African American Intimacy: The Racial Gap in Marriage

R. Richard Banks
Stanford Law School

Su Jin Gatlin
Stanford University School of Education
INTRODUCTION

During the past half century, marriage has become a less universal and less stable family form. Marriage rates have declined, divorce rates have risen and, consequently, single parent families have become more common.
Partly in response to these developments, some legislators, advocates and scholars recently have pushed for the establishment of government programs that promote marriage. In 2002, for example, President Bush proposed that $1.5 billion in federal funds be spent on marriage promotion efforts during a five year period. More than two dozen states have experimented with marriage promotion programs.

Advocates of such programs rely on empirical evidence that children benefit from being raised by both their biological parents, a possibility whose likelihood is increased by the parents having married. Moreover, adults may benefit economically, psychologically, and physically from the long-term, interdependent relationship that marriage facilitates.

Critics of marriage promotion policies counter these arguments by contending that efforts to reverse the decline in marriage are doomed to failure. Further, they note that the supposed benefits of marriage may depend largely on the lack of direct state investment in the welfare of children and adults. Thus, resources would be better spent directly promoting the welfare of children and adults.


4. Sara McLanahan, et al., Introducing the Issue, 15 FUTURE OF CHILD 1 (2005), available at http://www.futureofchildren.org. The two bills and that made up the Bush administration’s marriage promotion programs have not yet become law.


8. See Hyunbae Chun & Injae Lee, Why Do Married Men Earn More: Productivity or Marriage Selection?, 39 ECONOMIC INQUIRY 307 (2001) (finding that married men earn more than unmarried men and that the marriage premium does not entirely result from the fact that higher-earning men are more likely to marry).


11. See generally, Waite & Gallagher, supra note 7.
African Americans have a special stake in these debates, as the decline in marriage among them has been deeper and steeper than among other groups. African Americans are now substantially less likely than members of any other group to marry. Black women are estimated to spend less than half as much time married as do White women. As one prominent researcher has remarked, "Marriage is typically a relatively short stage of life for Blacks." Although scholars and politicians have focused on the lack of marriage among the so-called Black underclass, the racial gap in marriage, as we will show, is substantial among the Black middle class as well.

Partly due to the marriage gap, Black children are nearly three times as likely as White children to live with a single parent mother. While the growth of single parent families since the 1960s has been concentrated among those Blacks and Whites who are most disadvantaged, the racial gap in single parent families exists even among women who are college educated. To the extent that marriage benefits adults and children, racial differences in marriage may well translate into racial differences in other outcomes—health, income, wealth, incarceration, and education—

12. If marriage promotion policies succeed, African Americans stand to benefit more than other groups. If the government were to undertake social welfare programs that serve individuals, families and children irrespective of marriage, and thereby diminish the relative benefits of marriage, then African Americans would also reap an especially large share of the benefits of such programs. In other words, African American children are especially disadvantaged by the privatization of dependency characteristic of our nation's (lack of) social welfare policy.

13. Andrew J. Cherlin, Marriage and Marital Dissolution Among Black Americans, 29 J. COMP. FAM. STUD. 147 (1998). During the 1950s, comparable percentages of White women and Black women were currently married: 67% and 64% respectively; Matthew D. Bramlett & William D. Mosher, Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States, Vital Health Stat., 10 (2002).


15. Cherlin, Marriage and Marital Dissolution Among Black Americans, supra note 13.


17. Throughout, references to the “marriage gap” or to the “racial gap in marriage” refer to racial differences in the likelihood of being married which, in turn, is comprised of gaps in the likelihood of getting married, getting divorced, and remarrying. See, e.g., Michael S. Rendall, Entry or Exit? A Transition-Probability Approach to Explaining the High Prevalence of Single Motherhood Among Black Women, 36 Demography 369 (1999) (disaggregating the higher rate of single motherhood among Black women into differences in unwed childbearing, subsequent marriage, and divorce).


that are important indicators of the relative well-being of different racial
groups. If one is concerned about racial disparities in these domains,
then one should be concerned about the racial gap in marriage as well.

