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Author(s): Valerie Kincade Oppenheimer
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# Women's Rising Employment and the Future of the Family in Industrial Societies

VALERIE KINCADE OPPENHEIMER

AMERICAN MARRIAGE AND FERTILITY BEHAVIOR has changed dramatically during the past 15 to 20 years. In contrast to the early ages at marriage characteristic of the post–World War II period, age at marriage has risen rapidly for both men and women (Rodgers and Thornton 1985; Espenshade 1985; Bianchi and Spain 1986). The proportion who will remain unmarried is probably growing as well, depending on how many of the apparent postponers never marry. Despite increasingly delayed marriage, however, Americans are becoming sexually active at younger ages (Hofferth, Kahn, and Baldwin 1987). Marital instability has also risen greatly so that, according to one estimate, as many as two-thirds of recent first marriages may end in separation or divorce (Martin and Bumpass 1989). Although it has leveled off in the 1980s and has even shown some signs of rising (National Center for Health Statistics 1991), fertility dropped substantially after the early 1960s, partly because of increasing delays in marriage and the start of childbearing after marriage, and partly because of declines in the total number of children women bear (Westoff 1983). One consequence of these changes in sexual, marital, and fertility behavior is that a rising proportion of all births are out-of-wedlock (Smith and Cutright 1988). For blacks, in fact, despite a decline in childbearing among the unmarried between 1963 and 1983, delayed marriage and nonmarriage increased so much and marital fertility declined so substantially that the proportion of all births out-of-wedlock rose from 26 percent in 1963 to almost 60 percent by 1983[1] (Smith and Cutright 1988: 239). Nor have these trends been characteristic solely of American society; they have also been exhibited by most other modern industrial societies, especially those in the West (van de Kaa 1987; Kiernan 1989; Hoem and Hoem 1988; Blossfeld 1994).

Demographers are naturally concerned with studying the determinants of these various trends, but the changes have been so extensive and so multifaceted that the analytical question has switched from the reason for this or that particular demographic shift to an assessment of what is happening generally to the marriage and family systems of modern societies and why. Accordingly, each demographic change is increasingly treated as just one example of the presumed underlying transformation.

Drawing on a large body of theoretical and empirical demographic research, this article critically examines the widely held view that the major factor responsible for these trends in family behavior is the postwar change in women's economic position. Because of the broad scope of the hypothesis, my analysis will examine it over its entire domain; but, to make the problem somewhat more tractable, the greatest stress will be on the analysis of marriage formation. My major argument is that the increasingly one-sided emphasis on the role of women's changing economic behavior and status as the most important determinant of recent demographic shifts is theoretically and empirically unwarranted. Moreover, the current preoccupation with women in demographic research is distorting our assessment of the nature and significance of these changes, thereby discouraging the investigation of potentially interesting alternative or supplementary explanations. In particular, I will argue that, although men's economic status has substantially deteriorated since the early 1970s, social scientists are paying scant attention to its impact on demographic behavior. Some of the reasons for this may be the demographer's traditional preoccupation with women as the reproducers in society, combined with the difficulty of studying male marriage and fertility behavior; the rise of feminism has also played a major role in stimulating interest in the impact of women's economic status on family behavior. In addition, the close association in demographers' minds between men's labor market position and relative cohort size has meant that the recent disenchantment with cohort explanations of demographic change has also deflected interest away from studying men. Whatever the reason, the net result has been a substantial decline in analyses of the implications of men's labor market position for family behavior, the one major exception being work on blacks. However, as this article shows, the deterioration in young men's labor market position is so substantial that, whatever the causes, its demographic consequences should not be ignored.

## The hypothesis of women's growing economic independence

A long tradition in the social science literature emphasizes the functional importance of differentiated sex roles for social integration. One major pro-

ponent of this argument in the early postwar period was the sociologist Talcott Parsons, who argued that sex-role segregation is a functional necessity for marital stability and even for the viability of society itself. This is so, Parsons maintained, because it is the most important mechanism preventing disruptive competition between husband and wife. He concluded that "it is scarcely conceivable that the main lines of the present situation could be altered without consequences fatal to the total of our unique society" (Parsons 1949: 268; see also Oppenheimer 1977; and D'Amico 1983). More recently, the idea that sex-differentiated economic roles have a major integrative function in the family has been elaborated in the economic theories of Gary Becker (1974, 1981).

Becker's (1981) theories of marriage and family behavior hypothesize that women's increasing labor force participation has had a critical and presumably irreversible impact on the family. In the case of fertility, he argues that the major component of the cost of children is the "indirect" cost—the cost of the mother's time. Therefore as women's wages rise, the cost of children increases, leading to the observed long-term decline in fertility experienced by industrial societies. Furthermore, declining fertility reduces the desirability of marriage since children represent the major source of marriage-specific capital; hence as fertility declines the gains to marriage are reduced. In the case of marriage, Becker argues that the major gain to marriage arises out of the mutual dependence between spouses that results from each specializing in certain functions—the woman in domestic production, the man in market work. Marriage then involves trading the fruits of these different skills. In response to rising wages, however, women's labor force participation also rises. As a consequence, women become less specialized and more economically independent, leading to a decline in the desirability of marrying or of staying married. As a variant of this theme, Becker also argues that welfare payments to women provide another means of achieving economic independence; the growth of the welfare state, along with women's rising employment, discourages stable marriages. Moreover, the growing prevalence of divorce increases the importance of a woman's developing marketable skills while further reducing the desirability of investing heavily in marriage-specific capital (i.e., children). An additional consequence of the decreasing gain to marriage is the rise in nonmarital cohabitation and female-headed families and the large growth in the ratio of the illegitimate to the legitimate birth rate.

The notion that, by creating an interdependence, specialization has a major role in promoting social integration is also an important tradition in sociological analysis. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, first published in 1893, Durkheim (1960) argued that there are two kinds of social solidarity—one based on similarity (mechanical solidarity), the other on the interdependence produced by the division of labor (organic solidarity). While he mainly

applied these concepts to occupational differentiation and its effect on social integration in the larger society, Durkheim started out by using the sexual division of labor as an example of organic solidarity, arguing that:

> the most remarkable effect of the division of labor is not that it increases the output of functions divided, but that it renders them solidary. . . . Permit the sexual division of labor to recede below a certain level and conjugal society would eventually subsist in sexual relations preeminently ephemeral. . . . It is possible that the economic utility of the division of labor may have a hand in this, but, in any case, it passes far beyond purely economic interests, for it consists in the establishment of a social and moral order *sui generis*. Through it, individuals are linked to one another. Without it, they would be independent. (Durkheim 1960: 60–61)

Not all researchers subscribe to Becker's or Durkheim's emphasis on the role of specialization per se in providing the gain to marriage and the ensuing reductions in such a gain once women's employment increases. Nevertheless, an economic independence argument of one sort or another, whether it be expressed in the terminology of exchange theory or some other perspective such as feminism, has had wide appeal since it can easily be incorporated into extremely diverse theoretical and ideological positions (Ross and Sawhill 1975; Cherlin 1980, 1992; Preston and Richards 1975; Waite and Spitze 1981; Fuchs 1983; Espenshade 1985; Goldscheider and Waite 1986; Farley 1988; Schoen and Wooldredge 1989; McLanahan 1991). Even where scholars do not espouse a particular position themselves, the independence hypothesis plays a prominent role in their discussions of the major determinants of changes in marriage behavior (Espenshade 1985; Cherlin 1988, 1992). In sum, married women's rising employment is increasingly seen as the single most critical factor transforming the family system of American society; for many, this transformation signifies the unraveling of America's social heritage. As I will argue below, however, such an apocalyptic view of the consequences of women's changing economic behavior is theoretically and empirically unwarranted and, furthermore, shifts our analytical attention away from important issues.

The following critical analysis of the economic independence hypothesis explores four major questions. First, I examine the historical "fit" between changes in married women's labor force participation and the observed patterns and trends in marriage formation, divorce, and fertility. Much of the empirical plausibility of the hypothesis is based on the apparent coincidence of trends in family behavior on the one hand and the rise in married women's employment on the other. Hence, it is important to review the extent to which recent and past demographic and labor force trends and patterns support this position.

The next three questions focus particularly on marriage formation. First, I try to pin down the nature of the marital phenomena that theories on women's economic independence seek to explain. Is it delayed marriage, nonmarriage, or both that are being predicted? At issue here is how well the dependent variables of the theory fit the behavioral changes we are actually observing.

Next I assess the strength of the empirical support for the hypothesis. While the juxtaposition of various trends has lent plausibility to the argument, how much direct evidence is there at the micro level that women's greater economic independence discourages marriage formation? That women's employment has been rapidly rising will explain little if it cannot be shown that their economic behavior has a marked impact on marriage behavior.

Finally, I critically examine the specialization argument itself. It provides a core feature of Becker's theory of marriage since the mutual interdependence between the spouses it presumably produces provides the major gain to marriage; this theme is emphasized in the sociological literature as well. The question I examine is the viability of an individual or family strategy of sex-role specialization in societies characterized by a small independent nuclear family system. Could specialization actually put individuals and families at risk? Here I think that an examination of the intrafamilial division of labor from a historical perspective casts a different light on changes in women's economic role in the family.

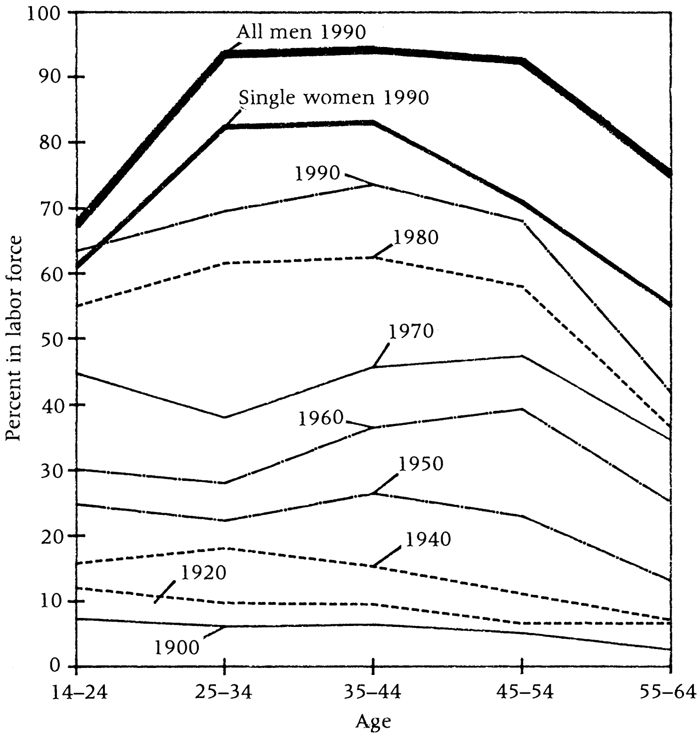
## What is the appropriate historical benchmark?

### Trends in married women's employment

Although married women's employment outside the home increased gradually throughout the first 40 years of the twentieth century, the major transformation in their economic behavior came after 1940 (Figure 1). Between 1940 and 1960 alone, wives' labor force participation either doubled or tripled, depending on the age group. Between 1960 and 1980 there was another quantum leap in work rates, especially for younger wives, and participation rates have continued to increase during the 1980s. By 1990, almost 70 percent of wives between ages 20 and 54 were in the labor force, compared to less than 20 percent in 1940 and only about 5 percent in 1900. In all, it is primarily in the postwar period that the magnitude of the changes in married women's employment could have the kind of substantial demographic impact posited by the independence hypothesis.

Partly because the most dramatic increases in employment happened after 1940 and were matched by equally marked shifts in demographic be-

**FIGURE 1 Labor force participation rates of US married women, 1900–1990, and of single women and all men, 1990, by age**




SOURCES: Smith and Ward 1985; US censuses; Current Population Surveys.

havior starting in the 1960s, most discussions of recent trends in marriage and fertility behavior take as their starting point the early postwar period (Becker 1981; Davis 1985; Espenshade 1985; Goldscheider and Waite 1986; Farley 1988). In effect, the marriage and family behavior of the 1950s and early 1960s has been used as the benchmark against which subsequent changes are compared. Even more, this benchmark has come to exemplify the "traditional" American family. This would be justified, however, only if the marriage and family patterns of the baby boom era were representative of historical periods predating the most rapid rise in married women's employment and therefore predating the effect of the presumed growth in their economic independence. Thus, it is worthwhile reviewing the long-term trends in marriage and fertility behavior to ascertain how closely this behavior resembles the 1950s benchmark.

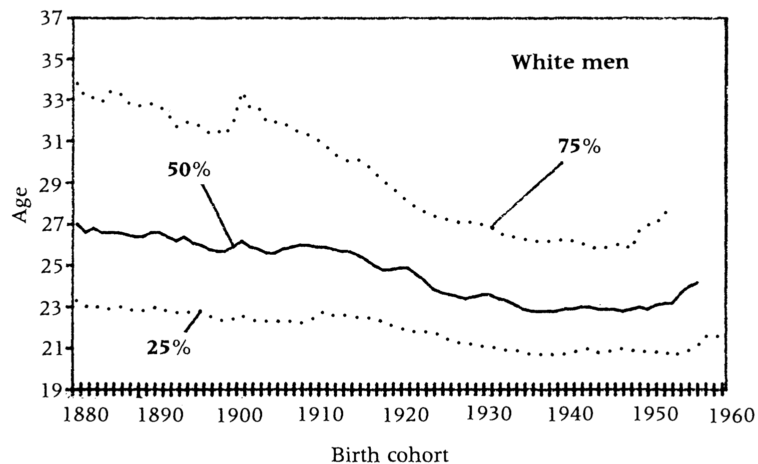
*Marriage and divorce trends* Data on marriage timing early in US history are not readily available. Sanderson (1979) has estimated that the

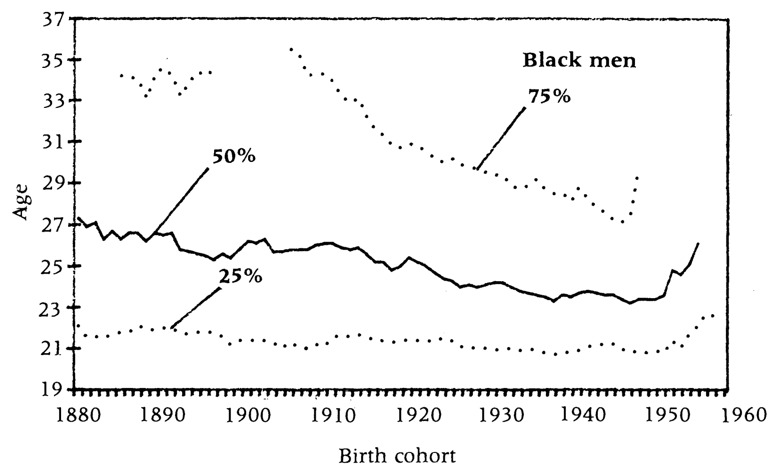
singulate mean age at marriage for white women in 1800 was only 19.3, quite young for a population which, at that time, was of predominantly Western European origin. Age at marriage apparently rose considerably during the nineteenth century (Haines 1990). Using census and Current Population Survey (CPS) data, Thornton and Rodgers (1983) have reconstructed marriage formation patterns, by race and sex, for the birth cohorts of 1880 through those of the mid-1950s. Their estimates of the age at which 25, 50, and 75 percent of the cohorts were ever married are presented in Figure 2.

