focuses on *two-parent families*. Among Blacks, about 68 percent of these families consist of married biological parents, about 13 percent are stepfamilies, and the rest are either cohabiting or kin or foster families.

Obviously, we rely most heavily on the first two groups and rely least on the fourth. Despite the inherent limitations of this approach, we believe that it enables us to produce a very good estimate of the effects of parental marriage on Black children.

New Analyses

Although we review a number of important studies on how marriage typically affects the well-being of Black adults, the relevant literature proved somewhat sparse for the period after 1990. For this reason, we chose to use a few sources from the late 1980s when they seemed particularly helpful to our research.

We also performed a few new analyses directed toward providing evidence on our topic, using data from the American General Social Surveys (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago over a 30-year period (1973-2002).³¹ The General Social Surveys, conducted every year or every other year during this period, asked questions about personal happiness, subjective health, satisfaction with family life, satisfaction with financial situation, and subjective economic rank. There are reasons to think that being married typically contributes to each of these qualities. The relevant question here is whether or not being married contributes to these positive outcomes for African Americans, and if it does, how great is that contribution relative to the comparable contribution (if any) to Whites.

We combined the data from all of the 1973-2002 General Social Surveys and used logistic regression analysis to see how being married related to the positive emotions listed above.

29. Lerman (2002).

30. Ibid.; Fields (2001).

31. These analyses were performed by Norval Glenn.

When logistic regression is used to compare two categories, such as unmarried and married, the odds ratio (the statistic generated using this analysis) for one of the compared categories is set at 1.0, and the odds ratio for the other category is meaningful only in relation to the 1.0 set for the first category. An odds ratio for the other category greater than 1.0 indicates that the other category ranks higher on the characteristic in question than the first category, while a ratio less than 1.0 indicates the opposite.

The fact that being married is associated with, say, being happy, does not necessarily mean that being married causes one to be happy. Rather, being married and being happy could be commonly caused by something else, such as a pleasant disposition. Considerable effort has been expended to try to discern the extent to which differences between married and unmarried adults reflect the consequences of being married. The evidence yielded by these efforts is not definitive, but it indicates that some, but not all, of the difference reflects an effect of being married.

Here, we present associations between being married and positive emotions as evidence that the former contributes to the latter, but we do not claim that the magnitude of the associations accurately reflects the strength of the effects. Furthermore, we consider differences between African Americans and Whites in the strength of these associations as evidence of differences in the effects of marriage, though we recognize that the evidence is not conclusive.

We control for age, mother's level of education, and economic rank of the family at age 16 because these variables could commonly affect marital status and the outcome variables we study. For instance, subjective health is less favorable among older persons than among younger ones, and the age distributions of African Americans and Whites differ. Thus, the relationships of being married to the outcome variables with the controls included are more likely to reflect the effects of the former on the latter than the relationships without the controls. However, since we cannot be sure that everything that needs to be controlled is statistically controlled, the estimated effects are just that — estimates rather than precise measures of what affects what and to what degree.

In addition to comparing married with unmarried persons, we compared persons in “very happy” marriages with everyone else, including those in less happy marriages and those not married. The differences found are generally much greater than the differences between married and unmarried persons, because married persons in poor or mediocre marriages generally report lower levels of positive emotions even than persons who are not married.

The Consequences of Marriage for African Americans

THE FOLLOWING SECTION focuses on the effects of marriage on adults (both men and women), the family unit, and children. It pays particular attention to the economic, health, psychological, social, familial — and in the case of children, academic — consequences for these groups, and includes a section on extended families.

Adults

A careful review of the literature on marriage and the welfare of African American adults reveals that marriage is clearly linked to positive economic, psychological, and social outcomes. The evidence is mixed, however, when it comes to health outcomes.

Our literature review also finds that marriage is more beneficial for Black men than it is for Black women, particularly when it comes to psychological outcomes.

The bottom line is that on most measures of well-being, married African American adults tend to come out on top, compared to their peers.

Economic Well-Being

On virtually every indicator of economic well-being, married Black adults do better than their divorced, widowed, separated, and never-married peers.

Several studies indicate that Black Americans who are married earn more money and attain higher levels of occupational prestige than their unmarried peers.³² The difference is especially stark between currently-married and never-married Black adults.

Marriage also appears to protect against economic trouble for African Americans. Specifically, married African Americans are significantly less likely to suffer from material hardship (for example, not having enough money to pay the rent or electric bill) or poverty.³³ And the marriage benefit goes beyond avoidance of poverty. Studies suggest that married African Americans are also more likely to secure an important part of the American Dream — owning a home.³⁴

Importantly, the economic benefits of marriage appear to extend to both Black men and Black women.

32. Keith and Herring (1991); Mincy and Pouncy (2003); Williams et al. (2000).

33. Nock (2003); Williams et al. (2000); Willson and Hardy (2002).

34. In particular, married African Americans have higher levels of home equity, compared to African Americans who are not married; Krivo and Kaufman (2004).

Estimates suggest that African American men who are married earn between 15 and 18 percent more than their never-married peers.³⁵ An important longitudinal study, which examines the actual increases in economic well-being that accompany marriage, yields similar results. It finds that Black men who marry earn about \$4,000 more than they did prior to marriage, work two more weeks than they did when single, and see their odds of living in poverty fall by more than 30 percent.³⁶ These findings are particularly important because they demonstrate that marriage is a wealth-creating institution for African Americans. In addition, the positive economic effects of marriage seem particularly pronounced for married fathers, who experience the biggest increases in earnings and work effort.³⁷

Black women also benefit economically from marriage. Studies suggest that Black married women earn about 13 percent more than their never-married peers, receive higher social security benefits than unmarried women, and are less likely to fall close to or below the poverty line.³⁸

Paralleling our findings for men, we find that marriage is particularly consequential for African American mothers. Black mothers who have never married have much lower levels of income, and higher reports of material hardship, compared to ever-married and especially currently-married mothers.³⁹ Marriage even benefits African American mothers with low levels of education and opportunity. For instance, one study finds that 35 percent of disadvantaged African American mothers who had a first birth outside of marriage are living in poverty, compared to 17 percent of disadvantaged African American mothers who had their first child while married.⁴⁰

The evidence therefore clearly indicates that marriage is associated with, and contributes towards, significant material benefits for African Americans. These benefits are particularly strong for mothers and fathers, and particularly so in comparison to those who never married.

Our analysis of the 1973-2002 General Social Surveys (see figure 1) supports these findings. We find, after controlling for age, mother's education, and family economic status at age 16, that married Black adults of both sexes are much more likely to report being of at least average economic standing. They are also much more likely report being satisfied with their financial condition.

35. The marriage premium is lower in comparison to divorced or widowed men; Cotton (1993); Mincy and Pouncy (2003).

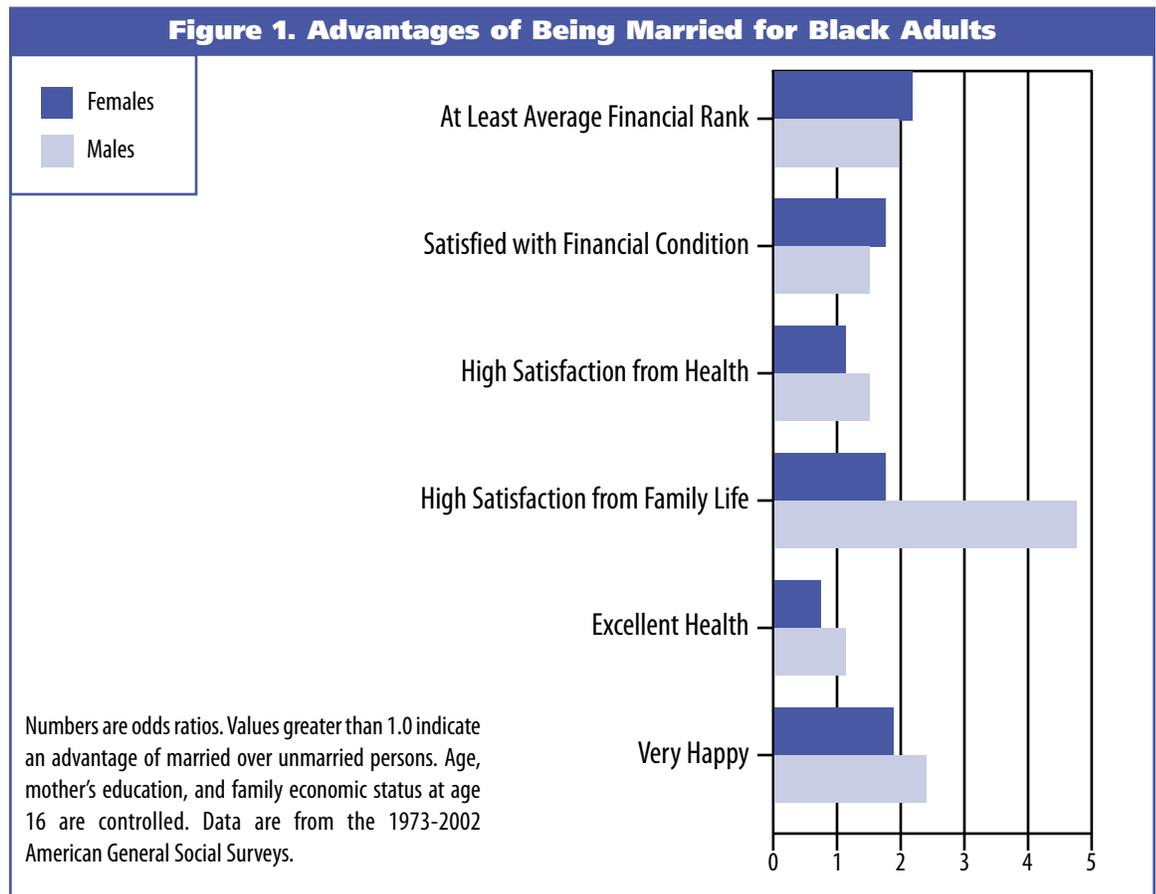
36. Nock (2003).

37. Ibid.

38. Mincy and Pouncy (2003); Willson and Hardy (2002); Meyer (1996).

39. Franklin et al. (1995).

40. Lichter et al. (2003).



Social and Familial Outcomes

When it comes to social outcomes — civic involvement, virtue, crime, and family relations — marriage appears to offer clear benefits to African Americans.⁴¹ African Americans who are married are significantly more likely to report that they reject illegal and unethical behavior.⁴² They are also significantly more likely to attend religious services.⁴³ Married African American adults have more positive interactions and fewer negative interactions with family members (for example, their parents and children), compared to unmarried African American adults.⁴⁴

Most evidence indicates that African American women gain from marriage in the social domain. Studies of kin relationships suggest that married African American mothers are less

41. Some of the relationship between marriage and social outcomes is likely due to selection effects, but the use of background controls in the studies should help to reduce the chances that they will be mistaken for marriage effects.

42. Swaidan et al. (2003).

43. Chatters et al. (1999).

44. Lincoln et al. (2003); Jayakody et al. (1993).

economically dependent on their mothers, engage in more reciprocal exchanges of material and emotional support with their mothers, and receive more emotional support from their mothers, compared to single African American mothers.⁴⁵ Studies also find that Black women who are married tend to report higher levels of family satisfaction,⁴⁶ which our research supports (see figure 1.)

According to our research, however, marriage promotes satisfaction with family life significantly more for Black men than for Black women (figure 1).⁴⁷

Other research on Black men finds that they are much less likely to be involved in criminal activity when married. As sociologist Robert Sampson observes, “The data clearly reveal that black family disruption has large effects on black robbery and murder.”⁴⁸

In sum, the evidence suggests that marriage benefits African Americans for a range of social outcomes, and that the differences between married and never-married African Americans in this regard are particularly noteworthy.

Psychological Well-Being

The effects of marriage on the psychological well-being of Black adults are somewhat unclear.

On the one hand, numerous studies find that married African Americans report more happiness, life satisfaction, and fewer emotional problems than their unmarried peers.⁴⁹ They are also apparently less likely to commit suicide or to express support for suicide.⁵⁰ Married African Americans also appear to be more outgoing than their unmarried peers.⁵¹ Many of these studies control for variables that affect marital status and psychological well-being, and thus these findings strongly suggest, though they do not conclusively prove, that marriage typically increases the psychological well-being of African American adults.

On the other hand, several of these same studies suggest that it is not so much that marriage promotes mental health — but rather that divorce, separation, and widowhood harm it.

45. Hogan et al. (1990); Hogan et al. (1993). Jayakody et al. (1993).

46. Aldous and Gainey (1999); Broman (1991).

47. These odds ratios are only estimates and do not necessarily reflect actual propensities.

48. Sampson (1995).

49. Broman (1988); Ellison (1990); Williams et al. (1992). Studies using marriage as a predictor variable while investigating African American well-being have consistently found marriage to be predictive of happiness and other positive feelings; see Aldous and Gainey (1999) and Glenn (2000). Also, numerous studies from the 1980s found that marriage promoted psychological well-being for Black adults. For example, using a national sample, Broman (1988) found a positive association for Black adults between marriage and life satisfaction, family life satisfaction, and happiness. See also Jackson, Chatters, and Neighbors (1986); Zollar and Williams (1987); and Chatters and Jackson (1989).

50. Luoma and Pearson (2002); Stack and Wasserman (1995).

51. Lincoln et al. (2003).

Never-married Black adults appear to do about as well as their married peers on most outcomes.⁵² If marital disruption, rather than marriage, distinguishes Blacks in terms of mental health, it is possible that marriage actually has less of an effect on psychological well-being than the studies at first seem to indicate.⁵³

Nevertheless, a significant body of literature still makes a compelling case that marriage promotes psychological well-being for Black adults. Further research on this important topic is needed.

The literature is also unclear about the connections between gender, marriage, and psychological welfare. Some studies suggest that Black women benefit more than Black men from marriage on outcomes such as depression.⁵⁴ But, another study finds that marriage predicts high life satisfaction for men only,⁵⁵ and our own analysis of the GSS indicates that, on average, Black men benefit somewhat more than do Black women in the psychological domain from marriage (see figure 1). Further research on this subject is also needed.

Physical Health

For African Americans, the scholarly research on marriage and health is contradictory and inconclusive. A number of studies indicate that married African Americans, especially those who are employed, are less likely to suffer from poor health, non-serious maladies, and activity limitations, compared to never-married, cohabiting, divorced, and widowed adults who are African American.⁵⁶ Married adults most likely benefit more from marriage when they are employed because employment often brings health insurance coverage to a wage-earner and his or her spouse.