Considerable research has not yielded any entirely satisfactory ex-
planation for the racial gap in marriage, and we do not purport to offer
one here. What we do hope to accomplish in this brief, lightly footnoted
essay is to provide an overview of the marriage gap and to explore a novel
approach to understanding it. Our discussion differs in three respects from
most treatments of the topic. First, we focus on the Black middle class,
both to underscore that the marriage gap is not confined to the socio-
economically disadvantaged, and because the Black middle class comprises
a substantial portion of the African American community. Second,
whereas most analyses center on the marital status of women (as the par-
ents with whom children typically live), we view the marriage related
behavior of men as a potential source of insight into the marriage gap.
Our third, and most unusual, innovation is to connect the racial gap in
marriage to the dramatic difference in the likelihood of interracial mar-
rriage by Black men and women.

The essay is divided into three parts. Part I documents the extent of
the racial gap in marriage. Part II uses the marriage patterns of affluent
Black men in particular to speculate about how the relationships of Black
men and women might be influenced by the relative numbers of men and
women and the men's socioeconomic characteristics in ways that depress
marriage rates. Part III connects the low rate of marriage among African
Americans to the differing interracial marriage rates of Black men and
women.

PART I: THE COMPONENTS OF THE MARRIAGE GAP

There are three components of the racial gap in marriage: the likeli-
hood of ever marrying, the likelihood of divorce, and the likelihood of
remarriage after divorce. Compared to White women, African American

Family Formation: A Theoretical and Statistical Overview, in THE DECLINE IN MARRIAGE AMONG
African Americans 3 (M. Belinda Tucker & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan eds., 1995); Robert
Schoen, The Widening Gap Between Black and White Marriage Rates: Context and Implications,
in THE DECLINE IN MARRIAGE AMONG African Americans, 103 (M. Belinda Tucker &
www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2004.html (March 2005) (ap-
proximately 982,000 of nearly 5.2 million Blacks age 25–34 are college graduates).
23. Throughout Parts I and II, we compare African Americans and Whites because
the White-Black disparity is most stark. The marriage patterns of other groups more
closely approximate those of Whites.
women are less likely to ever marry, more likely to divorce, and less likely to remarry after divorce.\textsuperscript{24}

A. First Marriage

Perhaps the most important factor in the growth of the racial gap in marriage is the racial gap in the likelihood of ever marrying. Black women now marry at a lower rate than any other group of women.\textsuperscript{25}

Historically, more than 95% of American women who lived to age 15 married at some time in their life, a rate that has been declining since the early 20th century.\textsuperscript{26} By the mid-1980s, it was estimated that approximately 90% of adult women would ever marry.\textsuperscript{27}

Among Black women, the decline in the likelihood of ever marrying has been particularly dramatic.\textsuperscript{28} While the estimated likelihood of ever marrying for White women dropped from approximately 95% or more in the 1950s to about 90% for young adult women in the 1980s, the likelihood of ever marrying for Black women dropped, during the same period, from an estimated 88% to somewhere between 70–75%.\textsuperscript{29}

Analyses of data from the 2000 Census are consistent with these findings. Among women ages 40–44, 10% of White women and nearly 30% Black women have never married.\textsuperscript{30} To the extent that women are unlikely to enter a first marriage at this stage in life, these figures suggest that Black women are nearly three times as likely as White women to never marry.

\textsuperscript{24} Cherlin, \textit{Marriage and Marital Dissolution Among Black Americans}, supra note 13, at 147.
\textsuperscript{26} Schoen, \textit{supra} note 21, at 103.
\textsuperscript{27} Id.
\textsuperscript{29} Rodgers & Thornton, \textit{supra} note 28, at 272, 274; Bennett et al. \textit{supra} note 28, at 696–98.
Census data also confirm that the racial gap in the likelihood of ever marrying exists among both the least and most well educated women. Among high school dropouts ages 40–44, 35% of Black women and 11% of White women have never married.\textsuperscript{31} Among women ages 40–44 with at least a college degree, 24% of Black women and 12% of White women have never married.\textsuperscript{32} At each level of educational attainment, Black women are substantially less likely than their White peers to have ever married. Even though disadvantaged Black women are the least likely to ever marry, the racial gap in marriage would not disappear even if disadvantaged Black women married at the same rates as their White counterparts.