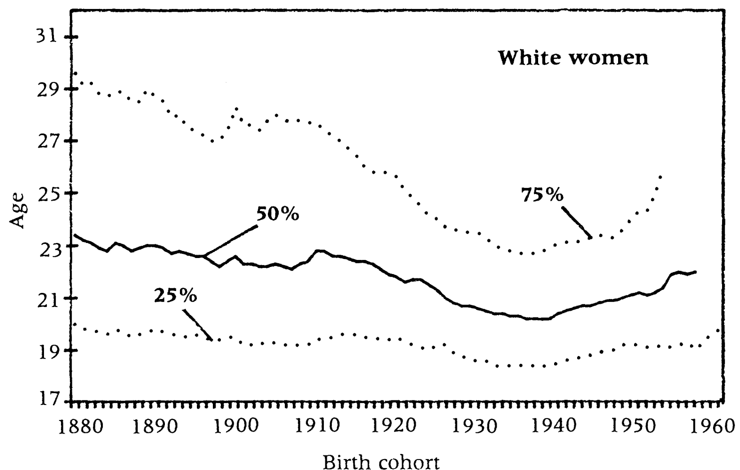
The data in Figure 2 provide no evidence that the marriage behavior of couples reaching young adulthood in the 1950s represented a historically "traditional" marriage pattern in the United States while current behavior signifies a major departure from that tradition. On the contrary, age at marriage was much more delayed for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cohorts compared to cohorts reaching maturity during the baby boom era. In fact, the marriage formation behavior of recent cohorts is starting to resemble that of women born around the turn of the century. Moreover, the common practice of focusing on a measure of central tendency, in this case the age by which half the cohort had ever married, greatly understates the frequency of delayed marriage in the first 30 years of the twentieth century. Marriage timing was much more variable then, largely because of a strongly positively skewed age-at-marriage distribution, as indicated by the high age at the 75th percentile and the large difference between the 50th and 75th percentiles (see also Sweet and Bumpass 1987: 15ff). Blacks, in particular, showed considerable diversity in their marriage patterns and delayed marriage was quite common. The twentieth century actually brought a substantial decline in just how late late-marriers were forming unions, especially among whites. In fact, these declines started among early twentieth-century cohorts and even continued for cohorts reaching adulthood during the Great Depression. Overall, the baby boom era represented a relatively short-lived homogeneity in the timing of marriage that is not only unusual today but was just as uncharacteristic of early twentieth-century cohorts.

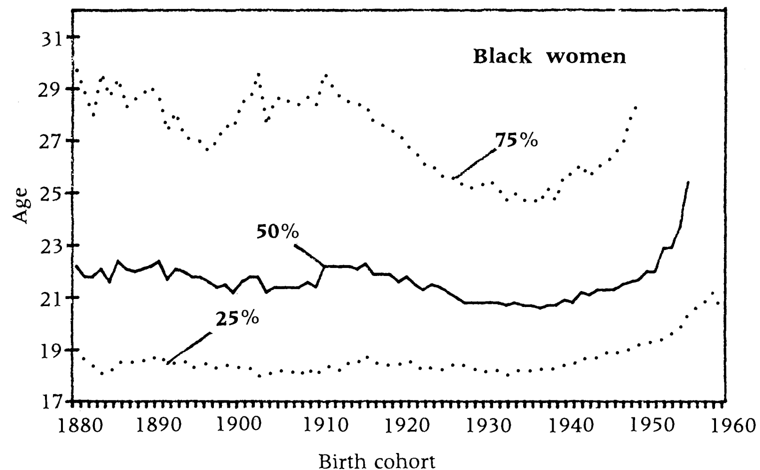
In light of the historical evidence that age at marriage was highly variable in the United States and that delayed marriage was quite common in periods when the traditional family was presumably very strong, it does not seem meaningful to talk about any particular age at marriage per se as "traditional"—an age from which recent patterns presumably represent a sharp departure as women's economic independence rose. Instead, what was really traditional was the sensitivity of marriage formation to varying circumstances. Moreover, the notion of a traditional sensitivity of marriage to exogenous circumstances, rather than a traditional age at marriage per se, fits well with the historical patterns of Western European societies (Hajnal

**FIGURE 2 Age at which specified percent had ever married, by race and sex: US birth cohorts 1880–1960**



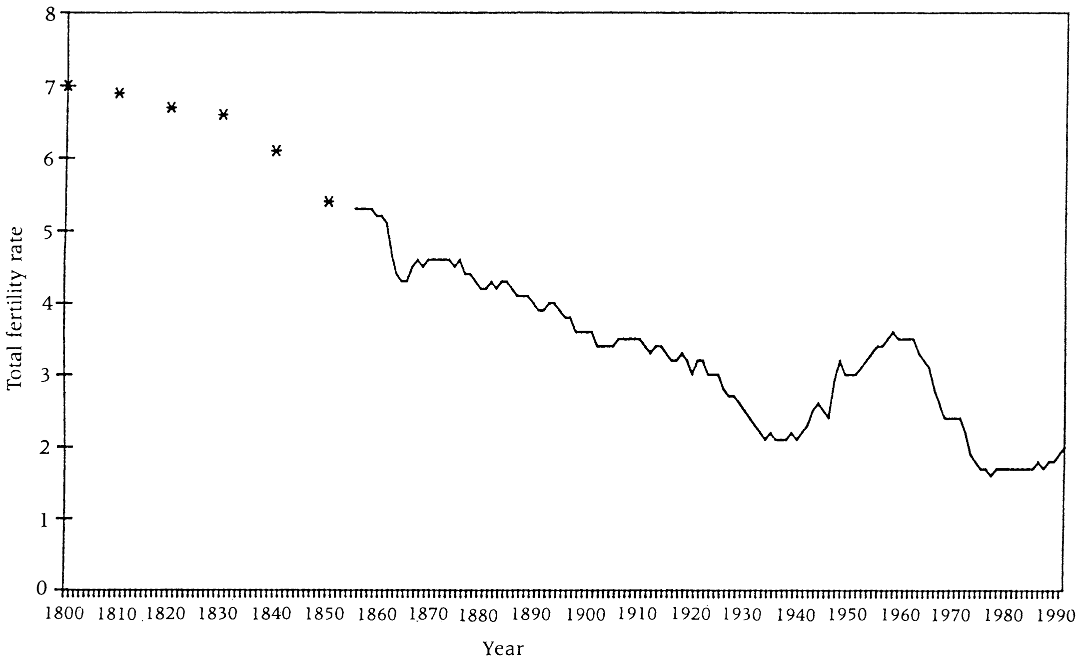

SOURCE: Thornton and Rodgers 1983.

1965; Wrigley and Schofield 1981; Goldstone 1986; Watkins 1984; Haines 1990). Rather than representing a universal moral imperative, marriage was typically contingent on a variety of circumstances. What has received the greatest emphasis in the literature is the longstanding requirement that young couples be economically independent before they marry and, in addition, have the realistic long-term expectation of maintaining a "suitable" life style.[2] In addition, while the economic ability of young marrieds to establish themselves has received the greatest research emphasis, obligations to parents or dependent siblings are also recognized as a traditionally important factor in marriage delays and nonmarriage (Watkins 1984; Alter 1988).

With regard to marital instability, although the proportion of all marriages ending in divorce has risen substantially since the 1950s and 1960s,[3] the trend toward increased marital instability is of long standing in American society; furthermore marriages contracted during the baby boom era were more stable than marriages contracted somewhat earlier as well as later and hence, once again, the baby boom era shows itself to be atypical in a historical context (Preston and McDonald 1979).

*Fertility trends* US fertility has declined markedly since the late 1950s (Figure 3). Once again, however, from a historical perspective it is the de-

**FIGURE 3 White total fertility rate: United States, 1800–1990**




SOURCES: Coale and Zelnick 1963; US Bureau of the Census 1975; National Center for Health Statistics 1991, 1993.

mographic behavior of the early postwar period, rather than that of recent cohorts, that stands out as unusual (if not anomalous); except for the prolonged baby boom, the total fertility rate has been declining since at least 1800. Moreover, the data shown in Figure 3 tend to overstate the differences between late nineteenth-century fertility and the low fertility of the 1970s and 1980s because the composition of the population was so different around the turn of the century. At that time, much higher proportions of Americans were living on farms or else were foreign born. Going beyond these compositional differences, the recent work of several demographers shows that not only was marital fertility under control fairly early in US history, but low—even below-replacement—fertility is not just a late twentieth-century phenomenon (Sanderson 1987; David and Sanderson 1987; Wilcox and Golden 1982; Tolnay and Guest 1982, 1984; Morgan 1991; and Haines 1990). Sanderson (1987), for example, finds that in the Northeast and for persons most comparable to the average American of recent years—urban whites of native parentage—the mean number of children ever born to ever-married women aged 45–54 in 1900 was only 3.0, of which 2.1 were surviving; for all such women (regardless of marital status) the number surviving was 1.8—that is, below replacement level. Fertility was higher in the North Central states and the South but, even so, the number of children surviving to Southern women was only 2.4. Nor could the low fertility of white women of native parentage in the Northeast (or other regions) be attributed to their extensive employment. Although highest in the Northeast, the proportion of married women, husband present, who reported an occupation in 1900 varied between 2 and 4 percent for those in the 20–44 age group (Sanderson 1987: 308).

Carrying this research farther back, David and Sanderson (1987) conclude that a small-family pattern did not gradually emerge in the United States; instead, among white native urban women, low fertility was already in place by the 1850s. The gradualness of the trend thereafter for the United States as a whole largely reflected the amount of time it took to make the compositional shift from a rural to an urban society and for a reduction in the proportion of the American population of foreign stock (David and Sanderson 1987; Wilcox and Golden 1982).

This brief review of demographic trends has reiterated several well-known findings. As others have pointed out, the baby boom period is highly unusual when viewed in the overall context of long-run demographic trends in the United States (Cherlin 1992; Westoff 1983; Goldscheider and Waite 1991; Coontz 1992). While this is well recognized on one level, researchers appear to have ignored the full implications of these historical patterns by arbitrarily limiting their discussions of recent trends to a comparison with the anomolous patterns of the 1950s and early 1960s. The whole prewar period has not been denied so much as it has been gratuitously treated as

theoretically and empirically irrelevant to recent trends. Although the marriage and family patterns of the baby boom do not empirically typify the reality of a traditional American way of life, they have achieved this status theoretically, becoming the most recent version of what Goode has called "the classical family of Western nostalgia" (Goode 1963: 6). The result is a considerable exaggeration of the extensiveness of the break with traditional patterns and of the historical origins of many recent trends, thereby creating a spuriously high correlation with changes in women's employment.

These demographic and employment trends also have other implications for the economic independence argument. The entire postwar period, including the baby boom era, was characterized by a rapid rise in the employment of married women and hence, by this indicator, it was by no means a period of stable or rising sex-role specialization. The increase in employment was initially most dramatic among women past the childbearing period, it is true, but work rates rose rapidly for younger married women as well. At the same time as couples were marrying and having children much earlier, increasing their family size, and exhibiting more stable marriages, married women of all ages were flocking into the labor market in ever greater numbers. According to the theory, their work rates should have been stable or declining rather than increasing. If the baby boom era had just represented a continuation of highly family-oriented behavior, then the lack of an immediate response to women's rising employment might possibly be attributed to a lag effect. However, this is not the case. The postwar demographic behavior was largely a reversal of past trends but a reversal that was obviously not precipitated by a decline in married women's labor market involvement.

## Delayed marriage or nonmarriage?

A critical issue in any empirical test of a hypothesis is how well the phenomenon being measured matches the phenomenon being predicted by the theory. If the measured phenomenon is only a very weak indicator of the predicted one, then even an apparently strong relationship provides a poor test. The analysis of variations in marriage behavior raises particularly knotty problems in this respect. The declines in first or remarriage rates or the decreasing proportions ever married at younger ages that we have observed in recent years confound two different phenomena—delayed marriage (or remarriage) and nonmarriage (or non-remarriage). Until cohorts reach a fairly late age (especially in the case of remarriage), we will be uncertain what proportions will never marry (or remarry). Of course, nonmarriage has a certain relationship to delayed marriage since a considerable delay in marriage may itself promote some nonmarriage, especially for women, whose marriage-market position appears to deteriorate with

age (Goldman et al. 1984; Watkins 1984). Moreover, in a multinational analysis, Dixon (1978) found that a substantial proportion of the variation in the percentage never marrying could be accounted for by delayed marriage, especially before 1960. Aside from this issue, however, nonmarriage and delayed marriage are two rather different phenomena.

There are many reasons why varying numbers of people may want to or feel compelled to delay marriage but still wish to marry eventually. Economic factors, school enrollment, service in the military, getting established in a career, and so on, may all signify the necessity or desirability of delaying marriage without affecting the desirability of marriage per se. Theories designed to explain nonmarriage may not be relevant if much of what is really happening is delayed marriage. Moreover, the particularly late age at which delayed marriers marry in a period of high average age at marriage greatly increases the difficulty of interpreting whether or not current trends signify a considerable rise in nonmarriage.

