

Michigan Journal of Race and Law

Volume 11

2005

African American Intimacy: The Racial Gap in Marriage

R. Richard Banks
Stanford Law School

Su Jin Gatlin
Stanford University School of Education

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjrl>



Part of the [Family Law Commons](#), and the [Law and Race Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

R. R. Banks & Su J. Gatlin, *African American Intimacy: The Racial Gap in Marriage*, 11 MICH. J. RACE & L. 115 (2005).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjrl/vol11/iss1/7>

This Symposium Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Journal of Race and Law by an authorized editor of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact mlaw.repository@umich.edu.

AFRICAN AMERICAN INTIMACY: THE RACIAL GAP IN MARRIAGE

R. Richard Banks*
Su Jin Gatlin**

INTRODUCTION.....	115
PART I: THE COMPONENTS OF THE MARRIAGE GAP.....	118
A. <i>First Marriage</i>	119
B. <i>Divorce</i>	120
C. <i>Remarriage</i>	123
PART II: MARRIAGE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN.....	123
A. <i>The Marriage Gap among Men</i>	124
B. <i>The Marriageable Male Explanation</i>	125
C. <i>Two Sexual Bargaining Models</i>	126
1. The Sex Ratio Theory.....	127
2. The Sexual Matching Approach.....	128
PART III: INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE AND THE BARGAINING IMBALANCE.....	129
CONCLUSION.....	132

INTRODUCTION

During the past half century,¹ marriage has become a less universal and less stable family form.² Marriage rates have declined, divorce rates have risen and, consequently, single parent families have become more common.³

* Professor of Law and Justin M. Roach Jr. Faculty Scholar, Stanford Law School; J.D. Harvard Law School, 1994; A.B./A.M. Stanford University, 1987. For helpful comments on a prior version of this essay, the authors thank Jennifer Eberhardt, Dorothy Brown, and Kim Forde-Mazrui. Special thanks go to the *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, especially Amrita Mallik, for extraordinary patience during the extensive revision of this essay.

** Ph.D. candidate in Administration and Policy Analysis, Stanford University School of Education; M.A. student in Economics, Stanford University. B.A. in Statistics, UC Berkeley, 2002.

1. The 1950s is often regarded as the golden age of marriage, when people married earlier and had more children than in other historical periods. See generally ANDREW CHERLIN, *MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE* (1992).

2. Larry L. Bumpass, *What's Happening to the Family? Interactions Between Demographic and Institutional Change*, 27 *DEMOGRAPHY* 483 (1990); Andrew Cherlin, *The Deinstitutionalization of American Marriage*, 66 *J. MARRIAGE & FAM.*, 848 (2004); Stephanie Coontz, *The World Historical Transformation of Marriage*, 66 *J. MARRIAGE & FAM.* 974 (2004).

3. R. Kelly Raley & Larry Bumpass, *The Topography of the Divorce Plateau: Levels and Trends in Union Stability in the United States After 1980*, 8 *DEMOGRAPHIC RES.* 245 (2003) (discussing changes in divorce rates), available at <http://www.demographic-research.org>.

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.⁴ More than two dozen states have experimented with marriage promotion programs.⁵

Advocates of such programs rely on empirical evidence that children benefit from being raised by both their biological parents,⁶ a possibility whose likelihood is increased by the parents having married.⁷ Moreover, adults may benefit economically,⁸ psychologically,⁹ and physically¹⁰ from the long-term, interdependent relationship that marriage facilitates.¹¹

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.

Today, 28% of American children live in single parent families. Current Population Survey, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, table C3: Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 Years and Marital Status of Parents, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin and Selected Characteristics of the Child for All Children, at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2004.html>.

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.

5. Steven L. Nock, *Marriage as a Public Issue*, 15 FUTURE OF CHILD 13, 24–25 (2005), available at <http://www.futureofchildren.org>.

6. See, e.g., Linda J. Waite, *Does Marriage Matter?*, 32 DEMOGRAPHY 483 (1995); SARA McLANAHAN & GARY SANDEFUR, *GROWING UP WITH A SINGLE PARENT: WHAT HURTS, WHAT HELPS* (1994); Suet-Ling Pong et al. *Family Policies and Children's School Achievement in Single- Versus Two-Parent Families*, 65 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 681 (2003).

7. See generally, e.g., LINDA J. WAITE & MAGGIE GALLAGHER, *THE CASE FOR MARRIAGE* (2000).

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).

9. LINDA J. WAITE, *Trends in Men's and Women's Well-Being in Marriage*, in *THE TIES THAT BIND: PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION* 368 (2000).