B. Divorce

The second component of the marriage gap is the divorce gap. As with marriage, there have been society-wide changes in the rates of divorce during the past half century. Although the divorce rate had been rising slowly since before the turn of the 20th century,\textsuperscript{33} divorce rates increased dramatically beginning in the early 1960s, especially for Blacks.\textsuperscript{34} While socioeconomically disadvantaged couples are substantially more likely to divorce than are more affluent and better educated couples,\textsuperscript{35} racial differences in divorce rates are accounted for neither by the fact that Black couples are more likely to be poor, nor by the higher divorce rate of poor Black couples compared to poor White couples.

\begin{itemize}
\item 31. \textit{IPUMS 5\% Sample, supra} note 30. This gap persists for younger and older cohorts, too. For Black female high school drop outs age 30–34, 53\% had never been married, as compared to 18\% of White female high school drop outs in the same age group. For women age 50–54, 19\% of Black female high school drop outs had never been married, as compared to 6\% of their White counterparts.
\item 32. \textit{Id.} This gap persists for younger and older cohorts, too. For Black female college graduates age 30–34, 44\% had never been married, as compared to 23\% of White female college graduates in the same age group. For women age 50–54, 14\% of Black female college graduates had never been married, as compared to 8\% of their White counterparts.
\item 33. Robert Joseph Taylor, \textit{et al.}, \textit{Recent Demographic Trends in African American Family Structure, in Family Life in Black America}, 14, 49 (Robert Joseph Taylor \textit{et al.} eds. 1997). According to sociologist and family researcher Andrew Cherlin, in 1860 there were fewer than 2 divorces per 1000 existing marriages. With some annual fluctuations, the divorce rate has increased consistently since then. Cherlin, \textit{Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage, supra} note 1, at 49.
\item 34. By 1960, the overall divorce rate stood at 42 divorces per 1000 existing marriages: 78 for Blacks and 38 for Whites. Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, \textit{supra} note 21, at 10. By 1990, the overall divorce rate had increased dramatically to 166; 358 for Blacks and 153 for Whites. \textit{Id.}
\end{itemize}
Although divorce rates are typically defined as the number of divorces per 1000 existing marriages, we believe that the crude statistic is not a particularly apt measure of the stability of marriage. A better measure, in our view, is the ratio of divorced or separated to married people within a particular age group.

Application of this (somewhat unconventional) measure dramatizes the magnitude of the current racial gap in divorce. At each socioeconomic level, African American women are substantially more likely than White women to be divorced or separated than married. Analyses of data from the 2000 Census show that among high school drop-outs ages 40–44, there are 96 divorced or separated Black women for every 100 who are married, and only 39 divorced or separated White women for every 100 who are married. While the ratio of divorces and separations to marriages is lower among college educated women, the racial gap remains. Among women ages 40–44 with at least a college degree, there are 50 divorced or separated Black women for every 100 who are married, and only 33 divorced or separated White women for every 100 who are married. A comparison of these findings reveals that the likelihood of being divorced or separated rather than married is greater for college educated Black women than for White women who dropped out of high school.

36. The crude divorce rate does not well capture changes across time in the stability of new marriages. Imagine, for example, that the percentage of young adults who marry is declining and that every young adult who marries will divorce within a few years. If there are large numbers of older adults who married years ago and who do not divorce, then the crude divorce rate would underestimate the stability of new marriages.

37. IPUMS 5% Sample, supra note 30. This ratio is computed by dividing the sum of currently divorced and separated women by the number of currently married (with spouse present) women.

38. Id.
Other studies complement these findings. A study from the late 1980s found that Black female college graduates were nearly twice as likely as comparably educated White women to separate from or divorce their husbands within 10 years of marriage. Among women who had married 10 to 14 years earlier, 44% of Black women and only 23% of White women were separated or divorced. Another study found that even among those marriages that one might expect to be most stable—where the woman had completed college, did not marry young, and did not have a child before marriage—"the risk [of divorce was] more than twice as high for [B]lacks as for [W]hites." More recent analyses have reported similar findings.

The racial gap in divorce is so substantial that divorced or separated women constitute a larger share of the adult African American population than of the adult White population, notwithstanding African Americans’ lower rate of marriage. In other words, African American women are more likely than White women to be separated or divorced, even though Black women are less likely than White women to have ever married.


41. Bramlett & Mosher, supra note 13, at 17–19.
Analyses of data from the 2000 Census indicate that at every educational level, the percent of divorced or separated Black women is greater than the percent of divorced or separated White women. Among women ages 40–44 with a high school diploma or less, approximately 27.6% of Black women and 20.3% of White women were divorced or separated. The racial gap becomes more pronounced at higher levels of educational attainment. For women ages 40–44 with at least a bachelor’s degree, 24.1% of Black women and 12.9% of White women were divorced or separated. Across the socioeconomic spectrum, Black women are more likely than White women to be separated or divorced, even though they are substantially less likely than White women ever to marry.