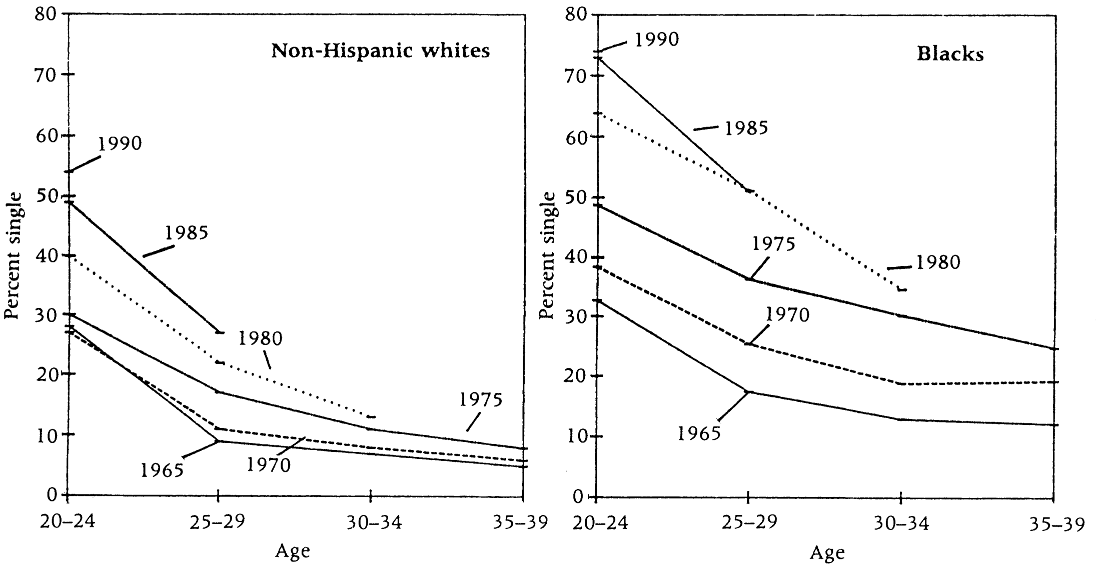
The argument that women's increasing economic independence (due to their rising employment) sharply reduces the desirability of marriage may or may not be true, but it is essentially a hypothesis about whether people marry, not when.[4] Little attention is paid, however, to the important analytical distinction between delayed and nonmarriage and how this should affect empirical investigations of the hypothesis. As a result, the hypothesis garners far more apparent empirical support for its position than is analytically warranted. Further, because the theory defines the problem in terms of the desirability of marrying versus not marrying, it immediately transforms our perception of the recent trends into one with alarming implications. A critical empirical issue is whether these trends represent a rejection of marriage as a way of life or whether they are primarily indicative of marriage or remarriage postponement, perhaps in response to economic or other difficulties. If postponement represents the major part of the phenomenon we are observing, then although independence theories might explain part of any increase in nonmarriage, they are not highly relevant to the bulk of the changes we have been observing.

It is not possible to provide a definitive answer to whether recent trends mainly signify rising rates of nonmarriage or of delayed marriage, because most of the cohorts involved are not yet old enough to reveal what proportion will never marry. Nevertheless, I will approach the problem by exploring three relevant questions. First, does marriage and remarriage behavior itself indicate that it is primarily delayed marriage rather than nonmarriage that accounts for the trends? Second, what can the considerable increase in nonmarital cohabitation tell us about what is happening to marriage? Finally, what do attitudinal studies indicate about changes in the subjective desirability of marriage and what are some of the problems involved in interpreting attitudinal data?

*Marriage behavior* To begin, let us place recent trends in nonmarriage within a historical context. We saw earlier that delayed marriage was quite common among late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US cohorts—much higher than among 1930s cohorts although similar to the behavior of recent cohorts. What about the extent of nonmarriage? As one might expect, the proportion never marrying was also higher among turn-of-the-century cohorts than among 1930s cohorts. For whites born in 1880, for example, only 88 percent of both women and men had ever married by age 44. However, nonmarriage declined considerably in the first part of the twentieth century. Among the 1920s birth cohorts, the percent ever marrying had climbed to about 95 percent for women and 94 percent for men and increased somewhat further for the 1930s cohorts (Thornton and Rodgers 1983: Tables 2-1 to 2-4). The proportion ever marrying is projected to decline again, though by how much is uncertain. Bennett and his colleagues estimate that it will drop to 91 percent for white women from the cohorts of the early 1950s; Rodgers and Thornton reached similar conclusions, although using a somewhat different estimating technique (Bennett, Bloom, and Craig 1989; Rodgers and Thornton 1985). This is still above the proportions ever marrying for the cohorts of the 1880s but, judging from the continued substantial increases in the proportions single at younger ages, the proportions ever marrying may decrease still further.

Using March CPS public-use sample data, I examined the proportions single among successive out-of-school non-Hispanic white and black female cohorts, classified by the year they reached the age group 20–24 (Figure 4). Each line shows the percent still single at subsequent ages for cohorts reaching their early 20s at five-year intervals. The data reveal a continuing sharp increase in the proportions single in their 20s, a pattern that had not stabilized by 1990; hence it is difficult to assess the long-run implications of these trends for nonmarriage. Nevertheless, for the first wave of delayers, whom we can at least follow into their early 30s, there are no indications of a rise in nonmarriage that would exceed that of late nineteenth-century cohorts. For example, 40 percent of the cohorts who reached age 20–24 in 1980 were single at that time, compared to only 27 percent of the cohorts in this age group in 1970. However, the proportion of those 20–24 in 1980 who had not married by age 30–34 was only 13 percent by 1990, and it is unlikely that this figure represents the final extent of nonmarriage since older cohorts exhibited a decrease in the proportions never married even after ages 30–34. Whether such a low level of nonmarriage will continue, despite even greater delays among subsequent cohorts, remains to be seen. So far, at least, the percentages still single show a strong tendency to converge as cohorts reach older age groups; moreover, the degree of nonmarriage among whites does not represent a sharp contrast with previous historical periods characterized by delayed marriage.

**FIGURE 4 Percent single, by age and race, for out-of school cohorts, classified by the year in which they reached age 20–24: US women, selected years, 1965–90**




SOURCE: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Surveys, 1964–90, unified file

For black women, by contrast, there seems little doubt that, in addition to greater delays in marriage, the proportion who will never marry has been rising significantly and is historically unprecedented. It is unclear whether this represents a rejection of marriage or is indicative of the difficulties blacks have been experiencing in making a satisfactory marriage (Wilson and Neckerman 1987). For white women at least, the major story appears to be that of delayed marriage, a phenomenon that is not well addressed by a theory arguing that marriage per se is becoming less and less attractive.

Does the rapidly increasing prevalence of divorce signify a growth in the proportion of people rejecting marriage in general or rather an increasing rejection of particular marriages and/or a greater intolerance of being in an unhappy marriage (perhaps because marriage is becoming a more rather than a less critical personal relationship)? One indication of whether it is particular marriages or marriage in general that is being rejected is the extent of remarriage. Age-specific remarriage rates have fallen substantially since the mid-1960s (Bumpass et al. 1990). However, these are period measures and if economic conditions, for example, are depressing first marriage rates, they may also have the same discouraging effect on remarriage rates, especially since marital dissolution selects out those in a more unstable labor market position. Moreover, remarriage rates based on vital statistics do not control for compositional changes in a number of factors that

affect remarriage chances, such as age at marriage or at separation (Goldman et al. 1984; Bumpass et al. 1990; Smock 1990). In addition, due to more delayed marriage in the 1970s and 1980s, those divorced women who were 25–29 in 1965 are more likely to have been divorced a greater length of time (and hence have had more opportunity to remarry) than divorced women in that age group in 1985. For black women, however, the chances for ultimate remarriage, as for a first marriage, appear to be decreasing, though these data cannot tell us why.

*Cohabitation* Substantial changes in premarital sexual behavior, as well as a growing liberalization of attitudes regarding it, have occurred in the past 25 years (Gwartney-Gibbs 1986; Thornton 1988, 1989; Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Does this represent a rejection of marriage per se, perhaps even a trend toward more casual relationships that can easily be formed and just as easily broken? Or might the increase in cohabiting be a response to the necessity or desirability of delaying marriage? It may also signify a change in the nature of the courtship process and, as such, be responsible for greater delays in marriage.

The rapid rise in cohabiting began so recently, and our data about it are still so sketchy, that its role in marriage formation is difficult to assess. Regardless of any implications for nonmarriage, there is little doubt that the growing importance of cohabitation signifies a major change in the courtship process. Using data from the National Surveys of Families and Households (NSFH), Bumpass and Sweet (1989) found that the proportion of first marriages in which the couple cohabited beforehand has risen substantially—from 9 percent for the marriage cohorts of 1965–74 to 39 percent for the 1980–84 cohorts. Starting the union by cohabiting was still more common for those entering their second marriage, and this was even observed for earlier marriage cohorts; it rose from 29 percent to 54 percent respectively for the 1965–74 and 1980–84 cohorts. Whether cohabiting also signifies, for some, a social substitute for marriage, perhaps even connoting a highly casual relationship, is more difficult to determine. Bumpass and Sweet's findings on the fate of cohabiting unions suggest that cohabiting, like other heterosexual relationships, tends to have an inner dynamic—either the couple establishes more permanent ties (i.e., marries) or the relationship dissolves within a relatively short period of time. However, it is difficult to tell what happens to those who split up instead of marrying. Do they subsequently marry, or do they repeatedly form other short-lived cohabiting relationships? This issue has not been explored using the NSFH data and it may not yet be possible to do this, given the recency of the changes. Nevertheless, the small proportions *currently* cohabiting (e.g., 8 percent for all those 25–29 and 16 percent for the never-married in this age group) despite relatively high proportions who have *ever* cohabited (42

percent for the same age cohort) or who cohabited before their first marriage (36 percent) suggests that, so far, cohabitation is not a long-term substitute for marriage.

Cohabiting may not be so much a substitute for marriage as an adaptation to the delays in marriage caused by other factors such as the growing uncertainties associated with young men's deteriorating economic situation or with the more extensive career aspirations of young women (Oppenheimer 1988). Cohabiting gets young people out of high-cost search activities during a period of social immaturity but without incurring the penalties of either heterosexual isolation or promiscuity, and it often offers many of the benefits of marriage, including the pooling of resources and the economies of scale that living together provides. Cohabiting also provides some of the advantages of remaining single. While it may currently tie people up (though not as much as a marriage), its influence on future mating behavior is much less as it entails fewer long-run financial obligations. Nevertheless, cohabiting is probably a major factor in the rising delays in marriage, first, because cohabitations that do not work out are likely to take up more of a person's life than a dating relationship; more will be invested in them and they may take longer to dissolve. Moreover, while cohabiting, partners may not be actively engaged in marriage-market searches. Second, cohabitors who plan to marry each other may be under little pressure to formalize the union and only do so at the impetus of some critical life transition—for example, the desire to have a child or the imminent geographic relocation of one of the partners due to job mobility. There is not the same impetus to marry in the immediate future that once existed in an era when the every-day intimacy of living together was confined to the married state. The date of the marriage ceremony may increasingly represent the time when it is most convenient to publicly cement the bond between two persons, rather than signifying the date that a socially meaningful commitment occurred[5] (Bumpass and Sweet 1989).

*Attitudes* What do attitudinal data tell us about changes in the desirability of marriage, either because of women's growing economic independence or because changing norms are causing shifts in marriage and family behavior independently of economic factors? An increasing emphasis in the literature posits a cultural explanation of the recent behavioral changes in marriage and family behavior (Cherlin 1990; Preston 1987; Lesthaeghe 1983; Bianchi and Spain 1986; Thornton 1989). The basic idea is that in the West, modernization has inevitably led to the growth of individualism with its emphasis on the importance of self-fulfillment as opposed to the subordination of individual needs and desires to social norms and to the welfare of the group. As a result, people not only lead less traditional lives, but are also increasingly tolerant of differences in life styles among others.

In sum, the argument is that there is a general erosion of family norms with the result that marriage and family behavior is becoming more discretionary and less important in people's lives. This perspective takes us beyond the economist's narrow individualistic decisionmaking concern with the gain to marriage and into the sociological realm of norms and values; but, in a sense, the cultural argument is that the self-interested economic man (or woman) of traditional microeconomics is what has been emerging from the more tradition-bound conformist of the past.

Two different types of attitudinal questions need to be distinguished in examining changes in attitudes toward family behavior. First are the "evaluative" questions that seem to be expressly designed to establish the individual's moral positions and, if generally shared, might be interpreted as social norms. Second are the questions that ask respondents to predict their own future behaviors. These will reflect the personal preferences of individuals, as modified by their appreciation of the various constraints on their behavior, some of which may be normative.

In general, results from questions that ask for respondents' evaluations tell a mixed story. Americans have been surveyed on their opinions on sex roles since the 1930s, and these data do show a marked increase in egalitarian attitudes among both males and females as well as among both older and younger cohorts (Oppenheimer 1970; Cherlin and Walters 1981; Thornton 1989; Goldscheider and Waite 1991). The picture is less clear regarding attitudes toward the desirability of marriage and, unfortunately, most of the time series do not start until the mid-1970s, just about when age at marriage began to rise.[6] These surveys indicate that a substantial proportion of young people disagreed with statements that it is better for people to marry, although no increase in this negative attitude occurred in the 1980s, a period of rapid change in marriage formation, and responses appear to be highly sensitive to question wording (Thornton 1989). Attitudes toward divorce also seem to have become more permissive over the years, as did those concerning nonmarital cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing as well as premarital sex and childlessness[7] (Thornton 1989).

