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Trends in Marriage and Cohabitation

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As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, individuals of varying backgrounds are interacting and negotiating issues that even 30 years ago most people assumed to be clear-cut. In the family arena, one of the most complicated and controversial topics today is marriage. There is little general agreement about who should be permitted to marry (heterosexuals versus homosexuals), the steps leading up to marriage (sexuality, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock births), and expectations once married (children, gender roles, work versus family, and divorce).

While marriage and its conceptualization have become much more contentious, it remains a significant institution in the United States. Although some observe a retreat from marriage in the United States, demographics indicate that marriage has not lost its powerful ideological significance (Cherlin, 2004). The United States leads the rest of the industrialized world in terms of marriage rates and, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 90 percent of Americans will eventually marry. What has changed, however, is that individuals are waiting longer to marry, they may cohabit at some point, and they may divorce with greater ease.

Recent research indicates that across races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, the ideal of marriage remains significant to a majority of both men

and women but that members of some racial and ethnic groups may not always have access to appropriate marital partners (Crowder & Tolnay, 2000). Nonetheless, the attributes of marriage are changing. Historically, marriage signified the formation of a new household unit, the initiation of a sexual relationship, and the birth of children. With the increasing social acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation, childbirth outside of marriage, and same-sex partnerships, the fundamental aspects of this institution have been separated and, for some, redefined.

The problems of what marriage is and of how individuals of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and educational and class backgrounds perceive and practice marriage is more complex than is often acknowledged. Anthropologists have long documented that some form of a marital relationship, a public acknowledgment of a couple's relationship, exists in all societies. As such, marriage takes on multiple forms. But this cross-cultural knowledge is rarely acknowledged in the family literature. Studies and discussions about marriage center on the definition and legal aspects of marriage and often ignore that marriage is a societal institution that is dynamic and subject to change over time. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the U.S. population coupled with significant regional differences suggests that individuals of different ages and backgrounds may have quite varied perceptions of marriage. Who we believe to be appropriate and inappropriate partners and what we believe to be acceptable or unacceptable behaviors with respect to the marital process are the products of multiple factors including our families, culture, religion, media, social contacts, and various other pervasive factors such as technology and globalization. Furthermore, our own outlook may change as a result of personal experiences and the ever-shifting nature of our culture. This explains, at least in part, why as a society we are surrounded by a complex and variable array of attitudes and values with respect to the definition, meaning, and utility of marriage.

The Issue of Sample Populations

Up to this point, there is scant research examining the links between cultural diversity and marriage. The problem central to the study of all aspects of culturally diverse families is also inherent in the marriage literature. The major focus of marital research has focused on White European American families with some recent contrasting work on African Americans. The findings have then been generalized to the rest of the U.S. population (Bean, Crane, & Lewis, 2002; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000).

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Despite the changing demographics of our society and the awareness in the scholarly community of the implications of these changes, there is a significant dearth of work on marriage among various Hispanic, Asian, and Indian American families (McLoyd et al., 2000). Other culturally diverse peoples such as Armenians, Arabs, Turks, and Eastern Europeans are subsumed under the census heading “White non-Hispanic,” and are, thus, often not specifically accounted for in marital research. Scholarship on marriage often glosses over class and ethnic differences by concentrating on racial categories instead of delineating the specific population that may be under study. For example, we also know very little about the relationship between religion and marriage. The reliance on racial typologies serves to subsume these complex fundamental differences that could give us a very different picture of how marriage is conceptualized and practiced in different groups.

This lack of differentiation leads to generalizations, even about White families, and misses the many meanings and practices of marriage that coexist in our society. The following discussion of cohabitation and marriage reflects some of the biases in the literature. This chapter concentrates on issues of demographics, cohabitation, marital quality, same-sex relationships, power, communication, and divorce. A more nuanced discussion of gender roles and the division of household labor is found in the following chapter on the relationship between work and family.