But other research indicates that there is no benefit from marriage when it comes to smoking, preventative medicine, and non-serious maladies.⁵⁷

To the extent that there is a gender difference in the link between marriage and health, it appears that Black men benefit from marriage more than Black women. For example, several studies find that Black men benefit from marriage more than Black women in terms of activity level, self-reported health, health-related spousal support, and preventative healthcare.⁵⁸

52. For example, Ellison (1990); Williams et al. (1992).

53. A possible alternative explanation is that the unmarried tend to have lower psychological well-being, but the never-married possess better coping mechanisms. For example, never-married African Americans may draw from other resources (friends, church, extended family) in ways that make their lives meaningful and afford them a sense of belonging, whereas previously-married Black adults have suffered both emotional trauma and the loss of a primary source of emotional support.

54. Nomaguchi (2005).

55. Ball and Robbins (1986).

56. This research also suggests that the gap between the married and the never-married is smaller than the gap between the married and the previously-married; Schoenborn (2004); Pienta et al. (2000). On the link between marriage and employment among African Americans, see Rushing et al. (1992).

57. Joseph et al. (2003); Jennings-Dozier and Lawrence (2000); Rushing et al. (1992).

58. Crespo et al. (2000); Sternfeld et al. (2000); Waite (1995); Taylor et al. (1997).

Our research finds that marriage brings small health benefits to Black men and none to Black women (see figure 1). In fact, married Black women are significantly less likely to report having excellent health than are unmarried Black women. These findings are unexpected and beg for explanation. One credible explanation is that the marriages of African Americans often subject them to conflict and stress⁵⁹ — this may be particularly true for Black women, who often experience high levels of role strain in marriage. We will return to this topic later in our discussion of Black-White differences in the effects of marriage on adults.

What Explains the Apparent Benefits of Marriage?

How do we account for the apparent positive effect of marriage on well-being among African American adults, where it exists? Undoubtedly, some of the associations are a product of selection — that is, employed, law-abiding, church-going, and happy African Americans are more likely also to make it to the altar.⁶⁰ But most of the studies under review addressing the link between marriage and adult well-being control for obvious factors that might confound the links between marriage and adult well-being, such as education and income. In fact, some of the studies we rely upon are quite sophisticated. For instance, Steven Nock's research on the effects of marriage on Black men's income and work effort is based upon a longitudinal study with fixed effects, so his research enables us to see how men's income and work effort change in the wake of marriage.⁶¹ Studies like this one provide us with greater confidence in concluding that marriage is indeed creating some of the better outcomes generally enjoyed by married African Americans.

What, then, are the mechanisms that explain the link between marriage and adult well-being among African Americans? As a social institution, marriage confers to men and women a set of norms that provide them with new meaning, order their lives together, and signal to the outside world that their status in life has changed. Black men who become husbands may come to see themselves as providers, especially after children are born, in a particularly powerful way; this change, in turn, may motivate them to work longer and smarter at work, which helps boost their wages.⁶² Women and especially men may also engage less in risky behavior and overspending after they marry, insofar as marriage is associated with settling down and acting responsibly.⁶³ These changes, in turn, may help them change their spending patterns to save for a house, which would explain research findings linking marriage to higher levels of household equity among African Americans.⁶⁴

59. See Broman (2005).

60. For different views on what predicts entry into marriage among African Americans, see Patterson (1999) and Wilson (1997).

61. Nock (2003).

62. Nock (1998).

63. Ibid.

64. Krivo and Kaufman (2004).

Finally, marriage typically provides individuals with important social, structural, and psychological resources, including economies of scale and a ready source of emotional and social support. Individuals who can and do share income, wealth, and skills stand to benefit economically, just as individuals who share social and emotional support with one another on a daily basis stand to benefit on a range of psychological outcomes. Moreover, whatever our common lore about in-laws, the reality is that married persons often do benefit from the social and economic resources of their partner's kin; and they are more likely to get support from their partner's kin if they are married rather than cohabiting, in large part because families are more likely to invest in a couple if they believe that the relationship will endure.⁶⁵ For these reasons and numerous others, marriage matters to the welfare of African American adults.

Families and Communities

The Impact of Marriage on the Economic Status of Black Families

The evidence clearly indicates that marriage profoundly improves the economic standing of Black families.

We find a marked income differential between single and married households. A study of census data from the late 1980s finds that Black married-couple households have 131 percent more income than single households (\$25,848 versus \$11,200) and much more net worth (\$17,437 versus \$800).⁶⁶ When the authors focus on families with children, the differences in economic status become even more pronounced, with married households possessing 147 percent more income (\$23,021 versus \$9,322) and far more net worth (\$23,021 versus \$0) than single households.⁶⁷ Several other studies yield similar results.⁶⁸

What mechanisms account for these large differences? Is marriage creating wealth? A large-sample, longitudinal study by Marianne Page and Ann Stevens provides some clues.⁶⁹ It finds that the family incomes of Black single-parent households increase by an average of 81.2 percent when the parent — almost always a single-mother⁷⁰ — marries.⁷¹ The income advantage is less after the third year of marriage, but is still considerable at 42.9 percent. (These income gains are even higher and more persistent among those with stable marriages.) Further analysis provided in the study demonstrates that these large increases in

65. Robert Lerman (2002).

66. Data were from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, Oliver and Shapiro (1997).

67. Blacks possessed no net financial assets, on average, in any of the marital or child status groups.

68. Smetana and Gaines (1999); Heiss (1996).

69. Page and Stevens (2005); Data were for 4,069 Black children from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), 1968-1993.

70. Fields (2001).

71. The data used by the study conflated marriage and cohabitation prior to 1983. Although this is certainly problematic, we discuss these data in this report because they nevertheless show some of the mechanisms by which marriage promotes household income.

income are due almost entirely to the addition of a male income to the household. Not surprisingly, Page and Stevens also find that divorce is associated with substantial loss of family income. Among Black two-parent families, those that *eventually divorce* have 24.6 percent less family income. After divorce, they possess about 50 percent less income than intact households in the long term, again due almost entirely to the loss of a father's earnings. If we combine these figures with data on the determinants of marriage and divorce,⁷² a clear picture emerges. The higher income of Black married-couple families is most primarily and immediately a consequence of the addition of a male's income to the household, and this addition is contingent to some degree on the male's ability to obtain and maintain employment (particularly a good-paying job).

But because married Black men are more productive than and earn more than their unmarried peers,⁷³ there should be a marriage benefit *beyond* the mechanical addition of incomes. This does seem to be the case. Cohabiting African American households possess substantially less income than married-couple households.⁷⁴ Likewise, a study of 2,107 Black adults finds that marriage strongly predicts higher personal income for males and higher family income for both males and females. The correlation between marriage and family income (.246, $p < .01$) is net of, and stronger than, correlations between income and skin tone, region, urbanicity, education, occupation, age, and gender.⁷⁵ These findings provide evidence that marriage *itself* contributes to higher family income and greater wealth.

One might argue that focusing on household income is problematic. After all, marriage often brings not just money, but at least one more mouth to feed. Marriage has the potential to dilute, not just augment, income. It is therefore important that we know how marriage affects the *overall economic well-being* of Black families.

The evidence on this subject is again clear: Marriage is vastly important to the economic well-being of Black families, and it often means the difference between living above or below the poverty line. For example, a longitudinal study of 3,079 Black householders found that marrying was strongly associated with moving from a poor to non-poor census tract; the effect ($b = .622$, $p < .01$) was independent of, and stronger than that of, other important variables such as education, number of children, residential segregation, poverty concentration, *and even changes in one's employment status and personal income*.⁷⁶ Being married strongly reduced one's likelihood of moving into a poor tract ($b = -1.062$, $p < .01$) and divorce greatly increased it ($b = 1.785$, $p < .01$). Another study, drawing on recent data for a large number of households with children, finds that Black married-parent households are significantly less likely to live in poverty than single-mother, cohabiting single-parent,

72. South and Lloyd (1992); Oppenheimer et al. (1997).

73. See the previous section of this report on Black adults.

74. Manning and Lichter (1996).

75. Data are from the 1979-80 National Survey of Black Americans; Keith and Herring (1991). Heiss (1996) also found that two-parent households had significantly higher income, net of maternal education, region, urbanicity, and maternal employment.

76. South and Crowder (1997). The study was based on longitudinal PSID data for householders from the years 1979 to 1985 ($n = 3,079$ Black adults, 10,682 person-years).

cohabiting two-parent, extended, and other types of households.⁷⁷ The differential between married couple and cohabiting couple households again likely indicates that marriage brings economic benefits beyond the mechanical addition of incomes.

Other important studies also find that marriage has a substantial impact on the poverty rate among Black households with children.⁷⁸

Marriage and Money over the Generations

One commonly argued thesis regarding Black family fragmentation is that broken homes and poverty beget more broken homes and poverty. The thinking is that a lack of stability and resources associated with single-mother families places children at a disadvantage, making them less likely to marry or find economic stability as adults. Studies focusing on Black women tend to support this argument.

Irrespective of structural conditions, Black women who live in non-intact families at age 14 are considerably more likely to have out-of-wedlock⁷⁹ and teenage⁸⁰ births and are less likely to legitimize births.⁸¹ They are also less likely to marry in general.⁸² Thus, non-intact family structure tends to perpetuate itself intergenerationally among Black Americans through the family formation practices of Black women.⁸³ (This finding resonates with a number of studies published in the 1980s.)⁸⁴

Studies on the intergenerational transmission of economic and marital status among Black women yield complex results. What generally seems to be the case is that marriage and wealth represent two kinds of social capital that are transmitted from one generation to the next in a somewhat interchangeable fashion.⁸⁵ In other words, Black women who grow up in intact families are more likely to marry and to have higher incomes.

77. Educational background, number of children, and immigrant status controlled for. The study used data on 57,322 households with children from the 1997 and 1999 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families. Lerman (2002).

78. For example, Lichter and Crowley (2004) find that changes in Black family structure in the late 1990s — which included declines in single-mother families and increases in married-parent families — caused a 15 percent reduction in the overall child poverty rate among Black children.

79. South (1996); first marriage treated as a competing risk; the family background effect was net of, and stronger than, the effects of age, employment, education, parental education, and a marriageable males index; only school enrollment was a stronger reducer of premarital birth. Blackburn (2000) found similar results using a similar set of controls.

80. The effect was strong after controlling for age of mother at birth, religion, urbanicity, mother's education, church attendance, parent-child discussions about pregnancy, sexual debut, and early contraceptive use; Kahn and Anderson (1992).

81. Blackburn (2000).

82. Raley (1996). It should be pointed out, however, that other studies of the effect of family background on the likelihood of marital versus nonmarital birth have yielded contradictory findings; South (1996); Blackburn (2000).

83. This is not to say that the family formation practices of Black women are the *only* mechanism by which the family structure of one generation influences the family structure of the next.

84. See Taylor et al. (1990).

85. Musick and Mare (2004); Franklin et al. (1995).

Some evidence suggests that Black women's family backgrounds shape the *quality* of their marital lives. Among Black married couples, those in which the wife grew up in an intact household report feeling closer to their extended family and receiving more familial support. They are also less likely to quarrel over one another's families.⁸⁶ Thus, there is strong evidence that the family structure of one generation plays an important role in shaping the family structure and well-being of the next.

At the same time, the family history of Black men may have only a weak or even a non-existent effect on their current family life. One study finds that Black men are no more or less likely to legitimize births based on whether or not their father was present at age 14.⁸⁷ Another finds that the family background of married Black men has only a very small effect on spousal conflict and relations with extended family.⁸⁸ While these findings are by no means definitive, they suggest that Black men's current family life is shaped more by structural conditions such as employment than childhood family structure.

Communities

Several studies find that local marriage rates appear to be negatively associated with crime in Black communities. For example, drawing on a very data sample, Robert Sampson finds that higher marriage rates among Black families with children significantly predicts lower murder and robbery rates among Black city populations.⁸⁹ Three other large-sample studies carried out in the 1990s find that higher percentages of single-mother households in a city predict higher crime rates.⁹⁰ In addition, one study finds that Black women are less likely to be victimized when living in neighborhoods with higher proportions of married couples.⁹¹ Thus, there appears to be a strong negative association between marriage and crime rates for Black Americans.

How do we explain these findings? One probable cause is that married men are less likely to commit crimes, and so there is a natural inverse relationship between marriage and crime rates. It may also be that marriage is a pro-social institution and therefore higher marriage rates in a community contribute to a greater amount of social control and also, perhaps, a more pro-social culture in general. We believe that this underdeveloped area of academic research is important and deserves more attention in the future. In particular, scholars might compare estimated⁹² and actual effects of marriage rates on outcomes in order to isolate the communal and social pathways by which marriage reduces crime.

86. Parental status, educational attainment, and household income controlled for; Timmer and Veroff (2000).

87. Zavodny (1999).

88. Timmer and Veroff (2000).

89. Sampson (1995).

90. See Parker and Johns (2002); studies on the percentage of divorced Black households in a city have yielded contradictory results.

91. Wooldredge and Thistlewaite (2003).

92. Based on the consequences of individual marriages.

In addition to crime, two studies suggest that local marriage rates promote the likelihood that Black adults will marry or legitimize a birth.⁹³ These studies are only suggestive, however. The effect of marriage rates on family formation also deserves further research.

In sum, marriage greatly promotes the income and economic well-being of Black families. It does so by bringing another, usually male, income into the household and further, by fostering higher individual economic productivity and thus higher individual earnings.

Having lived in an intact household during childhood appears to be an important promoter of marriage and wealth among Black women, but not among Black men. Thus, the marital status of one generation plays an important role in shaping the family structure and well-being of the next, primarily through the family formation practices of Black women.

Finally, higher marriage rates appear to inhibit crime in Black communities. This finding is likely due to the aggregate effects of individual marriages, and may also be due to the presumed effects of marriage on the social environment.

Children

Parental Marriage and the Well-Being of Black Children: Some Possible Causal Mechanisms

How might having married parents promote the well-being of Black children? One obvious possibility is that the benefits of marriage for adults trickle down to children. Common sense tells us that adults with higher levels of psychological well-being are more likely to be good parents. Improvements in economic security associated with marriage may help reduce familial stress and conflict. In addition, father presence may reduce the childrearing burden of mothers and translate into greater parental control.

Marriage also tends to create a sense of permanence for families, which may positively affect familial relationships. Whereas a cohabiting father, for example, might perceive his family situation to be somewhat transient, a married father might feel a greater sense of permanent connection to his wife and children, and he may consequently be more likely to invest time and energy in their well-being — in part because he expects to be there to reap the rewards of his investment. Studies have suggested that parents who cohabit rather than marry — perhaps sensing a greater threat of separation — may try to maintain a perfectly equal relationship and tend to be cautious about investing in it.⁹⁴

Marriage also confers a new social identity to adults. When adult parents become husbands and wives, they implicitly acquire a set of socially-defined rules about what they

93. Guzzo (in press); Blackburn (2000).

94. Wilson (forthcoming, 2005).

are supposed to do, such as be a good provider or be a good nurturer. A husband or wife is implicitly judged according to these standards. They can derive self-worth and prestige from performing marriage roles well. In contrast, unmarried parents may lack clear rules about how they are supposed to behave towards children, translating into weaker parental control and poorer outcomes for children.⁹⁵

Of course, marriage likely has a direct effect on children as well. Because marriage signals an adult's intent to stay with his or her family, it likely conveys a sense of stability and safety to children. Also, as the statistics on the desirability of marriage indicate, Americans are socialized to see marriage as an ideal family form. A child who lives in a married-couple family may therefore feel a sense of being relatively special, whereas other children may feel a relative lack.