Although there is evidence of an increased permissiveness toward marital and sexual behavior, relatively few young Americans believe that remaining single is preferable; most feel that having a good marriage and family is important in their lives. Moreover, these views show no sign of diminishing. For example, the Monitoring the Future surveys report that in 1976–77 90.6 percent of female high school seniors thought that having a good marriage and family life was important (fully 78.5 percent thought it "extremely important"); by 1985–86, the proportions had even risen slightly. The survey also found that, at each interview, less than 3 percent of young women said they would prefer not to have a mate.[8] Despite these positive attitudes toward marriage in general, there is also evidence of an

increasing desire to delay marriage (Thornton 1989). Of course, these data may not accurately predict young people's future behavior, but they do indicate that few changes have occurred in their stated expectations or goals. Hence, they provide little support for the hypothesis that the perceived desirability of marriage is declining.

The argument that the normative imperative to marry has declined implies that recent changes in family behavior are due to a weakening in the coercive force of social norms. However, it is unclear how the rise in delayed marriage can be attributed to a declining moral imperative when it is preferences that should now be governing behavior under such an argument and these remain strongly in favor of marriage. And what of the causal role of norms in family behavior? Here one could envision at least two models of change. In one, modernization leads to (or involves) changes in family norms, which, in turn, change family behavior. Such a model supports the view of a monotonic change in marriage and fertility behavior, especially if modernization is perceived as underlying the whole process. An alternative scenario is that changing conditions can produce changes in norms and/or behavior, either of which can then affect the other, the causal direction predominating in any situation being an empirical question. This model envisions a diminished role for norms, which, at times, may not change at all or only after behavior has already changed. Such an approach is also not tied to monotonic trends in demographic behavior, and could readily predict fluctuations in behavior in response to fluctuating social or economic conditions.

While sociologists tend to be strongly committed to the idea that norms and values are typically determinants of behavior, I would argue that too exclusive a reliance on this causal ordering raises a number of empirical problems. Such a model, when combined with a modernization argument, is not well suited for explaining fluctuations in marriage or fertility behavior. On the other hand, a model where behavior is at least partly a response to changing conditions has no intrinsic difficulty in handling reversals in demographic behavior. Relying too exclusively on the supposed force of moral imperatives in the past also has a number of drawbacks. One question is how rigid these imperatives ever were. There is considerable evidence that the demographic, social, and economic context influences responses. This is undoubtedly one factor in the sensitivity of responses to question wording, but it may also be due to historical or short-term qualifications of norms that reflect realistically based differences in the sensitivity of respondents to mitigating circumstances. Thus, long before attitudes toward a married woman working outside the home showed evidence of a general decline in disapproval levels, responses to questions were highly sensitive to the qualifying conditions that were mentioned (Oppenheimer 1970: 39–52). If it was indicated that her work might take jobs away from

others, disapproval ratings were very high (around 86 percent in 1945) while if it was specified that it was to facilitate a young couple's marriage, the disapproval rate dropped considerably (to 33 and 39 percent in 1946 for men and women respondents respectively). And if it was to help the war effort, the proportion disapproving plummeted (to 13 percent in 1942).

The further question is how much Westerners ever believed that marriage was always better than remaining single; was there ever a normative imperative on this issue? As Watkins and others have pointed out, the relatively high proportions of never-marrying men and women in pre–twentieth-century Western Europe (as opposed to a pattern of universal marriage among much poorer Asian societies, for example) indicate that circumstances frequently made certain marriages unacceptable alternatives to singlehood (Smith 1981; Watkins 1984; Goldstone 1986). Yet this was presumably a time in which spinsterhood was denigrated and the so-called traditional family was the dominant institutional form. Moreover, too rigid an adherence to the notion of a historically strong normative imperative presumes that the early age at marriage and the exceptionally high proportion ever marrying for the baby boom era were due to such a moral imperative rather than to other factors such as a strong desire to marry, coupled with a favorable economic climate and other circumstances. We have no evidence that this was the case, and it is doubtful that we would then want to go on to argue that the delayed marriage and higher rates of nonmarriage around the turn of the century were therefore due to a lower moral imperative to marry at that time. Only if we conveniently forget about patterns of behavior in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and take the postwar baby boom as the model of the "traditional" American family can the moral imperative argument be very convincing.

Finally, there is little empirical research that actually tests the presumed causal effect of norms on behavior, and what evidence exists is often negative. For example, while there is considerable evidence that sex-role attitudes have changed substantially over time, the very extensiveness of these data also reveals that attitudes toward women's employment remained negative for 20 to 30 years after the rapid postwar increases in married women's employment had started, suggesting that attitudes were adjusting themselves (albeit slowly) to changing work behavior rather than representing a major force in producing these changes[9] (Oppenheimer 1970; Cherlin and Walters 1981; Mason and Bumpass 1973). An interesting analysis of the Study of American Families panel data showed, moreover, that women's 1962 attitudes toward divorce had no significant effect on whether their marriages dissolved between 1962 and 1977 (Thornton 1985). On the other hand, whether a woman experienced a divorce or separation during this period was the strongest determinant of attitudinal changes, substantially increasing their approval of divorce as a solution to troubled marriages.

## The effect of women's economic independence on marriage formation

Despite its widespread acceptance, the idea that women's rising employment is responsible for recent shifts in marital behavior has received surprisingly little direct empirical support, aside from the apparent negative correlation exhibited between recent time-series bearing on these trends. In fact, the evidence indicates that a better labor market position either has no effect or else has a positive one on women's marriage behavior. Take first the role of educational attainment, which is primarily used as a proxy for skill level but sometimes also for career aspirations (Goldscheider and Waite 1986). It is well known that the more-educated marry later, but is this because they are more economically independent and are "buying out" of marriage (an independence argument) or because they go to school longer and school enrollment is inhibiting marriage formation? There is little support for the economic independence hypothesis if the education/marriage-timing relationship is simply caused by the different lengths of time spent in school. Using CPS data, I have explored this issue in Figures 5 and 6 by examining the proportions of out-of-school men and women who were ever married by educational attainment and time out of school from 1964 to 1990.[10] The analysis is limited to non-Hispanic whites since Hispanics and blacks have very different marriage patterns but their samples were too small to support this level of detail in a descriptive analysis. Since school enrollment is a major inhibitor of marriage formation and the period right after leaving school is usually one of considerable career development and experimentation, I have roughly controlled for these factors by presenting the results in terms of estimated time out of school. This was calculated as age minus school years completed minus seven.

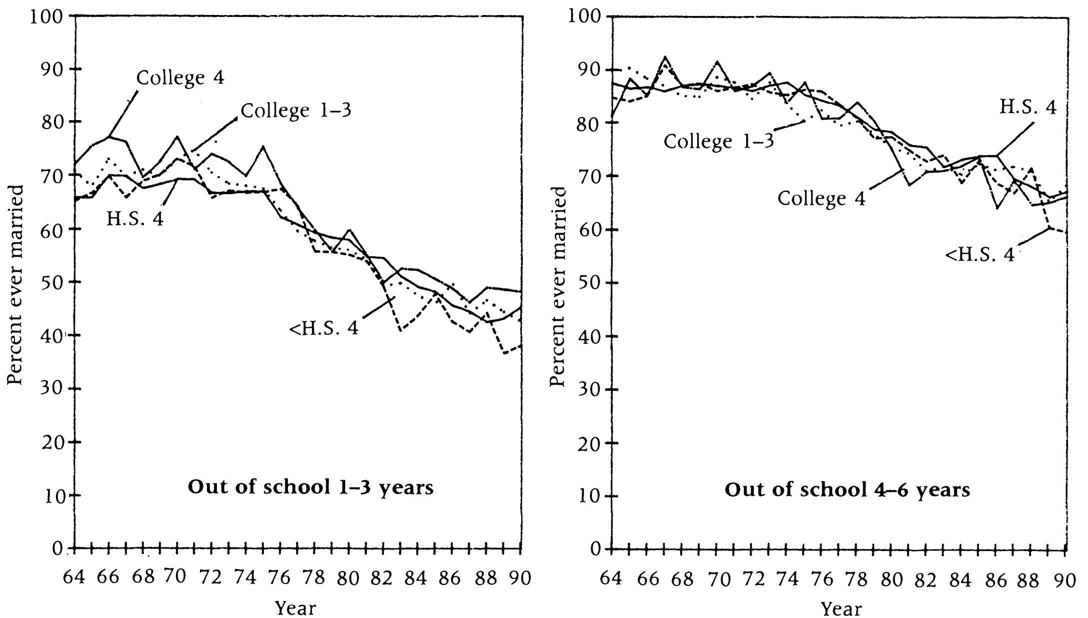
Looking at women estimated to be out of school for 1–3 years, there is very little difference among educational groups in the proportions ever married. The differences that exist do not support the independence hypothesis. In fact, throughout the period, those with a college education were somewhat more rather than less likely to be married shortly after leaving school; the least likely were high school dropouts. The same lack of large educational differences is also the case for those out 4–6 years. Furthermore, while the proportions ever married have declined substantially since the mid-1970s, the declines are roughly equal for each schooling group so that the curves are just as tightly intertwined in 1988 as they were in 1964. There is no evidence of a tendency toward the rejection of marriage or even its postponement that is particularly characteristic of women in a more favorable labor market position. Even the rise in the school-leaving age, resulting from increasing educational attainment, did not play a substantial role in women's rising age at marriage. Indeed, if school enrollment had

not changed since 1965, most of the observed decline in the proportion married would have occurred anyway because the increases in delayed marriage among those *not* enrolled dominated the trend[11] (Figure 5; Oppenheimer, Blossfeld, and Wackerow 1994).

The female marriage patterns are in strong contrast to those of males, for whom educational attainment makes a substantial difference—especially among men who were out of school only a short time (Figure 6). For them, the more schooling the more likely they are to have married, presumably partly reflecting the importance of young men's economic position in marriage formation and the much more precarious labor market position of the less-educated right after leaving school.

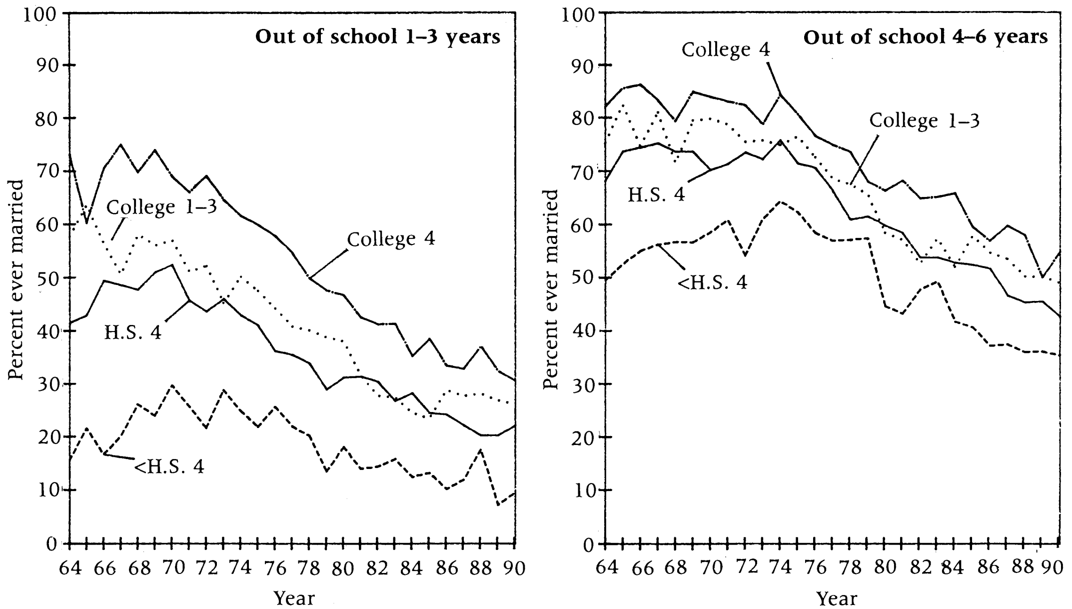
In short, these data indicate that, among the variables considered, school completion, not educational attainment, appears to be the important factor in women's marriage formation in the first six years out of school. For men, however, age (and/or the factors for which age is a proxy, such as career maturity) is much more important throughout this period. For both sexes and regardless of educational attainment, the proportions of those out of school who were ever married declined sharply from the early 1970s.

**FIGURE 5 Percent ever married, by education: US non-Hispanic white women out of school 1–3 and 4–6 years, 1964–90**




H.S. 4 = completed high school
<H.S. 4 = completed less than 4 years of high school
SOURCE: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Surveys, 1964–90

**FIGURE 6 Percent ever married, by education: US non-Hispanic white men out of school 1–3 and 4–6 years, 1964–90**




H.S. 4 = completed high school
<H.S. 4 = completed less than 4 years of high school
SOURCE: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Surveys, 1964–90

Multivariate micro-level analyses of the role of educational attainment in marriage formation have also found that the schooling effect was either neutral or, more commonly, positive. This was true for regression analyses based on longitudinal data sets and those obtaining retrospective data such as the NLS, the NLSY, or the NSFH[12] and using event-history types of analyses[13] (Cherlin 1980; Goldscheider and Waite 1986; Lichter et al. 1992; Oppenheimer and Blossfeld 1994) or time series of cross-sectional data (Mare and Winship 1991; Qian and Preston 1993). Schooling does not even seem to have a negative impact on women's remarriage chances; in fact, for blacks recent evidence indicates it has a strong positive effect (Bumpass et al. 1990; Smock 1990). Micro-level analyses of longitudinal data have also found that being employed had a positive rather than a negative effect on women's marriage formation[14] (Cherlin 1980; Goldscheider and Waite 1986; Bennett et al. 1989; Lichter et al. 1992). Moreover, employment in upper-level white-collar jobs exhibited no negative effect while working in an unskilled job sometimes depressed marriage propensities (Oppenheimer and Lew, forthcoming). Evidence from the NLSY also indicates a positive effect of women's earnings in the previous year on the likelihood of marrying in the subsequent year[15] (Lichter et al. 1992).