10. See, e.g., Janice K. Kiecolt-Glaser & Tamara L. Newton, *Marriage and Health: His and Hers*, 127 PSYCHOL. BULL. 472 (2001).

11. See generally, Waite & Gallagher, *supra* note 7.

African Americans have a special stake in these debates,¹² 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.¹³ Black women are estimated to spend less than half as much time married as do White women.¹⁴ As one prominent researcher has remarked, "Marriage is typically a relatively short stage of life for Blacks."¹⁵ Although scholars and politicians have focused on the lack of marriage among the so-called Black underclass,¹⁶ the racial gap in marriage, as we will show, is substantial among the Black middle class as well.

Partly due to the marriage gap,¹⁷ Black children are nearly three times as likely as White children to live with a single parent mother.¹⁸ While the growth of single parent families since the 1960s has been concentrated among those Blacks and Whites who are most disadvantaged,¹⁹ 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).

14. See McLanahan et al, *supra* note 4, at 71.

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

16. See WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED: THE INNER CITY, THE UNDERCLASS AND PUBLIC POLICY* 145–46 (1987); WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, *WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS* 88–95 (1996); Kathryn Edin et al, *A Peek Inside the Black Box: What Marriage Means for Poor Unmarried Parents*, 66 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 1007, 1007–14 (2004).

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).

18. Current Population Survey, *supra* note 3. Fifty percent of Black children live with only their mother, compared to eighteen percent of White children.

19. David T. Ellwood & Christopher Jencks, *The Uneven Spread of Single Parent Families: What do we know? Where do we look for answers?*, in SOCIAL INEQUALITY 3 (Kathryn M. Neckerman ed., 2004).

that are important indicators of the relative well-being of different racial groups.²⁰ 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 explanation 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.²¹ 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.²² Second, whereas most analyses center on the marital status of women (as the parents 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 marriage 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 likelihood of ever marrying, the likelihood of divorce, and the likelihood of remarriage after divorce. Compared to White women,²³ African American

20. Waite & Gallagher, *supra* note 7, at 13–35, 47–96, 110–40.

21. See M. Belinda Tucker & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, *Trends in 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 & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan eds., 1995).

22. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, table 1 for Blacks at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2004.html> (March 2005) (approximately 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.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.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.²⁶ By the mid-1980s, it was estimated that approximately 90% of adult women would ever marry.²⁷

Among Black women, the decline in the likelihood of ever marrying has been particularly dramatic.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%.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.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.

24. Cherlin, *Marriage and Marital Dissolution Among Black Americans*, *supra* note 13, at 147.

25. See Sara McLanahan & Lynne Casper, *Growing Diversity and Inequality in the American Family*, in STATE OF THE UNION: AMERICA IN THE 1990s. VOL. 2: SOCIAL TRENDS 1, 13 (Reynolds Farley ed. 1995); Waite, *supra* note 6.

26. Schoen, *supra* note 21, at 103.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*; Cherlin, *Marriage and Marital Dissolution Among Black Americans*, *supra* note 13, at 1–2. See also Neil G. Bennett et al, *The Divergence of Black and White Marriage Patterns*, 95 AM. J. SOC. 692, 696–98 (1989); Willard L. Rodgers & Arland Thornton, *Changing Patterns of First Marriage in the United States*, 22 DEMOGRAPHY 265, 274 (1985); Michael Haines, *Ethnic Differences in Demographic Behavior in the United States: Has There Been Convergence?* 16, 56 (NBER Working Paper No. 9042 2002) (noting recent increase in percentage of never-married Black women) available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w9042>.

29. Rodgers & Thornton, *supra* note 28, at 272, 274; Bennett et al. *supra* note 28, at 696–98.

30. Steven Ruggles, et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 3.0* (2004), available at <http://www.ipums.umn.edu/usa/cite.html> [hereinafter “IPUMS 5% Sample”]; note that in this paper, with regards to the IPUMS 5% Sample analyses, Black and White are those respondents who self-identified as Black only and White only; Current Population Survey, *America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2004*, available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2004.html>.

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.³¹ Among women ages 40–44 with at least a college degree, 24% of Black women and 12% of White women have never married.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,³³ divorce rates increased dramatically beginning in the early 1960s, especially for Blacks.³⁴ While socioeconomically disadvantaged couples are substantially more likely to divorce than are more affluent and better educated couples,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.

31. 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.

32. *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.