We therefore can expect to find that marriage brings clear benefits to Black children.⁹⁶ We also expect that the benefits of marriage will be larger for boys in many instances, since parental marriage often brings a positive male role model into the household.

Parental Support

High quality parenting is both a good in and of itself and one of the most consistently powerful predictors of positive outcomes for children. We therefore begin our analysis of the consequences of marriage for Black children by investigating how marriage shapes the quality and quantity of parents' involvement in their children's lives. Not surprisingly, married Black fathers tend to be more involved in their children's lives in a number of ways.

One study, by R.L. Coley and P.L. Chase-Lansdale, estimates that Black fathers who are married to or cohabiting with their child's mother are 11.56 times more likely to have been highly involved (financially, emotionally, and in childcare) in their child's life over time. These fathers are estimated to be 9.13 times more likely to have increased their paternal involvement over time.⁹⁷ These higher levels of involvement apparently stem from the better mother-father relationships associated with marriage. Another multivariate study of 45 intact African American families finds, after controlling for paternal age, education, income, function,⁹⁸ and extrafamilial support, that length of marriage significantly predicts the

95. Wilson (forthcoming, 2005).

96. Interestingly, the findings presented in the previous sections indicate that the presence of children increases the benefits of marriage, perhaps by strengthening the marital bond. (Children are also likely to place extra stress on single-mother households, which would explain part of the greater marriage benefit among families with children).

97. Paternal age, education, and employment controlled for. Paternal employment was also linked to involvement in childrearing, but the association was weaker than that for marriage/coresidence. The study was based on maternal reports from 133 young African American mothers with three-year-old children; Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1999).

98. Includes measures of a father's sense of how he should and does interact with his family (willingness to "pitch in," make sacrifices, solve family problems, ability to communicate productively with other family members, etc.).

father's overall involvement in his child's life, provision of childcare, and socialization of his child (disciplining, setting limits, helping the child with personal problems).⁹⁹ In both studies, marriage is among the strongest predictors of paternal involvement.

Bivariate studies of at-risk adolescents yield similar results. A study of 634 at-risk African American adolescents finds that those living in an intact household spend significantly more time with their fathers.¹⁰⁰ They are also much more likely to feel that their fathers are important to them. Both effects are stronger among boys. A similar study focusing on Black males finds that those living in intact homes are considerably more likely to report that they can rely on their fathers for emotional support.¹⁰¹ They are also much more likely to report that their fathers serve as their male role model. This finding is significant because fathers are the primary male role model across all family types and consequently boys not living in intact households are much more likely not to have a male role model.¹⁰²

The data therefore indicate that marriage, both in and of itself and as a proxy for paternal coresidence, promotes significantly better parenting among Black fathers.¹⁰³ Interestingly, one study seems to indicate that Black fathers' involvement in their children's lives brings little benefit when it is outside the context of marriage.¹⁰⁴

For Black mothers, we find evidence that being married promotes better parenting, but the magnitude of this effect is unclear.

One study finds, after controlling for mother's age at first birth, education, number of children, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, PPVT-R¹⁰⁵ scores, and grandmother's characteristics, that married Black mothers display considerably more positive feelings and emotions, and less negative affect, towards their children.¹⁰⁶ They are also more likely to be an authoritative¹⁰⁷ parent.¹⁰⁸ Other studies based on large, representative samples yield

99. Length of marriage, along with age and extrafamilial support, was negatively correlated with father's availability; No variables positively predicted father's availability. Education, income, and extrafamilial support (friends, neighbors, churchgoers) also predicted some measures of paternal involvement; Ahmeduzzaman and Jaipaul (1992).

100. The respondents were adolescents with low GPA's living in Michigan; Salem et al. (1998).

101. The sample consisted of 254 male adolescents living in an inner-city. Seventy percent of the respondents had dropped out of school; Zimmerman et al. (1995)

102. The exception was boys in stepfamilies. They were likely to report having an "other male" as a role model, presumably the stepfather in most cases.

103. Marriage may also have an additional, positive, indirect effect on parenting through variables such as income (Ahmeduzzaman and Jaipaul, 1992) but the studies did not explore that possibility.

104. King (2004).

105. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (PPVT-R) is a 20-minute word knowledge test that correlates with school performance and IQ.

106. *N*=99 African American mothers; Chase-Lansdale et al. (1994).

107. "Authoritative parenting" is a mix of warmth and appropriate control. For a general discussion of authoritative parenting and authoritative communities, see Kline et al. (2003), p. 33-43.

108. The coefficients linking marriage to other measures of maternal parenting quality (supportive presence, permissive parenting, etc.) did not achieve statistical significance, but their direction and magnitude were consistent with a marriage benefit.

somewhat divergent results. One finds a statistically significant but weak link between current marriage and Black mothers' emotional support of their children.¹⁰⁹ A similar study finds that being married has a numerically large but statistically insignificant effect on Black women's maternal affection.¹¹⁰

Therefore, there appears to be a real, positive link between marriage and better parenting among Black mothers, but the strength of this link could be anywhere from minimal to substantial.¹¹¹ Clearly, further research on the issue is needed.

It is important to note that the increased maternal affection observed among married Black mothers — whatever its magnitude may be — does not coincide with lax parenting. The study by P.L. Chase-Lansdale et al. finds that marriage consistently promotes “good” maternal control and discourages “bad” control among Black mothers, though the relationship is not always statistically significant.¹¹² Several other studies find that marriage reduces Black mothers' use of spanking only when the child is an older adolescent.¹¹³ Thus, to the degree that marriage increases maternal warmth and emotional support, it appears also to promote authoritative parenting among Black mothers.

The data suggest that parental marriage promotes overall parental support¹¹⁴ weakly for girls but substantially for boys.

When studies look at African American girls and boys combined, it appears that marriage brings small increases in parental support. For example, one study finds a statistically significant but fairly weak correlation between marriage and parental monitoring.¹¹⁵ A multivariate study based on a large, representative sample finds that Black children living in intact homes receive moderately more education-related parental involvement.¹¹⁶ Changes in family income and reduced maternal employment explain a small portion of the family structure effect.

But when one of the same studies reran its analyses independently for African American boys, the correlation between father presence and parental involvement tripled in strength. It also became entirely direct, which implies that *father presence itself* — and not income or maternal availability — explains why Black boys receive considerably more parental

109. This correlation was independent of maternal education, persistent poverty, and number of children. Data were from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY); Schmitz (2003).

110. McLeod et al. (1994)

111. Unfortunately, we are unable to offer any further interpretation of the data because the studies paint no clear picture of what influences maternal affection in general. For example, studies disagree as to whether maternal education, poverty, and number of children influence maternal affection; McLeod et al. (1994); Schmitz (2003); Chase-Lansdale et al. (1994).

112. Chase-Lansdale et al. (1994).

113. McLeod et al. (1994); Schmitz (2003); Lansford (2004).

114. That is, the quality and quantity of mother's and father's parenting combined.

115. Using a sample of 95 middle-class African American families with children. The correlation was $R=.20$ ($p<.05$); marriage was the only parental variable correlated with monitoring; Smetana and Gaines (1999).

116. The increases were found after controlling for maternal education, region, and urbanicity; the referent category is single-mother household; Heiss (1996).

support when living in intact homes. J. Mandara and C. B. Murray also found that parental marriage promotes a supportive family environment more for African American boys than girls, particularly in terms of achievement orientation.¹¹⁷ It therefore seems that parental marriage is associated with marked increases in parental support for African American boys but only minimal increases for Black girls.

In summary, marriage strongly promotes the involvement of Black fathers in their children's lives. It likely leads to warmer maternal parenting, and it also promotes overall parental support. Importantly, the studies find marriage to be an independent and *relatively* powerful indicator of parental support when it is not an *absolutely* powerful indicator. (In other words, the link between marriage and parental support is almost always highly consequential.)

The marriage benefit appears to be much stronger among African American boys, who receive considerably more attention when their father is married and in the home. This finding may indicate that living with married parents is more important to the well-being of African American boys *in general* — and that parental support is a major reason why.

A Note on the Extended Family

Many scholars, pointing to the importance of extended kin networks in African American family life,¹¹⁸ have argued that single Black mothers can rely on family for support in the absence of, or in lieu of, marriage. Thus, Black children may receive the support they need even when a father is not present.

Studies on familial resources indicate that kin support often brings benefits to single Black parents, but to a lesser degree than marriage. For example, a large-sample multivariate study finds that Black single parents are about half as likely to be poor when they lived in an extended family household; they are still, however, much more likely than married-couple families to live in poverty.¹¹⁹ Likewise, single Black mothers are more likely to receive childcare assistance from kin than married mothers, but this fact does not translate into equal access to adequate childcare overall.¹²⁰ On other measures of kin support, married Black parents have the advantage: They are more likely to report feeling close to their extended family,¹²¹ and are significantly more likely to receive emotional and financial support from them.¹²²

Studies focusing on outcomes show no clear extended family benefit. One multivariate study finds that grandmother coresidence has a clearly negative effect on both mother's and

117. Controlling for income, parents' education, and number of people in the home did not affect the family structure effect; Mandara and Murray (2000).

118. Ruggles (1994).

119. Lerman (2002).

120. Hogan et al. (1990).

121. Hatchett and Jackson (1993).

122. Referent category was never-married mothers. Education, poverty, household extendedness, family closeness, and numerous other important variables and interactions controlled for; Jayakody et al. (1993). See also Hatchett and Jackson (1993) on financial assistance.

grandmother's parenting.¹²³ A similar study finds that grandmother coresidence in single-parent Black families enhances some aspects of familial life (moral-religious emphasis) but hurts others (organization).¹²⁴ Studies of at-risk Black children do not find a clear benefit to living in a mother-extended versus mother-only family.¹²⁵

A study on *kin support* (not family extendedness) finds some evidence that kin support promotes better parenting and better educational values among Black children, but the validity of these findings is questionable.¹²⁶

In sum, then, it seems that kin support and extended families promote the well-being of single-parent Black families in important ways but do not compensate for the marriage advantage. It is also important to note that, in recent decades, family extendedness has been in decline for both White and African American households with children, including single-mother households.¹²⁷ Consequently, between 1960 and 1980, the percentage of African American households with children that were single-mother rose from 10.1 to 17.2 percent, while the percentage of these households that were extended declined from 40.8 percent to 21.5 percent.¹²⁸ These trends also cast doubt on the notion that the decline in marriage among African Americans is being offset by kinship factors.

Delinquency and Psychosocial Well-Being

A large body of evidence clearly indicates that living in a married-couple or intact household is significantly associated with lower incidence of externalizing disorders (e.g., hyperactivity, delinquent behaviors) among Black children.

A study of sibling pairs¹²⁹ who experienced stable family structures over five years finds that Black children from two-parent families exhibit significantly lower levels of behavioral problems.¹³⁰ Numerous multivariate studies based on large, representative samples confirm these findings. For example, two thorough analyses of National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) data found that Black children of married mothers are less likely to exhibit antisocial behavior¹³¹ and delinquency.¹³² Another comprehensive study of NLSY data finds

123. Chase-Lansdale et al. (1994).

124. Tolson and Wilson (1990); it should be pointed out that the sample size of this study is quite small at 64 families.

125. Salem et al. (1998); Zimmerman et al. (1995).

126. The kin support benefit was found according to student self-reports, but was not corroborated by teacher reports. Important background variables were controlled for; Lamborn and Nguyen (2003).

127. Between 1960 and 1980, the percentage of households with children that were extended declined from 11.5 percent to 6.6 percent for Whites and 25.4 percent to 17.2 percent for Blacks; Ruggles (1994).

128. Ibid.

129. 358 pairs; approximately 16 percent were African American.

130. Teachman et al. (1998).

131. $N=680$ African American children. The controlled variables were: gender, maternal education, persistent poverty status, number of children, use of spanking, cognitive stimulation, emotional support, and hyperactivity. No marriage effect on hyperactivity was found; Schmitz (2003).

132. Specifically "years spent in married-couple family" versus "years spent in cohabiting-mother family" predicted reduced delinquency (more strongly than any other variable). No effect was found for years spent

that a mother who has never married predicts Black children's antisocial behavior more strongly than other important variables,¹³³ including poverty, number of children, and mother's age at child's birth, education, employment, alcohol use, use of spanking, and affection.¹³⁴ Another study links intact households to reduced school-related delinquency among Black children.¹³⁵ Finally, a study by Robert Sampson et al. finds, among a sample of 445 White and 1,067 Black children, that a lack of parental marriage in particular (not just two-parent families) accounts for a substantial portion of why Black children are more likely to be violent than White children.¹³⁶ Only one study fails to find a significant relationship between marital status and children's externalizing disorders.¹³⁷

The evidence is therefore quite clear: Parental marriage greatly reduces externalizing disorders among Black children.¹³⁸ Parental marriage may even be the *greatest* reducer of externalizing disorders among Black children. This means that future research on the subject would be most useful if it focused on "why" rather than "if" there is a marriage benefit — for the mechanisms of the effect are unclear.¹³⁹

It may be that the mechanisms of the marriage benefit are unclear in studies of African American children because marriage affects delinquency differently for African American

in a single-mother family. Maternal warmth, parental control, income, age of mother and child and other relevant variables controlled; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002).

133. Excluding child's gender, which predicted antisocial behavior comparably.

134. McLeod et al. (1994).

135. Data were for a large sample from the 1980-82 High School and Beyond Study. The family structure effect was independent of income, educational aspirations, and several important parenting variables; Heiss (1996).

136. Gender, age, family structure, socioeconomic status, years at same address, hyperactivity, immigrant status, test scores, and neighborhood racial distribution controlled for; Sampson et al. (2005).

137. McLeod and Nonnemaker (2000), which analyzed 1992 NLSY data for 573 Black children.

138. One study finds that visitation by nonresident fathers positively predicts behavior problems among Black children; King (1994).

