Family Formation, Marriage Rates, and Cohabitation

Mass media images of Black masculinity and Black femininity can have an especially pernicious effect on how Black men and women perceive one another. African American men who see Black women as being physically unattractive, domineering, and promiscuous and African American women who see Black men as being criminally inclined, promiscuous, and dangerous evaluate the worth of potential sex partners and love interests through distorted lenses.

—Patricia Hill-Collins (2004), p. 255

Objectives

- Use empirical data to examine the patterns of marriage and cohabitation among African Americans.
- Analyze differences in patterns of marriage and cohabitation between African Americans and whites using a theoretical framework, specifically the race, class, and gender paradigm.
- Understand how ideologies and norms affect relationships in African American marriages.
- Examine the outcomes, both positive and negative, of low rates of marriage on African American families.
- Develop solutions to the negative outcomes associated with low rates of marriage.
Introduction

Marriage rates in the African American community are one of the most contentious issues both inside and outside the African American community. White Americans often discuss the issue from a morality perspective, arguing that it is somehow not “normal” for adults not to marry and remain in monogamous relationships throughout adulthood. As sociologists, we find this such an interesting phenomenon as well as an interesting argument because, of course, although marriage rates are higher among white Americans, the likelihood of staying married is quite another issue. Many of the very people who are accusing African Americans of living immoral lives because they don’t marry are in fact divorced themselves! In contrast, the marriage issue that dominates the discourse of African American women is that of interracial marriage: specifically, the issue of white women marrying African American men.

Scholars such as Patricia Hill-Collins and Orlando Patterson articulate the complexities of African American marriage under the oppressive structures of both racism and patriarchy, structures that leave African American men and women adrift as they attempt to create family life without the advantage of visible and accessible images to guide them (Hill-Collins, 2004).

In this chapter, we will examine data and patterns on marriage rates in the African American community. We will explore the variety of reasons for the fact that African Americans, and especially African American women, marry at a rate significantly lower than that of their white counterparts. We will offer some suggested solutions for creating stronger, more stable, and less poor families in the African American community.

Factors That Affect Family Form

We must begin this discussion by asking the question “Why does it matter whether or not people marry?” First of all, we note that although most, but certainly not all, Americans assume that marriage to one partner for a lifetime is a “natural” phenomenon, data from other cultures suggest that it is only one of many patterns of adult intimate relationships that exist within the human population. There are many reasons why patterns of adult relationships vary across both space (culture/society) and time (historically). Here, we briefly examine the most important factors that contribute to the ways in which adult relationships are constructed: the economy and religion.
The Economy

The economy of a society plays a very important role in structuring family relationships. Agricultural economies are heavily dependent on both labor power and land. Therefore, fertility rates tend to be high and marriage patterns tend to follow certain prescribed rules. For example, in many agricultural societies, polygamy, or being married to more than one person at a time, is common. Even today, although polygamy is shunned by the Western world, in cultures as varied as China and Kenya, polygamy is still desired and practiced (Murdock, 1954/1983). Specifically, the polygamous pattern that is used is polygyny, or the form that allows a man to have more than one wife. This form is useful in agricultural economies because it allows men to father more children, who will provide the intensive labor that characterizes an agricultural economy. Another typical pattern of marriage in agricultural societies is the preference for marriage between families that allows for greater accumulation of land. So, for example, in many cultures, cross-cousin marriage is the preferred pattern. Cross-cousin marriage involves the sons in one family marrying their mother’s brothers’ (their maternal uncles) daughters (their cross-cousins). This pattern allows for the concentration of land and wealth within families.

These marriage and fertility patterns are strikingly different from those that we see in industrial and postindustrial societies across Western Europe, in Japan, and in the United States. In industrial and postindustrial economies, which are characterized by adults going to work away from home; in factories; in the service economy (health care, retail, food service); and so forth, there is no benefit to having large families. In fact, because the education and training to work in these economies is significantly greater than in agricultural economies, a family is more likely to be successful over time if they have few children and invest heavily in the development of each child’s human capital (education, training, credentials). Thus, fertility rates decline significantly as societies industrialize. This is referred to as the “demographic transition” (Fehr, Jokisch, & Kotlikoff, 2003).

Because of the changing needs of the family—having fewer children and investing heavily in each—the most successful marriage patterns in postindustrial economies will be long-term monogamous marriages. In other words, one man and one woman marry for life and focus their investments on the one or two children they bear. Although this is the predominant marriage pattern, it does not preclude other patterns such as homosexual marriages, polygamy, and so on. There is very little reason why, for example, a same-sex couple would fare better or worse than a heterosexual couple, speaking in strictly economic terms.
Religion

Religious ideology also plays a significant role in shaping marriage patterns. In many cultures, for example, it is religion, and not the economic system, that is used as the rationale for the legal restrictions on marriage. For example, the Judeo-Christian doctrine that dominates both religious as well as political institutions across the European and the North and South American continents restricts marriage to monogamy. In the United States, marriage, in most states, is further restricted, legally, to a union between a man and a woman. The heated battle over homosexual marriage in the United States is generally framed in religious terms, citing the Bible as providing evidence for this restriction of marriage to heterosexuals.