33. Robert Joseph Taylor, et al., *Recent Demographic Trends in African American Family Structure*, in *FAMILY LIFE IN BLACK AMERICA* 14, 49 (Robert Joseph Taylor 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, *MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND REMARRIAGE*, *supra* note 1, at 49.

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, *supra* note 21, at 10. By 1990, the overall divorce rate had increased dramatically to 166; 358 for Blacks and 153 for Whites. *Id.*

35. Shirley Hatchett et al., *Marital Instability Among Black and White Couples in Early Marriage*, in *THE DECLINE IN MARRIAGE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS*, 178 (M. Belinda Tucker & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, eds. 1995).

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.³⁶ A better measure, in our view, is the ratio of divorced or separated to married people within a particular age group.

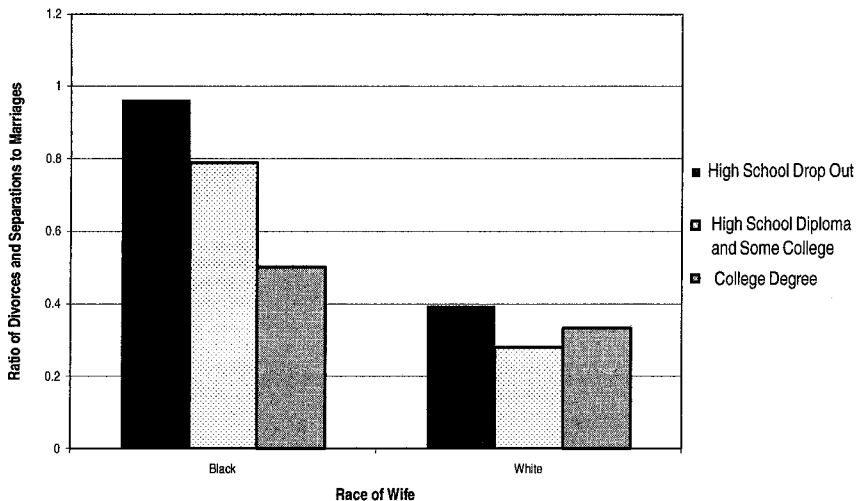
Application of this (somewhat unconventional) measure dramatizes the magnitude of the current racial gap in divorce. At each socioeconomic level, African American women are substantially more likely than White women to be divorced or separated than married. Analyses of data from the 2000 Census show 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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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 understate 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.*

CHART A
RATIO OF DIVORCES AND SEPARATIONS TO MARRIAGES
AGES 40–44



Source: 2000 Census

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.³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰ More recent analyses have reported similar findings.⁴¹

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.

39. JAMES A. SWEET & LARRY L. BUMPASS, *AMERICAN FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS* 189 (1987).

40. Teresa Castro Martin and Larry L. Bumpass, *Recent Trends in Marital Disruption*, 26 *DEMOGRAPHY* 37, 44 (1989); see also Megan M. Sweeney & Julie A. Phillips, *Understanding Racial Differences in Marital Disruption: Recent Trends and Explanations*, 66 *J. OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY* 639, 644 (2004).

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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ While the likelihood of remarriage is associated with socioeconomic status,⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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.

A. *The Marriage Gap among Men*

As marriage rates declined for African American women during the past few decades, Black men, unsurprisingly, also became less likely ever to marry.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.⁵⁰ Second, by 1990, Black men at each income level had become substantially less likely than their White counterparts to have ever been married.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.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.⁵³ To the best of our knowledge, this phenomenon has not been previously identified.

49. WILSON, *WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS*, *supra* note 16, at 90, 91, 95.

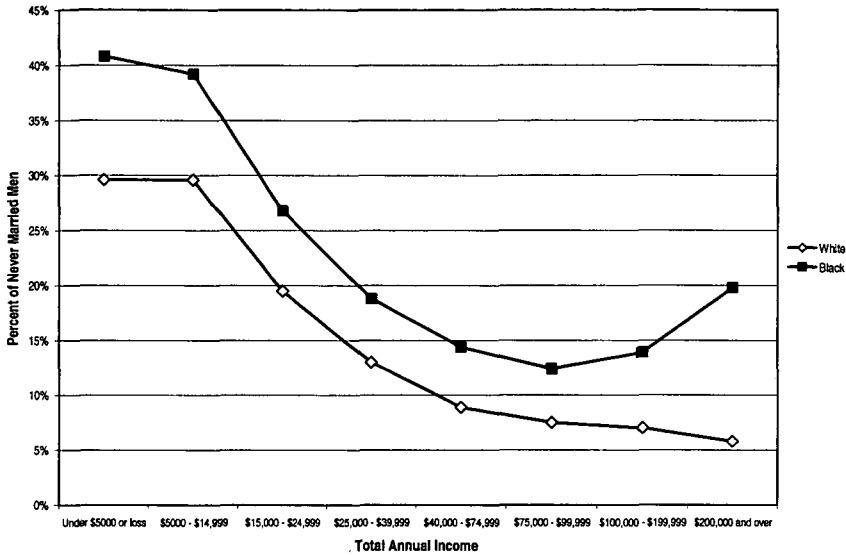
50. THE URBAN UNDERCLASS 193–94 (Christopher Jencks & Paul E. Peterson eds., 1991).