Demographics

The bulk of research on the relationship between cultural diversity and marriage has focused on trends in structural changes of families among various racial groups. Of particular interest has been the overall decline in the rate of marriage and later age at first marriage accompanied by the phenomenon of higher proportions of unwed mothers, higher percentages of mother-only or father-only families, and higher numbers of families living in poverty (McLoyd et al., 2000).

The census breakdown by racial and ethnic group indicates an uneven distribution with respect to marriage trends. In 2001, approximately 62 percent of non-Hispanic Whites and Asians, 60 percent of Hispanics, and 42 percent of African Americans were married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Statistics for the same year indicate that 8 percent of Black men and 7 percent of Black women aged 55 and older had never married, in contrast to White men at 4 percent and White women also at 4 percent. Among Asians, approximately 2 percent of men and 6 percent of women were unmarried, while Latinos were at 5 percent for men and 7 percent for women.

Much of the research on marriage and cultural diversity has focused on trends among African American families. Since 1970, these patterns include the decline in two-parent families from 68 percent in 1970 to 42 percent in 2000, the doubling of divorce rates, and a rise in the proportion of children being brought up in single-parent households (Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). In terms of age of marriage, African Americans tend to marry later and have higher rates of divorce than Whites (Sweeney & Phillips, 2004). Furthermore, parental status does not play a role: The marriage gap between Whites and Blacks remains equally strong whether or not a Black woman has children.

Recent scholarship points primarily to demographic and economic explanations for these trends. Currently there are a disproportionate number of African American women available in relation to men, especially during the marital age bracket of 20–49 years, the time when women are most likely to marry. Based on an economic explanation, Black women are not marrying because there is a lack of eligible partners; that is, those who have an education and a job. Changes in the labor market have created unfavorable employment conditions that prohibit men from becoming economic providers and, thus, make them less eligible on the marriage market (Ooms, 2002). It is important to note that African Americans are not against marriage, and in fact hold strong marital ideals. Instead, differences in marital patterns are determined primarily by economic differences among various groups. Among African Americans, marital patterns closely correlate to class. Middle-class and upper-class families are much more likely to be headed by a married, usually dual-income, husband-wife team (Hirschl, Altobelli, & Rank, 2003; White & Rogers, 2000).

Notable in the marital literature is that family demographers have given considerable attention to differences in marriage rates between Black and White women but not to the race gap between Black and White men (Raley, 2002). Yet, the gap with respect to being unmarried is considerably smaller for Black men at 16 percent than for Black women at 26.9 percent (Raley, 2002, p. 774). Possible explanations include that men still have an easier time finding marriage partners due to power differentials that exist in our society with respect to gender differences and marriageability.

Statistically, some similar trends are found among Latinos: There has been a significant increase in female-headed families, to about 31.2 percent of all Latino families in 1998; they are less likely to be married than Whites or Asians; a single parent is more likely to be the head of the household; and they are more likely to become parents at younger ages. These trends, however, are not consistent among Latino subgroups. Instead, we find a great deal of variation across class and national origin. For example, female-headed households are twice as common among Puerto Rican Americans as

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they are among Mexican and Cuban Americans. Interestingly, Cuban women tend to be older than their other Hispanic counterparts when having children and have the lowest fertility rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

Another change in the Hispanic population is the projected future composition of this group. Presently, about 40 percent is foreign-born due to patterns of increasing immigration (Suro & Passel, 2003). However, over the next few years, fertility will begin to supersede immigration as the basis for Hispanic population growth. This trend indicates that it will become increasingly important to study generational differences as well as attitudes toward marriage and the process of assimilation, such as intermarriage, across generational lines.

When it comes to Asian American families, it is equally difficult to discuss general trends. While the average Asian American household contains 3.3 members (in contrast to White households that average 2.5 members and Hispanic households at 3.5), there is much variation depending on group. For example, on average, Vietnamese households are estimated at 4.0, while other Southeast Asian households such as those of Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians contain approximately 5.1 persons. These figures stand in contrast to figures for Japanese Americans who have an average of only 2.5 members per household (McLoyd et al., 2000). Larger household size among Asian Americans is correlated with the presence of extended family members such as grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. These individuals play important roles in these families but are often ignored in both research and policy decisions, since they do not fit a Eurocentric notion of who constitutes the core family.

