

THE BLACK FAMILY

4TH

ROBERT STAPLES

THE BLACK FAMILY

Essays and Studies

FOURTH EDITION

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PREFACE

At the time of this writing, the *Moynihan Report* is observing its twenty-fifth anniversary. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now the senior senator from the state of New York, is being hailed as a prophet for his prediction in 1965 that "At the root of the deterioration of the Negro community is the deterioration of the Negro family." Certainly, it has become increasingly difficult to refute the statistical indices of Black family disruption. However, it is instructive to note that the statistical indices Moynihan applied to define family "pathology" among Black Americans in 1965 (such as female-headed households, out-of-wedlock birth rates, and fertility rates) are very similar to statistical indices of the same phenomena among White Americans in 1990. Obviously, this fact suggests that the direction of social change was the same for all racial groups in the United States over that twenty-five year period.

The Black American community has its share of problems, and considerable controversy exists over the cause and nature of those problems. Some students of the subject assert that misguided liberal social policies have been the force behind Black family disruption. Other theorists claim that society's failure to provide relevant education, meaningful employment, and equal opportunities for Black Americans has adversely affected their family system. Both views are represented in this fourth edition of *The Black Family: Essays and Studies*. Moreover, we address as many dimensions of the Black family as possible in this new edition. A majority of the articles in this edition are new and thus represent recent information, theories, and statistics.

Also in this fourth edition, we have expanded the sections on history and public policy—two vital

areas that explain much about the past and future of Black American families. We have included new articles on women's issues, family violence, and the Black gay experience. In addition, a new section on health issues that impact the Black family, such as AIDS and substance abuse has been added. Every dimension and segment of the Black American family is represented in this new edition. This coverage of topics maintains the tradition that has been established over the last twenty years that this text is the most comprehensive work available on the Black American family.

As always, this new edition is a collective effort, and I am indebted to a number of people for their assistance. Even though he is now Editor-in-Chief, Steve Rutter continues to support all efforts to produce, update, and promote this book. Serina Beauparlant came on board as Sociology Editor at Wadsworth and was not content to be a passive agent for this revision. Instead, she gave me the benefit of her work in the field and filled me in on the latest ideas and trends in family studies. Marla Nowick, Senior Editorial Assistant, was the anchor for all the tasks that must be done to put together a new manuscript. She is an excellent coordinator and maintained morale in the face of the tricky problems that beset any effort involving forty different authors. I am also grateful to the manuscript reviewers for their invaluable suggestions. They are Rose Brewer, University of Minnesota; Terry Jones, California State University, Hayward; and Teresa Labov, University of Pennsylvania. Others who played crucial roles in the production process were Mary Douglas, Production Coordinator, Toni Haskell, Copy Editor, and Robert Kauser, Permissions Editor whose tasks included

quiet diplomacy and some detective work. Finally, I thank Professor Talmadge Anderson, the editor of the *Western Journal of Black Studies*, who was kind enough to give me permission to reprint articles from his journal. Moreover, he has been a good friend and source of support since he first met me as a young graduate student many years ago. Erma

Lawson and Lawrence Gary were also helpful in my efforts to organize this book. Because only my name appears on the front of this book, I remain responsible for any omissions and flaws.

Robert Staples

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PART ONE

The Setting

Many changes have occurred in this country since 1954, covering a wide array of personalities, values, and institutions and bringing about a marked change in the functioning of society as a whole. These changes have been most dramatic within the institution of the family where they have had a most telling effect on our personal lives. We are all, to some degree, affected by increasing sexual permissiveness, changes in sex role expectations, a declining fertility rate, altered attitudes toward childbearing and childrearing, a continuing increase in the divorce rate, and the like.

One would not expect Black families to be immune to the forces modifying our family forms. There is ample evidence that they are not. At the same time, their special status as a racial minority with a singular history continues to give the Black marital and family patterns a unique character. Despite what many allege to be the positive gains of the sixties and seventies, the problems of poverty and racial oppression continue to plague large numbers of Afro-Americans. Black Americans are still spatially segregated from the majority of the more affluent white citizenry, and certain cultural values distinguish their family life in form and content from that of the middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon model.

Nevertheless, the commonality of the two may be greater than the differences. We lose nothing by admitting this. Moreover, the variations within the Black population may be greater than the differences between the two racial groups. Therefore, it becomes even more important to view the Black

family from the widest possible perspective, from its peculiar history to the alternate family life-styles now emerging.