C. Remarriage

Another component of the racial gap in marriage is the low rate at which Black women remarry. Only 1/3 of divorced Black women will remarry, compared to 7 out of 10 divorced White women. While the likelihood of remarriage is associated with socioeconomic status, socioeconomic differences between Black and White women do not wholly explain the remarriage gap, as even high status Black women are less likely than their White peers to remarry.

PART II: MARRIAGE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN

In this part, we move beyond the conventional emphasis on the perspective of women by considering the likelihood that affluent Black men in particular will ever marry. Drawing on the work of other scholars, we consider how the balance of men and women in a population and men’s socioeconomic characteristics may influence the interactions of Black men and women in ways that diminish the likelihood of marriage.

42. IPUMS 5% Sample, supra note 30 (Women who were divorced or separated when the 2000 Census was taken).
43. Id.
44. Id.
45. Cherlin, supra note 1, at 95.
46. Id.; Sweet & Bumpass, supra note 39.
47. See, e.g., Bramlett & Mosher, supra note 13, at 23–24. It should be noted that it is difficult to assess the influence of income on a woman’s likelihood of remarriage, as income may be a consequence as much as a cause of remarriage.
48. Taylor et al., supra note 33, at 51.
As marriage rates declined for African American women during the past few decades, Black men, unsurprisingly, also became less likely ever to marry.\textsuperscript{49} Three aspects of this decline are especially noteworthy. First, between 1970 and 1990, Black men’s likelihood of having ever been married diminished at each level of earnings.\textsuperscript{50} Second, by 1990, Black men at each income level had become substantially less likely than their White counterparts to have ever been married.\textsuperscript{51} Third, and most surprisingly, the most affluent Black men are now less likely to have ever been married than are their lower earning, but economically stable, African American counterparts. This finding is surprising because, among men, the positive association between earnings and the likelihood of marriage has been so well established as to be beyond dispute.

Analyses of data from the 2000 Census confirm that higher earnings consistently translate into a greater likelihood of marriage for White men, though not for Black men. Among White men ages 40–44, for example, higher earning men are consistently more likely to have been married.\textsuperscript{52} Among Black men ages 40–44, in contrast, the highest earners are actually less likely to have ever been married than are their lower earning, but economically stable, peers.\textsuperscript{53} To the best of our knowledge, this phenomenon has not been previously identified.

\textsuperscript{49} \textsc{Wilson, When Work Disappears}, \textit{supra} note 16, at 90, 91, 95.

\textsuperscript{50} \textsc{The Urban Underclass} 193–94 (Christopher Jencks & Paul E. Peterson eds., 1991).

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{52} IPUMS 5\% Sample, \textit{supra} note 30. The percent of White men never married falls consistently from 30\% for earning less than $5,000 to 27\% for those making between $5,000 and $14,999 to 20\% for those making between $15,000 and $24,999 to 13\% for those making between $25,000 and $39,999 to 9\% for those making between $40,000 and $74,999 to 8\% for those making between $75,000 and $99,999 to 7\% for those making between $100,000 and $199,999, and finally, to 6\% for those making $200,000 or more.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Id.} The percent of Black men never married men falls from 40\% for those earning between $5,000 and $14,999 to a low of 12\% for those earning between $75,000 and $99,999 and then increases to 20\% for men earning $200,000 or more.
B. The Marriageable Male Explanation

While many potential accounts of the decline in marriage among African Americans have been proposed, a common theme is the poor economic prospects of African American men. A number of commentators have emphasized the paucity of economically stable Black men in explaining the low marriage rate among African Americans. One of the

---

54. See, e.g., Orlando Patterson, Rituals of Blood 56–82 (1998); Cherlin, supra note 13, at 147; Robert D. Mare and Christopher Winship, Socioeconomic Change and the Decline of Marriage for Blacks and Whites, in The Urban Underclass 175 (Christopher Jencks and Paul E. Peterson eds., 1991); Richard Bulcroft & Kris Bulcroft, Race Differences in Attitudinal and Motivational Factors in the Decision to Marry, 55 J. of Marriage & Fam. 338 (1993) (noting that survey data undermines the intuition that Black women desire marriage less than do White women).