Other distinguishing features of Asian American families are that the women in them tend to be foreign-born, have a higher average educational level than women in families of other groups, and are the least likely to have a child outside of marriage. These trends are likely to be interrelated and may explain the low incidence of out-of-wedlock births among Asian Americans. However, as Southeast Asian women are having more children than either Chinese or Japanese Americans, the demographic picture of Asian Americans will change. Notable also is that South Asian Indian Americans, while playing an increasingly significant role in certain facets of U.S. culture, are subsumed under the Asian category, even though their religious affiliations are usually Hindu and Muslim, which indicates that, at times, they may exhibit different cultural patterns in marital and family customs.

Indian American families are probably the most understudied group by family scientists. Currently about 62 percent of families are maintained by married couples, 30 percent by women with no husband living in the household, and 2 percent by men with no wife present. Almost 24 percent

of children, similar to those in Black and Asian households, live in extended families (Fields, 2003). Beyond these census figures, we know virtually nothing about the dynamics of marriages among the various Indian American groups.

Theoretical Approaches Used to Understand Cohabitation and Marriage

Much of the research on marriage is dominated either explicitly or implicitly by a structuralist perspective and concepts of social exchange. Structuralism, which gained its greatest momentum in the 1960s, advocates that role distribution, and specifically clearly defined gender roles, is a fundamental aspect of marriage. While this perspective has dropped out of favor in recent years, implicit assumptions about appropriate roles and tasks continue to pervade much of the marriage literature.

Social Exchange Theory

Recently, cohabitation and marriage have been studied much more extensively from a social exchange perspective. The central component of this approach assumes that human behavior is fundamentally self-interested and that interactions with others are sought primarily to maximize rewards and minimize costs. From this perspective, cohabiting and marital relationships are based on levels of attraction, the availability of alternative relationships, and dependence between the partners (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004). Social and cultural elements influence both the types of resources that partners bring to their relationship and also what is seen as a fair or advantageous exchange. Relationships become unstable when the exchange becomes uneven; that is, when one or both partners feel that they are not maximizing their rewards and they are not as dependent on one another (Carroll, Knapp, & Holman, 2005).

Feminist Theories or Frameworks

In the field of marriage research, new directions have been proposed primarily through feminist theorizing. Feminist analysis has served to reveal aspects of marriage that remained hidden with more traditional positivist approaches (Thompson, 1993). For example, feminists advocate that traditional marriages with a homemaker wife and breadwinner husband serve to reinforce the patriarchal order; prevent women from being acknowledged

for their contributions to the family, the community, and the larger society; and often have negative consequences for women with respect to financial, emotional, and physical factors (Blaisure & Allen, 1995).

Feminist approaches have also allowed researchers to pursue the question of why certain forms of social organization continue to dominate and why mainstream practices may not represent the voices of all members of our society. Through feminist analysis, we now know that there is a great deal of variation in cohabiting and marital behaviors between and within groups. We also now recognize that we are only at the beginning of understanding the impact of these differences on the larger society and for individual couples.

Cohabitation

Since the 1970s there has been a great deal of scholarly debate about the role of cohabitation with respect to marriage. Is cohabitation a stage in the courtship process leading to marriage, or is it a separate institution functioning as an alternative to marriage? However, while similar on the surface, cohabitation and marriage are not the same phenomenon. Cohabitation is a shared union between two individuals based on private feelings. Marriage is a public institution governed by overt rules and laws about the rights and responsibilities of its members. Framing the debate as a unified concept diverts attention from the multitude of cohabiting experiences that can encompass same-sex couples, young college-age students, middle-aged individuals with children, and older adults. Furthermore, cohabitation may range from a short-term arrangement to a long-term union with all the shared economic and parenting responsibilities that are present in marriage.