Although most cultures are guided by either religious or economic principles, many are influenced by an intersection of the economy and the dominant religion. For example, many regions of the world that remain ensconced in an agricultural economy are coupled with hegemonic Christian religions (for example, much of Central and South America), and in these cultures, we see the power of hegemonic religion in dictating marriage patterns—monogamy is the only legal form of marriage despite the fact that the economic system would favor polygamy. Similarly, we have examples of postindustrial economies that are dominated by Islam. For example, some Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia, meet this definition. In these countries, religion is more powerful in shaping marriage patterns; polygyny is still preferred, despite the fact that it may not be the most efficient family form for this type of economy.

Therefore, although the economy plays a powerful role in shaping family patterns (marriage and childbearing), it is more powerful in shaping fertility patterns than in shaping marriage patterns. Marriage patterns are, by and large, shaped by hegemonic religious ideology.

Functions and Purposes of Marriage

Marriage has a variety of functions or purposes. We will review here the primary functions and purposes that hold true across all cultures and across time.

Economic Function

Marriage has many economic functions. One purpose it serves is to allow for the accumulation of land, wealth, and power within families. Throughout the period of monarch rule in Europe, for example, marriages
among the aristocracy were heavily constrained to maximize economic gain and political power. Much of the concentration of power in Western Europe was accomplished through marriages by the aristocracy that crossed national lines.

In fact, these same patterns persist today. There are several examples of the power of these social networks in the marriages of American politicians, such as that of Arnold Schwarzenegger (governor of California) and Maria Shriver (who is part of the Kennedy family), and the marriage of John Kerry (2004 presidential candidate) and Teresa Heinz (heir to the Heinz fortune and widow of powerful Senator John Heinz). In addition to the access to social networks and political capital that these unions provide, they also provide access to enormous amounts of money, or financial capital, that is necessary to successfully attain state and federal elected positions. At the individual level, marriage allows for two people to combine their assets and their networks. One outcome is clearly economic stability. Indeed, one of the most serious negative consequences of the low marriage rate among African Americans is poverty. Patterson also notes that one of the negative outcomes of low rates of interracial marriage is the exclusion of African Americans from the social networks of whites.

But there is a broader, and more powerful way in which intermarriage has influenced both the successful integration of Euro-American and other immigrants and the vitality of American civilization. When we marry, we engage in an exchange of social and cultural dowries potentially far more valuable than gold-rimmed china. The cultural capital exchanged in intermarriage is considerably greater than that within ethnic groups. . . . The main intent and effect of segregation has been to deny Afro-Americans access to the nation’s rich marital market, propinquity being one of the most important factors explaining choice of spouse. (Patterson, 1999, p. 155)

Sexual Access

One of the most important functions of marriage is to restrict with whom one can have sexual relations. There are many reasons for this, including paternity establishment, age of sanctioned sexual relations, and restrictions on marrying family members. In the United States, there is a minimum age requirement to marry. (This varies from state to state and has been as low as 12 in some southern and western states.) This restriction is clearly designed to prohibit sexual behavior among or with children. In contemporary times, this law has been used primarily to protect children from child molesters and is seldom used against the majority of teenagers who are sexually active. In most, but not all, states, one may not marry a relative who is
closer than a second cousin. However, in some other cultures, first cousins are the preferred marriage partner. So, the restrictions can be used in different ways, to either prohibit or encourage certain marriage partners depending on norms of marriage in the particular culture. In the United States, until very recently (1967), it was illegal in many states for whites to marry non-whites. The purpose of these restrictions—known as antimiscegenation laws—was to prohibit interracial marriages, interracial sexual relationships, and the “mixing” of the races, as well as to prevent access to the social, economic, and political power that marriage can bring (as noted in the quote above by Patterson).

**Establishing Paternity and Guaranteeing Childrearing**

In most cultures, regardless of how much childrearing is shared by the community, the primary responsibility for supporting, caring for, and rearing children falls to the child’s parents. Prior to the advances in DNA testing, paternity was nearly impossible to verify. This remains the case in virtually all parts of the world where DNA testing is expensive and not readily accessible. Therefore, one of the primary functions of marriage has always been to provide evidence of paternity. Because investing in raising a child is expensive, in terms of both financial support and time, marriage reassured men that the children born from their unions were, in fact, theirs, and worthy of such a significant investment. From the mother’s perspective, the marriage also ties the father to the family and guarantees her the support of the father in providing for and raising her children. We cannot overstate the importance of this function. Because maternity is always certain but paternity can be established only through marriage (or now through DNA when it is available), marriage is used to both establish paternity and tie the father into the family. Because DNA has become available as a mechanism for establishing paternity only in the past 15 years or so, and because it is widely available only in industrialized societies, historically, marriage has established the legal relationship between fathers and their children. This legal relationship established guarantees that children would be provided for economically and that property would be passed down to them through inheritance. However, relying on marriage to establish paternity, although useful, is not always accurate. Women can and do have sexual relationships with men to whom they are not married, and they can and do become pregnant by these men. We note that often these cases go unnoticed unless there are particularly obvious markers such as having a sexual liaison with a man who is of a different race from one’s husband! Many social scientists (anthropologists, sociologists) note that this gender difference in parental
establishment is one of the primary reasons why nearly all polygamous cultures allow men to have more than one wife but prohibit women from having more than one husband.