51. *Id.*

52. IPUMS 5% Sample, *supra* note 30. The percent of White men never married falls consistently from 30% for earning less than \$5000 to 27% for those making between \$5000 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.

53. *Id.* The percent of Black men never married men falls from 40% for those earning between \$5000 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.

CHART B
PERCENT OF NEVER MARRIED MEN BY INCOME
AGES 40-44



Source: 2000 Census

B. The Marriageable Male Explanation

While many potential accounts of the decline in marriage among African Americans have been proposed,⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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).

55. See, e.g., Sandra Lane, et al, *Marriage Promotion and Missing Men: African American Women in a Demographic Double Bind*, 18 *MED. ANTHROPOLOGY Q.* 405, 405-06 (2004); William A. Darity, Jr. & Samuel L. Myers, Jr., *Family Structure and the Marginalization of Black Men: Policy Implications*, in *THE DECLINE IN MARRIAGE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS* 263, 263 (M. Belinda Tucker & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan eds., 1995); Scott J. South & Kim M. Lloyd, *Marriage Opportunities and Family Formation: Further Implications of Imbalanced Sex Ratios*, 54 *J. OF MARRIAGE & FAM.* 440, 449-50 (1992); Daniel T. Lichter, Felicia B. LeClere & Diane K. McLaughlin, *Local Marriage Markets and the Marital Behavior of Black and White*

most widely known and cited of such theories—the marriageable male hypothesis—was developed by the sociologist William Julius Wilson.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.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.⁵⁸ Men became hesitant to assume a role whose cultural expectations they could not fulfill.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.⁶⁰ Among African Americans ages 30–34 who have a graduate or professional degree, there are 156 women for every 100 men.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

Women, 96 THE AM. J. OF SOC. 843, 843 (1991); Daniel T. Lichter et al. *Race and the Retreat From Marriage: A Shortage of Marriageable Men?*, 57 AM. SOC. REV. 781, 781 (1992); K. Jill Kiecolt & Mark A. Fossett, *The Effects of Mate Availability on Marriage Among Black Americans*, in FAMILY LIFE IN BLACK AMERICA 75–76 (Robert J. Taylor et al. 1997).

56. Wilson, THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED, *supra* note 16, at 83–92, 95–106, 145–6, 148, 205; WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS, *supra* note 16, at 95–97.

57. WILSON, THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED, *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., *supra* note 16, at 1013.

60. IPUMS 5% Sample, *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. *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 Secord⁶² and the sexual matching model of Edward Laumann and colleagues at the University of Chicago.⁶³ 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,⁶⁴ and subsequently investigated by others,⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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

62. MARCIA GUTTENTAG & PAUL F. SECORD, *TOO MANY WOMEN? THE SEX RATIO QUESTION* (1983).

63. See, e.g., *THE SEXUAL ORGANIZATION OF THE CITY* (Edward O. Laumann, et al. eds., 2004).

64. GUTTENTAG & SECORD, *supra* note 62.

65. See generally, JAMES Q. WILSON, *THE MARRIAGE PROBLEM* (2002); South & Lloyd, *supra* note 55; Scott J. South & Katherine Trent, *Sex Ratios and Women's Roles: A Cross-National Analysis*, 93 AM. J. SOC. 1096 (1988); Josh Angrist, *Consequences of Imbalanced Sex Ratios: Evidence From America's Second Generation* (NBER Working Paper No. 8042, 2000), available at <http://www.neber.org/papers/w8042>.

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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

Although the evidence is far from conclusive, the results of some quantitative studies are consistent with the sex ratio theory.⁶⁹ 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 environment⁷⁰ and that it does influence their behavior with potential intimate partners.⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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.⁷³ 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.