most widely known and cited of such theories—the marriageable male hypothesis—was developed by the sociologist William Julius Wilson.\textsuperscript{56} Wilson traced the decline in marriage among African Americans to the industrial restructuring of the 1970s, which decimated the sort of well-paying manufacturing jobs often relied on by men in inner city areas to be able to support a family.\textsuperscript{57} In this account, marriage rates declined because men became increasingly unable to fulfill the economic role of husband and father. Women hesitated to wed someone who, economically, would bring so little to the marriage.\textsuperscript{58} Men became hesitant to assume a role whose cultural expectations they could not fulfill.\textsuperscript{59}

Although Wilson focused on the underclass, his approach could readily be extended to the middle class. Middle class Black women encounter relatively few Black men who are their professional and educational peers. For example, among African Americans ages 30–34 who have at least a bachelor's degree, there are 145 women for every 100 men.\textsuperscript{60} Among African Americans ages 30–34 who have a graduate or professional degree, there are 156 women for every 100 men.\textsuperscript{61}

While the marriageable male hypothesis might seem suited to explaining the low marriage rates of African American women or of economically disadvantaged Black men, it does not offer much insight into the marriage gap among more affluent men, much less why the very highest earning African American men are less likely to marry than are their lower earning, but economically stable, peers.

C. Two Sexual Bargaining Models

To better understand the depressed marriage rate of affluent Black men and, by extension, of African Americans more generally, we briefly


57. Wilson, \textit{The Truly Disadvantaged}, \textit{supra} note 16, at 39–43. There are also, obviously, a variety of other factors that currently contribute to the shortage of marriageable African American men, including the drug war and the high incarceration rates of young Black men in particular.

58. While the traditional role of husband as breadwinner may have declined in importance, the expectation that a man will contribute economically to his family remains very much a part of American culture.

59. Edin et al., \textit{supra} note 16, at 1013.

60. IPUMS 5% Sample, \textit{supra} note 30. There are 228,526 Black women ages 30–34 with a bachelor's degree, compared to 157,896 Black men in the same age group.

61. \textit{Id.} There are 61,146 Black women ages 30–34 with a graduate professional degree, compared to 39,136 Black men in the same age group.
consider two approaches that situate intimate relationships as an outcome of a bargaining process between individual men and women: the sex ratio theory originally proposed by Guttentag and Secord and the sexual matching model of Edward Laumann and colleagues at the University of Chicago. Whereas the sex ratio theory centers on the relative numbers of men and women, the sexual matching approach highlights the importance of men’s socioeconomic characteristics.

1. The Sex Ratio Theory

Originally propounded by Guttentag and Secord two decades ago, and subsequently investigated by others, the sex ratio theory posits that when the relative numbers of men and women are imbalanced, marriage rates will depend on which group is in the majority. When there are substantially more men than women, marriage rates are predicted to rise. When there are more women than men, marriage rates are predicted to decline.

The sex ratio theory rests on two premises. First, whichever group is in short supply (or, in other words, in great demand) will have greater leverage to dictate the terms of any intimate relationship. Second, women will tend to use their leverage to marry, while men will tend to use their leverage not to marry. Proponents of the sex ratio theory have offered sociobiological and cultural explanations for the different preferences of men and women. The sociobiological explanation would be that as a consequence of millennia of evolution, men are hardwired to want

---

64. GUTTENTAG & SECORD, supra note 62.
66. One might assume that both men and women negotiate issues within a relationship (certainly the early stages) with an awareness of the alternatives to that relationship and a willingness to pursue those alternatives. In other words, each person's negotiating power within the relationship depends on the appeal of the alternatives to that relationship for each person. If there are more men than women in a given area, then women will have more power in relationship negotiations than if there were more women than men. If women use their power to extract an agreement to marry, and men use their power to avoid marriage, then an excess of women would reduce marriage rates, while an excess of men would increase marriage rates. If women are in short supply, they would be able to extract an agreement to marry because if the man does not agree to marry, then the women would (or could at least plausibly threaten to) go elsewhere. Men have a similar bargaining power when they are in short supply.
sex, and women to want commitment, which in our society means marriage. The cultural explanation would be some variant of the claim that because women tend to do most of the childrearing, they are more concerned with having a committed, long-term partner.