Finally, we conclude with an important distinction: Marriage is not just a ceremony but a legal contract that binds two people’s lives together. In most states, a marriage contract means that each member of the couple has a legal right to the assets of the other: both those brought into the marriage as well as those acquired, together and separately, after the marriage. Furthermore, this means that upon the death of one member, the assets held both in common as well as separately by the deceased, pass automatically and in most cases without being taxed to the surviving spouse. This legal contract can be dissolved only by another legal action: divorce. The implications of this legal contract are the most powerful of any contract most Americans ever enter.

Marriage Patterns

Now that we have examined some of the functions and purposes of marriage, we turn to an examination of marriage patterns in the African American community.

Looking carefully at the data in Table 3.1, we see that African Americans are far less likely to ever marry than are their white counterparts. African American women are twice as likely to have never married (41.9%) than are their white counterparts (20.7%). The gap is similar for men, although white men are less likely to marry than their female counterparts, so the race gap is not quite as great for men as for women.

Afro-Americans are the most unpartnered and isolated group of people in America and quite possibly in the world. Unlike any other group of Americans, most of them will go through most of their adult lives without any deep and sustained attachment to a non-kin companion. Sixty percent of Afro-American children are now being brought up without the emotional or material support of a father. This is so because the great majority of Afro-American mothers have been seduced, deceived, betrayed, and abandoned by the men to whom they gave their love and trust. (Patterson, 1999, p. 4, emphasis added)

However, as any family sociologist knows, getting married does not necessarily mean staying married. Estimates are that nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, and this divorce rate has remained stable for nearly 20 years (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). A closer examination of the data in Table 3.1 reveals that although whites are more likely to marry, they are also more likely to divorce. Thus, we agree with Patterson
and others that African Americans are less likely to live in and raise children in married couple households, but when we consider the overall situation, the gap between whites and African Americans is not as great as the “ever married” data would suggest, and much of the narrowing of this gap is driven by the higher divorce rate among white Americans.

One of the most important findings in these data is that there are differences in both race and gender. Although African Americans are less likely to marry than whites, and women are more likely to marry than men, there is virtually no gender difference for African Americans, whereas there is a significant gender difference for whites. This is another example of the importance of analyzing data through the lens of the race, class, and gender paradigm that allows the researcher to disentangle race and gender effects on marriage. We turn now to a detailed discussion of the marriage gap and its causes. A table with all of the data on marriage, broken down by age, is available in Appendix B.

### The Marriage Gap

There have been a variety of explanations for the marriage gap between whites and African Americans, including “low morality” among African Americans, gender role ideology, welfare rules, the limited marriage pool for African American women, and even the race gap in the interracial marriage rate. In this section, we will explore the various explanations for marriage rate patterns.
“Low Morality” and Critiques

Many scholars, both African American and white, have often argued that the lower marriage rate among African Americans was driven by their lack of morality (Fogel & Engerman, 1974; Frazier, 1939). This belief is based on the notion that African Americans were never socialized into understanding the importance of marriage. An important underlying assumption is that the family structure in Africa was “uncivilized,” polygamous, and thus morally questionable.

However, other scholars argue that although there is a link between slavery and trends in contemporary African American family form, it is not the link that is purported by proponents of the “low morality” argument. Gutman’s work suggests that it is most likely that the descendants of Africans, slaves and freed slaves, had a high regard for and valued family life. Rather than seeing the failed attempts in creating families during slavery and reconstruction, Gutman offers the argument that it is more instructive to focus on the successes, the degree to which African Americans were able to create and maintain family life in the face of institutional and legal forces that prohibited family life, rather than focus on the inability of some enslaved Africans and African Americans to successfully form families and keep them together—a right to which they were not entitled anyway (Gutman, 1976).

Other scholars believe that trends in African American family form are the result of the development of gender roles, coping strategies, and resiliency in the face of employment and housing discrimination and strict welfare rules, and that these phenomena provide the links between slavery and contemporary marriage patterns.

Ideology and Norms

One of the strongest gender norms in contemporary American family life is that of the male breadwinner (Hattery, 2001b; Kimmel, 1995, 2005). Under patriarchy, men were crowned “king of the castle” and “head of the household,” and implicit in this distinction are the responsibilities to rule the household and all of its members (Engels & Leacock, 1884/1972). Engels argued that male power descends directly from patriarchy and is in large part codified by the economic power men derive from employment. Men worked in the public sphere, where they earned higher wages and had access to other forms of power (Padavic & Reskin, 2002; Reskin & Padavic, 1994), and they brought that sense of power back into their families (Engels & Leacock, 1884/1972; Hattery, 2001b). Women, because they did not start working in the public sphere in vast numbers until 1970 or so, have only
recently had access to the economic power to which men have had access for 150 years (since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution), and this results in a gendered power differential within families and marriages.

Although seldom critiqued, this pattern is race specific. In the period of reconstruction up through today, African American men have faced significantly more employment and wage discrimination than their white counterparts. As a result, women in African American families are and have always been more likely to be employed, and in many cases, they have outearned their male partners (husbands) (see Coontz, 1992, 1997; Hattery, 2001b; Hill-Collins, 2004).