69. See e.g., *Id.* at 49; WILSON, *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED*, *supra* note 16, at 83–92, 95–106; Robert Sampson, *Unemployment and Imbalanced Sex Ratios: Race-Specific Consequences for Family Structure and Crime*, in *THE DECLINE IN MARRIAGE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS* 229, 249–52 (M. Belinda Tucker & Claudia Mitchell-Kernan eds., 1995); Carol Mulford Albrecht & Don E. Albrecht, *Sex Ratio and Family Structure in the Nonmetropolitan United States*, 71 *SOC. INQUIRY* 67, 82 (2001); Angrist, *supra* note 65, at 29. *But see* Katherine Trent & Scott J. South, *Spousal Alternatives and Marital Relations*, 24 *J. FAM. ISSUES* 787, 805–08 (2003) (finding no evidence that Black-White differences in marital satisfaction are related to sex ratios).

70. M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, *Psychological Well-Being and Perceived Marital Opportunity Among Single African American, Latina and White Women*, 29 *J. COMP. FAM. STUD.* 57 (1998) (finding that both Black men and women are aware of the shortage of African American men).

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.*

72. Scott J. South, *Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Desire to Marry*, 55 *J. MARRIAGE & FAM.* 357 (1993).

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 researchers 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 partner, 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 implications of the fact that Black men are much more likely than Black women to marry someone of another race. Such a sex disparity in interracial marriage rates may exacerbate the bargaining disadvantage of Black women and thereby further depress marriage rates among African Americans.

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.

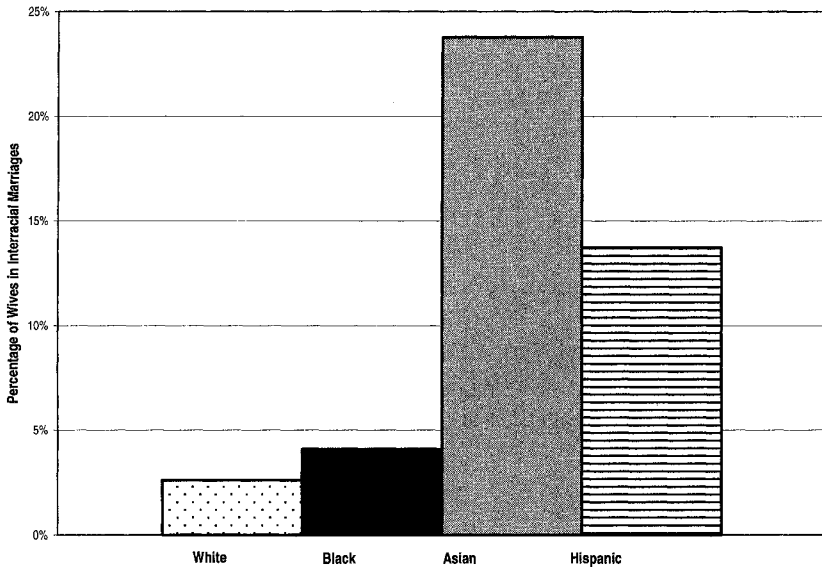
75. *Id.* In this study, Youm and Paik analyzed the correlation between non-exclusive relationships and education.

76. See, e.g., R. KENNEDY, *INTERRACIAL INTIMACIES: SEX, MARRIAGE, IDENTITY, AND ADOPTION* (2003); R. MORAN, *INTERRACIAL INTIMACY: THE REGULATION OF RACE & ROMANCE* (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, Nativity, 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,⁷⁷ a figure that increased to 5.4% by the turn of the century.⁷⁸

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.⁷⁹ In fact, more Black women remain unmarried than marry someone of another race.

CHART C
PERCENTAGE OF WIVES IN INTERRACIAL MARRIAGES
ALL AGES



Source: 2000 Census

While Black women marry interracially at substantially lower rates than other minority women,⁸⁰ 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

77. Sharon M. Lee & Barry Edmonston, *New Marriages, New Families: U.S. Racial and Hispanic Intermarriage* 11, 12 POPULATION BULL. 60, no. 2 (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2005).

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.

men.⁸¹ African American men, however, out marry at a higher rate than Black women.⁸² More precisely, Black men out marry 2.4 times more frequently than Black women.⁸³ Among African Americans with at least a college degree, 13% of men and 6% of women are married to someone of another race.⁸⁴

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.⁸⁵ 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 out marry 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.

85. Kyle D. Crowder & Stewart E. Tolnay, *A New Marriage Squeeze for Black Women: The Role of Racial Intermarriage by Black Men*, 62 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 792, 792 (2000) (finding an inverse relationship between Black men's rates of intermarriage and Black women's rates of marriage).

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.