The Changing Black Family

It is generally accepted that the precursor of contemporary sociological research and theories on the Black family is the work of the late Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Although Frazier's investigations of the Black family began in the twenties, his works are still considered the definitive findings on Black family life in the United States (Frazier, 1939). As a sociologist, Frazier was primarily interested in race relations as a social process, and he sought to explain that process through the study of the Black family. Through his training in the University of Chicago's social ecology school under the tutelage of Park, Wirth, Burgess, and others, Frazier came to believe that race relations proceeded through different stages of development to the final stage of assimilation.

Since it is through the family that the culture of a group is transmitted, Frazier chose this group as the object of his sociological study. Using the natural history approach, he explained the present condition of the Black family as the culmination of an evolutionary process, its structure strongly affected by the vestiges of slavery, racism, and economic exploitation. The institution of enslavement and slavery virtually destroyed the cultural

moorings of Blacks and prevented any perpetuation of African kinship and family relations. Consequently, the Black family developed various forms according to the different situations it encountered (Frazier, 1939).

Variations in sex and marital practices, according to Frazier, grew out of the social heritage of slavery; and what slavery began—the pattern of racism and economic deprivation—continued to impinge on the family life of Afro-Americans. The variations Frazier spoke of are: (1) the matriarchal character of the Black family whereby Black males are marginal, ineffective figures in the family constellation; (2) the instability of marital life resulting from the lack of a legal basis for marriage during the period of slavery, which meant that marriage never acquired the position of a strong institution in Black life and casual sex relations were the prevailing norm; and (3) the dissolution—caused by the process of urbanization—of the stability of family life that had existed among Black peasants in an agrarian society (Frazier, 1939).

Most of Frazier's studies were limited to pre-World War II Black family life. His research method was the use of case studies and documents whose content he analyzed and from which he attempted to deduce a pattern of Black family life. The next large-scale theory of the Black family was developed by Daniel Moynihan (1965); it was based largely on census data and pertained to Black family life as it existed in the sixties. In a sense, Moynihan attempted to confirm statistically Frazier's theory that the Black family was disorganized as a result of slavery, urbanization, and economic deprivation. But he added a new dimension to Frazier's theory: "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family" (Moynihan, 1965:5). Moynihan attempted to document his major hypothesis by citing statistics on the dissolution of Black marriages, the high rate of Black illegitimate births, the prevalence of female-headed households in the Black community, and how the deterioration of the Black family had led to a shocking increase in welfare dependency (Moynihan, 1965).

This study of the Black family, commonly referred to as the Moynihan Report, generated a largely critical response from members of the Black

community. It drew a mixed response from members of the white academic community, some critically supporting most of Moynihan's contentions, others imputing no validity to his assertions (Rainwater and Yancy, 1967; Staples and Mirande, 1980). The reasons for the negative reaction to Moynihan's study are manifest. In effect, he made a generalized indictment of all Black families. And, although he cited the antecedents of slavery and high unemployment as historically important variables, he shifted the burden of Black deprivation onto the Black family rather than the social structure of the United States.

The Moynihan Report assumed a greater importance than other studies on the Black family for several reasons. As an official government publication, it implied a shift in the government's position in dealing with the effects of racism and economic deprivation on the Black community. However, the Moynihan Report did not spell out a plan for action. The conclusion drawn by most people was that whatever his solution, it would focus on strengthening the Black family rather than dealing with the more relevant problems of segregation and discrimination.

Historical Background

The most ground-breaking research on Black families has been conducted by historians. For years the work of Frazier (1939), together with that of Stanley Elkins, had been accepted as the definitive history of Black families and posited as a causal explanation of their contemporary condition. Using traditional historical methods based on plantation records and slave owner testimony, both historians reached the conclusion that slavery destroyed the Black family and decimated Black culture. The first historian to challenge this thesis was Blassingame (1972), whose use of slave narratives indicated that in the slave quarters Black families did exist as functioning institutions and role models for others. Moreover, strong family ties persisted in face of the frequent breakups deriving from the slave trade. To further counteract the Frazier-Elkins thesis, Fogel and Engerman (1974) used elaborate quantitative methods to document that slave owners did not separate a

majority of the slave families. Their contention, also controversial, was that capitalistic efficiency of the slave system meant it was more practical to keep slave families intact.