One of the results of this link between employment and marriage patterns is that when wives are the primary wage earners or they outearn their husbands, the marriages are more likely than not to dissolve (Franklin, 1997). Data on educational attainment and wages in the African American community demonstrate that this pattern of women being more highly educated and outearning male partners is highly probable in poor, working-class, middle-class, and even professional couples (see Tables 7.1 and 7.3 and Appendix H).

This is where ideology becomes a bigger problem than the earnings themselves. Hill-Collins (2004) notes, “This explanation is only plausible in a situation in which women and men accept prevailing gender ideology that grants men natural financial superiority” (p. 254). In other words, there is no intrinsic reason why men must be financially superior to women, but because the hegemonic gender role ideology dictates this set of gender relations when women are the breadwinners or outearn their male partners, they are less likely to (a) get married and (b) stay married. Therefore, gender role ideology and its consequent requirements shape marriage patterns.

Hegemonic and Alternative Ideologies

A brief discussion of hegemonic and alternative gender role ideologies is useful here. As Hill-Collins notes, it is the belief that men are supposed to be the breadwinners and the heads of their households that causes the problem in men’s and women’s attempts to negotiate relationships. This raises the question of the importance of dominant and hegemonic ideologies. In spite of the fact that African American women have always been involved in the paid labor market (see Hill-Collins 1994; Rollins, 1985; Romero, 1992; Segura, 1994) and thus have always lived in relationships that are non-normative.4 Hill-Collins argues that out of these lived experiences, women of color and mothers of color in particular developed alternative ideologies that matched their lived realities (Hill-Collins, 1994, 2004). Yet African
American men and women continue to report that they are influenced by the dominant gender role ideology. Despite the development of these ideologies, they remained marginal and thus of little consequence in influencing individual behavior (see also Hattery, 2001b; Therborn, 1980).

African Americans, despite living in families that often appear different from the hegemonic images, make decisions and compare their lives to these images rather than to the lived realities in their families and communities. This practice is indicative of the extensive power that hegemonic ideologies have on individual actors. As Hill-Collins (2004) notes, the problem is not the fact that in many couples, African American women would or do out-earn African American men, but rather that they both perceive this to be problematic. She argues that if men and women were no longer constrained by these beliefs, then ideological barriers to forming family units would be dissolved (Hill-Collins, 2004). The mere fact that they cannot simply discard and move beyond these beliefs, even when they contradict their lives and the lives of those around them, demonstrates the power of hegemonic ideologies (Hattery, 2001b; Therborn, 1980).

The Role of Welfare in Shaping Family Forms

Another significant impact on family formation in African American civil society, and especially among low-income and poor African Americans, were the many welfare programs that originated out of the period of the famous “War on Poverty” that President Johnson’s administration launched in the 1960s. For example, one of the early requirements of AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) was that there be only one parent present in the home. Thus, poor mothers with children would refuse to marry the fathers of these children because to do so would result in the denial of the much-needed AFDC checks they received. This practice was widespread among low-income African Americans and even had a name: “the man in the house rule” (McLanahan, 1985; Moffitt, 1997). As prohibitions against marriage became codified into welfare and public policy, norms around cohabitation evolved. Now, 30 years later, we see lower rates of marriage among African Americans, who are disproportionately likely to be receiving public assistance and/or to have grown up in households that were. It is possible that norms of cohabitation replaced norms of marriage. For example, research from the Fragile Families study concludes that increases in the receipt of welfare, although they do not necessarily encourage marriage, are correlated with the situation where parents in a nonmarital birth stay together (Carlson, Garfinkel, McLanahan, Mincy, & Primus, 2004). This finding suggests that researchers and policymakers may need to seriously consider the possibility
that cohabitation has evolved as an alternative to legalized marriage that allows poor families, both African American and white, to continue to receive assistance (welfare, Medicaid, and so forth) while retaining much of the same stability and advantages of marriage.\(^7\)

### The Male Marriageable Pool: The Impact of Unemployment and Incarceration

Much of the scholarship on the lower rate of marriage among African Americans as compared to whites focuses on what is termed the male marriageable pool. The term refers to the fact that in order to be “marriageable,” men must have compiled educational credentials, they must be employable (and preferably employed), and so on. In 1995, according to Kiecolt and Fossett, there were 78 African American males for every 100 females in the general population. Termed the Male Marriage Pool Index, this ratio indicates that the pool of eligible African American men for marriage is significantly smaller than the pool of African American women presumably looking for marriage partners (Kiecolt & Fossett, 1995).

#### Education and Employment

Limited access to the male marriage pool occurs primarily because African American men face severe limitations in access to the opportunity structure: namely, education and employment. The barriers include everything from direct racial discrimination to the disproportionate likelihood of being poor. For example, African Americans are far more likely to attend underresourced primary and secondary schools (see especially Kozol, 2001, 2005), which leave them without the credentials to pursue higher education. Thus, removing barriers of race and class inequality, specifically with regard to education and employment, would result in a significant rise in the male marriageable pool. Finally, we strongly agree with Hill-Collins (2004) that, in addition, if African American men and women adopted alternative gender role prescriptions that did not restrict masculinity to being the breadwinner and femininity to being subordinate to men, then these discrepancies in educational attainment and employment between men and women in the African American community would not have a significant impact on the likelihood of marrying.\(^8\)

#### Incarceration

Incarceration also plays a clear and obvious role in the marriageable pool explanation for lower marriage rates among African Americans.
When any community has 25%–33% of its men incarcerated for any length of time, the likelihood of maintaining healthy, stable intimate and family relationships is severely affected. In the past 30 years, the rate of marriage for African Americans has declined while the rate of incarceration for African American men has exploded. We conclude that incarceration plays a major role in the marriage rates of African American men and women (Western, 2006).