Most empirical studies exploring the independence hypothesis have not distinguished between delayed marriage and nonmarriage. Oppenheimer and Lew (forthcoming) have specifically addressed the question of whether young women's current and/or long-term economic position affected the likelihood of nonmarriage as well as delayed marriage. We reasoned that if a greater economic independence promotes nonmarriage, then indicators of a woman's labor market position should not only have a negative effect for younger women but continue to have this effect for the same cohorts when they reach their mid-to-late 20s as well. However, we found no evidence of a negative outcome from a more favorable labor market position for these women when they were somewhat older. Quite the contrary—the relationship was often positive. For example, the positive net effect of earnings on marriage formation only emerged for women in their mid-to-late 20s.

A major reason why so little empirical support has been found for the hypothesis that women's economic independence is the most important factor in declining marriage rates may be that the positive effects of women's favorable labor market position are offsetting the negative ones. The demographic literature has paid scant attention to the possibility of significant positive effects but a number can be proposed. For one, a wife's employment can actually encourage an earlier marriage if a young man's earnings are still too low to support an independent household. A more serious work involvement, and the training leading up to it, may also provide better access to marriage markets from which young women might otherwise be excluded. Thus, holding a good job within an attractive work environment can promote marriage formation because, like colleges and universities, such settings provide an opportunity to meet eligible bachelors who are social equals; they also bring together people who may have many interests and life style goals in common, thereby extending social networks and hence facilitating assortative mating. In addition, work provides the funds for creating an attractive image and for the leisure activities that enlarge the effective boundaries of a woman's marriage market. Finally, the expectation of a regular work career may enable some women to "afford" to marry a man who is unlikely to be a great provider but who is highly desirable in many other respects.

In short, the causal relationship between women's employment and marriage formation is highly complex and most likely includes offsetting positive and negative effects. The critical demographic question is not whether there is or is not an independence effect but whether it is the driving force behind recent changes in marriage formation, as is often claimed. Unless its *net* impact is negative, and rather large, neither of which is the case, women's rising labor market involvement cannot be the major explanation of the dramatic marriage-formation trends of the past 20 years.

Given the poor empirical support for the independence argument, an interesting question is why, the Chicago School of economics aside, it has remained so firmly entrenched in our thinking about recent trends in family behavior. My view is that, in essence, the theory has something for everyone, regardless of the person's theoretical or ideological persuasion; as such, there has been no one with a vested interest in seriously questioning it. For feminists, the independence argument signifies that women are announcing they are no longer going to play the game of wife and mother—at least not until men and social institutions have sufficiently reformed themselves so that they cease to be the instruments of women's oppression. At the other extreme, for political or religious conservatives, the independence argument can be irresistible, given their hostility to feminism plus the firmly held conviction that women's changing social roles represent the major threat to their notion of what the traditional American family was and should remain. Even for those who view modernization and the rise of individualism as the major force in recent changes in family behavior, the independence argument is essential for it is impossible for women to be autonomous individualists, free of the traditional family and kinship bonds of yesteryear, if they are still economically dependent on these same familial ties. And finally, there are many, without strong ideological commitments, who are genuinely concerned about the apparent deterioration of American family life. The rapid postwar rise in women's employment and the apparent transformation of women's social roles seem to provide a coherent explanation of what is going on. In the meantime, we are missing the kind of healthy debate that can either eliminate a weak theory or strengthen a good one.

## Specialization as a viable family strategy

A core feature of Becker's trading model of marriage is that, according to the principle of comparative advantage, spouses will tend to specialize because this is the most efficient productive strategy. The result is that sex-role specialization increases the interdependency of spouses and this interdependency creates the gain to marriage. Specialization thus operates as an integrative mechanism, as Durkheim argued a century ago.[16] But does it? The division of labor may promote interdependencies at the general functional level but may not provide much cohesion for particular marriages. If it is relatively easy for one or both partners to replace the other (i.e., remarry), then considerable marital instability could exist alongside specialization. As England and Farkas argue, however, in many cases segregated sex roles probably do increase the stake in a particular marriage—but mainly for women, not men. This is because there are often asymmetries in just how relationship-specific certain investments are. Men's specialization—

that is, investments in labor market skills—is typically not specific to any particular marital relationship and hence is highly transferable from one marriage to another, while women's maternal role tends to be much less so (England and Farkas 1986: 55–56). Hence specialization may increase the "gain" women obtain from a particular marriage by virtually eliminating other (marital and nonmarital) options. It is the coercive nature of this choice set (and its implications for the status of women within the family) that has become so unattractive to contemporary American women.

It is true that there are some marriage-specific capital investments that men may have difficulty transferring to another marriage, thereby increasing their reluctance to dissolve a particular marriage. A prime example is children, as Becker argues (1981: 224). These would increase the husband's stake in a marriage since men are less likely to obtain custody of their children, although this is becoming less true over time; for a woman children may increase the attractiveness of remaining married to the father and dissuade her from marrying someone else. However, children can provide this integrative function in any marriage, whether or not it is characterized by sex-role specialization. In fact, a decline in specialization may actually increase the integrative role of children if it means that fathers are more actively involved in the care of their children and hence develop a closer bond with them.

Aside from the question of how well specialization actually fulfills the integrative role assigned to it, another aspect of the argument has received even less attention. This is the vulnerability of individuals and family groups under a regimen of extreme sex-role specialization. For individuals, specialization means that if, for one reason or another, they lose their complementary specialist they are ill equipped to perform functions vital to their survival. This may put the female specialist in a particularly difficult position if her remarriage chances are very poor—either because her husband is still there but not performing his functions, or because of age, number of children, and so on.

Beyond the hazards specialization may create for individuals, the viability of the nuclear family can also be at considerable risk. Specialization may be a feasible strategy in a large extended-family household where no particular individual is indispensable because of the redundancy in personnel that can characterize such a system.[17] For small independent nuclear families, on the other hand, specialization can make the family particularly vulnerable to the temporary or permanent loss of a unique individual who provides an essential function—typically the father or the mother. In such a situation, flexibility, and even some redundancy in social roles, seem to be more viable social strategies; and, indeed, in evolutionary terms it is the generalist character of *homo sapiens* that is considered responsible for the species' ready adaptability and resulting evolutionary success. The vulner-

abilities of extreme specialization tend to be overlooked by trading theory because, in the interests of developing a mathematically tractable model, it ignores the real-world exigencies shaping the adaptive strategies that actually emerge. In Becker's model, critical specialized personnel never get sick or die (at least not at inconvenient times), making them temporarily or permanently unable to fulfill vital functions. The husband/father never loses his job, thereby depriving his family of its sole source of earnings or of other employment-related benefits such as health insurance. While the possibility of a "rotten kid" is envisioned and dealt with theoretically via the theory of altruism, there is no consideration of what happens if there is a rotten Dad. He may not only fail to contribute enough of his essential earnings to the family but, in addition, may not fulfill his role as the altruist who also keeps everyone else's behavior in line. In this model, the needs of the family seem to be constant over time, as does the ability of particular personnel to meet these needs; and what uncertainties or cyclical variations in needs or capacities exist are presumably covered by resorting to capital markets. These are assumed to be universally prevalent, to function reliably and honestly, and to be available to all adults, regardless of their sex, age, or walk of life. Extreme sex-role specialization entails risks not only because the world is characterized by such unpredictable events such as sickness, death, or unemployment but also because of the very nature of the independent nuclear family as a social unit. An inescapable fact of human biology is that individuals' consumption needs and productive capabilities vary markedly by age. Consequently, a basic feature of nuclear families is that the ratio of consumers to producers, and hence the family's level of living, can vary substantially over the family's developmental cycle (Berkner 1972; Oppenheimer 1982; Lee 1983). Specialization involves a potentially serious loss of flexibility in dealing with changes in both a family's internal composition and the stresses posed by its environment.

Examination of the Western family and the economic roles of its members in historical perspective suggests that, in different societies and different time periods, a variety of equilibrating strategies was developed to maintain an economic homeostasis over the family's developmental cycle (Oppenheimer 1982: Ch. 9; Lee 1983). In the past, many of these strategies involved the behavior of children (daughters as well as sons) but, in recent years, this equilibrating role has shifted to wives.[18] Whether this is necessarily a negative development cannot be determined unless we also assess some of the "costs" previously entailed in utilizing children to maintain an economic homeostasis.

The solution to maintaining a stable consumer/producer ratio, despite the inherent variability of that ratio over the developmental cycle of the family, took a particular form in preindustrial Western European farm families. While farm size tended to be fixed, the number of producers and con-

sumers varied over time. When children were young, they were primarily consumers and could contribute little productive labor to the farm; as a result, the farm household often experienced labor shortages during this early stage of the family cycle. On the other hand, when the children were adolescents and young adults, there was often an excess of family labor available to work the farm—and also an excess of mouths to feed. A common "solution" to this problem was the "life-cycle service" pattern (Berkner 1972; Hajnal 1982; Laslett 1977; McIntosh 1984). Servants (basically farm workers) were imported to help with the farm when there was insufficient family labor, and later on "surplus" children were exported to work as farm laborers for other households. This practice was so common that service became a stage of the life cycle for a high proportion of farm daughters and sons. Hajnal estimates that in parts of Northwestern Europe some 35 to 50 percent of adolescents and young adults were, at any point in time, engaged in service in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries (Hajnal 1982: 470–475). In sum, by interhousehold exchanges of labor, farm households maintained a consumer/producer balance over time despite marked family-cycle variations in family composition.

Children also played an important economic role in working-class families in industrializing Europe and the United States. While married women rarely worked outside the home in the late nineteenth and first part of the twentieth century, this presumed sexual division of labor did not mean that the family's economic well-being entirely depended on the father's earnings. Instead, starting at a fairly young age, children were often sent out to work to supplement the father's sometimes inadequate income (Rowntree 1922; Anderson 1971; Haines 1979; Goldin 1981; Tilly and Scott 1978). Wages of unskilled or semiskilled workers tended to peak early. Moreover, the work was physically demanding and often unhealthful, if not dangerous. The result was that men's earnings might actually decline relatively early as they moved to less physically taxing jobs or as ill health prevented regular employment (Haines 1979; Anderson 1971: 132). Early death was also a high risk (Jacobson 1964), resulting in a substantial proportion of children losing one or both parents before they grew up (Uhlenberg 1978).

There is considerable evidence that adolescents were commonly employed around the turn of the century. Using the 1880 census of Philadelphia, Goldin found that by age sixteen, 72 percent of the sons of native-born whites were working; for the sons of immigrants it was even higher—81 percent, for example, among boys with a German-born parent. The comparable figures for daughters were also substantial—39 and 49 percent respectively[19] (Goldin 1981: Table 2). The result was that the pattern of family income for men of different ages diverged considerably from the age pattern of their individual income (Haines 1979; Anderson 1971; Rowntree 1922). For example, using the 1889–90 Commissioner of Labor Survey,

Haines found that while the husband's income peaked for men in their 30s in both Europe and the United States, family income was at a peak and at a considerably higher level for men in their 50s (Haines 1979: 299).

In her regression analysis of the determinants of child labor, using data from the 1880 census of Philadelphia, Goldin provides direct evidence that children's labor was highly responsive to the family's economic and demographic circumstances. The probabilities of both sons and daughters working were strongly and inversely related to the absence of the father in the household. There was also a strong negative relationship of children's employment to the father's estimated earnings and to whether he was employed, especially among sons. First-born children were more likely to work and children's employment was positively affected by how many younger siblings were in the home. On the other hand, daughters (but not sons) were less likely to work if they had no mother in the home, and daughters' employment was strongly negatively affected by the presence of working relatives (Goldin 1981). In short, the pattern of the market work of both sons and daughters, as well as the domestic work of daughters, supports the idea that children's labor was an important means not only of raising the family's living level in general but of offsetting variations in the productive performance of other family members and in the consumption needs of the household. While there was a pattern of using sons and daughters to substitute for or supplement the productive contribution of the same-sex parent, there was also considerable flexibility in the nature of daughters' economic contributions, which clearly were not limited to home production.

The strategy of using one's children to maintain an economic equilibrium or to foster the attainment of higher living levels was not a costless one, however. Because the productive capacity of children is highly related to their age, too heavy a reliance on children—especially numerous children—limits their equilibrating potential to the middle and later stages of the family cycle. Families who temporarily or permanently lose the contribution of the father early in the family cycle, through illness, death, unemployment, or malfeasance (e.g., heavy drinking)[20] are not greatly helped by such a strategy. And, in general, this strategy often led to a pattern of "life cycle poverty" where periods of poverty and comparative plenty alternated over the life cycle of workers; this phenomenon was graphically described by Rowntree (1922) in his 1898 study of poverty among the working-class families of York, England. Even in families where the husband's earnings were always sufficient to keep the family out of poverty, the economic well-being of the household could still be expected to fluctuate over the family's developmental cycle.

A final and well-known disadvantage to the extensive employment of children was that it tended to discourage schooling and thus had a negative

effect on their socioeconomic status as adults (Perlmann 1988). Goldin found in the case of Philadelphia in 1880 that for sons of native-born whites, as the proportions working increased, the proportions in school dropped from 76 percent for 13-year-olds to 46 percent and to 21 percent for 15- and 16-year-olds respectively. For the children of immigrants, the drop was even more precipitous. Only a quarter of the 14-year-old sons of German immigrants were in school and 10 percent of 16-year-olds (Goldin 1981: Table 2). Moreover, Parsons and Goldin (1989) found that children's schooling was particularly affected in the families of men in child labor–intensive industries such as textiles. Using the 1889–90 Commissioner of Labor Survey, they estimated the probability that a male child between ages 11 and 13 would be in school was only 41.3 percent in textile families compared to 75.6 percent in nontextile industrial families. Nor did they find evidence in this and other data sets of this period that children were allowed to retain a substantial proportion of their earnings, though what they did retain increased as the child approached maturity.[21]

Aside from these drawbacks of using the work of children as a means of maintaining an economic equilibrium over the developmental cycle of the family, the relative advantage of employing children and youth was bound to decline as industrialization proceeded. As the structure of demand shifted to a more skilled labor force, adult male earnings rose and the potential relative contribution of the unskilled labor of children declined, particularly in middle-class families. This suggests that some other equilibrating mechanism was required, and the employment of wives was an obvious alternative.