Continuing in the vein of revisionist historical research, Genovese used a mix of slave holders' papers and slave testimony. Still, he concluded that Black culture, through compromise and negotiation between slaves and slave owners, did flourish during the era of slavery. Within that cultural vortex there was a variety of socially approved and sanctioned relationships between slave men and women. The alleged female matriarchy extant during that era was described by Genovese as a closer approximation to a healthy sexual equality than was possible for whites. Finally, the landmark study by Gutman (1976) put to rest one of the most common and enduring myths about Black families. Using census data for a number of cities between 1880 and 1925, Gutman found that the majority of Blacks of all social classes were lodged in nuclear families. Through the use of plantation birth records and marriage applications, he concluded that the biparental household was the dominant form during slavery. More important than Gutman's compelling evidence that slavery did not destroy the Black family was his contention that their family form in the past era had evolved from family and kinship patterns that had originated under slavery. This contention gives credence to the Africanity model, which assumes African origins for Afro-American family values, traits, and behavior.

Using a classical theory of slave family life, Stanley Elkins made a comparative analysis of the effect of slavery on the bondsman's family life in

North and South America. His thesis was that the principal differences between the two regions was the manumission process and the legal basis of marriage between slaves. That is, slaves could become free citizens more easily in South America and those who remained in bondage were permitted to have legal marriage ceremonies. The sanctity of the family was sanctioned in both law and the canons of the Catholic church. The reverse was true, he asserted, in the slave system of the United States. One should view the Elkins research critically since other historians contend that the slave code of which he speaks was not only unenforced but never promulgated in any of the South American countries. In fact, it is claimed, some of the measures encouraging marriage among slaves were designed to bind the slaves to the estates via family ties (Hall, 1970).

However, these historical studies demonstrate that the Black family was a stable unit during slavery and in the immediate postslavery years. The rise in out-of-wedlock births and female-headed households are concomitants of twentieth-century urban ghettos. A doubling of those phenomena is a function of the economic contingencies of industrial America. Unlike the European immigrants before them, U.S. Blacks were disadvantaged by the hard lines of Northern segregation along racial lines. Moreover, families in cities were more vulnerable to disruptions due to the traumatizing experiences of urbanization, the reduction of family functions, and the loss of extended family supports. In order to understand the modern Black family, it is necessary to look at how its structure is affected by socioeconomic forces.

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1 / The Changing Black Family

THE GROWING RACIAL DIFFERENCE IN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY PATTERNS

Reynolds Farley · Suzanne M. Bianchi

Since 1960, major changes have taken place in marital status and family structure, but their magnitude has been greater among blacks. In this paper, Farley and Bianchi review those changes and then consider two possible explanations for the growing racial difference. They find some empirical support for the explanation that the economic utility of marriage has declined more for black than for white women, but do not find support for the argument that the marriage market has become relatively worse for black than for white women.

Introduction

If one were to characterize changes in the marriage patterns of women between 1960 and the present, one would point to the delayed age at which first marriages occur resulting in an increased number

of years spent single prior to marriage. Women also have become more likely to end their first marriage with divorce and so the average duration of first marriages has declined while the time women spent divorced between marriages has increased. With the rise in divorce and separation we now see an increase in the proportion of women who remarry and experience a second period of separation, followed by divorce.

These trends characterize black as well as white women but during this period, particularly between 1970 and the present, changes have been much more substantial for blacks than for whites. The result has been increasingly divergent marital and family experiences. In this paper, we describe the nature of the divergence and explore two possible explanations. While much is known about the differences between the races in marital and family living arrangements, there has been little systematic exploration of why those differences have widened over the past twenty-five years.

TABLE 1 Indicators of Racial Differences in Marital and Family Status, 1960 to Mid-1980s

YEAR	WHITE	BLACK	RACIAL DIFFERENCE
	Percent of Women 15 to 44 Living with Husband		
1960 ^a	69%	52%	17
1970	61	42	19
1980	55	30	25
1984	55	28	27
	Percent of Births Delivered to Unmarried Women		
1960 ^a	2%	22%	20
1970	6	35	29
1980	11	55	44
1984	13	59	46
	Percent of Families with Children under 18 Maintained by a Woman		
1960 ^a	6%	24%	18
1970	9	33	24
1980	14	48	34
1984	15	50	35
	Percent of Children under Age 18 in Mother-Only Families		
1960 ^a	6%	20%	14
1970	8	29	21
1980	14	44	30
1984	15	50	35

^aData for 1960 refer to whites and non-whites.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1960*, PC(1)-1D, Table 176; PC(2)-4A, Table 2; *Census of Population: 1970*, PC(1)-D1, Table 203; *Census of Population: 1980*, PB80-1-D1-A, Table 264; *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 212, Table 4; No. 218, Table 1; No. 365, Table 4; No. 366, Table 1; No.