Black-White Intermarriage

One of the biggest complaints of African American women is the “out-marriage” rate of African American men. African American women complain that white women are “taking their men.” Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2005b) confirm black women’s complaints that white women were more likely to marry black men than white men were to marry black women. African American men had white wives 2.65 times more often than black women had white husbands. In other words, in 73% of black-white couples, the husband was black.

Looking at the big picture, an examination of trends confirms that there has been an overall steady increase in the rates of all interracial marriage (Wilson, 1987). In 1960, fewer than 4 in 1,000 married couples in the United States were interracial couples. By 1998, this proportion had increased by more than six times to slightly more than 24 per 1,000 couples (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). Although still modest overall, interracial marriage has become particularly pronounced among some segments of the population, whereas it remains very uncommon in others. For example, it is important to note that among all interracial marriages, the highest rate by far is white-Asian marriages, with the most common arrangement occurring between white men and Asian women. In fact, more than 60% of Asian women are currently marrying “out” (Qian, 2005; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).

With respect to black-white marriages, we note that these unions are also strongly shaped by the intersection of race and gender (see Figure 3.1). Those involving black men and non-black women, for example, have become increasingly more common since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that laws prohibiting interracial unions are unconstitutional (Kalmijn, 1993). In 1970, less than 1.5% of married African American men were married to non-black women, and only 1.2% of African American men were married to white women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972). In comparison, according to census data, by 1990, about 4.5% of the nation’s married African American men had non-black spouses, with the majority of these being white women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). In contrast, marriages between African
American women and non-black men, especially white men, have historically been much less common than intermarriage between African American men and non-black women. For example, census data indicate that in 1990, less than 2% of the country’s married African American women had non-black spouses (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999), up from just 0.8% in 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1972).

In addition, Qian (2005) notes that there are other differences in marriages between African Americans and whites. Although overall, African Americans receive less education than all other race/ethnic and gender status groups, when they do attain high levels of education, they are more likely to marry outside of their race. For example, when white women marry African American men, they “marry up” in terms of educational attainment. In other words, there are more pronounced educational differences in marriages between African American men and white women than in African American or white intraracial marriages (Qian, 2005). Qian goes on to suggest that this difference in educational attainment can lead to the presumption that white women are taking the best African American men out of the marriage pool, which is consistent with the beliefs that many African American women report (Qian, 2005).

Figure 3.1   Interracial Marriage Among White and Black Americans
Despite a variety of reasons we find for a decrease in marriage among African Americans (unemployment, incarceration, norms, and interracial marriage), interracial marriage has the smallest impact but is treated in the media and especially in popular magazines targeting African American women as the single most important explanation for why they remain single. In reality, the impact of interracial marriage on the male marriage pool is relatively insignificant. Whereas 25 of every 100 African American men will spend time in prison, most during the years of family formation, only 4 in 100 will marry outside the race! Thus, the issue of interracial dating and marriage, although perhaps interesting in light of the long history of anti-miscegenation, has only the smallest actual impact on marriages between African American men and women; it contributes almost nothing to the marriage gap in the African American community. In fact, African American men and women who struggle against all of the odds presented above—male unemployment, male incarceration, female educational attainment, and female earning capacity—and do form loving, intimate partnerships overwhelmingly do so with other African Americans (Qian, 2005).

Although our sample of African American men and women is not representative of all African Americans, the reasons they give for not marrying are consistent with what the literature on marriage reports. Therefore, we use their voices to tell their stories.

In Their Own Words

Of the 40 African American men and women we interviewed, slightly more than half of the men we interviewed (11) were or had been married, whereas only 6 (30%) of the women we interviewed were or had been married. When we examined the data by including cohabitation, we found that 18 of the 20 men (90%) that we interviewed were married to or cohabiting with their female partners. Of the women, only 6 (30%) were still married to or cohabiting with their male partners. We grappled with how to explain these numbers, because they vary rather dramatically by gender, and in the case of the men, they vary dramatically from the data provided by the census.

We believe there are several structural reasons why the men in our sample were far more likely to be married and cohabiting than the women. First, our sampling technique in Minnesota was designed to identify couples. In fact, all of the women we interviewed who were married or cohabiting came from our Minnesota sample, and this is a direct result of our sampling technique. In contrast, the women we interviewed in North Carolina were all either living in the battered women’s shelter or had only recently moved out.
Thus, they were not likely to be living with men (they weren’t living with anyone, otherwise they wouldn’t be in the shelter). It’s important to note here a unique aspect of conducting this kind of research. In North Carolina, when a domestic violence incident is entered into the criminal justice system or when a woman seeks shelter, one of the first things that happens is the issuing of a restraining order, a 50-B. One of the requirements of the restraining order, obviously, is that the woman not have any contact with the man and vice versa. Similarly, one of the conditions of the shelter is that the woman identifies and makes arrangements for a living situation that does not include her violent partner. Thus, like the “man in the house rule” that was an issue in welfare enforcement in the 1960s and 1970s, women in our North Carolina sample may have lied about their actual living arrangements. Although we assured them that we were not checking up on them, nor would we report their circumstances to the system (either the shelter staff or the criminal justice system), they may still have felt they needed to lie about their living situation. Thus, this measure is subject to various forms of systematic error.