139. *First*, there is a question about what family structure promotes delinquency. Specifically, studies agree that divorce is unrelated to externalizing disorders among Black children (McLeod et al., 1994; McLeod and Nonnemaker, 2000; Shaw et al., 1999) but they cannot find agreement over what family structure is detrimental for children (McLeod and Nonnemaker, 2000; McLeod et al., 1994; Heiss, 1996; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2002). Second, it is unclear what mechanisms produce the observed marriage effect. We identified several variables that were potential mediators between marriage and delinquency, but the studies either disconfirmed that these variables were mediators or contained little information by which to investigate the issue. Briefly, studies agreed that income and poverty have no effect on externalizing disorders (McLeod et al., 1994; McLeod and Nonnemaker, 2000; Schmitz, 2003; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2002). Spanking (McLeod et al., 1994; McLeod and Nonnemaker, 2000; Schmitz, 2003; Lansford et al., 2004) and maternal employment (Heiss, 1996; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2002) are potential predictors of delinquency. Parental support and maternal parenting and well-being are strong predictors (McLeod et al., 1994; McLeod and Nonnemaker, 2000; Schmitz, 2003; Lansford et al., 2004; Heiss, 1996; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Salem et al., 1998). But none of these variables accounted for the family structure effect where they could be tested. For example, McLeod et al. (1994) found that the detrimental effect of non-marriage was not carried through changes in maternal spanking, affection, or alcohol use — all of which were correlated with non-marriage. In fact, it was found that Black children's antisocial problems predicted maternal spanking more than the reverse. Similarly, neither maternal warmth and employment nor parental involvement/control were found to account for the negative effects of living in single-mother and cohabiting-couple families (Heiss, 1996; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones, 2002).

girls and boys. Fortunately, there are enough studies that disaggregate their samples by gender for us to investigate this issue.

Studies focusing on African American boys confirm that parental marriage is associated with reduced delinquency. According to a bivariate analysis of data for 433 African American male adolescents, those in non-intact families are approximately 5.9 times more likely to run away from home, 1.58 times more likely to skip school, 1.35 times more likely to be suspended, and 1.47 times more likely to have trouble with the police.¹⁴⁰ Multivariate studies likewise find that non-intact family structure predicts past-year fighting in school ($aOR=2.9, p<.01$)¹⁴¹ and other school-related discipline problems among African American boys.¹⁴² In addition to parental marriage, several multivariate studies find that family conflict and parental support have strong effects on school-related discipline problems among African American boys.¹⁴³ Other measures of family functioning have also been found to be negatively associated with delinquency.¹⁴⁴

Thus, the studies indicate that for African American boys, marriage and family functioning are important determinants of delinquency.

One might expect to see that these causalities are interrelated — namely, that marriage is decreasing the risk of the delinquency among African American boys in part by promoting better family functioning. The previously-cited study by Jerold Heiss contains some indirect support for this hypothesis.¹⁴⁵ If we turn to a highly relevant article by Ross Matsueda and Karen Heimer from the late 1980s, however, we find that there is excellent direct evidence for this hypothesis.¹⁴⁶ Analyzing data for 948 Black boys,¹⁴⁷ Matsueda and Heimer find that non-intact homes promote delinquency independently of, and much more strongly than, socioeconomic status and neighborhood peer delinquency.¹⁴⁸ The negative impact of non-intact homes is due almost entirely to two factors: Non-intact homes result in less parental

140. Sample consisted of 13- to 17-year-old boys living in a Midwestern city; Rodney and Mupier (1999).

141. $N=163$ Black male 7th and 8th graders; grade, urbanicity, attachment to parents and family stress and conflict are controlled (neither predicts past-year fighting); Paschall et al. (1996).

142. Heiss (1996).

143. One study finds that Black boys who experience family stress and conflict are more likely to instigate fights in school ($aOR=2.12, p<.05$); Paschall et al (1996). Heiss (1996) finds a strong correlation between parental support and reduced discipline problems for Black boys.

144. The other measures are paternal significance, paternal support, parental supervision; Salem et al. (1998); Zimmerman et al., (1995); Ensminger (1990).

145. Specifically, when it disaggregates Black boys out of the combined sample, the effect of intact family structure on discipline problems become entirely indirect, mediated through a set of variables consisting of income, maternal employment, parental involvement, and task preparedness. Since the intercorrelations between family structure, parental involvement, and discipline simultaneously increase in strength and become large, it seems likely that at least a significant portion of the indirect effect of family structure is being mediated through parental support. Unfortunately, the information provided in the study cannot be used to directly test this supposition; Heiss (1996).

146. ($R^2=.456$); Matsueda and Heimer (1987).

147. Data are from the Richmond Youth Project.

148. Age is also controlled.

supervision for African American boys, and more importantly they often fail in effectively instilling anti-delinquent, pro-social attitudes in African American boys.¹⁴⁹

Therefore, there is strong evidence that parental marriage substantially reduces delinquency for African American boys, in part by promoting better family functioning and parenting.

Studies of self-esteem point to a similar dynamic. One finds that African American boys in two-parent homes have markedly higher self-concept (confidence, perceptions of strength, etc.).¹⁵⁰ Another study finds, while controlling for income, that both parental marriage and family functioning play important roles — sometimes jointly, sometimes independently — in promoting self-esteem among Black boys.¹⁵¹ Together, they account for about 29 percent of the overall variation in self-esteem.

It is unclear how parental marriage affects delinquency among Black girls. One study seems to indicate that intact families reduce discipline problems more for Black girls.¹⁵² But two other studies of at-risk children do not corroborate this gender effect.¹⁵³ What does appear to be clear is that family process has considerably less impact on delinquency among African American girls than among African American boys.¹⁵⁴

Data suggest that marriage has no impact whatsoever on the self-esteem of African American girls.¹⁵⁵ Family functioning, however, has a major impact on African American girls' psychosocial well-being. It accounts for about 25 percent of the variation in self-esteem¹⁵⁶ and is linked to other positive psychosocial outcomes.¹⁵⁷ These findings fit together because marriage and family functioning are at most weakly tied together for African American girls.

For Black girls, then, while parental marriage may reduce delinquency it does not apparently affect psychosocial well-being. For both outcomes, family functioning appears not to be a significant mediator between family structure and the outcome — in stark contrast to what we find for African American boys.

149. And there are strong intercorrelations among these variables: reduced parental supervision helps explain why non-intact Black families are associated with pro-delinquent attitudes; Matsuema and Heimer (1987). It should be noted that one study (Paschall et al., 1996) did not support this mediational model, but it was far less comprehensive than the other two studies.

150. Data are for 36 Black boys ages 4½ to 6½; McAdoo (2001).

151. The study is based on self reports from 46 African American adolescent males. Income is controlled; Mandara and Murray (2000). See also Salem et al. (1998).

152. Heiss (1996).

153. Salem et al. (1998); Ensminger (1990).

154. Family functioning appears not to be a significant mediator between family structure and delinquency for Black girls; Heiss (1996); Salem et al. (1998); Ensminger (1990).

155. Income and family process controlled; Mandara and Murray (2000); McAdoo (2001).

156. Parental marital status and income are controlled (Mandara and Murray, 2000).

157. Salem et al. (1998).

Though we cannot be sure, these gender differences may very well explain why studies using combined samples have difficulty mapping out the relationship between parental marriage and delinquency among African American children. At the very least, they underscore the importance of disaggregating samples into girls and boys when studying parental marriage and outcomes among African American children. Parental marriage apparently affects African American boys and girls to different degrees and in different ways and conflating these two groups may produce skewed or inaccurate results.

Grades and Academic Performance

Bivariate studies suggest that parental marriage has a moderate positive effect on the educational performance and aspirations of African American children. One study finds that Black college students from intact families are more likely to have carried an A average in high school.¹⁵⁸ Another study, an analysis of sibling pairs in stable families, finds that Black children living in intact households have somewhat higher scores on standardized reading and mathematics tests.¹⁵⁹ Likewise, a study of 2,292 African American high school students by Jerold Heiss finds that those living in intact families have moderately but significantly higher educational aspirations and grades.¹⁶⁰

The Heiss study also offers multivariate analyses that help clarify the extent to which family structure is responsible for the observed differences in educational outcomes.¹⁶¹ These analyses confirm that intact families moderately encourage the educational aspirations of Black adolescents. About half of this effect is explained by family structure-related differences in income, parental involvement, and maternal employment.¹⁶² The multivariate analyses also confirm that intact households have a beneficial effect on Black children's grade point average. This benefit is apparently explained entirely by several characteristics associated with intact households, such as reduced discipline problems. An additional multivariate study based on a representative sample of 2,561 African American students finds, after controlling for numerous relevant variables, that Black students living in two-parent households¹⁶³ have significantly higher test scores.¹⁶⁴

158. $N=870$ African American college students. The difference was 21.3 percent versus 14.1 percent ($p<.01$). No significant differences were found in terms of educational aspirations/expectations. It should be remembered, however, that the sample, because it is composed of university students, naturally overrepresents ambitious youth; Phillips and Asbury (1993).

159. The tests were the PIATR and PIATM; Teachman et al. (1998).

160. Specifically, Black children from two-biological-parent (versus single-mother) homes were significantly more likely to report expecting to finish college (45.8 percent versus 37.1 percent), being satisfied only if they complete college (24.9 percent versus 17.7 percent) and were more likely to report feeling that they had the ability to finish college (74.9 percent versus 72.2 percent). Children from two-biological-parent homes were also more likely to report having at least a 2.5 GPA (66 percent versus 60.6 percent); Heiss (1996).

161. Region, size of community, and mother's communication are controlled exogenous variables. Independent variables aside from family structure are added sequentially in the multivariate analyses.

162. It is not known specifically which of these variables is (or are) carrying the indirect family structure effect.

163. Either mother-father or parent-guardian.

164. Genders, socioeconomic status, socioeconomic status by single parent, school type, family size, urbanicity, region, and birth year are controlled. Data are from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Survey; Battle (1998).

The study also provides some interesting data on the relationship between family structure, socioeconomic status, and children's test scores. It finds that children from one-parent homes actually have higher test scores at the lowest levels of socioeconomic status; but, as socioeconomic status increases, the test scores of children from two-parent families increase more rapidly and then, at average levels of socioeconomic status, surpass those of children from single-parent families. The finding that African Americans apparently receive less benefit from marriage at lower levels of socioeconomic status seems to hold true for other outcomes as well. This pattern, and some possible explanations for it, will be discussed in the section on racial differences in the consequences of marriage.

One large-sample, multivariate study by R. Dunifon and L. Kowaleski-Jones does not find a significant marriage benefit on African American children's educational performance.¹⁶⁵ In fact, it finds while controlling for a wide range of variables that years spent in a cohabiting-couple family (versus married-couple family) *positively* predicts Black children's scores on a standardized math test (years in a single-mother family is not found to have an effect).

Although the study by Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones finds no marriage benefit, most studies seem to indicate that living with married parents or in an intact family moderately promotes better educational outcomes for African American children.¹⁶⁶ This effect appears to be attributable in part to increased income, reduced discipline problems, and other changes associated with family structure.

In terms of gender, it again appears that parental marriage may be especially important for African American boys. When Heiss reran his analyses for African American boys alone, the positive effect of living with both biological parents on educational aspirations increased in strength.¹⁶⁷ The effect was also carried entirely through several mediating variables, of which parental involvement was likely the most important. In other words, it appears that intact households promote the educational aspirations of African American boys in large part by promoting the amount of parental attention they receive. This possible causal chain is consistent with data presented in the previous sections of this report. It is also supported by another study that finds that African American boys in intact households report significantly more achievement orientation in their families.¹⁶⁸

The Heiss study also finds that intact households predict more school preparedness for African American boys,¹⁶⁹ an effect that appears not to exist for girls. The intact household effect on grades is about the same for boys and girls.

165. Data are from the NLSY; Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002).

166. One study finds that visitation by nonresident fathers predicted lower PIAT-M scores for Black children; King (1994).

167. Heiss (1996).

168. Mandara and Murray (2000).

169. Finishes homework, brings materials to school, etc.

It therefore seems that parental marriage promotes positive educational outcomes somewhat more for African American boys than girls.

Infant Health

The data indicate that the infants of married Black mothers are healthier on average. For example, a study of 1,656,044 African American mother-child pairs finds that infant mortality rates are significantly higher among the children of unmarried mothers.¹⁷⁰ Another study, of 65,923 births to African American mothers, finds that mother's marital status is a more important determinant of birth weight than parity, maternal education, cigarette usage, and level of neighborhood disadvantage.¹⁷¹ Only prenatal care has a greater impact on birth weight, according to the study.¹⁷²

Sexual Activity

During the teenage years, having married parents appears to discourage sexual activity among Black adolescents. One study of African American girls in high poverty neighborhoods finds that those with a married mother are much less likely to have had sexual intercourse ($OR=.38$, $p<.05$) and to have been pregnant ($OR=.21$, $p<.05$).¹⁷³ Another study of both boys and girls strongly suggests that the lower prevalence of intact families among African Americans is a major reason why African American teens are more likely to have had intercourse.¹⁷⁴ In addition, several other studies — including a comprehensive analysis of 1,995 Black females¹⁷⁵ — find strong links between intact families and reduced likelihood of teenage births among African American girls.¹⁷⁶

Two Possible Gaps in the Marriage Premium: School Dropout and Substance Use

Studies on school dropout and substance use are somewhat inconsistent, but do not provide strong evidence of a marriage benefit.

For example, one study focusing specifically on single-parent households finds that they may encourage dropout among African American adolescents.¹⁷⁷ But a study focusing specifically on intact homes finds that they have no univariate or multivariate effect on

170. The effect is found even after maternal age, parity, education, prenatal care, and urbanicity are taken into account; Bennett et al. (1994).

171. The other control variables were racial composition of neighborhood, neighborhood social support, maternal age, and child's gender; Buka et al. (2003).

172. Child's gender is also a stronger predictor, but that is of course irrelevant for the purposes of this study.

173. $N=289$. Numerous relevant variables such as age, age at menarche, mother-daughter relationship, and income-to-needs ratio are controlled; Moore and Chase-Lansdale (2001).

174. Browning et al. (2004).

175. Religion, urbanicity, birth year, maternal education, parent-child discussions about pregnancy, and other important variables are controlled; Kahn and Anderson (1992).

176. For a discussion of articles on the subject published during the 1980s, see Taylor et al. (1990), p. 1005.

177. Crowder and South (2003).

school dropout — either for adolescents in general or boys in particular.¹⁷⁸ In addition, a study of high school dropouts in the mid-twentieth century finds that intact family structure had no effect on Black females.¹⁷⁹ The weight of the evidence therefore suggests that parental marriage does not promote high school completion.

Parental marriage also does not apparently reduce alcohol and marijuana use among Black adolescents. Two bivariate studies of at-risk African American adolescents find no significant association between living in an intact family and alcohol and marijuana use.¹⁸⁰ A multivariate study of 268 Black adolescents corroborates these results for the general population; it finds that neither divorced nor never-married parental status significantly predicts alcohol or marijuana use among Black adolescents.¹⁸¹ (The coefficients are actually large and negative, suggesting that marriage promotes substance use, if anything.)

