The Marriage Mystery

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The African-American Family at the Forefront of Social Change

• In the last century the African-American family pioneered present day marriage conventions.
Dual-Earner Couples by Race 1940-2000

**Figure 5.** Percentage of Upper- and Lower-Middle-Class Wives in the Labor Force, by Race, 1940–1994
Relative Earnings within Married Couples


Relative Earnings within Married Couples


Returns to Marriage Greater by Race and Gender

Figure 3.
Log-Wage Difference from Never Married, by Race-Ethnicity and Gender: 1994-1996

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
Major Findings

The net effect of Direct and Indirect Gains to marriage is that married people have the highest household incomes.

Even though cohabiting women earn more than married women on average, a husband's earnings premium is so large that it offsets the cohabiting women's earning premium.

So, the net effect is that married women, on average, have higher household incomes than cohabiting or never-married women.

Married couples pool their resources with greater freedom, making the stream of consumption they derive from their incomes higher. For example, cohabiting couples are more likely to hold separate savings and checking accounts, which indicate that income pooling is more constrained than the pooling that occurs among married couples.
New Realities

Living Arrangements for Children under 18 by Race (1960-98)

Living Arrangements of Black Children Under Age 18, 1960-1998, White Family Formations vs Black Family Formations
New Realities - 2

QuickTime™ and a TIFF (LZW) decompressor are needed to see this picture.
What Happened - 1?

Take the occupational distribution . . .

From Ruggles and Fitch, 2004 with permission
What Happened - 2?

Figure 7. Percent Never-married: Native-born Black Men Ages 22-27, by Occupational Group, 1850-1990

multiply by unmarried in each group.

From Ruggles and Fitch, 2004 with permission
What Happened - 3?

... and the marriage boom for blacks evaporates.

From Ruggles and Fitch, 2004 with permission.
Consequences -1

• At all ages, black men in 2000 were more often married than black women.

• This is very strange.

• For both men and women, the curve has flattened dramatically and is now almost linear.

Ruggles and Fitch - with permission
Consequences - 1

Figure 11. Percent ever-married by age:
Black men and women, 2000
Consequences -2

Greater Fiscal Parity in Black Marriages
Chart XI: Fiscal Parity by Race and Education among Dual-Earner Married Couples With Children

- wife's share of household earnings minus 50%

- whites with child hs or less - 50%
- whites with child some college or more
- blacks with child hs or less
- black with child with some college or more
Consequences - 3

Black Marriages are more difficult to sustain

The historical strength of the institution among African-Americans is also weak. African-Americans are more likely to divorce because it is more difficult to maintain relationships based on financial parity than it is to maintain unions based on equality.
A commitment to fiscal parity may also contribute to lower African-American marriage rates. African-American women are more likely than their white or Hispanic peers to expect an adequate income in their male partner before marriage (Tucker). And given the dynamics of modern families, it is reasonably to assume that African-American men hold similar expectations of their partners. Thus, just as evenly yoked couples must negotiate the perils of maintaining parity after marriage, similar dynamics may be at work before marriage. Each party to a prospective marriage must also meet the expectation of parity.