Although the evidence is far from conclusive, the results of some quantitative studies are consistent with the sex ratio theory. Fewer women leads to more marriage, and fewer men leads to less. Some qualitative evidence, focusing mostly on women, suggests that people are aware of the sex ratio in their local dating environment and that it does influence their behavior with potential intimate partners. Applied to the case of African Americans, the abundance of women may leave Black men feeling less of a need to get married in order to have female companionship, and may leave women less able to insist on marriage as a condition of a relationship.

2. The Sexual Matching Approach

Researchers from the University of Chicago have hypothesized that marriage outcomes are mediated by what they term sexual matching strategies, which, in turn, are influenced by socioeconomic status. In

67. Supra note 65, at 26–27.
68. Id. at 28. We should be clear that, in this essay, we do not intend to endorse either of these explanations in particular.
71. Adaora A. Adimora M.D., et al., Social Context of Sexual Relationships Among Rural African Americans, 28 J. AM. SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASE ASSOC. 69 (2001); Adaora A. Adimora, et al., Concurrent Sexual Partnerships Among Women in the United States, 13 EPIDEMIOLOGY 320 (2002). According to some qualitative evidence, women often feel as though they cannot ask for much out of the relationship, or must accept whatever terms the man offers, because there are so few men and so many women. Id.
73. Yoosik Youm & Anthony Paik, The Sex Market and Its Implications for Family Formation, in THE SEXUAL ORGANIZATION OF THE CITY 165 (Edward O. Laumann, et al. eds., 2004). A sexual matching strategy refers to the type of relationship that one seeks or would accept; a monogamous relationship, for example, or a non-exclusive relationship.
their study of sexual matching strategies in Chicago, the researchers found
that Black men with greater resources were more likely to be involved in
concurrent sexual relationships, which the researchers view as less likely
than monogamous relationships to culminate in marriage.74 The research-
ers reasoned that even women who might seek marriage would prefer a
non-exclusive relationship with a high resource man to a monogamous or
marital relationship with a low resource man. In this view, whereas very
low status men might lack sufficient economic resources to attract a part-
ner, the most affluent Black men, because they are in especially short
supply, would be able to attract women without a promise of marriage or
even the commitment of monogamy.75

PART III: INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE AND THE BARGAINING IMBALANCE

The models discussed above presuppose, contrary to fact, a racially
segregated romantic arena in which Black men and women constitute
each other's entire pool of romantic partners. This part considers the im-
plications of the fact that Black men are much more likely than Black
women to marry someone of another race. Such a sex disparity in inter-
racial marriage rates may exacerbate the bargaining disadvantage of Black
women and thereby further depress marriage rates among African Ameri-
cans.

Numerous scholars have examined patterns of interracial marriage.76
While rates of marriage have declined during the past few decades, rates
of interracial marriage have risen substantially, though unevenly across
groups, during that same period. In 1970, interracial couples made up less

---

74. Id. at 179.
75. Id. In this study Youm and Paik analyzed the correlation between non-exclusive
relationships and education.
76. See, e.g., R. Kennedy, Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and
Adoption (2003); R. Moran, Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race & Ro-
mance (2001); D. Blackwell & D. Lichter, Mate Selection Among Married and Cohabiting
Couples, 21 J. of Fam. Issues 275 (2000); Tim B. Heaton & Cardell K. Jacobson, Intergroup
Marriage: An Examination of Opportunity Structures, 70 Soc. Inquiry 30 (2000); Matthijs
Kalmijn, Intermarriage and Homogamy: Causes, Patterns, Trends, 24 Ann. R. of Soc. 395
(1998); Matthijs Kalmijn, Trends in Black/White Intermarriage, 72 Soc. Forces 119 (1993);
Zhenchao Qian, Breaking the Racial Barriers: Variations in Interracial Marriage Between 1980
and 1990, 34 Demography 263 (1997); Zhenchao Qian, Who Intermarries? Education, Na-
tivity, Region, and Interracial Marriage, 1980 and 1990, 30 J. of Comp. Fam. Stud. 579 (1999);
M. Rosenfeld, A Critique of Exchange Theory and Mate Selection, 110 Am. J. of Soc. 1284
(2005).
than 1% of all married couples, a figure that increased to 5.4% by the turn of the century.