The studies under review therefore do not suggest that marriage is a significant determinant of substance use among African American adolescents.

Data on cigarette use are inconclusive. Two bivariate studies of at-risk African American adolescents find that adolescents living in intact homes average less cigarette use, but the difference is not statistically significant.¹⁸² Of the multivariate studies on the subject, one finds that parental marriage is associated with greater cigarette use,¹⁸³ but a more comprehensive study finds that Black adolescents with married parents are less likely to have ever tried smoking ($OR=.56$).¹⁸⁴

Thus, we do not find any clear evidence of a marriage benefit for African American adolescents in terms of dropout, drug use, and smoking. Because the research on these outcomes is relatively sparse and inconclusive, we cannot say with certainty that there is no marriage effect in reality. More research on these outcomes is needed.

178. Heiss (1996).

179. Astone and Upchurch (1994).

180. Salem et al. (1998); Zimmerman et al. (1995). In both of these bivariate studies, several paternal and parental support variables were weakly to moderately negatively correlated with drug use, with r falling into the $-.10$ to $-.25$ range.

181. Age, gender, region, income, and family process controlled for. No variable other than age significantly predicted substance use among Black adolescents; Amey and Albrecht (1998).

182. Salem et al. (1998); Zimmerman et al. (1995).

183. Amey and Albrecht (1998).

184. $N=247$; Gritz et al. (2003).

Racial Differences in the Consequences of Marriage

THIS SECTION discusses research investigating racial differences in the effects of marriage on adults (both women and men), the family unit, and children. It focuses on the economic, health, psychological, social and familial consequences for African Americans and Whites.

Adults

Although less is known about how and why the marriage premium on adult well-being differs between Blacks and Whites, the studies under review suggest that the premium is smaller for African Americans, especially African American women. Particularly when it comes to psychological, health, and family outcomes, African American women seem less likely to benefit from marriage.

The evidence is mixed on Black-White differences in the economic benefits of marriage. On the one hand, Blacks appear to benefit more than Whites from marriage when it comes to facing a reduced likelihood of material hardship; Black women appear to get a bigger earned income boost from marriage (13 percent) than do White women (1 percent); and married Black men see increases in work effort that largely parallel those of White men.¹⁸⁵ On the other hand, according to one study, Black men get a smaller boost in earned income from marriage (18 percent) than do White men (22 percent).¹⁸⁶ African American women also appear to receive less income security (the odds of avoiding poverty) from marriage than do White women.¹⁸⁷

Our review of the literature indicates that marriage has inconsistent effects on health for African Americans. Most studies suggest that Whites, on the other hand, gain clear health benefits from marriage. This leads us to hypothesize that the marriage premium for adult health is also smaller among African Americans than it is among Whites.

The evidence is clearer on racial differences in the psychological and relationship consequences of marriage: A few studies suggest that marriage is as protective for Blacks as it is for Whites on outcomes such as post-divorce depression,¹⁸⁸ but most indicate that marriage provides fewer psychological benefits to Blacks than it does to Whites. Marriage is less likely to reduce a range of emotional problems (e.g., depression, problem drinking, unhappiness) among African Americans, compared to Whites.¹⁸⁹

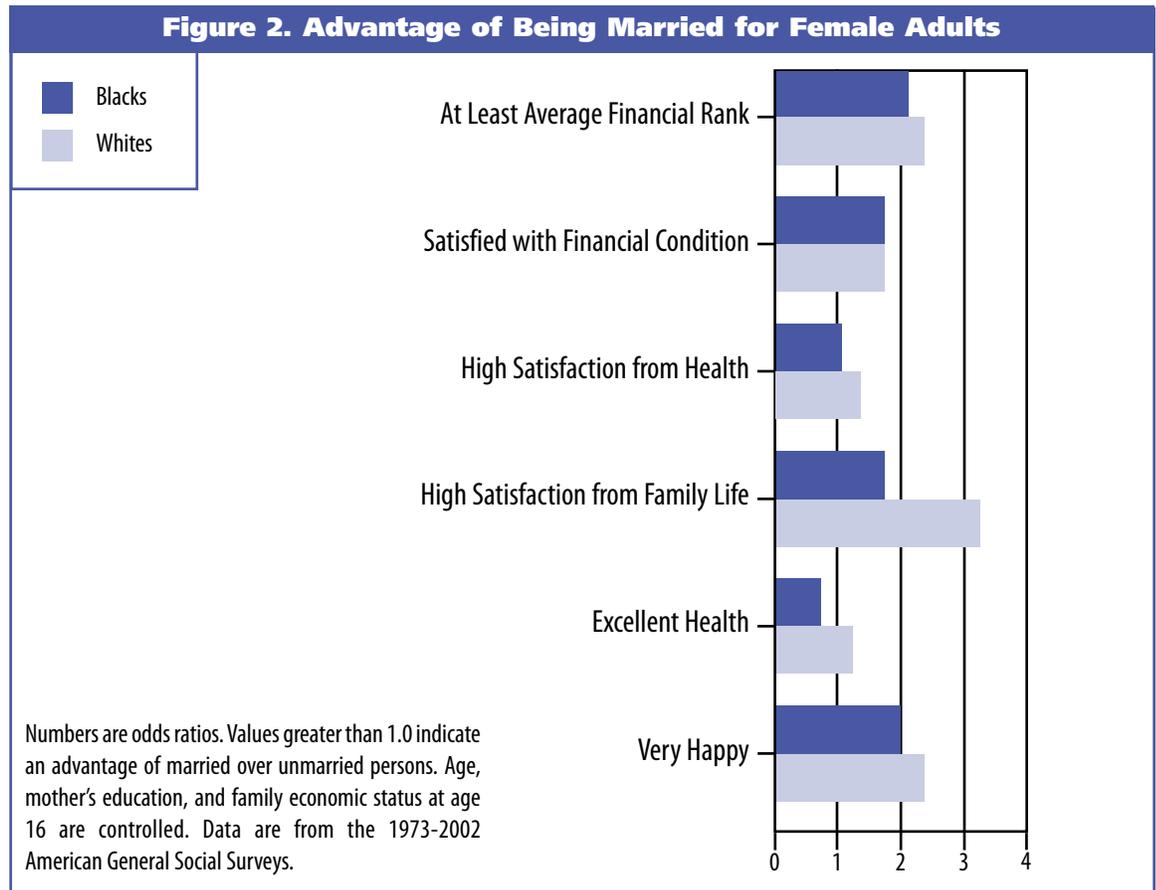
185. Gomel et al. (1998); Mincy and Pouncy (2003); Nock (2003); Waite (1995).

186. Mincy and Pouncy (2003).

187. Willson and Hardy (2002).

188. Stack et al. (1995); Nomaguchi (2005).

189. Aldous (1999); Clark (1998); Pienta et al. (2000); Williams et al. (1992).



Our analysis of data from the 1973-2002 General Social Surveys generally supports the findings of our literature review. It indicates that, for females, Blacks apparently receive fewer benefits from marriage, on the average, than do Whites (figure 2).

As figure 2 shows, the marriage advantage is larger for White women than for Black women on all measures except satisfaction with financial situation.¹⁹⁰ The racial difference in “satisfaction derived from family life” is huge, and the difference in subjective health is important because marriage seems to have a negative effect on Black women but a positive effect on White women.

The racial difference in the estimated effect of being married on being “very happy” is statistically significant but modest. There is an important distinction to be made here, however, and one that is obscured in the graph: Among women without a child in the home, being married seems to make about the same difference in happiness for Blacks as for Whites, the odds ratios being 2.1 and 2.3, respectively; but when we focus on women who

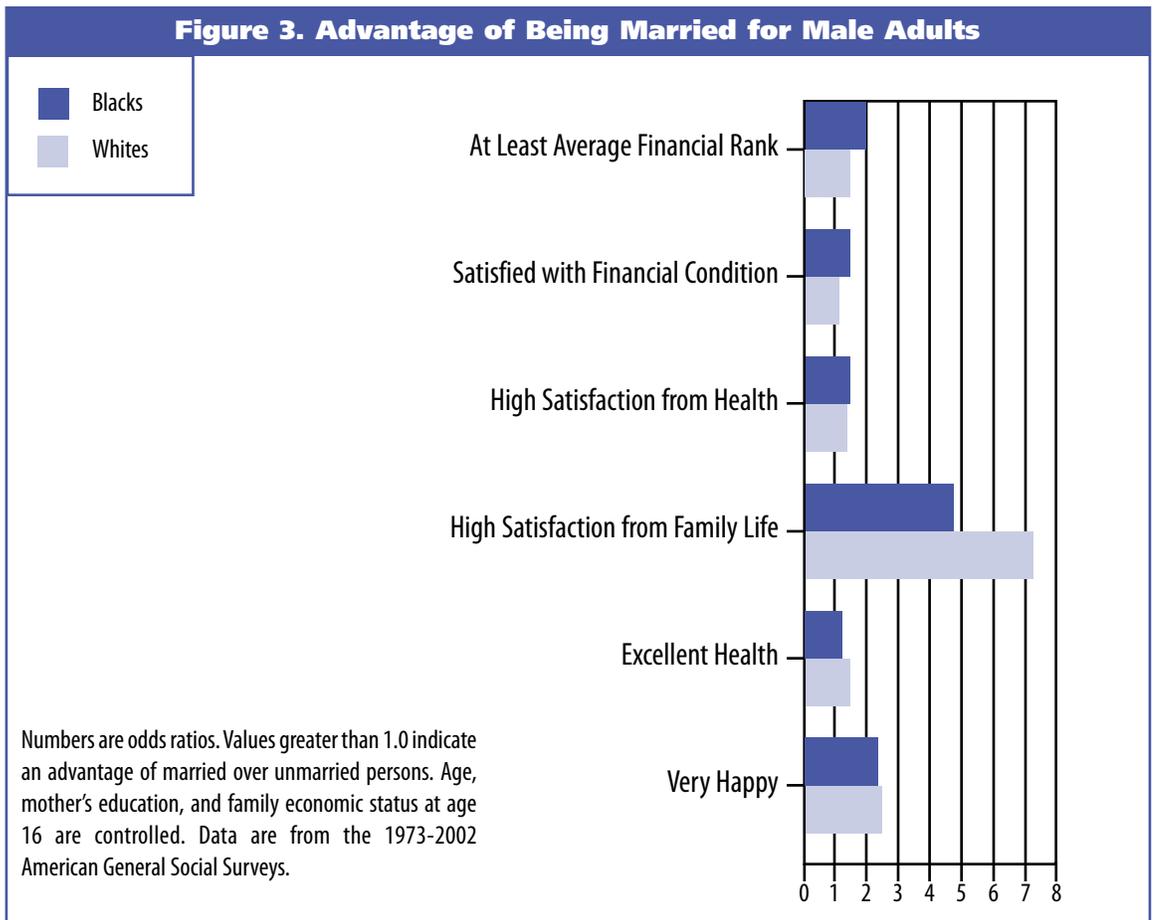
190. The Black-White differences are all statistically significant except for the racial difference on subjective financial status, which approaches significance.

have at least one child living in the home, the racial gap increases, with the respective odds ratios for Blacks and Whites standing at 1.8 and 3.1. This difference is both statistically significant and large enough to be quite important.

In contrast to the situation for women, the data fails to provide strong evidence that marriage is less beneficial to Black men than White men (figure 3). The only statistically significant difference between Black and White men is for “satisfaction derived from family life” (though the difference is substantial). The subjective financial benefits of marriage appear to be somewhat greater for Black men than for White men, though the differences fall short of statistical significance. On the crucial variable of personal happiness, there is hardly any indicated racial difference in the advantage of being married.

In short, it appears that Black women derive less benefit from marriage than White women, and that the marriage premium is smaller for Black men only in regard to satisfaction from family life.

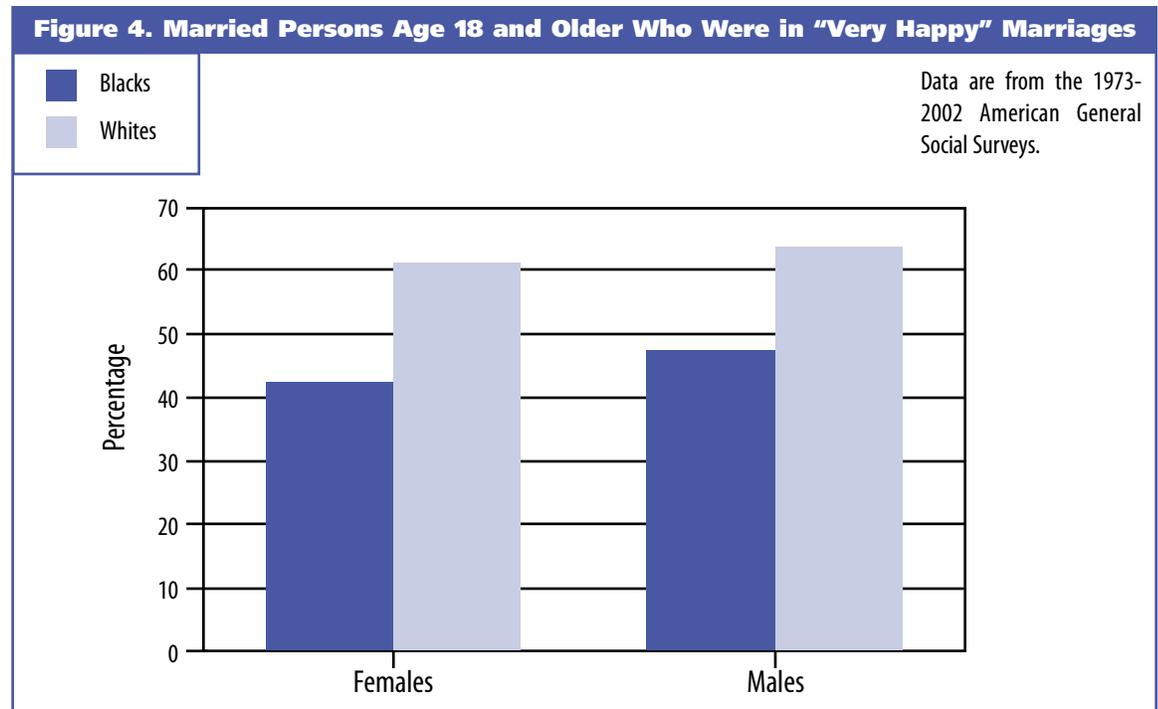
We are unable to provide a definitive explanation for these apparent racial differences in the effects of marriage, but we can provide some clues and speculation.



One reason is undoubtedly the well-documented fact that the marriages of African Americans are, on average, of poorer quality than the marriages of Whites.¹⁹¹ The difference in the percentage of the General Social Survey married respondents who said their marriages were “very happy” is shown in figure 4. Consistent with other evidence, the indicated racial difference is substantial and is somewhat greater for women than for men.