Based on a racial breakdown, African Americans and Indian Americans are most likely to cohabit with rates at about 17 percent for each group. The lowest rates of cohabitation are found among Asian Americans at about 5 percent while Whites are at about 8.2 percent and Latinos at 12.2 percent (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003). These statistics, however, mask a multitude of interrelated complicated issues with respect to why different groups exhibit such dramatically varied behaviors.

Patterns of Cohabitation

Current research indicates that three-quarters of cohabiting women expect to marry their partners (Manning & Smock, 2002); however, only about one-third of those living together marry within a three-year time

period (Bumpass, 1995). Research also indicates that patterns of cohabitation and marriage differ among different groups. For example, Whites who cohabit are much more likely to marry than are Blacks. Two-thirds of White cohabiting women eventually marry their partners, while only 10 percent of cohabiting Black women do (Manning & Smock, 1995). Furthermore, should a pregnancy result, Whites are much more likely to marry than are Blacks (Manning, 1993). Interestingly, employment plays a role in marriage decisions too. For example, if both individuals in a Black couple are working, they are more likely to marry. The same is not true in White couples, specifically if the woman is not working (Manning & Smock, 1995).

These findings suggest that cohabitation has different meanings among Whites and Blacks; among Whites it is often a transitional step to marriage, while among some Blacks it functions as a substitute for marriage. Similar findings have been found among certain Hispanic groups. For example, Puerto Rican women tend to view cohabitation as a substitute for marriage. These findings, however, need to be contextualized. Research indicates that many Black and Latino women, in particular, place a high value on marriage and feel that cohabitation is morally wrong. This would indicate that there are other factors than race and ethnicity at work in the decision to cohabit. While often ignored, the economic situation of couples contributes immensely to the choice of cohabitation over marriage. Economic opportunities for men and skewed sex ratios in populations where there are more women than men seem to contribute to the phenomenon of higher cohabitation rates among certain racial and ethnic groups.

Research on this topic for other ethnic and cultural groups is virtually nonexistent. Since so many Asian cultures do not favor cohabitation, it would be instructive to examine if there are class variations among these groups as well.

Gender Roles and Marital Quality in Marriage

Most research on gender roles, marital quality, and marital processes among culturally diverse marriages has been on White and Black families. We are only now beginning to see some interest in marriage scholarship on Latinos, and research on Asian Americans remains scarce at best. In fact, as McLoyd et al. (2000) point out, statistical differences between Asian Americans and other groups are often explained through cultural interpretations that have not been verified through systematic empirical observations.

Division of Labor

One of the most popular discussions in terms of gender and the family involves the division of labor in the home. Research on racial differences in gender roles reveals differences between African American and White men with respect to their participation in household work. For example, John and Shelton (1997) report that African American men spend an average of 21.7 hours per week engaged in housework, while White men spend an average of 17.8 hours per week participating in household labor. This finding is supported by other authors who report that Black men participate more frequently in childcare and household work than do White men (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995). The increase in Black men's participation may be attributed to the belief of African American women that their employment outside the home is part of their familial obligation, and thus the men are expected to participate evenly in household tasks as well (Piotrkowski & Hughes, 1993). Different life experiences in White and Black families may account for differences in gender roles and gender attitudes as well as the more equitable participation in household labor in African American marriages.

Marital Dynamics and Communication

There have been various studies that have documented the differences in gender roles and housework participation in different cultures. In one study, Lim (1997) examined working Korean women's experiences in attempting to decrease the unequal division of labor in the home. The author suggests that "a sense of unfairness develops when they feel their lives relatively more burdened than their husbands'. With a sense of injustice, wives attempt to change the unequal division of family work by demand or appeal to their husbands" (p. 41). Despite the tendency for more traditional gender roles in Korean culture, the women respectfully challenged gender inequality within the home through expressing their opinions and a growing sense of entitlement.