Second, with regard to the men, certainly it is the case that the men in Minnesota were married or cohabiting because that’s how we designed the study; thus, their overrepresentation among the married and cohabiting is a function of the study design. However, what is curious and is indeed more difficult to explain is the fact that the majority (9 out of 10) of the men we interviewed in North Carolina were also married or cohabiting. This overrepresentation stands as an intriguing question because couple status was not part of this research design, nor are there any obvious structural explanations for it (as the shelter is for the female sample). We propose that the answer lies in the influence women have on their male partners’ behavior, specifically their likelihood of attending the intervention program. We know that only 50% of the men in Forsyth County, North Carolina, who are sentenced to the Time Out batterer intervention program attend (Williams, Smith, & Hattery, 2005). Perhaps those who are most likely to attend (and thus be available for our sample) are those who are still living with (either by marriage or cohabitation) the women they battered. It may be that one condition these women make for the relationship to continue is that the men attend the intervention program. This would explain the high rate of marriage and cohabitation among the men we interviewed in North Carolina.

In our interviews, we found that the lack of romantic relationships was a constant theme among the women. One would reasonably assume, as we did, that a woman who has survived one or even several battering relationships would have had enough of men, at least for a while, and would be content to get her own life together and be single. Yet without fail, when we
asked, at the end of each interview, what the women saw in their future, every one of them answered that she would like to find a man.

AH: How would it be to not be with a guy? I mean, would you envision five years from now, you’re still not with a guy? Or do you really feel like you’re just one of those people that needs to be with a guy?

Sheri: That’s how I feel ‘cause I’ve always been with somebody. I’ve never been alone.

Second, there is the issue referred to as the “feminization of poverty.” As a result of many structural forces, from gendered wage discrimination to the responsibilities associated with childbearing and childrearing, even when women are employed full-time, they earn less, on average, than their male counterparts. Thus, women who are not in marital or cohabiting relationships with men are more likely to find themselves living in poverty (see Rich, 1980, 1995, for a lengthy discussion of the economic compulsion for marriage and heterosexuality).

The women in our study indicated that they wanted to be in a relationship with a man, and most of them were living in poverty and thus in need of the financial support of a male partner, so why didn’t they marry or cohabit? The two primary reasons were male unemployment and incarceration. If, as Rich argues, it is “being attached to a man” and his wages that compel women to marry (or, as we argue in the contemporary United States, cohabit) then both male unemployment and incarceration (sometimes conflated) negate one or both of the reasons women marry in the first place. Thus, rather than propelling women toward marriage or cohabitation, these forces, as they exist in the world of African American men, exist as barriers to marriage and partnership.

This is different from thinking about the issue as one of an inadequate marriage pool in that Rich suggests something more pragmatic and rational. If what women get from marriage is primarily access to wages and status (in that no woman wants to be an old maid), and if neither of these can be conferred in a relationship, then the question is not “Why not marry?” but rather “Why bother marrying?”

For decades, some scholars have looked at the outcomes of not marrying, especially on women and children (e.g., see Gordon, 1988). More recently, however, research has focused specifically on two key outcomes of marital status for children: financial support and cohabitation. McLanahan and Sandefur (1994), in their study of single-parent, primarily female-headed households, note that the most significant negative outcome for children in female-headed households is poverty.
When children in female-headed households receive adequate financial contributions from their fathers, there are few significant differences between their own life chances and those of children raised in two-parent households. Furthermore, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) note that legal marriage is not as strong a predictor of child well-being as is the involvement of the father or a male figure in the child’s life. This involvement, coupled with his financial support, significantly reduces the childhood risks that are typically associated with single-parent households. Finally, they and others note that stable cohabititions may be as healthy for children as are legal marriages. This finding is important because the trend, especially among younger Americans and across most of Western Europe, toward long-term cohabitation indicates that in some geographic regions and among some populations, cohabitation is replacing legalized marriage. (We note, for example, that marriage rates in Sweden have dropped below 50%. Most adults enter long-term cohabiting relationships that look in every other way like marriages, except for the presence of the legal contract.)

We concluded every interview by asking the women what they saw in their futures, specifically with regard to male partners. We wondered if they would seek new relationships or if they would take some time to be single and get their lives together. We wondered if they planned to seek out relationships, and if so, what they would look for in a man. To a one, they all indicated that they wanted a man who was employed and had not been in jail. In their vernacular:

“A man with a J-O-B and NO FEL-ONY!”

Why did all of the women plan to seek out men who were employed and had not been incarcerated? When we probed, we learned that they associated the problems in their relationships, including the violence, with both unemployment and incarceration.