398, Table 1; No. 399, Table 4; U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, *Vital Statistics of the United States: 1970*, Vol. 1—Nativity, Table 1—29, *Monthly Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 31, No. 8 (Supplement), November 30, 1982, Table 15; Vol. 35, No. 4 (Supplement), July 18, 1986, Table 18.

Trends in Marital Status of Blacks and Whites

In 1960, 52 percent of black and 69 percent of white women 15 to 44 lived with a husband. By 1984, this proportion declined to 28 percent for black women, and 55 percent for white (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1963: Table 176; 1985b: Table 1). Two major changes produced this shift in marital status. First, young people increasingly delayed their marriage, resulting in a sharp rise in the proportion of young adults who were single. Second, an increasing proportion of marriages ended in separation or divorce.

Traditionally, blacks married at younger ages than whites but this was reversed in the 1950s and whites now marry at much younger ages than blacks

(Cherlin, 1981: Figure 4-1; Rodgers and Thornton, 1985; Michael and Tuma, 1985). An indication of these shifts is given in Figure 1 which shows the proportion of 20- to 24-year-old women and 25- to 29-year-old men who have married. The proportion for women peaked for both races at around 70 percent in the mid-to-late 1950s. By 1984, the proportion who had married fell to 20 percent for blacks and 40 percent for whites. A similar shift away from earlier marriage is evident among men and by the 1980s, fewer than one-half of black men aged 25 to 29 had married.

In addition to marrying at later ages, black and white women are spending less time in their first marriages. Demographic models suggest that as many as one-half of marriages contracted in the late

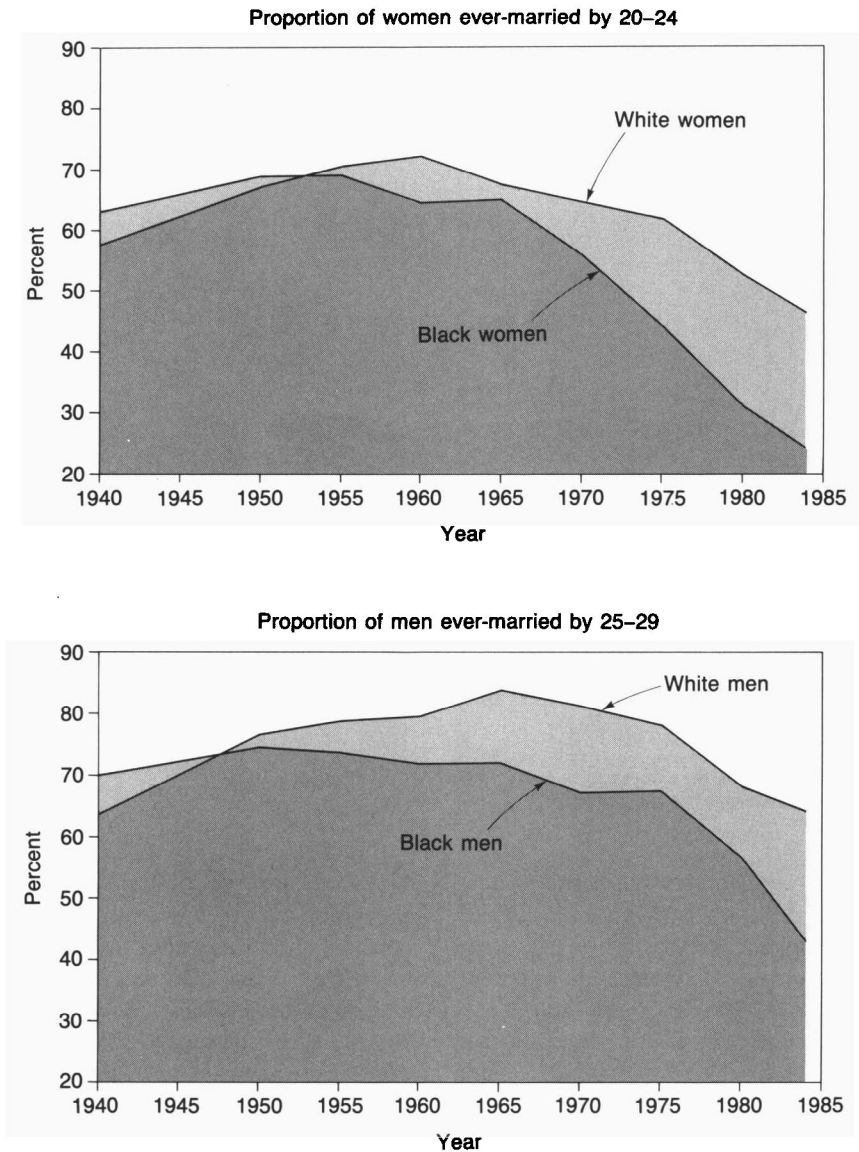


FIGURE 1 Proportion of Women Ever Married by 20–24 and Men by 25–29, by Race, 1940–1984^a