In another study that addresses cultural differences in marital dynamics, Hampson, Beavers, and Hulgus (1990) discuss different interactional patterns in White, Black, and Mexican American families. They argue that their findings are "consistent with and supportive of the hypothesis that any differences found between ethnic groups are likely to be differences in style of structure or interaction rather than differences in competence or health" (p. 316). They report in their study that Black families expressed fewer feelings and thoughts in a verbally direct or clear manner and were higher in sanctioning the expression of positive over negative feelings as compared to

White or Mexican American families. Also, Mexican American families were more likely than White or Black families to allow the most expression of dependency needs and to emphasize emotional bonding between family members (Hampson et al., 1990).

The authors believe their findings may be useful for a greater understanding of marital and familial dynamics among those from different ethnic backgrounds. Further, their data “encourage the view that for families of all ethnic backgrounds, subtle ethnic and social class differences exist, and imposing one’s own ethnically influenced standards regarding clarity of expression, autonomy, egalitarianism, and even sex-role standards may limit efficacy” and be detrimental to a greater understanding of these different cultures (Hampson et al., 1990, p. 318).

Marital Quality Over Time

Over the past 25 years, research on marriage has been dominated by an emphasis on marital quality and observable patterns of interactions between couples. Much of this research has concentrated on identifying causes of marital conflict in order to help stabilize marriages (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Marital quality is conceptualized as being composed of two primary factors—marital stability and marital satisfaction. These two components have been studied since the early 1940s, initially through self reporting on large-scale surveys and more recently through clinical observation (Carroll et al., 2005). It is important to note that the early studies on marital quality focused exclusively on White middle-class heterosexual samples, thus skewing interpretations of marital behavior among diverse groups.

In describing contemporary marriages, spousal satisfaction and relationship stability have remained the key factors in analyses (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). While observational research on marriages has yielded fascinating descriptions of marital interactions and marital problems, the marriage field is plagued by a lack of information about the underlying factors that influence marital processes and outcomes among various groups.

Marital Quality and the Transition to Parenthood

While changing societal trends in employment, gender equality, and income levels affect marital quality over time, other factors that relate to marital dynamics and interactions also may affect levels of marital satisfaction. For example, a study by Crohan (1996) explored the changes in

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marital quality and conflict that occur during the transition to parenthood for both White and African American couples. The results of the study indicate similar trends: Among White and African American couples, participants who had become parents by the third year had higher levels of tension in their marriages.

In regard to marital quality and couple interaction, the researcher found similar levels of conflict resolution among African American and White participants, but found that for women, destructive conflict behavior correlated with less happiness in the marriage (Crohan, 1996). The findings of the study indicate that more research is needed to gain a clearer understanding of the intersection of the transition to parenthood, marital stressors, and race and gender issues.

In a study on African American and European women's experiences of marital well-being, Goodwin (2003) studied a sample of 247 women and explored factors that influenced their relationships such as individual, interpersonal, economic, and social resources. She found that for both groups of women, equity and trust, which were considered interpersonal resources, and emotional health, an individual resource, predicted marital well-being. However, she found that among the African American women, their physical health and the closeness of their relationships to their in-laws also predicted an increase of marital well-being, whereas this was not the case for the White women in the sample. The author states, "Given the importance of strong family ties for support and guidance among African Americans, it is not surprising that in-law relations could affect marital functioning" (Goodwin, 2003, p. 558).

In their review of longitudinal studies on marriage and marital quality, Karney and Bradbury (1995) reviewed the 115 studies that have been published that address the issue of marital quality over time. Of the 68 independent samples in these studies, they found that only 8 percent draw from African American populations, and only 17 percent of the research includes a sample that is representative of the national population of those who are married. They found that 75 percent of the samples used in these studies consist primarily of those who are White and middle class. Again, this raises a question about the nature of the knowledge we *really* have about marital quality and satisfaction among culturally diverse families.