From a historical perspective, then, one way of viewing the rise in married women's employment is that their work has come to represent a functional substitute for the work of their children, facilitating the more extensive schooling of the next generation and thereby fostering upward intergenerational social mobility. Instead of children being an important equilibrating factor in the family's economic position over its developmental cycle, with all the attendant disadvantages for both children and the family, wives' employment can function in this capacity instead—before children are born, when they are young, and even after they reach adulthood and leave the parental household. And wives, being adults, and usually having educational attainments roughly similar to their husbands', can command a much higher wage than could unskilled children. In sum, if we expand our horizons beyond a narrow focus on the individual and consider the problem of maintaining living levels over the developmental cycle of the family, as well as diversifying the family's income sources as an insurance against risk, wives' employment in a modern low-mortality society can be viewed as a highly adaptive family strategy rather than as a threat to the family as a social institution.

## The deteriorating economic status of young men

One consequence of the popularity of theories that emphasize the overriding importance of the transformation of women's economic behavior in demographic and family change is an extraordinary de-emphasis on the effect of men's economic position on marriage and the family. In this sense, men have become almost invisible. This is unfortunate because the view that the marriage timing of both men and women is affected by men's economic status has a long tradition in demographic theory and research dating back to Malthus. Given the norm in Western societies that a married couple should establish an independent household, a recurring theme has been that marriage timing is related to young men's transition to an adult economic role—either via the inheritance of property or the achievement of stable employment at wages above some threshold level, often defined in terms of an "accustomed" standard of living (Banks 1954; Goldstone 1986; Easterlin 1978, 1987; Watkins 1984). Since there will be variations among men and over time in how long it takes to pass such a threshold and in the proportion of men who never succeed in doing so, there will be corresponding cross-sectional and temporal variations in the age at marriage and proportions never marrying, with resulting effects on fertility (Goldstone 1986).

Postwar analyses of the influence of men's economic position on marriage formation and fertility have been dominated by the work of Richard Easterlin (1978, 1987), who has hypothesized that fluctuations in relative cohort size have a major effect on young men's labor market position, thereby affecting marriage timing and marital fertility. This argument has run into empirical difficulties in recent years—a major problem being that many demographers have found evidence that postwar marriage and fertility fluctuations were *period* rather than *cohort* driven (Rodgers and Thornton 1985; Smith 1981; Pullum 1980). Since a concern with the economic position of young men had become so closely identified with the relative cohort size argument, this concern has become an additional casualty of any failure of that argument. Hence, analytical interest in the role of men's economic status on family behavior has languished while attention has shifted to the assessment of women's changing socioeconomic position. But can we really afford to ignore men? I believe to do so is a serious empirical mistake. Moreover, the possibility that changes in men's economic status are making a substantial contribution to recent demographic trends has important theoretical implications. Men's poor labor market position is likely to be reversible as the economy improves and so, in part, may some of the demographic behaviors that are a response to their recent economic difficulties. Therefore, whether or not men's economic position has a major impact on family behavior has potentially important implications for the future of the family as well as its recent past.

One approach to assessing changes in men's economic position relevant to their marriage and family behavior is essentially a threshold approach. This is the tactic espoused by Wilson and Neckerman (1987), who argue that the rapid rise in black female-headed families in the United States is primarily due to the worsening economic position of inner-city black males, thereby signifying a decline in the supply of men who would be eligible to marry. They define "eligible" as being an employed non-incarcerated civilian and measure the age-specific supply of such men in terms of their ratio to women in the same age group. While thresholds undoubtedly exist, relying solely on such a model implies that changes in the economic situation of those above this threshold are irrelevant to the marriage-formation process. However, the level of economic security people consider a prerequisite to establishing a marital household may not be the same for all socioeconomic groups—the same for a college graduate, for example, as for a high school dropout. It is perfectly conceivable that the economic position of middle-class males has also deteriorated (though a measure of employment status will not adequately capture this), leading, in turn, to increasing delays in *their* marriage formation. Hence, a threshold model does not lend itself to a general analysis of how changes in absolute or relative economic status may influence marriage behavior in a variety of socioeconomic groups. In consequence, it is a particularly poor strategy for analyzing the effect of changes in white males' economic position on their demographic behavior. Therefore I will approach the problem from two perspectives. First, I will examine changes in the economic position of males that might signify shifts in the proportion who are operating below various rough measures of marriageability, defined in terms of the proportions not employed and in the proportions with low earnings. Second, I will consider changes in the absolute and relative earnings position of males, irrespective of whether they are likely to be above or below some absolute threshold.

### Changes in marriageability

In a paper based on data from the US Census public-use samples, Finis Welch (1990) explored a number of measures of male economic activity. I will use one of these as an indicator of an unstable labor market position—the proportion of men who were neither employed (including military service as employment) nor in school during the census reference week (Table 1). First-marriage probabilities started to plummet in the early 1970s; hence the question is whether the trend in nonemployment also changed considerably during this period.

A striking characteristic of these employment data is the considerable deterioration in the position of moderately educated as well as less edu-

**TABLE 1 Percent of men neither employed nor enrolled in school, by age, race, and educational attainment: United States, 1940–80**

| Race, age, and years of school | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Blacks** | | | | | |
| Age 20–24 | | | | | |
| 0–11 years | 19.8 | 18.9 | 25.9 | 34.7 | 50.2 |
| 12 years | 20.6 | 17.9 | 19.6 | 21.7 | 28.2 |
| 13–15 years | 14.5 | 9.6 | 9.3 | 10.8 | 13.3 |
| 16 or more years | 6.3 | 8.3 | 3.0 | 5.1 | 6.8 |
| All education levels | 19.5 | 18.0 | 22.2 | 24.5 | 29.7 |
| Age 25–34 | | | | | |
| 0–11 years | 16.6 | 17.0 | 19.9 | 21.6 | 38.1 |
| 12 years | 13.7 | 14.2 | 13.8 | 12.4 | 22.6 |
| 13–15 years | 13.8 | 16.4 | 11.2 | 7.8 | 15.1 |
| 16 or more years | 7.5 | 7.9 | 5.3 | 5.0 | 7.0 |
| All education levels | 16.3 | 16.4 | 17.5 | 16.1 | 23.3 |
| **Whites** | | | | | |
| Age 20–24 | | | | | |
| 0–11 years | 20.8 | 13.8 | 17.9 | 20.9 | 28.8 |
| 12 years | 15.5 | 8.3 | 7.8 | 10.6 | 14.4 |
| 13–15 years | 10.4 | 4.6 | 4.4 | 5.2 | 5.1 |
| 16 or more years | 8.6 | 3.3 | 2.7 | 3.2 | 3.0 |
| All education levels | 17.6 | 9.9 | 9.9 | 9.7 | 12.3 |
| Age 25–34 | | | | | |
| 0–11 years | 13.0 | 10.0 | 11.2 | 13.3 | 22.7 |
| 12 years | 8.0 | 5.4 | 4.4 | 5.0 | 10.1 |
| 13–15 years | 6.7 | 5.2 | 3.4 | 3.6 | 6.0 |
| 16 or more years | 4.6 | 3.8 | 1.8 | 2.4 | 3.2 |
| All education levels | 10.8 | 7.4 | 6.6 | 6.4 | 8.7 |

SOURCE: Welch 1990, based on decennial census data.

cated young males. This is especially the case for blacks but is also true for whites. Compared to high school graduates, 20–24-year-old blacks and whites without a high school degree were in a much less favorable labor market position and one that rapidly deteriorated throughout the 1950–80 period. However, in terms of its larger implications for the marriage timing of all young men, this trend was offset by the sharp decline in the proportions with less than 12 years of schooling, especially for blacks—for 20–24-year-olds, a drop from 78.8 percent of blacks in 1950 to 28.6 percent in 1980 (Welch 1990). Nevertheless, three aspects of the observed shifts are

indicative of a particularly sharp decrease in young men's labor market position during the 1970s, and thus probably of their marriage market position as well.

First, even though the employment position of males with 0–11 years of schooling was already deteriorating before 1970, this deterioration accelerated after 1970. Second, the labor market position of 25–34-year-old nongraduates also rapidly declined; hence, the labor market and, by inference, the marriage market handicaps of dropouts were becoming much less limited to very young men. The third shift, and probably the most important in terms of its overall impact on marriageability, was the deteriorating employment position of high school graduates, a group whose numerical importance was increasing rapidly—rising from 13.7 percent of black males aged 20–24 in 1950 to 41.8 percent in 1980; the comparable rise for whites was from 30.1 to 41.3 percent (Welch 1990). In general, then, there was a rapid deterioration after 1970 in the employment situation not only of the most marginal educational groups—high school dropouts—but also of the numerically important group of high school graduates. Moreover, the deterioration occurred throughout the prime marrying ages; as we saw earlier, from the birth cohorts of 1880 on, 75 percent of both black and white males had been married before age 35 (Figure 2).

Using the March CPS from 1968 to 1988, a recent article by Chinhui Juhn (1992) updates and expands on Welch's findings, revealing that the extensiveness of men's employment throughout the year declined considerably over time. This was true for both blacks and whites but especially for blacks. Juhn also found that a great proportion of this decrease was due to those who remained out of work for all or most of the year, particularly among blacks. Another important finding was that, although there was no upward trend in the entry into nonemployment, exits from nonemployment decreased markedly, again especially for blacks, indicating that, once out of work, such men remain nonemployed for an increasing length of time.

We can also approach the marriageability threshold issue from an earnings perspective. A recent government report looks at workers with "low" earnings, defined as those with annual earnings (expressed in 1990 dollars) less than the poverty level for a four-person family (US Bureau of the Census 1992). The report shows that although the proportion of young males with low annual earnings declined substantially in the 1960s and remained roughly stable in the 1970s, it then rose sharply again in the 1980s to proportions exceeding those of the 1960s. This was not only the case for males still of an age where changes in school enrollment might be a factor (young men aged 18–24) but for 25–34-year-olds as well. A deterioration in earnings position was similarly observed for those who worked full-time year-round, so that low earnings were not just a function of the amount of time worked.

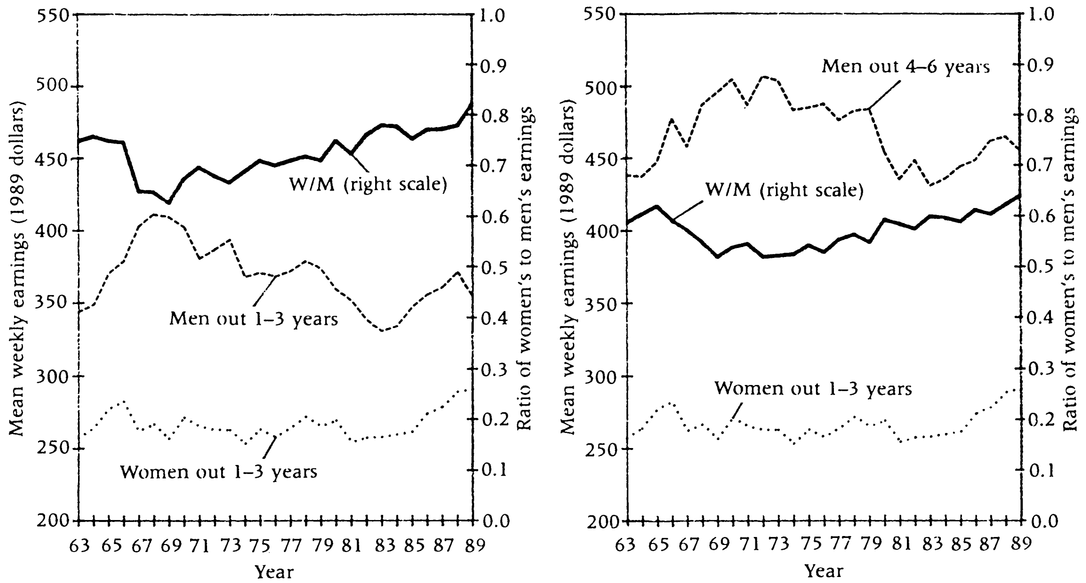
### Trends in earnings among educational groups

One analytical strategy that has greatly obscured the potential effect of the deterioration in men's economic position on demographic behavior is the tendency to focus on women's relative earnings, to the extent researchers deal with earnings at all (Smith and Ward 1985; Espenshade 1985; Farley 1988). Often, only the earnings ratios are presented or emphasized. However, earnings ratios are calculated from two sets of earnings data; a rise in the ratio only supports the economic independence argument if it is a growth in *women's* earnings that is driving the change rather than a deterioration in *men's* earnings. The latter possibility may also signify a decline in the economic incentives to marry during this period but it hardly fits with the major thrust of the independence argument—that the shift in women's earnings power is the cause of changes in marriage and family behavior. To illustrate the problem, I use March CPS data from 1964 to 1990 to examine trends in young people's earnings. The analysis indicates that, while the relative earnings of young women have increased since the late 1960s, this is primarily because of a substantial decline in young men's real earnings; until the mid-1980s, young women's earnings position remained relatively unchanged.

Figure 7 shows, for 1963–89 earnings, the ratio of the mean weekly earnings of young non-Hispanic white women to those of comparable young men as well as the individual earnings components (in 1989 dollars) of this ratio.[22] As with the marital status data of Figures 5 and 6, earnings are presented for non-Hispanic white groups by estimated time out of school rather than by age. Young people's employment patterns tend to change markedly upon finishing school, and time out of school is also an estimate of potential work experience, an important factor in earnings attainment (Becker 1975; Mincer 1974). In addition, school enrollment is probably the major impediment to marriage formation for younger people, especially women. The weekly earnings of women out of school 1 to 3 years are first compared to those of men also out this length of time and, second, to the earnings of men out of school 4 to 6 years, since women tend to marry men older than themselves. In the 1960s at least, as we have seen, relatively high proportions of young men as well as women married in their first three years out of school (Figures 5 and 6). Hence trends in earnings for recent school-leavers are particularly pertinent to understanding shifts in marriage timing.