^aData prior to 1965 refer to non-whites.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1960*, PC(1)-10, Table 177; *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, Nos. 56, 62, 72, 105, 144, 212, 287, 365, and 399.

1970s will end in divorce. Among marriages contracted in the early 1940s, about one in four ended in divorce (Preston and McDonald, 1979; McCarthy, 1978; Plateris, 1978; Weed, 1980; Schoen et al., 1985).

The rate of marital dissolution due to separation or divorce is much higher for blacks than for whites. For example, among black women first marrying in 1960, approximately 48 percent separated

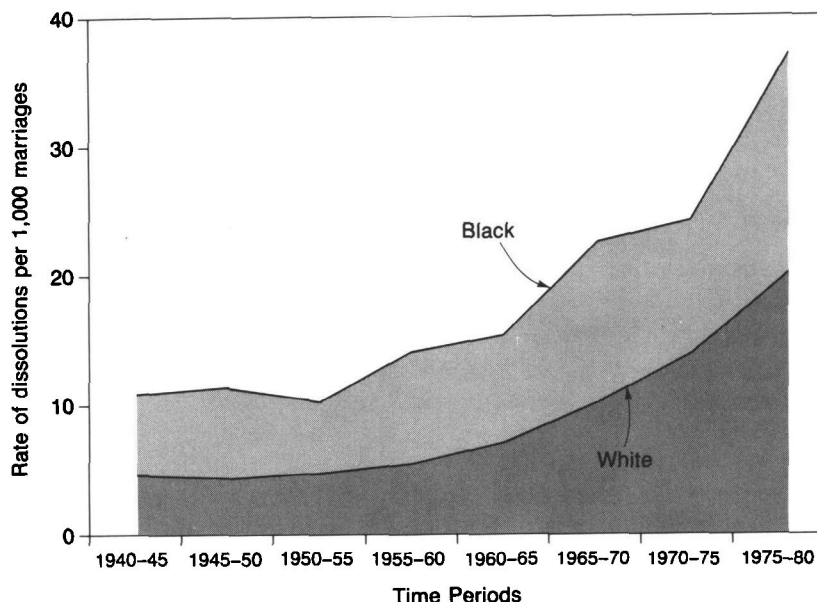


FIGURE 2 Rates of Separation or Divorce per 1,000 Marriages for Five-Year Periods from 1940 to 1980 for Black and White Women

Source: Thomas J. Espenshade, "Black-White Differences in Marriage, Separation, Divorce, and Remarriage," paper presented at the annual meetings of the Population Association of America, Pittsburgh, Penn., April 16, 1983.

from their husband within twenty years and 34 percent ended the marriage by divorce. For white women first marrying in 1960, the comparable proportions were 30 percent separating and 27 percent divorced (Thornton and Rodgers, 1983: Table 3-2).

As can be seen in Figure 2, the divorce/separation rates of black and white women have become more divergent since the early 1940s. Data shown in this figure are based on the work of Thomas Espenshade and describe rates of marital dissolution in different five-year intervals. In the early 1940s, the divorce/separation rate (per thousand marriages) was 11 for black women compared with 5 for white women. Over the next four decades, rates increased for both groups and by the late 1970s, black women had a divorce/separation rate of 38 compared with 21 for white women (Espenshade, 1985: Tables 3 and 4).

Blacks and whites differ substantially in what they do following marital discord. Data from the

1973 National Survey of Family Growth indicate that about nine out of ten white couples who separated obtained a divorce within five years but only one-half of the black couples divorced this rapidly (Thornton, 1977: Tables 1, 3, and 4; McCarthy, 1978: Table 2). Espenshade (1985: Table 6) has also shown that black women spend an average of 11 years separated between their first marriage and divorce compared with 2 years for white women.