Power and Communication

The institution of marriage, characterized as a rigid institution defined by patriarchal norms, is undergoing a significant transformation. In particular,

issues of power in marriage are being transformed through the greater level of education of women and the large numbers of women in the labor force around the world. In the household, power tends to take on multiple forms and can change and mutate over time. Sparse studies on power in the marriages of culturally diverse individuals indicate that old stereotypes are often falsely perpetuated due to inaccurate cultural explanations. Thus, for example, the portrayal of Hispanic families that are characterized by an all-powerful husband and a submissive wife have been reevaluated and found not to be representative of the current situation (Gutmann, 1996). Similarly, research on Muslim families relies on religious depictions of family life instead of indicating that there is a great deal of intragroup diversity (Sherif-Trask, 2004). We know little about the effects of immigration on marriage and power, but scant research indicates that migration requires flexibility in roles and decision-making in order for the couple to be successful in its new environment (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, as discussed in Oropesa & Landale, 2004).

Power, and how it is realized in the gap between a culture's ideals and an individual's behavior, has been a focus in particular in the study of Chicano families. For example, Baca Zinn (1982) found important differences in the concept of *entre dicho y hecho* (between what is said and what is done). Interviews with Chicana women indicate that verbally they may support patriarchal ideologies; however, they do not abide by those rules in their daily lives. Instead, especially when women are employed in the labor force, they are likely to challenge their partners, make their own decisions, and in general defy their husbands (Baca Zinn, 1982; Williams, 1990).

Same-Sex Relationships

Currently, little is known about culturally diverse lesbian or gay couples. Scant research indicates that they are likely to experience prejudice and discrimination from two fronts simultaneously: heterosexuals and other gay and lesbian couples (Kurdek, 2004). Regionality plays a role in the development and maintenance of all gay and lesbian relationships, since some areas of the country, such as large urban places and the Northeast and West Coasts, are more accommodating of people with varying lifestyles. It is logical to assume that in these areas, diverse couples are also more likely to find communities of others with whom they share cultural, linguistic, or educational commonalities.

Culturally diverse, same-sex relationships are characterized by many of the same definitional and typological issues that plague a discussion of all culturally diverse families. In the case of same-sex relationships, the issue of

boundary definition is wrought with even more complex dimensions pertaining to inherent prejudices with respect to sexuality. It is important to note that while distinctions such as heterosexuality, homosexuality, and lesbianism are politically and socially important, they are socially constructed constructs. From a social constructionist perspective, "Sexuality is situational and changeable, modified by day-to-day circumstances throughout the life course" (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990, as quoted in Aulette, 2002, p. 173). How people identify themselves, the types of relationships they may have engaged in, and the question of whether they would like to be part of a same-sex relationship are just some of the variables.

Current debates about the legality of same-sex marriages indicate that certain segments of U.S. society are very uncomfortable with redefining marriage in any manner that is not strictly religious and restricts marriage to heterosexual partners. However, the legality of same-sex marriages in Canada, the Netherlands, and Germany indicates that Western societies are becoming more open to redefinitions of marriage even on a legal level. The public debates on this subject in the United States indicate that attitudes are changing, albeit slowly.

Interracial Marriage

As Oropesa and Landale (2004) point out, "The extent of intermarriage between racial/ethnic groups is a reflection of the social distance between them" (p. 911). Significantly, rates of intermarriage in the United States have increased, but not dramatically, in the past 30 years. In 1970, approximately 300,000 couples were identified as interracial. By 1990, this figure had jumped to 1.5 million and by 2000, to 3 million. This translates to approximately 1 percent of couples being interracial in 1970 and 5 percent in 2000 (Lee & Edmonston, 2005). The rise in interracial marriages can be attributed to both a growth in population and changing social mores that are more open to marriages across social lines. It is important to point out that until 1967, many states had antimiscegenation laws forbidding Whites from marrying either Blacks or Asians. The low number of interracial marriages especially among older demographic groups reflects these laws.