A consistent finding is that of all groups of minority men and women, Black women are the least likely to marry interracially. Four percent of married Black women are married to men of another race, compared to 24% of Asian women and 14% of Latinas. In fact, more Black women remain unmarried than marry someone of another race.

**Chart C**

**Percentage of Wives in Interracial Marriages All Ages**

![Chart showing percentage of wives in interracial marriages by race/color]

Source: 2000 Census

While Black women marry interracially at substantially lower rates than other minority women, it is the gender gap in African Americans' rates of interracial marriage that is most remarkable. Typically, among racial or ethnic minorities, women out marry at equal or higher rates than...


78. Id.

79. IPUMS 5% Sample, supra note 30.

80. Sharon M. Lee & Barry Edmonston, *supra* note 77, at 3. White women marry interracially at a nominally lower rate than Black women, but the intermarriage rates of Whites cannot be straightforwardly compared to the intermarriage rates of minority groups due to drastic differences in relative size.
African American men, however, outmarry at a higher rate than Black women. More precisely, Black men outmarry 2.4 times more frequently than Black women. Among African Americans with at least a college degree, 13% of men and 6% of women are married to someone of another race.

While a number of commentators have considered potential explanations for the sex disparity in African Americans' rates of interracial marriage, our purpose in this brief essay instead is to sketch a potential connection between the sex disparity in interracial marriage and the racial gap in the likelihood of ever marrying. If marriage rates depend in part on the leverage that men and women bring to the negotiation of an intimate relationship, and if that leverage, in turn, depends on the relative numbers of men and women in the dating market, then sex specific rates of interracial marriage could influence rates of intra-racial marriage. To cast the situation starkly, if Black men intermarry, but Black women do not, then the imbalance in the numbers of Black men and women in the dating pool would become greater, which may further depress marriage rates among African Americans. The paradoxical logic, then, is that if more Black women married non-Black men, more Black men and women might marry each other. Greater interracial marriage by Black women would increase the ratio of single Black men to single Black women. And if the numbers of Black men and women in the African American dating pool were more nearly balanced, Black men (at least those who prefer to date Black women and would have otherwise remained unmarried) would be more likely to marry.

Admittedly, the plausibility of this scenario relies on a multitude of assumptions that yield a host of questions: What are the causes of Black women's current low rate of intermarriage and how could it be increased? Would a smaller pool of Black women cause African American

81. IPUMS 5% Sample, supra note 30. Twenty-four percent of Asian women and 14% of Latinas marry interracially, whereas 13% of Asian men and 13% of Latinos do so. White men outmarry at a slightly higher rate than White women—2.6% of White women outmarry and 2.9% of White men do so.

82. Kalmijn, Intermarriage and Homogamy, supra note 76, at 412; Kalmijn, Trends in Black/White Intermarriage, supra note 76, at 126; IPUMS 5% Sample, supra note 30.

83. IPUMS 5% Sample, supra note 30. Because the census permits individuals to select their own race, and to choose more than one racial group, one might define interracial marriage in any number of ways. We defined interracial marriages as those including one spouse self-described as Black only and one spouse not self-described as Black at all. Alternative definitions of interracial marriage would yield higher rates of interracial marriage.

84. IPUMS 5% Sample, supra note 30.

men to marry intraracially or simply to date interracially? These are important issues, to be examined in subsequent analyses.

CONCLUSION

In American society, marriage remains, for better or for worse, a uniquely important social institution. Because our society, to a greater extent than many, relies on the private investment of parents to meet the needs of children and the institution of marriage to meet many of the needs of adults, the racial gap in marriage may well contribute to racial disparities in other areas as well.

This essay has offered a preliminary overview of the racial gap in marriage. In presenting original analyses of data from the 2000 census, we have highlighted the marriage gap among the middle class and rebutted any assumption that racial differences in marriage are confined to the so-called underclass. Seizing on a previously overlooked link between earnings and marriage for Black men, we have supplemented conventional analyses by considering how men's high socioeconomic status and the imbalance in the numbers of Black men and women might influence intimate negotiations in a way that depresses marriage rates. Finally, we have identified a potential connection between the sex disparity in rates of interracial marriage among African Americans on one hand and the racial gap in marriage on the other.

Rather than provide definitive answers, we hope to have highlighted questions and approaches that may provide bases for future investigation of an important social development.