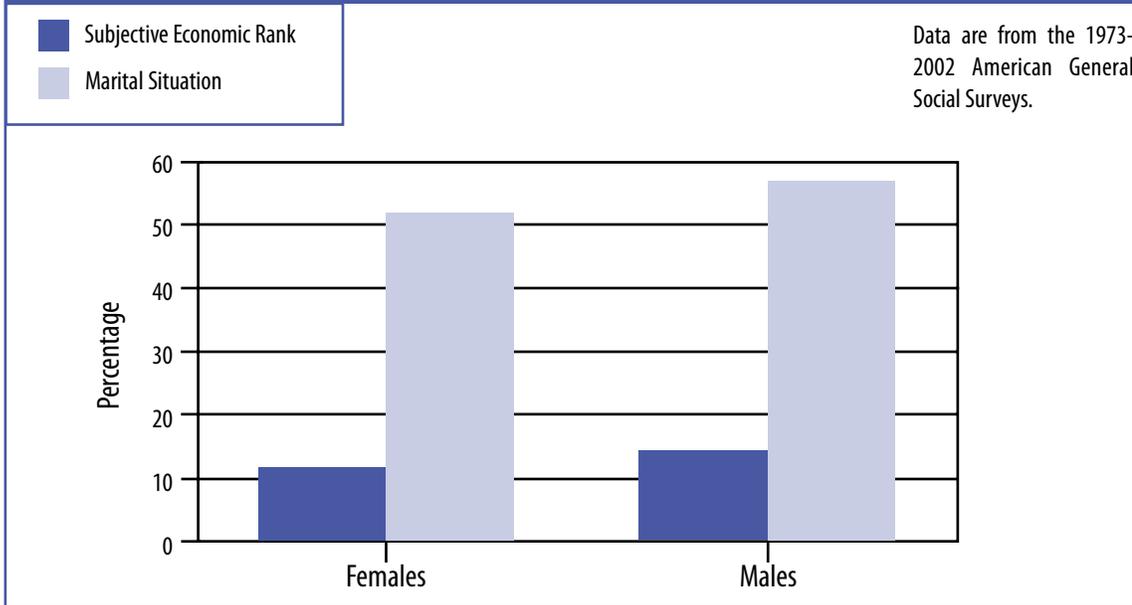
This difference statistically accounts for some, but not all, of the racial differences in the estimated effects of being married shown in figures 2 and 3. When “being in a ‘very happy’ marriage” is substituted for “being married” in the analyses shown in Figures 2 and 3, the estimated positive effects not surprisingly go up for both genders, both races, and all of the outcome variables. Simultaneously, some of the *racial differences* in the consequences of marriage become *smaller*. For instance, on the crucial variable of personal happiness, the racial difference is reduced by 62 percent for females. The racial difference in regard to satisfaction derived from family life is reduced by 83 percent for females and by 36 percent for males. Nevertheless, all three of these racial differences remain statistically significant and large enough to be important.

The lower average quality of Black marriages and the lower marriage rates among African Americans statistically explain a large proportion of the difference in psychological well-being between Blacks and Whites in the United States. The data in figure 5 show how much



191. Ineffective child socialization, inadequate emotional and economic security, and damaging sexual behavior are frequently among the outcomes of families headed by couples in distressed intimate relationships; Amato and Booth (1997); Blackman (1995); Blackman (1996); Blackman (1999).

Figure 5. Black-White Happiness by Economic Rank and Marital Situation (in “Very Happy” Marriages Versus All Other Conditions, Including Not Married)



of the racial difference in reported happiness is explained by being or not being in a “very happy” marriage and how much is explained by subjective economic standing. The difference is striking. It suggests that about 51 percent of the difference in happiness between Black women and White women can be explained by the fact that there are fewer high quality marriages among African Americans — whereas only about 12 percent appears to be due to perceived economic status. The effects are fairly similar for men.

Thus, racial differences in the quality of marriages loom large as an explanation for Black-White differences in the effects of marriage on adult well-being.¹⁹²

192. A possible reason that differences in marital quality (as measured) do not account for all of the estimated racial differences in the effects of marriage on psychological well-being is that, given the great difficulty Blacks have had in entering and maintaining good marriages, they have developed more effective mechanisms for dealing with childrearing and the other major tasks of life outside of good marriages. This explanation is especially credible for Black females, given the large apparent racial difference in the beneficial consequences of marriage to women with children. Nevertheless, even if this reason accounts for all of the Black-White difference in the positive effects of marriage not explained by differences in marital quality, marital quality apparently overshadows it as an explanation in the case of females. And for males, there are few differences to explain. Furthermore, there is another credible explanation for why marital quality, as measured, does not fully account for Black-White differences in the estimated positive effects of marriage. It is very likely that among the marriages rated “very happy” there are objective racial differences in interaction patterns, conflict, and mutual support between the spouses. A recent study by Clifford Broman (2005) with data from the Americans’ Changing Lives Survey showed that Black marriages had a higher prevalence than White marriages of affairs, minor violence, and spouses not feeling loved by one another. Given these differences, it is likely that Blacks tend to have somewhat lower expectations and standards for their marriages than do Whites, and thus they may often rate as “very happy” marriages that few Whites would give that rating.

The reasons for the quality differences are not entirely clear, though research by Clifford Broman indicates that spouses' behaviors toward one another are largely responsible.¹⁹³

Part of the story here appears to be an economic one. For a variety of reasons (e.g., discrimination, educational differences, a history of incarceration), African American men typically contribute less money in absolute and relative terms to their marriages than do White men. This has obvious material consequences. It also has less obvious psychological and relationship consequences. Because the husbandly role is so closely tied in our society to breadwinning, African American men may be less satisfied with their own performance and their wives may be less happy with their performance as providers. One new study indicates that American wives are happier when their husbands earn more than 66 percent of the couple's income, something which is much less common in African American households than it is in White households.¹⁹⁴ So one reason that African American wives may be much less likely than their White peers to say they are satisfied with their family life (see figure 2) is that their husbands are not meeting their expectations financially.

Part of the problem also seems to be that harsh economic realities have led to somewhat contradictory and conflictual gender roles among African Americans. Throughout American history, discrimination and economic shifts have often worked to exclude Black men from good jobs. This exclusion has required Black women to work in the paid labor force more than White women, and consequently African Americans have developed comparatively positive views of working wives.¹⁹⁵ A corollary effect can be observed for Black men: Studies find that Black men do more housework than White men even when other important variables are controlled — and, for Blacks, a husband's participation in housework appears to guard against divorce significantly.¹⁹⁶ There are therefore aspects of African American gender roles and expectations that go against traditional norms.

While these nontraditional norms are not necessarily problematic in and of themselves, they can become problematic in practice because African Americans often simultaneously maintain adherence to traditional gender roles. For example, while Black men are more likely to have a favorable view of working wives, they tend to have more conservative ideas about women's roles in general;¹⁹⁷ if Black women are expected both to work in the paid labor force and maintain a household, they will likely experience role strain.¹⁹⁸ Likewise, if Black men are expected to work hard and be the provider but do not receive deference and support in the household, they may feel like *they* are getting a raw deal. This intersection between income and interpersonal relations appears to be particularly important for African Americans: Studies suggest that, for Blacks, marital happiness is not dependent on

193. Broman (2005).

194. Wilcox and Nock (forthcoming, 2005); Mincy and Pouncy (2003).

195. McLoyd et al. (2000); Kamo and Cohen (1998).

196. Ibid.; Orbuch et al. (2002). The latter study uses longitudinal data for 199 White and 174 married Black couples.

197. McLoyd et al. (2000).

198. See Kamo and Cohen (1998).

income alone, but rather on whether or not the income, spousal support, and personal recognition one receives meets his or her needs.¹⁹⁹

More generally, the relative lack of complementary gender roles²⁰⁰ among African Americans may create a need for constant negotiation and monitoring of one's spouse to ensure fairness. The relative lack of complementary gender roles might very well also undercut one of the benefits typically associated with marriage: namely, that marriage provides a couple with a set of norms that guide their behavior in productive ways.

Another possibility is that, as members of a community in which marriage rates are low and divorce rates are high, African Americans may be less inclined to have faith that their individual marriages will last. A lack of faith would obviously dissuade investment in one's marriage — thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, perhaps. (Even after controlling for other variables, studies find that married Black men and women are more likely than Whites to believe that their condition will improve if they divorce.)²⁰¹

Ultimately, these problems likely have deep roots in the unique, sometimes traumatic, historical experience of the African American community. Orlando Patterson has eloquently argued that slavery and Jim Crow scarred male-female relations among African Americans in ways that continue to shape current marriages — particularly in the ways that slavery denuded Black men of their proper role as husbands and fathers, fostered promiscuity, and wove violence and domination into the fabric of male-female sexual relations among Blacks (and interracial relationships).²⁰² This cultural legacy, and the unique sex ratio of African Americans, may help explain why studies suggest that infidelity, domestic violence, and mistrust of the opposite sex are particularly salient problems in the African American world, even after taking into account the effects of economic factors.²⁰³ In Patterson's words, "The nation as a whole, and Afro-Americans in particular, are still paying the ethnocidal price of slavery and the neo-dulotic Jim Crow system."²⁰⁴

Households

Family Economic Status

Studies on racial differences regarding the linkages between marriage and family income yield somewhat inconsistent results, but this inconsistency is likely due to researchers measuring the marriage-income relationship in different ways.²⁰⁵ The most relevant study on

199. Broman (1993); Clark-Nicolas and Gray-Little (1991).

200. See Boye-Beaman et al. (1993).

201. Trent and South (2003); Rank and Davis (1996).

202. Patterson (1998).

203. Patterson (1998); Chicago Health and Social Life Survey 2004.

204. Patterson (1998), p. 167.

205. Oliver and Shapiro (1997); Page and Stevens (2005); Heiss (1996).

the subject, which uses longitudinal data to examine how marriage actually affects income in families with children, finds that marriage brings greater relative and absolute benefits to Black families.²⁰⁶ As the authors of the study point out, this finding is surprising because Black men typically earn less than White men. One possibility is that differential selection into marriage is creating the racial difference: Since comparatively few single Black mothers with children marry,²⁰⁷ their spouses may be more likely to be the “cream of the crop” in terms of earnings.

There is more agreement among studies on the issue of economic security. Studies find that marriage brings more economic security to Blacks than Whites. For example, Scott South and K.D. Crowder find, after controlling for a wide range of variables, that marriage for Blacks, much more than for Whites, reduces the likelihood that a family will move into a poor neighborhood. Likewise, marital dissolution increases the likelihood of moving into poverty much more for Blacks than for Whites.²⁰⁸ Another study finds that, after controlling for a range of other variables, parental marital status and family structure have a much bigger impact on the likelihood of living in poverty for Black children than for White children.²⁰⁹

These findings are likely explained by the fact that more Black families live near the poverty line. Increases or decreases in wealth that come with parental marital status are more likely to move Black families in or out of poverty.

Marriage and Money over the Generations

The studies reviewed agree that childhood family structure has a greater impact on the family formation practices of White women. Studies find that growing up in an intact family reduces the likelihood of premarital²¹⁰ and teenage²¹¹ births more for White women than for Black women. It also appears that family disruption in childhood encourages nonmarital childbearing and divorce more for White women.²¹² Thus, there is apparently greater inter-generational transfer of family structure among White women. Marriage, childbearing, and family history are less interconnected for Black women. While the data do not clearly indicate what is causing these racial differences, it may be that they stem in part from underlying attitudinal shifts,²¹³ declines in the sex ratio, and different family formation norms among Black Americans.

206. Page and Stevens (2005).

207. Twelve percent of Black children and 30 percent of White children born to single mothers will experience a parental marriage by age three; Page and Stevens (2005).

208. The effects of being and getting married on moving from poor to non-poor tracts were comparable for Blacks and Whites; South and Crowder (1997).

209. Family structure and parental marital status are found to have about 1/2 to 2/3 the effect on White child poverty rates that they do on Black child poverty rates; Lerman (2002).

210. South (1996).

211. Kahn and Anderson (1992).

212. Taylor et al. (1990).

213. Such as a growing number of Black women who decide not to marry.

At the same time, it appears that childhood family structure and economic status are far less important in determining adult marital and poverty status of White women.²¹⁴ We do not find that White women are substantially more likely to be married or not poor when they have grown up in a married-couple household. The reason for this appears to be that White women experience far greater intergenerational mobility: Marriage and wealth are more easily obtained by White women regardless of their childhood family status.

Communities

Studies of local marriage and crime rates do not yield definitive information on race differences. What seems to be the case is that the prevalence of intact families reduces crime rates for both Blacks and Whites. Within this overall trend, it appears that the marriage rate plays a more important role in reducing crime among Blacks²¹⁵ while the divorce rate plays a more important role in promoting crime among Whites.²¹⁶

Children

The studies under review suggest that there are a number of racial differences in the link between parental marriage and child outcomes. These differences do not follow a clear pattern. In some cases Black children appear to benefit more from parental marriage; but, in other cases, White children seem to benefit more. Overall, however, the data suggest that parental marriage might bring slightly more benefit to White children.

Parental Support

Studies seem to indicate that marriage has a comparatively minimal effect on parental support in White families.

Two large-sample, multivariate studies find that married White mothers are more emotionally supportive of their children than never-married White mothers but are no different from divorced mothers.²¹⁷ In other words, being currently-married apparently has no unique effect on the maternal warmth of White mothers. The studies also provide no clear indication

214. Musick and Mare (2004).

215. Sampson (1995).

216. Parker and Johns (2002).

217. More specifically, an analysis of NLSY data by Schmitz (2003) found that being married did not predict White mothers' emotional support for their children. But when McLeod et al. (1994) took comparable data and disaggregated the "unmarried" category, they found an important nuance: While previously-married and currently-married White mothers do not differ significantly in maternal affection, never-married mothers display substantially less maternal affection. The study by Schmitz (2003) almost certainly found no significant marital status effect because its "unmarried" category conflated the quite small number of never-married White mothers with a large number of divorced White mothers. Thus, the studies indicate that there is no unique benefit associated with current marriage for White mothers, but White mothers, whether previously or currently married, display much more affection towards their children than never-married White mothers.

that marriage-related variables are creating these effects. We therefore suspect that marriage has little net impact on maternal warmth among White mothers and that affectionate White mothers are instead being selected into marriage.

A large-sample, multivariate study by Jerold Heiss finds that, among Whites, intact families do not predict higher levels of overall parental support.²¹⁸ The reason no effect exists is interesting: Among White families, father presence itself apparently reduces parental involvement while *the increased income and decreased maternal employment associated with father presence help to promote parental involvement*. Intact families simultaneously encourage and discourage parental support in different ways, resulting in no net family structure effect for Whites.