There is no doubt that the ratio of female to male earnings rose substantially after 1969, especially in the case where both the men and women were recent school-leavers. However, the earnings ratio data do not reveal the true nature of the changes producing them. In both cases, it is primarily changes in men's earnings, not women's, that are driving the shifts in

**FIGURE 7 Mean weekly earnings of women out of school 1–3 years and of men out 1–3 and 4–6 years (left scale) and ratio of women's to men's earnings (right scale): US whites, 1963–89**




SOURCE: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Surveys, 1964–90

the ratios; women's weekly earnings remained relatively stable until the mid-1980s. After a steep increase in mean weekly earnings for young men from 1963 to 1969 (producing the sharp drop in the ratio during that period), their earnings underwent a sharp decline from the mid-1970s until 1983 and then started to rise fairly rapidly. It is only between 1985 and 1988 that the ratio increased because women's earnings were rising relatively rapidly and faster than the rise for men; in 1989 men's earnings started down again and women's earnings leveled off. In sum, relying on just the trend in the ratio of female-to-male weekly earnings (especially if the late 1960s is chosen as the starting point) as an indicator of the rising earning power of women misrepresents the true nature of the recent trends. Except for a very short period in the 1980s, changes in men's earnings (of those out of school both 1–3 and 4–6 years) have been causing the shift in the earnings ratio.

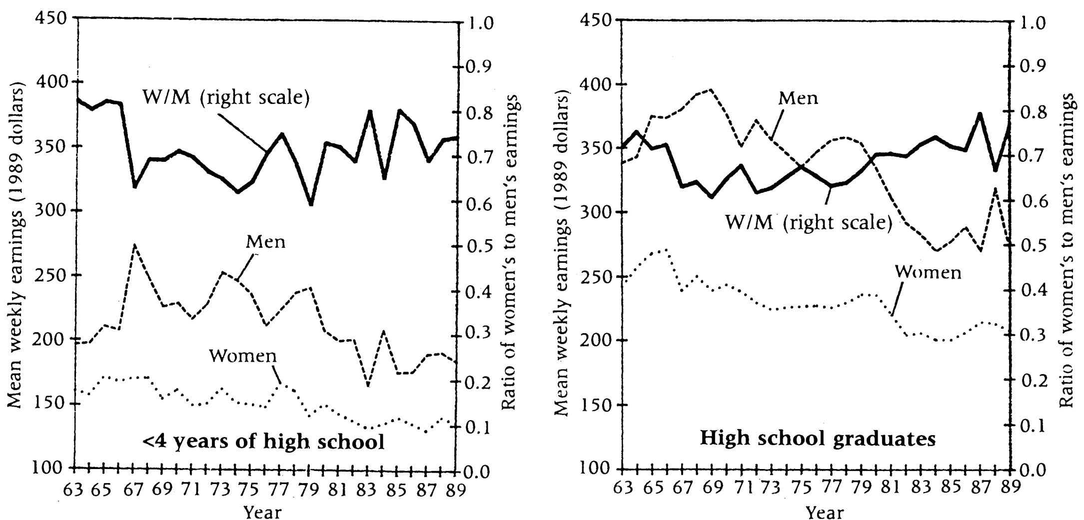
For both men and women, earnings vary substantially among educational groups, and the educational composition of the male and female populations has also changed considerably over time—within the same sex group and between the sexes as well. Moreover, educational attainment is a major social characteristic on which people mate assortatively (Kalmijn 1991a, 1991b; Mare 1991; Rockwell 1976). Hence it is changes in the economic position of those in a *similar* educational group that are most relevant to

the individual's marriage behavior. Figures 8 and 9 show the earnings data by educational attainment in order to shed light on whether the shifts in earnings and earnings ratios have been similar among different schooling groups.

With the exception of high school dropouts, every educational group shows some rise in women's *relative* earnings position, although the rise is particularly noteworthy only for high school graduates and those with 1–3 years of college. Once again, however, the shift is primarily due to the deterioration in young men's real earnings to levels below those of the mid-1960s, rather than to a rise in women's weekly earnings. In most cases, the trend for women actually mirrors that for men. The long-run decline in the earnings of the large group of high school graduates and those with some college is particularly noteworthy and there is little evidence of a major recovery in the 1980s. Earnings also declined substantially for college graduates in the 1970s, but, unlike the other educational groups, a sharp recovery in their earnings started after the 1981–82 recession. This recent trend apparently indicates that the continued rise in delayed marriage for college graduates in the 1980s is not well explained by changes in their economic position.

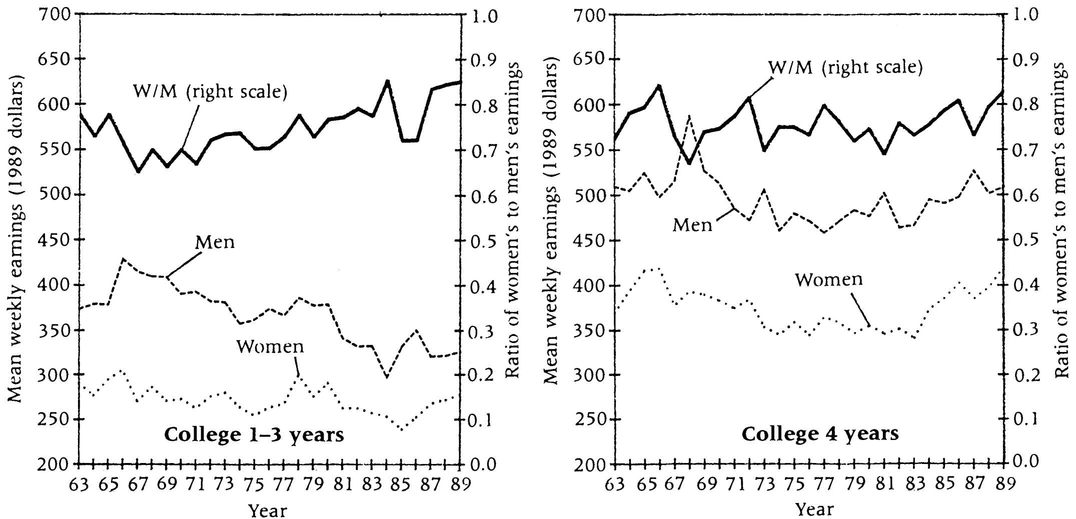
The pattern of men's earnings varies somewhat among the educational groups, however, as a direct comparison among groups shows (Figure 10). Weekly earnings declined quite steeply for college graduates from the late

**FIGURE 8 Mean weekly earnings of adults out of school 1–3 years, by sex and educational attainment (left scale) and ratio of women's to men's earnings (right scale): US whites, 1963–89**




SOURCE: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Surveys, 1964–90

**FIGURE 9 Mean weekly earnings of adults out of school 1–3 years, by sex and educational attainment (left scale) and ratio of women's to men's earnings (right scale): US whites, 1963–89**

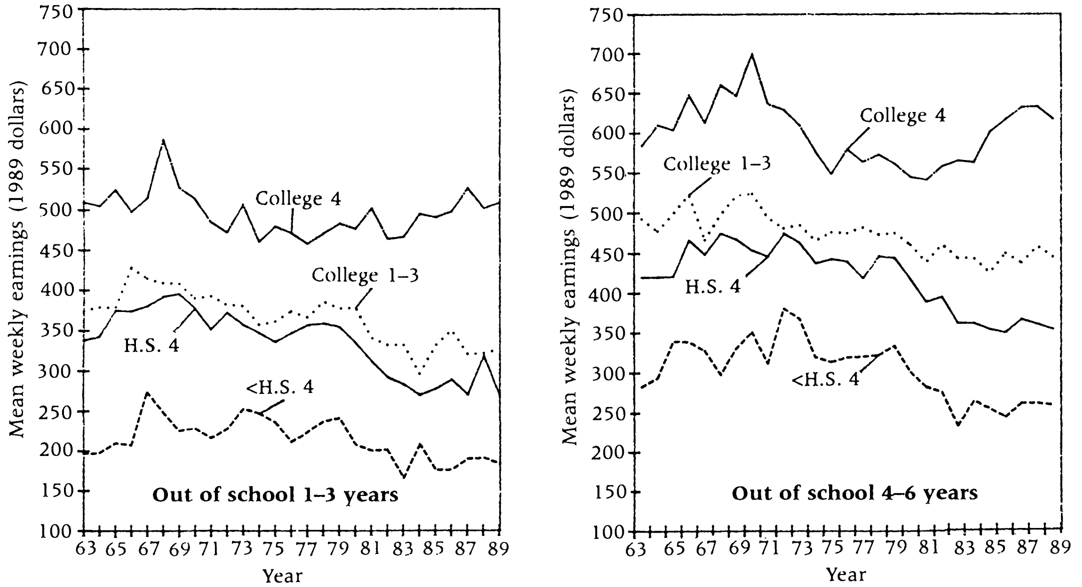



SOURCE: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Surveys, 1964–90.

1960s to the late 1970s but began rising again around 1983.[23] Nevertheless, for those out of school 1–3 years, weekly earnings in 1989 were still $78 below those of 1969 (expressed in 1989 dollars), an overall decrease of 13 percent. The earnings of those with four years of high school have also declined since the early 1970s, but, in contrast to college graduates, the 1980s witnessed no major recovery for this group. Overall, between 1969 and 1989, for high school graduates out of school 1–3 years, real mean weekly earnings decreased by $127, a drop of 32 percent (see also Murphy and Welch 1989). Examining the trend in earnings for men out of school 4–6 years shows that the pattern of decline persisted for some time and is consistent with the extensiveness of the observed marriage delays. An interesting exception is the moderating of the decrease for men with 1–3 years of college who are out of school 4–6 years and the particularly sharp rise among college graduates past the early school-leaving period.

So far, this discussion has focused on the average earnings of young men. These figures mask the considerable widening of earnings inequality since the early 1970s, hence do not fully detect the extent to which young men are experiencing declines in both their absolute and relative economic status. A relevant and updated analysis of this rising wage inequality is found in a recent article by Juhn, Murphy, and Pierce (1993). Using the March CPS files from 1964–90, they organized the log of weekly earnings data of men, aged 18–65, who had a relatively firm attachment to the labor force by their location in the earnings distribution, expressed in percentiles. Per-

**FIGURE 10 Men's weekly earnings by education and time out of school: US whites, 1963–89**




H.S. 4 = completed high school
<H.S. 4 = completed less than 4 years of high school
SOURCE: US Bureau of the Census, Current Population Surveys, 1964–90

centile rank is therefore treated as a rough proxy of differences in skill level. By examining how the log of weekly earnings changed over time for those in different parts of the wage distribution, the authors developed an intuitively appealing way of showing whether or not earnings inequality was on the rise. Particularly pertinent to the analysis of marriage behavior, this approach allows us to see what produced observed changes in inequality: was it differentials in the rate at which wages were rising—or falling—or was it increases for some groups but decreases for others? The demographic implications are likely to be very different depending on whether increases in inequality result from (1) rising earnings at all points in the distribution but faster for the better paid, or from (2) rising earnings for those at the top but falling earnings for those in the lower half of the distribution.[24]

Their overall finding is that, starting around 1970, the variance in earnings increased substantially, with those in the higher percentiles experiencing a large increase in real weekly wages while those in the lower percentiles exhibited a sharp drop. More interesting still are the trends across and within educational and potential work experience groups. Comparing the 1964–88 changes in the log average weekly real wage for men with 1–10 years of potential work experience to those with 11–20 years, they found that the wage differential between the two groups widened at all

percentiles by about 20 percent. Inequality within each experience group also increased sharply. In fact, among younger men, real wages were lower in 1988 than in 1964 for those in the lowest 40 percent of the distribution. On the other hand, for less experienced workers at the 90th percentile, weekly wages increased by almost 25 percent, and for older workers at the 90th percentile, the increase was about 40 percent. A similar pattern was observed when high school and college graduates with 1–10 years of experience were compared. Wage differentials between educational groups rose substantially, with college graduates gaining about 20 percent over high school graduates at all percentile levels. Once again, inequality also rose greatly within each group. In the case of young high school graduates, only the top 30 percent were earning more in 1988 than those at a comparable place in the distribution in 1964. Those in the bottom 40 percent of the distribution experienced a 10 to 20 percent decrease in real wages. Within the college graduate group, there was also a substantial rise in inequality, although only those at the 10th percentile experienced a small decrease in wages. Those at the 90th percentile experienced about a 25 percent increase over men at a comparable place in the distribution in 1964, while those in the lower 40 percent of the distribution only exhibited a rise in earnings varying between 0 and 10 percent over the 25-year period. Moreover, most of the within-group changes in inequality occurred after 1970.

In sum, the data presented by Juhn and colleagues show that, since about 1970, the average real earnings position of young men has deteriorated considerably. This has been true not only for high school dropouts but also for high school and college graduates. In addition, the employment position of high school dropouts and high school graduates has substantially worsened, particularly that of dropouts and especially among young black males. As chronicled by Juhn and her colleagues, this deterioration in average earnings was accompanied by a sharp increase in wage inequality, both within and between skill groups. Older workers improved their earnings position over recent entrants and, among the latter, college graduates greatly improved their position vis-à-vis high school graduates in the 1980s. However, within each of these groups those at the higher end of the wage distribution achieved a substantial increase in earnings while those lower down experienced much more modest increases and in many cases decreases. Even for the college-educated, who appeared to have considerably improved their earnings during the 1980s, a mixed picture emerges once trends within the group are examined, since there have been relatively small increases in weekly wages for those in the lower end of the distribution. Hence, for many college graduates, neither the absolute nor the relative earnings picture was as rosy as it appears when the focus is just on average wages. It seems reasonable to conclude that, with the possible exception of college graduates in the 1980s, the magnitude and pervasive-

ness of these changes are having a marked impact on family behavior—an impact that merits more serious attention than it has received. It is here that the earnings story seems to lie in recent years, not in the changes in women's earnings.

## Marriage models and the future of the family

A major theme of this article has been that the current preoccupation with women's growing economic role as the major force in demographic change in the United States has led social scientists to overlook the emergence of other important socioeconomic shifts that are having a major impact on family behavior. Prime among these is the deterioration in men's economic position—particularly that of young men and, within this group, of those in middle- and lower-level schooling groups. Little systematic study has been done to help us understand the effect of this deterioration on marital and fertility behavior. But there have been other missed opportunities as well. The popularity of the specialization-trading model of marriage has imposed a narrow view of the nature and basis of the marital relationship, almost inevitably leading to a prediction of the decline of marriage as an institution and discounting the chances of a stable family life in modern industrial societies.