Finally, black women are much less likely to remarry following divorce than are white women. Whereas remarriage rates have risen along with divorce rates for white women since the mid-1960s, remarriage probabilities have declined since the early 1960s for black women (Espenshade, 1985: 207-208).

Figure 3 is based upon the rates of marriage, divorce, and remarriage observed in five-year periods between 1940 and 1980, and shows the percent of a woman's lifetime which would be spent in

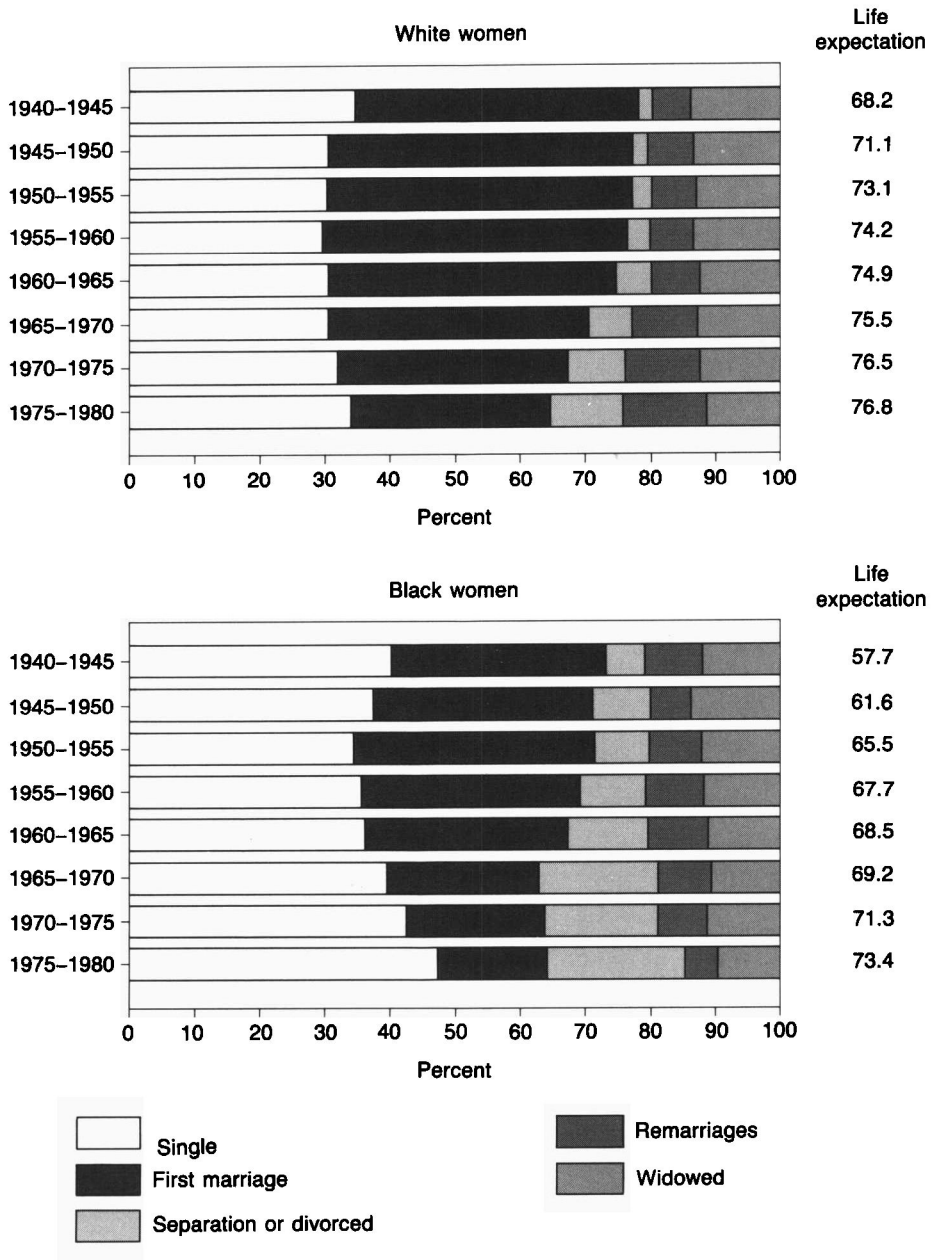


FIGURE 3 Percent of the Life Span Spent in Each of Five Marital Statuses for Black and White Women According to the Rates Observed in Five-Year Periods, 1940-1980

Source: Thomas J. Espenshade, "Marriage Trends in America: Estimates, Implications, and Underlying Causes," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (June, 1985): Tables 2 and 3.