Unemployment and Underemployment: Ronny and Tammy

Most of the men and women we interviewed associated male unemployment with tensions and conflicts in their marriages and relationships. Ronny, who was caught in the cycle of fast-food employment, was often unemployed. Fast-food employment is tenuous at best; Eric Schlosser notes that the typical fast-food employee turns over every 6–7 months (Schlosser, 2002). Although Ronny rose to the ranks of assistant manager in one or two restaurants, his wages remained low and he was subjected to the rigid rules
of fast-food employment. Ronny lost his job as assistant manager at a
Wendy’s because he ate a hamburger on the job. He clearly identified the
relationship between his unemployment or underemployment and the con-
licts in his marriage:

Sometimes we didn’t even have food to eat, so you know, we was eating like
food she would bring home from work, or scrapping food like every day or
something like that. And then you know, as them problems like that, we started
to get into fights. (Ronny, 28-year-old African American man, Minnesota)

Incarceration, Drugs, and Unemployment:
Will and Stella and Wanda and Chris

Men (and women) who have been incarcerated find it nearly impossible
to find employment, especially the kind of employment we associate with the
male role of breadwinner: employment that pays a living wage and is stable.
Like Ronny, Will had a variety of jobs working in the fast-food industry.

Both Will and Chris struggled to remain employed because they both had
prison records. (In fact, we interviewed Chris in jail.) In addition, both men
struggled with drug addiction. Chris’s was more mild in that he used mari-
juana, whereas Will’s was very severe—he was addicted to crack and had
been for 30 years. Both Will’s and Chris’s partners (Stella and Wanda,
respectively) noted that the problems in their relationships were—as they
perceived them—a direct result of the unemployment of their men.

For the first few years of their relationship, Will held down jobs in fast
food, rising at one point to the rank of assistant manager at Kentucky Fried
Chicken. However, as Stella notes, his drug habit got so severe that “Yeah,
he was still working. But it was getting to the point where he was getting so
bad that there were some days he couldn’t go in to work.” Within a few
years of getting together, Will stopped working for good and spent his days
focused on his next fix.

AH: Is he working now?
Stella: No. I pay everything. I pay ... and I even said that out loud in
front of him. I said, I said it to one of my friends. I said, why should
he leave? He doesn’t contribute anything to the house. I said, I pay
the rent. I pay the rent. I pay the utilities. He drives my car. I put
the gas in. I pay everything for the kids. I do the cooking and clean-
ing. Why should he leave? He’s got it made. You know. And it’s
sad that I can realize that and I know I’m being used, but I just
can’t take that final step and I think it’s because of the kids. They
love him so much, but it’s even gotten to the point where they’ll say, dad’s not here again. He’s out with his friends. Or why can’t dad do something with us? You know.

AH: But he’s not working.

Stella: No. He’s not working and even when he does, it’s not going to make a difference ‘cause his money is his money. He understands nothing about budgets, about this needs to be paid. This needs to be paid because he knows he’s going to get paid tomorrow for this. He’s already made plans with what he’s going to do.

AH: He’s pretty much just going to smoke up his money.

Stella: Yeah. Pretty much . . . (Stella, 20-something African American woman, Minnesota)

Wanda and Chris’s relationship was similar. Chris blamed his inability to keep a job on his prison record. At one point, Chris had a job as a security guard. “I was working too, doing this little security job. Once they found I had a felony, they let me go.” Chris is also partially blind as a result of glaucoma and this also affected his ability to find and keep a job. For example, he had worked for awhile at a car wash but was fired when he continued to miss entire sides of cars because of his visual impairment. His partner, Wanda, is very clear that his inability to contribute financially to the household is a source of conflict in their relationship. After a stint in jail, during which time Wanda developed friendships with other men, Chris returned home and told Wanda that he didn’t want these men in their house. She responded,

My house. I’m paying all the bills. I’m talking about rent, gas, light, phone, cable, everything. Everything. I even buy his deodorant, okay? So who are you? “I don’t want nobody around my woman.” All this and that, this and that. “What you want with my woman? Don’t be calling my house!” But this is his house he say. I’m like, I said, “Mother fucker, this ain’t your damn house. This is my mother-fucking house! You can get the fuck out!” So now I’m mad. Now I’m like get the hell out. So you know, now I really get angry. So now, you know, I’m not drinking at this point because there’s no use to have a drink because when you so angry, you can’t enjoy it. So now, really, I got hell in me now. I’m at, I’m at the end. Right. Okay. So now he got his people all up in Minneapolis, St. Paul, everywhere—Tennessee, calling me, please help Chris. Please help Chris. Please help Chris. I say, ya’ll going, ya’ll need to get Chris a place and pay him some rent somewhere. (Wanda, 40-something, African American woman, Minnesota)
Thus, we argue that in the context of the “marriageable pool” identified by Wilson and others, and the context of compulsory heterosexuality identified by Rich, it is not surprising that we see such low rates of marriage in the African American community. The women we interviewed did not see anything positive that the men in their lives were bringing to the table, which is consistent with the belief that marriage has often been described as a system of economic exchange. And although the women obviously put up with the men despite their inability to get a job, their drug use, and their lack of contributions to the household when they were in cohabiting relationships, they did not see any reason to legally marry. The women understood the structural constraints of unemployment and incarceration on their relationships and on their probability of marrying in similar ways to the family sociologists who theorize about the living conditions of women like these.