According to the trading model, as women's wages rise, presumably as a concomitant of economic growth, they experience greater involvement in paid employment and increasing economic independence; hence the major gain to marriage is greatly reduced. But there are other reasons why an institution of marriage based on such a model might become an endangered social form in industrial societies. The stability of such a family is theoretically founded on women specializing in home production, and a major part of this production involves the bearing and rearing of children who, as marriage-specific capital, provide an additional source of marital cohesion. Much of the specialized home production of women in the past was devoted to bearing and rearing children who never survived to adulthood. For women to be equally occupied in contemporary low-mortality societies would mean the production of large families. However, even moderate family sizes in a low-mortality society lead to rapid population growth. Hence, if the stability of marital relationships depends on exponential population growth, it is unclear whether this is a viable *societal* strategy over the long term. Moreover, couples do not just want to produce children per se, they want to produce children like themselves—that is, they are interested in social, not just biological reproduction. But the cost of social reproduction is high in a society where increasingly substantial and lengthy investments in human capital for each child are required. In short, high fertility does not appear to be a viable *family* strategy. Contemporary low fertility,

however, reduces the need for women's specialization in home production. Given their long lives, it also means women would be not doing anything highly productive most of the time. Can any society, even a wealthy one, afford to have more than half its citizenry economically nonproductive for a good part of their lives? All in all, if the basis of marriage is specialization and exchange, then marriage seems an increasingly anachronistic social form.

This may seem an exceedingly pessimistic view of the future of marriage but, in large part, this is a function of the specialization model itself. It may not follow from other models of marriage. For example, I have suggested that a more adaptive family strategy for a modern industrial society is one where wives as well as husbands engage in market work. A specialization model of marriage, aside from its other problems, entails considerable risks in an independent nuclear family system—risks for individuals as well as for the family unit. This is because in such a family there is rarely more than one person to occupy any single specialty, and if something happens to him or her, functions vital to the family's well-being and even its continued survival may cease to be performed. Moreover, nuclear families typically exhibit developmental cycles, characterized by sharp temporal variations in household composition and in the ratio of consumers to producers. This raises the problem of maintaining a socioeconomic homeostasis over time. In the past, children performed an important function in maintaining such an economic equilibrium over the family's developmental cycle and in providing a backup in case something prevented the father or mother from fully performing his or her specialized function. Using children in this manner was often a costly strategy. While it might have provided relative affluence at certain points in the family life cycle, it could also involve considerable poverty or relative deprivation at other times, and it typically reduced the schooling of the children involved and hence their ultimate socioeconomic status.

Moreover, as societies industrialize and become characterized by highly skilled and relatively high-wage labor, the potential relative contribution of unskilled children is greatly diminished. Wives' employment, therefore, provides a highly adaptive alternative strategy. It introduces some needed labor redundancy, thereby reducing the risks to the family's income position, and it also provides a means of helping to maintain living levels over the family's developmental cycle. But if wives' employment (whether intermittent or regular, part-time or full-time) is an adaptive family strategy in a modern society, then we are positing a model of marriage entirely different from that of specialization and trade. Now we are talking about a more collaborative model (see also Goldscheider and Waite 1991). Marriages are based, in part, on whether each partner can make valuable contributions to the marriage—sometimes a unique contribution and some-

times a similar contribution in order to maintain or increase the total "wealth" of the marriage. It is the kind of model that tends to predict relatively low fertility, a characteristic of most industrial societies. It suggests a high value of marriage for people but variability in marriage timing depending on the current ability of participants to "pull their weight" or on how well their future contributions can currently be predicted. It is also a model where a certain amount of marital instability is built in due to the importance of the collaborative endeavor and the greater ability of each partner to seek alternatives.

In sum, in this article I have tried to pull together and critically assess what the specialization and trading model of marriage, and the empirical research relevant to this theory, tell us about family demographic behavior in an industrial society such as the United States. First, I have tried to show that the specialization model of marriage has major deficiencies. I have argued that there are more theoretically and empirically satisfying models to be explored and ones that are less likely to have such dire implications for the family systems of modern industrial societies. Second, I have argued *that we have been looking in the wrong place for the economic component* of the explanation of recent demographic trends. Instead of focusing exclusively on women, more attention needs to be paid to changes in men's labor market position. I have demonstrated the substantial deterioration in the economic status of young men during the past 20 years—a deterioration whose consequences for recent marriage trends are not being seriously addressed. Further, by overlooking the importance of the changes in young men's economic position for family behavior, we are also overlooking a potential source of some reversals in that behavior. There is little doubt that these are troubling times for the American family. Nevertheless, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the death of the family system in industrial societies have been greatly exaggerated.

## Notes

1 Between 1983 and 1989, however, the nonmarital birth rate rose for black as well as white women. This rise was not limited to teenagers, moreover, but was exhibited by all age groups. Thus for unmarried women aged 25–29 the birth rate rose from 22.9 to 37.3 per thousand for whites and from 82.0 to 104.3 for blacks (National Center for Health Statistics 1991).

2 The literature on this issue is far too extensive to cite exhaustively. In addition to Malthus, one might also review Banks 1954; Homans 1960; Hajnal 1965, 1982; Arensberg and Kimball 1968; Wrigley and Schofield 1981; Goldstone 1986; and Johansson 1987. Watkins (1984) argues that what distinguished the role of economic factors in Western Europe from that in China, for example, was that in Europe, "economic circumstances were accepted as a legitimate reason not only for delaying female marriage but foregoing it altogether" (p. 320).

3 While there is some evidence that the long-term increase in marital instability may have plateaued since 1980 (Martin and Bumpass 1989), it is too soon to determine

this, especially given the possible role of business-cycle fluctuations.

4 This view is not limited to economists, of course. Goldscheider and Waite argued, for example, that "the recent decline in marriage rates should not be seen as resulting primarily from increased barriers to marriage but from decreases in women's relative preference for marriage because of their increased options outside of marriage" (1986: 107). They appear to have softened this position in their more recent book. (1991)

5 For example, one of my graduate students who has been cohabiting told me that she and her partner had decided to marry. For several reasons (the difficulties of getting geographically dispersed families together, completing her oral exams, etc.), it was not convenient to marry for about another year. Nevertheless, she has already booked a chapel in a particularly lovely location to celebrate the nuptials.

6 One exception to this is the Study of Modern Living, which interviewed two samples of adults—one in 1957, the other in 1973. It reported a sizable decline in the proportions with negative attitudes toward those who did not want to marry and in the proportions who thought that marriage had a positive effect on a person's life (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka 1981: 147). These results might be taken with some reservations, however. Although the questions were the same at both interviews, the responses were open-ended and it is difficult to ascertain how comparable the coding was for the two surveys.

7 Thornton (1989) does report a marked decrease in the proportions supporting obligatory parenthood. Although this probably reflects a true decline in American support of obligatory parenthood, the women in the Detroit Area study were selected on the basis of having just given birth to their first, second, or fourth child in 1961. Hence, it seems likely that the representativeness of their 1962 attitudes compared to the general population of women or to their own attitudes at other points in their life cycle was somewhat biased—because the sample was limited to mothers and to ones who had recently given birth. Using several Virginia Slims surveys, Pagnini and Rindfuss (1993) also report a substantial rise (from 31 to 47 percent) between 1974 and 1985 in the proportion of respondents who agreed with the statement that "there is no reason why single women shouldn't have children." Although the authors also note a rise in the proportion who would find it acceptable for their own daughter to have a child outside of marriage, the proportions remain very low (14 percent). Hence, while there is evidence of liberalization of attitudes toward the behavior of others, attitudes are not nearly as permissive when it comes to one's own family.

8 Other studies reached similar results. For example, 1960 Project TALENT data on high school seniors showed that 3 percent of females and 8 percent of males expected to remain single; by 1980, the High School and Beyond Survey indicated that the proportions had only risen to 5 percent for females and 10 percent for males (Thornton and Freedman 1982).

9 For example, the 1970 National Fertility Study of ever-married women found that 76 percent of those under age 30 and 79 percent of those 30 and older agreed with the statement that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family" (Mason and Bumpass 1973). At that time, however, 41 percent of married women (husband present) were in the labor force (US Bureau of the Census 1975). General Social Survey results show that by 1977 only 30 percent of all women aged 30 and older and 57 percent of those under 30 disagreed with this statement; however, by 1985 the proportions disagreeing rose to 47 percent for the older women and 72 percent for the younger women (Thornton 1989). Nor is there evidence that the rapid postwar rise in married women's labor force participation was initiated by the growth of the women's liberation movement. The proportion of married women (husband present) who were in the labor force rose from 13.8 to 30.6 percent between 1940 and 1960 (US Bureau of the Census 1975). Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was not published until 1963 and the National Organization of Women was only organized in 1966 (Freeman 1973).

10 These data were taken, in part, from *Current Population Surveys: Uniform March Files,*

*1964–1988* (Mare and Winship 1990); data for 1989 and 1990 from the March CPS files released by the Census Bureau were added to make the files complete through 1990. These are all public-use sample computer files. Those living in group quarters or whose major activity during the previous week was schooling are excluded from the analysis.

11 Using standardization, a recent study estimated that rising school enrollment only accounted for roughly 13 and 8 percent of the changes in the proportions ever married among 20–21 and 22–24-year-old women respectively (Oppenheimer, Blossfeld, and Wackerow 1994).

12 The NLS refers to the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience. The sample used by Goldscheider and Waite was cohorts of young women, aged 14–24 at the first interview in 1968, and of young men of the same age, first interviewed in 1966. Goldscheider and Waite's study covered marriages from ages 17–27 for women. The NLSY refers to the second set of youth cohorts, first interviewed in 1979 when they were 14–21 and reinterviewed every year since (Center for Human Resource Research 1992). The NSFH refers to the National Survey of Families and Households, conducted in 1987–88 (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Although cross-sectional, this survey has extensive retrospective information.

13 A comparative analysis of several industrial European societies also found that, net of school enrollment, there was little or no observed negative effect of educational attainment on women's marriage formation (Blossfeld 1994; see also Hoem 1985).

14 Goldscheider and Waite (1986) did conclude that recent declines in the marriage rate are "the result of the reduced willingness of women to marry and of their increased ability to support themselves outside of marriage" (p. 106). However, their two major measures of women's labor market position—education and employment—both have a positive effect on marriage formation. While the education effect disappears with age, the employment effect increases with age (the positive size of the coefficient for those 25–27 is three times greater than that for 21–24-year-olds). Instead, their conclusions seem to be primarily based on the coefficients for the characteristics of parents (education and income). No income data for women were incorporated in the model.

15 There may be more reason to argue that women's rising employment has a greater effect on marital disruption than formation. Here too a reexamination of the problem would be beneficial. A major issue is causal ordering. Women may increase their work effort if the marriage is going sour so that, even if the analysis is longitudinal, it may be difficult to distinguish cause from effect (Johnson and Skinner 1986). Second, where measures of the wife's independence rely on her relative earnings position, the effect on marital disruptions may be due more to the poor earnings of the husband than to the wife's strong earnings position (Cherlin 1979). Here the empirical results are somewhat contradictory (for a discussion of this see Spitze 1988 and Greenstein 1990).

16 Becker maintains that his perspective is quite different from Durkheim's. According to Becker, Durkheim is arguing that a division of labor increases the "congruence of the interest and sentiments ('organic solidarity') of those participating in the division of labor." Becker's position is that "a division of labor among selfish persons may encourage cheating and shirking" and that "a congruence of sentiments is a cause rather than a result of efficient division of labor" (Becker 1981: 190–191). Nevertheless, as the passage from Durkheim quoted earlier shows, Durkheim included the notion that specialization made people dependent on each other, which also seems to be Becker's point.

17 For example, Czap (1982) describes such a system in Russia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century—dubbing it the "perennial multiple family." Newly formed households were always joint, usually consisting of several families, so that there was never a period in the developmental cycle of the household where particular types of labor were scarce.

18 Thus just as Cain (1978, 1983) speaks of the value of children as insurance against risk in developing societies and Stark (1981) analyzes the rural–urban migration of working-age children as a family strategy for reducing risk through the diversification of income sources, I am dealing here with family

strategies that traditionally used children but have recently shifted to wives to help maintain an economic equilibrium over the family's developmental cycle.

19 As late as 1921 in England, 65 percent of 14–15-year-old males and 91 percent of 16–17-year-old males were working (Census of England and Wales 1921).

20 Rowntree estimated that in the United Kingdom the average weekly sum spent on alcohol was no less than 6s, which, if applicable to York, would have amounted to one-sixth the average total family income of the working classes (Rowntree 1922: 177).

21 Parsons and Goldin (1989) also report on a 1907 survey on the condition of women and child wage earners living at home in New York City. The highest proportion of daughters retaining any earnings was 50 percent for women in their late 20s; at age 21 the proportion was around 15 percent. See also Anderson 1971: 129.

22 Earnings were capped at $100,000 in order to make the upper limit consistent across the years and to avoid distortions by outliers in recent years. The Consumer Price Index, CPI-U-X1, was used to adjust income for cost-of-living changes. For a discussion of the various CPI indexes, see US Bureau of the Census 1990. Other analysts have used different price inflaters but have also found a sharp deterioration in young men's earning position (Juhn, Murphy, and Pierce 1993).

23 Data are not presented for those with five or more years of college because it is impossible to estimate time out of school for this group. This also has the advantage of keeping the College 4 group more homogeneous rather than increasingly inflating their earnings with the much higher earnings of the growing numbers with advanced degrees.

24 Starting in the 1980s, there has been a veritable explosion in research on the post-1970 growth of inequality. Most of this research either focuses on overall measures of inequality, such as the Gini Index, or uses earnings ratios as a direct indicator of inequality. As with interpreting trends in sex differentials in earnings, this approach makes it very difficult to interpret the significance of the results for demographic behavior. Moreover, much of this research concentrates on trends in family income and hence is not particularly relevant to the analysis of marriage formation. The paper by Juhn et al. is particularly interesting, as it focuses on male earnings and clearly reveals the nature of the divergence in earnings trends that is producing the rise in inequality.

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