Taken together these findings suggest that parental marriage has a relatively minimal effect on the amount of parental support White children receive. In contrast, current parental marriage has a significant and direct positive effect on the amount of paternal, maternal, and overall parental support Black children receive. The evidence therefore suggests that Black children derive greater benefit from parental marriage than White children in terms of parental support.

It must be pointed out, however, that the studies under review lack data on the parenting of White fathers. They also contain relatively limited data on overall parental support in White families.²¹⁹ Therefore, the tentative conclusions we offer above can only be considered estimates of the racial differences in the relationship between marriage and parental support.

The shortcomings in the data discussed above make it difficult to address the issue of why marriage appears to promote parental support differently for Whites than Blacks. We can, however, offer a purely speculative explanation that might be researched further in the future.

The possible explanation is that the racial differences in parental support stem, in part, from different gender roles among Blacks and Whites. Among Whites it seems that there is a gender specialization paradigm whereby mothers bear most of the responsibility for child-rearing. For example, data indicate that maternal and parental support are unaffected or even adversely affected by father presence; but, they appear to be promoted by income, reduced maternal employment, and several other variables that may be thought of as important to maternal parenting in traditional families.²²⁰ In other words, White mothers are the nurturers while the fathers are supposed to be providers. It appears that the net result of this dynamic is actually that affectionate White mothers are selected into marriage and the change in family conditions associated with divorce does not reduce parental support.

218. The study focuses on education-related parental support; Heiss (1996).

219. For example, we do not know whether White children of never-married mothers receive less overall parental support.

220. McLeod et al. (1994); Heiss (1996).

Married Black parents, in contrast, expect and experience less traditional gender roles and more mutuality in childrearing.²²¹ It may therefore be that there is a more additive relationship between paternal, maternal, and overall parental support in Black families. The studies under review seem to support this hypothesis. They consistently find that, for Blacks, current marriage and father presence significantly promote paternal involvement, maternal emotional support, and overall parental support.²²² Variables such as income and reduced maternal employment appear to have a comparatively weak effect on parental support among Black families.

Externalizing Disorders

Several comprehensive, large-sample studies find that parental marriage leads to approximately similar reductions in externalizing disorders among White and Black children. For example, two studies find that living with an unmarried mother leads to similar increases in antisocial/hyperactive behavior among White and Black children.²²³ Two other large-sample, multivariate studies find that parental marriage and intact families reduce delinquency among both races.²²⁴

Upon closer inspection of the data, however, we find that divorce, rather than marriage, is apparently responsible for the fluctuations in externalizing disorders among White children. Two large-sample, multivariate studies indicate that only the children of *divorced* White mothers experience significantly higher levels of externalizing disorders — children of never-married White mothers do not seem to experience a disadvantage.²²⁵ Controlling for time since divorce does not alter this effect. Similarly, a five-year longitudinal study finds that White children living in to-be-divorced married-couple households exhibit higher levels of externalizing disorders than children living in always-two-parent households.²²⁶ Thus, the studies suggest that divorce or problems related to divorce promote externalizing disorders among White children-but there appears to be no unique benefit associated with parental marriage.²²⁷

221. Mackey and O'Brien (1998); McLoyd et al. (2000).

222. Zimmerman et al. (1995); Heiss (1996); McLeod et al. (1994); Schmitz (2003); Chase-Lansdale et al. (1994); Black et al. (1999). In addition, Zimmerman et al. (1995) finds that paternal emotional support and overall parental support are correlated for African American boys.

223. Having a married mother decreases the likelihood that White children will develop a hyperactivity disorder over time, and it decreases the prevalence of antisocial behaviors among Black children; Schmitz (2003). McLeod et al. (1994) finds that living in a single-mother home promotes antisocial behavior similarly for Black and White children.

224. Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002) find that relative to married-couple households, White children in single-mother households have higher levels of behavior problems and Black children in cohabiting-mother households have more behavior problems; Heiss (1996) finds that living in an intact household reduces school-related discipline problems comparably for both races (effect size=.20 for Blacks and .16 for Whites).

225. McLeod and Nonnemaker (2000); McLeod et al. (1994).

226. Shaw et al. (1999).

227. It is also possible that White children with externalizing disorders increase the likelihood of parental divorce.

As we discussed above, current marriage is very strongly negatively associated with externalizing disorders among Black children. It therefore appears that parental marriage is a substantial reducer of externalizing disorders for Black children but not White children. Not surprisingly, the racial difference appears to be even more pronounced among boys. Even when studies effectively count the divorce penalty among White boys as a marriage benefit, they find that parental marriage is a dramatically stronger reducer of delinquency among African American boys.²²⁸ In fact, one study of inner-city boys finds that controlling for parental marital status²²⁹ reduces the positive relationship between African American ethnicity and externalizing disorders to insignificance.²³⁰

For technical reasons, we cannot use data on externalizing disorders among African Americans to investigate the issue of why marriage brings greater benefit to Black children.²³¹ We can however, do the opposite and use data on White children to investigate why they do not seem to benefit from parental marriage in this case.

To understand why parental marital status does or does not affect delinquency among White children, we must first identify what variables affect delinquency for White children in general. The studies under review point to three likely candidates. First, poverty and especially persistent poverty appear to promote externalizing disorders among White children.²³² Second, data suggest that active-supportive parenting²³³ is important.²³⁴ Third, the data also suggest that maternal behavior and well-being (e.g., alcohol use, depression) are significantly linked to externalizing disorders among White children.²³⁵

Of these variables, it appears that maternal behavior and well-being are highly important mediators of the divorce effect on delinquency. For example, one study finds that changes in maternal alcohol consumption and use of spanking explain 25 percent of the divorce effect on White children's antisocial behavior.²³⁶ Another finds that mother's depression and feeling out of control explains entirely the positive link between divorce and externalizing disorders.²³⁷ Studies also suggest — though only suggest — that changes in maternal employment and income may explain a small portion of the divorce penalty.²³⁸

228. Paschall et al. (1996); Matsueda and Heimer (1987).

229. Single-mother versus intact household.

230. Florsheim et al. (1998).

231. Almost all of the studies on racial differences do not disaggregate their samples by gender while the mechanisms by which marriage reduces delinquency appear to be gender-specific among Black children.

232. McLeod and Nonnemaker (2000); McLeod et al. (1994); Schmitz (2003).

233. "Active-supportive parenting" includes a loving family environment, parent-child conversations, mother's hopes for her child's future, the number of times parents take a child to events and activities outside the home, etc.

234. Heiss, (1996); Paschall et al. (1996); Schmitz (2003); McLeod and Nonnemaker (2000).

235. The full set of maternal behavior variables includes maternal affection, employment, use of spanking, alcohol use, prepartum delinquency, depression, and feeling out of control; McLeod et al. (1994); Schmitz (2003); McLeod and Nonnemaker (2000); Lansford et al. (2004).

236. The relationship between parenting and child's antisocial behavior was found to be reciprocal. McLeod et al. (1994).

237. McLeod and Nonnemaker (2000).

238. Heiss (1996); McLeod et al. (1994). Differences in maternal affection and parental involvement appear not to explain the divorce effect.

The data therefore indicate that divorce promotes externalizing disorders among White children both directly²³⁹ and indirectly through maternal use of spanking, depression, alcohol use, and a perceived loss of control.

These findings resonate to some degree with the gender-specialization paradigm outlined above. White children apparently depend relatively heavily on their mothers for support and are particularly affected by maternal parenting practices; White mothers, on average, parent better and have better maternal well-being²⁴⁰ when they are currently-married. Divorce promotes externalizing disorders among White children, to a substantial degree, by causing diminutions in maternal parenting quality and well-being. *In contrast, never-married status apparently does not cause these diminutions, or cause them to the same degree, which is likely a major reason why non-marriage appears unrelated to White children's externalizing disorders.*²⁴¹

The residual direct effect of divorce on externalizing disorders likely indicates that divorce is inherently psychologically damaging for White children. Some of the residual effect is also likely being created by the selection of behaviorally troubled children into divorce.²⁴²

Grades and Academic Performance

The studies under review suggest that married-couple and intact families may promote better educational outcomes for more White children than Black children. One multivariate study finds that intact families promote educational aspirations more for Black children, but promote task preparedness²⁴³ and grades more for Whites.²⁴⁴ Another large-sample, multivariate study finds that, for Whites, living in a single-mother or cohabiting-parent household (as opposed to a married-couple household) significantly predicts lower PIAT-Math scores.²⁴⁵ For Blacks, no similar marriage benefit was found. In fact, Black children in cohabiting-parent households were found to fare better than those in married-couple households. The data therefore suggest that parental marriage is a stronger predictor of positive educational outcomes for White children.

Infant Health

Two large-sample studies on infant health do not yield a clear racial pattern in the consequences of marriage. One finds that the infant mortality rate is about five points lower

239. The strongest direct family structure effect was found by Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002). In their multivariate study of 1,150 White children, they found that years spent in a single-mother family strongly and significantly predicted delinquency whereas other important variables — maternal warmth, parental control, income, previous family structure changes, etc. — did not.

240. E.g., use of spanking, alcohol use, depression, and feeling out of control.

241. See McLeod et al. (1994); McLeod and Nonnemaker (2002).

242. Shaw et al. (1999).

243. E.g., student brings necessary materials to school and completes homework.

244. Heiss (1996).

245. Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones (2002).

among married mothers of both races but that these reductions are comparatively larger for Whites.²⁴⁶ Another study finds that parental marriage promotes better birth weight for Black infants than for White infants.²⁴⁷

Sexual Activity

Parental marriage apparently protects against teen pregnancy more for White females than Black females. An analysis of 4,129 White and 1,955 Black women finds, after controlling for a wide range of variables, that living in an intact family discourages teen pregnancy much more for Whites.²⁴⁸ Earlier research supports this finding.²⁴⁹ As we discussed in the previous section on households, these differences may stem in part from attitudinal shifts, declines in the sex ratio, and different family formation norms among Black Americans.

School Dropout

One study finds that living in a single-mother household increases the risk of dropout for Black adolescents but not White adolescents.²⁵⁰ But two studies focusing on intact households find the opposite effect, namely, that intact households promote high school completion for Whites only, regardless of gender.²⁵¹

Substance Use

One study finds that Whites are generally more likely than Blacks to use marijuana and alcohol, and for them, living with a never-married or divorced parent significantly increases substance use.²⁵² No similar effect is found for Black adolescents. Thus, parental marital status may be a stronger determinant of alcohol and marijuana use for White adolescents than for Black adolescents. We cannot be sure, however, until more research on the issue is conducted.

Studies on parental marriage and smoking are inconclusive. One finds that having married parents reduces tobacco use for Black adolescents but not White adolescents, but another finds that parental marriage is associated with more smoking for Black adolescents.²⁵³ More research on this subject is also needed.

In sum, marriage appears to promote parental support and reduce delinquency more for Black children than White children. However, marriage appears to bring greater benefits to

246. Bennet et al. (1994).

247. Buka et al. (2003).

248. Kahn and Anderson (1992).

249. Taylor et al. (1990), p. 1005.

250. Crowder and South (2003).

251. Heiss (1996); Astone and Upchurch (1994).

252. Amey and Albrecht (1998).

253. Gritz et al. (2003); Amey and Albrecht (1998).

White children in terms of school performance, early sexual activity, substance use, and perhaps also school completion.

What Explains the Racial Differences?

The reasons for the racial differences in the consequences of marriage for children are generally unclear.

One possible explanation for the lack of clarity is that, for certain outcomes, many of the studies do not disaggregate their samples by gender. Combined samples might be muddying the water and obscuring *gender-specific* racial patterns.

Another possibility is that there is no straightforward answer to the question at hand. In many cases we find that parental marriage seems to have no effect for children of one race. This finding and the relevant data we do have suggest that the racial differences in the marriage premium for children may stem from broader racial differences in familial norms and children's needs. In other words, it may not be an issue of deficits and advantages — but rather that family structure relates to outcomes in fundamentally different ways for Black and White children, the variation in the marriage premium being a natural reflection of that fact.

For these reasons, we need additional research that explores *how and why* marriage affects the well-being of White and Black girls and boys individually.

Some Possible Reducers of the Marriage Premium for African American Children

We have identified two important factors that may be reducing the benefits of parental marriage for African American children. They may also be widening the racial gap in the marriage premium, though we have no direct evidence that this is the case.

First, socioeconomic hardship may be decreasing the marriage premium for African American children. Several of the studies we reviewed suggest that at lower levels of socioeconomic status, marriage is less likely to reduce parent-child conflict and externalizing disorders,²⁵⁴ promote parental support,²⁵⁵ and lead to better educational outcomes.²⁵⁶

Second, since marital quality is linked to parent-child relations,²⁵⁷ the lower average quality of African American marriages may be reducing the marriage premium for Black children.

We believe that researchers should explore these issues in the future.

254. Smetana and Gaines (1999); Zimmerman et al. (1995); Salem et al. (1998); Ensminger (1990); Florsheim et al. (1998).

255. Zimmerman et al. (1995).

256. Battle (1998).

257. Erel and Burman (1995); Brody et al. (1994). Both studies support the “spillover” hypothesis.

Conclusions

FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS, as for all groups of Americans, marriage matters. The single most important finding of this literature review is that *marriage typically and substantially improves the well-being of African American women, men, and children.*

Compared to African Americans of similar status who are unmarried, married African Americans are more likely to be happy. Marriage also correlates with, and seems to contribute to, significantly better family functioning in the African American community.

Economically, marriage for Black America is a wealth-creating and poverty-reducing institution. The marital status of African American parents is one of the most powerful determinants of the economic status of African American families.

In economic terms, and particularly as regards avoiding poverty, marriage appears to benefit Black Americans comparatively more than it does White Americans.

Among African Americans, higher marriage rates consistently correlate with, and seem to contribute to, lower crime rates.

For African American children, parental marriage produces important benefits. Black children of married parents typically enjoy better infant health, receive better parenting, are less delinquent, have fewer behavioral problems, have higher self-esteem, are more likely to delay sexual activity, and have moderately better educational outcomes. These findings almost certainly reflect more than mere correlations: *Marriage itself* appears to be contributing strongly to better outcomes for Black children.

At the same time, marriage may have little or no impact on school dropout rates and rates of drug use among Black adolescents. Marriage may also have little or no impact on the reported physical health of Black adults.

A principal finding of this literature review — and one that is vitally relevant for public policy makers at all levels and for the entire leadership of Black America — is that *marriage is particularly important to African American males at all stages of the life cycle.*

Consider two related sets of facts. First, for young Black males, having one's father in the home, and particularly one's married father, appears to be a crucial determinant of better outcomes in a range of important areas, including levels of parental support, risks of delinquency, self-esteem, and school performance. Parental marriage lowers the risk of delinquency much more for African American boys than it does for White boys. Indeed, after controlling for parental marital status, the apparent relationship between race and delinquency all but disappears. Thus, instead of encountering a *racial* difference — African American boys are more likely to act out — we discover instead that we are actually

encountering a *marriage* difference, namely, that boys without a married father in the home are more likely to act out.