Currently, African Americans are the least likely to marry outside of their group. In 2000, approximately 7 percent of marriages among Blacks involved a Black spouse and an individual of a different race. Interestingly, African American women are the least likely to be in an interracial marriage and are about one-third as likely as African American men to marry someone from another race. Asians exhibit the opposite pattern: One-fifth of all

married Asian women are married to someone of another race or ethnicity; this is more than double the rate among Asian men. According to census statistics, American Indians, Hawaiians, and individuals of mixed race have the highest interracial marriage rates (Lee & Edmonston, 2005). Data from the 2000 census indicate that the most common interracial marriages are between a person of "some other race" (usually refers to Hispanic) and a White spouse, a Black husband and a White wife, and a White husband and an American Indian wife. In sum, Asian women married to White husbands, along with these three other types of couples, represented 70 percent of all interracial couples in 2000.

Census data also indicate that it is more common for U.S.-born Asians and Hispanics to become involved in interracial marriages than for foreign-born individuals. For example, foreign-born Hispanic wives (87 percent) and foreign-born Hispanic husbands tend to be married to Hispanic spouses (92 percent). Furthermore, foreign-born individuals tend to marry someone from their country of origin. Among U.S. immigrants, of Mexicans born in their home country, 75 percent are married to other Mexicans; 69 percent of El Salvadorans and Dominicans are married to individuals from their native societies, and 79 percent of women born in Cuba are married to other Cubans. Similar figures exist for native-born Hispanics, with 65 percent of women and 78 percent of men having Hispanic spouses (Oropesa & Landale, 2004).

Intermarriage is dependent on a variety of factors including the availability of potential spouses, regionality, location, age, and education. For example, the higher the educational level of the partners, the greater is the potential for intermarriage. However, a study by Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell (1995) revealed that interracial couples still face a great deal of obstacles. For example, individuals revealed that other people, including their own families, often treated them poorly upon learning of their interracial relationship. Others experienced prejudice and discrimination from church members, coworkers, and even the police, while a few cited the benefits of having married outside of their group.

There is much that is unknown about intermarriages. For example, we do not understand why the rates of intermarriage have been so slow to shift or how interracial and interethnic coupling affects marital processes, the retention of cultural traditions, assimilation, and the rearing of children. Trends such as cohabitation and out-of-wedlock fertility among culturally diverse families are also understudied and misunderstood. This is unfortunate, since these are growing trends not just in the White population but throughout American society, and greater insight would allow us to understand more about the dynamics of group formation and ethnic identity.

Divorce

While the divorce rate increased in the period between 1940 and 1998, this trend has slowed and leveled off in recent years. In a recent survey, Teachman et al. (2000) found that demographic trends in divorce are similar for Hispanic, African American, and White women. Statistics indicate that there was a sharp increase in the proportion of those aged 40–44 who were divorced from a first spouse between 1975 and 1990. For Hispanic women, the increase within this age group rose from less than 20 percent in 1980 to 27 percent in 1990. Among African Americans, the increase in those divorced rose from just under 30 percent in 1975 to 45 percent in 1990. Among Whites, there was an increase from 20 percent to 32 percent during the years of 1975 to 1985, and a slight increase from 32 percent to 35 percent from 1985 to 1990 (Teachman et al., 2000). A recent study by Schwartz and Finley (2005) sought to determine the role of ethnicity in moderating the consequences of divorce and how children perceive levels of parental involvement. The study included a diverse sample of participants—56 percent Hispanic, 24 percent White, 10 percent Black, 7 percent Asian, and 4 percent mixed ethnicity. The authors found that in examining father involvement upon parental divorce, participants noted lower levels of nurturant fathering among all ethnic groups in the study compared to those in intact families.