Race, Class, and Gender Analysis

Here we underscore the importance of interpreting marriage data within the context of a theoretical framework such as the race, class, and gender paradigm. Although we argued in our previous discussion that interracial marriages have only a minimal effect on the marriageable pool problem identified by Wilson and others, we do note that there are distinct race/gender patterns in interracial marriage that must be considered. For example, the census data cited earlier demonstrate that African American men are five times more likely to marry outside the race than are African American women (10% compared to less than 2%). We also note that both unemployment rates and incarceration rates are significantly higher among African American men than any other race/gender segment of the population, which, as we noted, tend to depress marriage rates among African Americans. Thus, taken together, these two forces significantly influence the marriageable pool and significantly depress the marriage rates for African American women as compared to all other race/gender status groups.

If Rich is correct—that the primary reason most women have for marrying is economic security—then in the aggregate, women of any race who marry white men have, on average, a great deal to gain. But again, in the aggregate, women of any race who marry African American men have, on average, less to gain, and in fact, they may have something to lose. For example, the data in Table 8.5 illustrate that although marriage provides some insulation from poverty regardless of race, married African Americans are still significantly more likely to live in poverty than are married whites. In other words, race still matters. It is only when we analyze all of these
illustrations through the lens provided by the RCG paradigm that the particular race/gender patterns in marriage in the contemporary United States can be understood.

Summary: Outcomes of the Low Marriage Rate

In summary, we conclude that there are several negative outcomes associated with the low rates of marriage in the African American community.

1. The first, as noted by Patterson (1999), is the fact that adult African American men and women are less likely to be partnered than their white counterparts. The loss or absence of relationship is significant and affects the majority of African American men and women.

2. Low rates of marriage in the African American community result in a high percentage of African American children growing up in single-parent households. There is no question that the absence of fathers has a negative effect on their children. Children who grow up without the presence of a father in their lives have a gap in terms of their relationships with adults (it reduces the number they may have), in terms of available role models, and so on.

3. The feminization of poverty is a real problem facing African American women. In fact, three fourths of households with children headed by single African American women are below the poverty line. Thus, one of the clearest and perhaps most devastating outcomes of low marriage rates among African Americans is the poverty of the women and their children. Even with the severe job and wage discrimination experienced by African American men (women also experience this), the additional income that men could bring into a household would improve the life chances of their children.

However, we do want to draw attention to the fact that cohabitation may be replacing legalized marriage in the African American community as it is in countries like Sweden. If this is the case, the loss or absence of marriage may not be as significant as Patterson implies. Although there are differences in cohabitation as compared to marriage, these differences—such as rights of inheritance, slightly lower stability, and so on—do not seem to result in people being alone. This is true with regard to children as well. There may be very little difference for children if their father is present as a husband as compared to as a partner. The most important point is that fathers are present for their children. Furthermore, although a cohabiting partner may not
have legal rights to financial resources, many cohabiting couples do share financial resources just as married couples do. The only exception may be that upon the death of one partner, the financial assets will not transfer automatically to the surviving partner, and thus legal documents, such as a will, must be prepared in order for this type of transfer to take place.

Therefore, we conclude this chapter by noting that much more attention needs to be paid to comparing the outcomes of long-term cohabiting relationships and legal marriages on the life chances of African American men, women, and children. We offer some recommendations to increase the rate of marriage among African American men and women.

**Solutions**

- Encourage and support marriages; make this an attractive family option.
- Increase the minimum wage to a living wage so that men and women who are employed can keep themselves and their families out of poverty.
- Reduce the number of African American men who are incarcerated for low-level drug offenses. This would improve the male marriageable pool as well as increase the likelihood that African American fathers would be able to be employed (because they would not be in prison) and thus they would be able to provide financial support for their children.

In the next chapter, we will continue our discussion of family formation by examining patterns of childbearing in African American families.

**Notes**

1. See, in particular, the remarks of public figures such as Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich.
2. The Supreme Court ruling *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) rendered antimiscegenation laws unconstitutional. However, these laws still existed and were enforced in some states until the early 1970s.
3. We do not mean here that women did not work for pay; many did, but more often than not they were not employed in the public sphere. African American women, for example, were most likely to work as domestics in the homes of whites, and thus they did not have access to the power associated with the market economy of the public sphere.
4. We note here that it is typical that the lives, beliefs, and practices of minorities have constantly been compared to white Americans. We do not mean to imply here that we are making that kind of comparison. Rather, we note that among *all* women, historically, African American women have had significantly higher rates of
labor force participation than any other group of women, thus the use of the term *non-normative*.

5. Hattery (2001b) discusses this at length in her examination of the disconnect between women’s attempts at balancing work and family and the ideologies they hold about motherhood.

6. For a review of the struggles of welfare mothers to live by the rules of welfare, see Edin and Lein’s *Making Ends Meet* (1997). They demonstrate that it is virtually impossible to live off of welfare while adhering strictly to the requirements of no man in the household, no employment, and so on.

7. However, we note that cohabiting couples clearly do not have access to many of the tax advantages and benefit advantages associated with marriage.

8. We suggest the same loosening of gender role ideologies for men and women of all races/ethnicities, including whites. Rigid gender role ideology is associated with many other negative aspects of intimate relationships, most notably violence (see Hattery, in press-a).

9. Wilson (1987) explores these trends using a different technique, examining marriage license data. His analysis confirms the same trend.