Second, while both Black men and Black women appear to benefit from marriage, this marriage premium in most cases appears to be measurably larger for Black men. For Black females, then, marriage matters. But for Black males, it seems that marriage matters *even more*.

And what should we conclude from these facts? Many observers have pointed to the crisis of the Black male in our society. Fewer observers have emphasized what this literature review plainly suggests: Improving the number and quality of Black marriages is absolutely integral to any amelioration of that crisis.

Racial and Gender Differences

Another key finding of this literature review is that *Black women, while typically benefiting from marriage in most areas of well-being, appear to receive less benefit from marriage than either Black men or White women*. (By contrast, differences in the benefit from marriage between Black men and White men appear to in most cases to be minimal.) These differences in relationship to African American women — both a gender gap and a racial gap — are especially pronounced in the areas of the quality of family life and physical health. Amazingly, for example, married Black women actually report lower levels of health than do *unmarried* Black women.

One at least partial exception to this gendered and racialized pattern is the area of economic well-being, where, for example, Black men and Black women appear to benefit comparably from marriage, and where Black married couples appear in many respects to benefit more from marriage economically than do White married couples.

What explains this pattern of differences that seems to point, at least in part, to a detrimental impact on African American women? Regarding the overall racial gap in the consequences of marriage for adults, one likely explanation is that, compared to White marriages, Black marriages tend to be more conflictual and less stable. This lower average quality of African American marriages probably reduces the benefits to adults that those marriages might otherwise yield. Our new analyses of data from the General Social Surveys support this hypothesis. We find that controlling for marital quality significantly reduces the Black-White gap in the reported benefits of marriage.

Similarly, regarding the apparent gap between Black and White women, if we hypothesize that women (Black and White) are generally more sensitive to marital quality than are men (Black and White), then the comparatively more conflictual and unstable status of Black marriages, as compared to White marriages, may also help to explain the fact that Black women appear to benefit less from marriage than do White women.

Suggestions for Future Research

Parental marriage clearly benefits Black children. Yet we also find significant and sometimes hard-to-understand Black-White racial differences in the consequences of marriage for children. In some areas, Black children seem to benefit more from parental marriage than do White children. For example, the African American children of married couples seem to benefit more than their White peers regarding both the overall level of parental support and the risks of delinquency. At the same time, regarding educational performance, early sexual activity, substance use, and possibly also high school completion, White children appear to derive greater benefits from parental marriage than do their African American peers. Further research is needed to clarify the meaning of these differences. Future studies should carefully distinguish the effects of parental non-marriage on Black sons as compared to Black daughters, since the harmful impact on Black boys appears to be greater in some areas than the impact on Black girls.

In addition, we offer three more general recommendations for future scholarly research.

First, when possible, scholars should use more precise family structure categories in their studies. We realize that one can always point to any aspect of a study and complain that it is not detailed enough, or comprehensive enough. But in the case of family structure categories, greater specificity is genuinely of vital importance. For example, many of the studies we reviewed found substantial differences in the outcomes for children in cohabiting as compared to married-parent families. It is therefore misleading to use a vague category such as “two-parent family” that conflates these two quite different family forms. Some studies even include in the category of the “two-parent family” unrelated adults such as mothers’ boyfriends.

Second, we find that marriage affects well-being in markedly different ways for boys and girls, and for Blacks and Whites, in part because, in both cases, the two groups have distinctive (if also partly overlapping) needs and norms. When possible, scholars should disaggregate their study samples along both racial and gender lines when examining the consequences of marriage. Only in this way can we gain a truly comprehensive understanding of how and why marriage affects well-being.

Third, we note with regret that some studies tend to treat family structure and other variables as though they are in competition with one another. As a result, such studies frequently seem to suggest that it is not really marriage that promotes children’s well-being, but instead, say, good parenting, or economic stability. The problem with this kind of reasoning is that it can also easily obscure the fact that marriage tends to contribute strongly to, say, good parenting and economic stability. Only by taking into account these important facts about marriage can we fully understand how people’s decisions, including decisions to marry, actually affect their lives, even as scholars seek to isolate independent or partly independent variables.

Social and Policy Implications

This review finds that marriage is an important determinant of the quality of life in Black America. For this reason, public policies as well as civil society initiatives aimed at strengthening marriage in Black America could, if successful, significantly increase the well-being of African American adults, children, and communities. The positive social changes generated by such policies and initiatives could also contribute measurably to reducing U.S. racial inequality and improving American society as a whole.

We offer only one significant qualification to this perspective. Those in our society with comparatively more resources and more social capital are also more likely than others to be currently married. Those persons who are unmarried tend overall, on average, to be less successful. For this reason, boosts in well-being linked to higher future marriage rates would almost certainly be smaller than the boosts that are evident from currently existing marriages.

Yet this qualification notwithstanding, there is every reason to believe that increased marriage rates, and especially higher numbers of good marriages, would bring significant improvements to Black people's lives. To take only one example, we have seen in this review that higher marriage rates among African Americans would almost certainly reduce the risks of juvenile delinquency facing young African American males. More generally, we have also seen that strengthening marriage in Black America might be as important as, if not more important than, any other strategy when it comes to addressing today's crisis of the African American male.

Similarly, our review of the literature suggests that marriage may go even further than economics in explaining the comparatively lower psychological well-being of African American adults, as compared to White adults. This fact is striking, and perhaps also diagnostic, for it suggests that, when it comes to reducing the Black-White gap in psychological well-being, policies aimed at improving the marital situation of African Americans may be at least as effective as policies aimed at improving the economic situation of African Americans. Of course, both types of policies are crucially important, in part because improved economic opportunities for African Americans are likely to lead to more, and higher quality, African American marriages.

How might public policies and civil society initiatives increase marriage rates and marriage quality among African Americans?

First, it seems likely that all policies contributing to the marriageability of African American men will likely increase both marriage rates and marriage quality. It is beyond the scope of this report to recommend specific policies in this regard, but education, job training, and reforms of the criminal justice system stand out as important possibilities.

Second, just as a fiscal assessment is typically required for all pending legislation, the requirement of a marriage and family impact statement might similarly be added to all pending legislation, such that policy makers would in the future review the intended and possible unintended consequences of prospective policies on marriage, family formation, and family well-being.

Third, all policies aimed directly at strengthening marriage as a U.S. social institution, and in particular as a social institution that is relevant to, and supports the needs of, lower income and less educated Americans, will likely improve marriage rates and marriage quality in Black America. A menu of such policies might include:

- policies aimed at discouraging unwed childbearing;
- policies aimed at reducing unnecessary divorce;
- reforms of state tax codes and the U.S. tax code aimed at recognizing and strengthening marriage (for example, by eliminating the marriage penalty in the federal Earned Income Tax Credit);
- policies and programs aimed at detecting and eliminating violence in intimate relationships;
- programs providing social services, marriage and relationship education, and other supports to low-income couples with children who might consider marriage; and
- policies at all levels that provide or encourage marriage and relationship education for high school students, dating or engaged couples, married couples, and couples in currently troubled marriages.

FINALLY, and even more broadly, we need a new, national conversation in our society about the meaning and importance of marriage as a social institution. Scholars have a role to play in that conversation. So do business and political leaders. So do judges and lawyers. So do educators. So do celebrities. So do civic leaders. Our religious leaders, who have historically been among the most important custodians of our marriage traditions, have especially important roles to play. African American leaders at every level of our society should, and we believe will, provide key leadership in defining and meeting this marriage challenge for Black America, and for America.

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Technical Appendix

THE ORIGINAL ANALYSES reported here were conducted with data from the American General Social Surveys, repeated surveys of the civilian noninstitutionalized population of the 48 contiguous United States conducted every year or every other year from 1972 through 2002. The data used here are from the 1973-2002 surveys. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with one adult member of each sampled household, the number of respondents to each survey varying from about 1,500 to 3,000. Making the data representative of the adult population requires that the data be weighted on number of household members age 18 and older, and that weighting was used for our analyses.

The statistical technique used for our analyses is binary logistic regression, which is appropriate when the dependent variable is dichotomous, that is, has only two categories. Therefore, all dependent variables are scored dichotomously. The two independent variables for our study are also dichotomous (married versus not married, and in “very happy” marriages versus all other categories), though that is not a necessary condition for binary logistic regression. Two of the control variables used — mother’s education and respondent’s age — bear a nonlinear relationship to most of the dependent variables used for the research, and thus they are entered into the analysis as sets of dummy variables. The categories used for the mother’s education dummy variables are less than 9 years, 9-11 years, 12 years, 1-3 years of college, and 4 or more years of college. The age categories are 18-24, 25-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and 80-89. Family economic rank is a five-point ordinal scale varying from “far below average” to “far above average” that is treated as though it were an interval variable.

All of the control variables apparently commonly affect the independent and dependent variables, but their control does not necessarily remove all of the spuriousness from the relationships between the independent and dependent variables [IV and DV]. It is virtually certain that there are other variables that commonly affect the independent and dependent variables and produce some of the relationship (association) between pairs of IVs and DVs. One way to estimate the effects of these unmeasured variables is through an analysis of residuals, that is, by looking at correlations between the residuals (differences between predicted and observed values) generated by using the IV and DV respectively in simultaneous equations in which the control variables are the predictor variables. Any correlations between these two sets of residuals indicate spuriousness in the relationship between the IV and DV. That is, it indicates that some of the relationship does not reflect effects of the IV and DV on one another.

Whether or not such analysis can very accurately determine what proportion of a relationship between an IV and a DV is spurious is debatable, but what is important for our purposes is whether or not there are similar degrees of spuriousness in the relationships for Blacks and Whites. Our residual analyses provide no evidence for any substantial Black-White differences. For instance, when married/not married is the independent variable and personal happiness is the dependent variable, the correlation between the residuals is .134

for Blacks and .160 for Whites. If there is any racial difference in the proportion of the relationship that is spurious (noncausal), apparently the proportion is somewhat higher for Whites than for Blacks.

It is important to keep in mind that no quasi-experimental methods such as the ones we used can provide conclusive evidence of what causes what, and to what degree. The estimates we provide are just that, estimates, and these estimates are not precisely correct and could be substantially in error. The same caution applies to all of the research reviewed for this project.

The number of respondents for analyses with different dependent variables varies because of differences in the number of cases deleted because of missing values, and also because not all of the relevant questions were asked of all of the respondents to all of the surveys. However, the samples sizes were generally around 1,800 for Black females, 1,200 for Black males, 12,000 for White females, and 10,000 for White males.

Our estimates of the proportion of the racial difference in estimated effects of being married on personal happiness and on satisfaction derived from family life that is explained by racial differences in marital quality is based on logistic regression coefficients rather than odds ratios.

About Alma Thomas

A LMA WOODSEY THOMAS was born on September 22, 1891 in Columbus, Georgia, and moved with her family to Washington, DC as a young child. She studied art at Howard University and later received an M.A. at Columbia University. From 1924 to 1960, she taught art at Shaw Junior High School in Washington. At the age of 55, she undertook a formal study of art at American University.

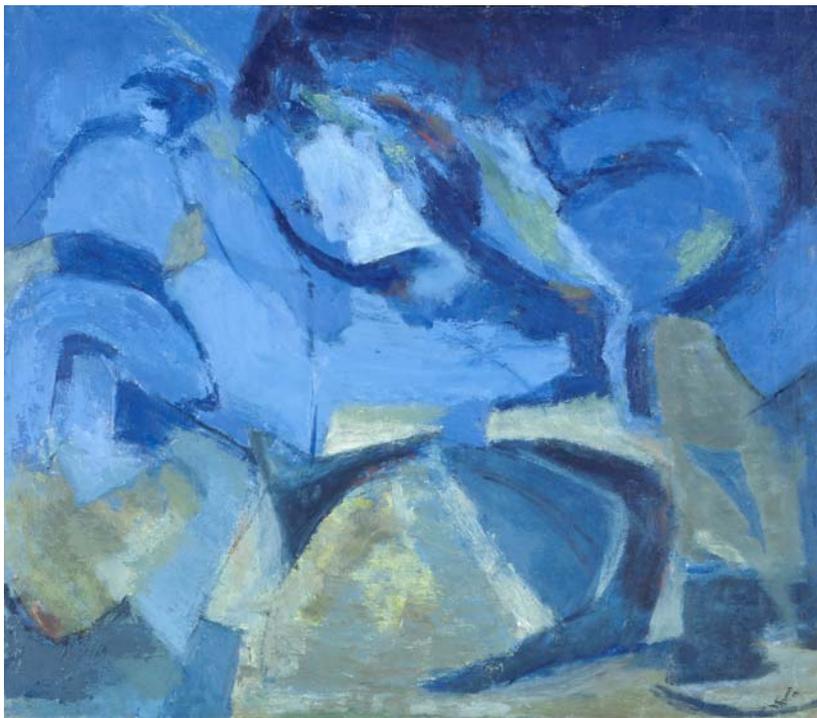
Thomas is best known for her large-scale abstract paintings comprised of vivid and rhythmic marks of color. She was inspired by nature and, in particular, her garden. She spoke often of “watching the leaves and flowers tossing in the wind as though they were singing and dancing,” and once, when describing her paintings, said, “Little dabs of color that spread out free . . . that’s how it all began. And every morning since then, the wind has given me new colors through the windowpanes.” Her luminous, contemplative paintings, with their powerful explorations of color, can be associated with the work of other abstract colorists such as Morris Louis, Gene Davis, Kenneth Noland, and even Wassily Kandinsky.

The Whitney Museum of American Art sponsored a solo exhibition of Thomas’ paintings in 1972. Her work has been on display at many museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. In 2001, the Women’s Museum in Dallas organized a major retrospective, *Alma Thomas: Phantasmagoria, Major Paintings*.

Alma Thomas died in Washington, DC in 1978.



At left: Orangery (1973) by Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891-1978). Acrylic on canvas, 68" x 58". Collection of The Newark Museum. Gift of Harold Hart. Photo © The Newark Museum/ Art Resource, NY.



At left: The Stormy Sea (1958) by Alma Woodsey Thomas (1891-1978). Oil on canvas, 48 1/8" x 41 7/8". Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Gift of the artist. Photo © Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC/ Art Resource, NY.

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The Institute for American Values is a nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world. The Institute brings together approximately 100 leading scholars — from across the human sciences and across the political spectrum — for interdisciplinary deliberation, collaborative research, and joint public statements on the challenges facing families and civil society. In all of its work, the Institute seeks to bring fresh analyses and new research to the attention of policy makers in government, opinion makers in the media, and decision makers in the private sector.

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