Immigration and Divorce Rates

In comparison to all other groups, Asian Americans are least likely to divorce; their divorce rates—meaning the percentage of the population that is divorced at any given time—are estimated at 4 percent for men and 4.7 percent for women, in contrast with rates for the general population of 8 percent for men and 10.3 percent for women. These statistics are somewhat deceptive, however. A decreased incidence of divorce is closely correlated with being foreign-born and having immigrated to the United States. Individuals who are born in the United States, whatever their country of origin, are much more likely to be divorced than those who are not native-born. These observations point to the significant role that cultural norms play in helping influence behavior. As divorce remains a stigmatized condition in many societies, this provides a plausible explanation for the relatively low incidence of divorce among immigrants. Furthermore, limited research indicates that often, unhappy couples will stay together for the sake of making the immigration experience work for the good of the whole family. By the second generation, other values, such as those attached to more individualistic actions, begin to pervade and influence marital and family behaviors.

Cultural Competence

Research on marriage and culturally diverse families reveals that it is extremely important not to draw implications and assumptions from group membership. Simplistic typologies that attempt to draw on general descriptions of groups explicitly and implicitly stereotype individuals without much attention to the problems that this may create. It is not useful, for example, to imply that all Latino or Muslim Middle Eastern families are patriarchal in nature. Some may be, but this will vary depending on country of origin, age of the family members at arrival in the United States, educational level, wealth, etc. For family service providers, teachers, and mental health administrators and other individuals who work with diverse groups, it is important to realize that there is as much intragroup variation as there is intergroup variation. The popular practice of employing typologies of cultures and characteristics of individual groups only serves to obscure the heterogeneous nature of the various segments of American society. Cultural competence becomes a more useful concept when individual differences within specific social contexts are acknowledged (Berg & Miller, 1992).

Recommendations for Future Research

A useful productive perspective for understanding cohabitation and marriage is an ecological systems framework. This allows researchers to account for the influence of historical, cultural, and environmental conditions in which phenomena occur. Relationships are defined and experienced based in great part on social placement and sociohistorical time. Contextual factors influence patterns of attraction and the structure, organization, and experience of relationships.

In studies of culturally diverse families, it is important to acknowledge that assimilation and acculturation are not a one-way process with immigrant groups being absorbed into the middle-class mainstream. Instead, assimilation is a dynamic two-way process whereby the larger culture is also affected by the new trends and values that are brought to it. We currently know very little about the relationship between assimilation, acculturation, and marital processes among underrepresented groups and immigrants in particular. To what extent have any of the cultural norms of these groups affected mainstream conceptions about marriage, cohabitation, and relationships in general? Also, the interplay between marriage and class is an understudied topic. We know that economics influence stressors in marriage. However, we do not have information about how middle-class,

upper-middle-class, and wealthy diverse families conceive of cohabitation and marriage throughout the life cycle. There exists an implicit assumption in the literature that most culturally diverse families are poor and uneducated. However, the enormous variations between groups and within groups indicates that we must acknowledge that individuals at different points on the socioeconomic ladder may perceive and live out their relationships and marriages differently. We know that this is true for African Americans, with middle- and upper-class African American families closely resembling similarly situated White families. We do not have the same type of information for other groups in our society.

We also know very little about how religion intersects with group identity and marital issues. Are the marriages of Korean Christians in the United States similar to those of Korean Buddhists? What about secular Muslims from North Africa or Southeast Asia versus conservative Muslims from Iran? What about the issues of generational differences when it comes to cohabitation and to same-sex and heterosexual marriage? Are young Mexican Americans just as likely to marry young and have children as their parents? Recent information indicates that even for Mexicans, who have traditionally had one of the highest fertility rates in the United States, young women are choosing to limit the number of children born in marriage due to the costs associated with childrearing. This is altering projected demographic growth profiles for Mexicans.

In order for us to gain a better understanding of the relationship between marriage and cultural diversity, it is imperative that social scientists and, specifically, marriage researchers begin to ask new questions, examine intra-group variation, and account for context and socioeconomic positioning. This will provide the path to new understandings about the role of cultural diversity in the marital process.

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