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TWO DECADES OF FAMILY CHANGE: THE SHIFTING ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF MARRIAGE

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Has the relationship between economic prospects and marriage formation in the United States changed in recent decades? To answer this question, a discrete-time event-history analysis was conducted using data from multiple cohorts of the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience. Among women, results indicate growth in the importance of earnings for marriage formation between the early baby-boom cohort (born between 1950 and 1954) and late baby-boom cohort (born between 1961 and 1965). Evidence of cohort change in the relationship between men's economic prospects and marriage, however, is limited. Despite important racial differences in the economic and attitudinal context of marriage, key results are generally similar for whites and for African Americans. Taken together, these findings imply that men and women are growing to resemble one another with respect to the relationship between economic prospects and marriage, although this convergence is driven primarily by changing patterns of marriage among women. These results are largely supportive of Oppenheimer's career-entry theory of marriage and suggest that Becker's specialization and trading model of marriage may be outdated.

IN THE DECADES since the mid-1960s, the United States has experienced great change in both the marriage and labor force participation rates of women. Between 1965 and 1993, the median age at first marriage rose almost four years, to 26.5 years for men and 24.5 years for women. During this period, married women's labor force participation nearly doubled from 30 to 58 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994). The increasing delay of marriage has been accompanied by rapid growth in the earnings of married women but by only slow growth in the earnings of men (Cancian, Danziger, and Gottschalk 1993). Social scientists frequently attribute declines in marriage to increases in women's economic independence resulting from these trends (e.g., Becker [1981] 1992; Cherlin 1992; Preston and Richards 1975; Waite and Spitze 1981). Commonly labeled the "economic independence hypothesis," this argument assumes that women with good prospects in the labor market will be less likely to marry than will women with relatively poorer prospects. As women's rising incomes reduce economic dependence on a spouse, many argue that the incentive for women to marry has diminished.

This perspective presumes a model of marriage characterized by a high degree of spe-

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cialization in sex roles, with men expecting to focus on market work after marriage and women expecting to concentrate their efforts at home. Such a view suggests that good prospects in the labor market will increase the likelihood of marriage among men, who will feel better prepared to marry, but reduce the likelihood of marriage among women, who will see marriage as a relatively less attractive option than continuing to work outside the home. Yet models that were designed to explain marriage before the revolutionary economic changes of the 1960s and 1970s may be inappropriate for understanding marriage formation in more recent historical periods. Building on the work of Oppenheimer (1988), I consider an alternative possibility: Rather than making marriage unnecessary or undesirable, changes in the labor market positions of both women and men—along with contemporaneous shifts in gender role attitudes and patterns of consumption—have altered the nature of the marital bargain. Through an investigation of the changing relationship between economic prospects and entry into first marriage, I examine the possibility that the economic foundations of marriage have shifted.

Although previous research has examined the association between marriage and economic prospects in particular historical periods, few studies have been explicitly designed to investigate historical change, thus limiting our understanding of the roots and meanings of contemporary marriage patterns (Modell 1999). I use a classic demographic technique to study the process of social change: a comparison of the experiences of successive birth cohorts. Indeed, Ryder (1965) argues that the continued replacement of one cohort by another greatly facilitates transformations in societies, and further, "if change does occur, it differentiates cohorts from one another, and the comparison of their careers becomes a way to study change" (p. 844). To this end, the current analysis combines data from multiple sources to compare the marriage formation behaviors of the "early baby-boom" cohort (born between 1950 and 1954) and the "late baby-boom" cohort (born between 1961 and 1965) in the United States. These cohorts reached adulthood, and made decisions about marriage, in somewhat different historical contexts. Indeed, trends that began when the early baby-boomers were entering adulthood in the late 1960s and 1970s—trends such as improved economic opportunities for women and widespread movement toward more egalitarian gender role ideals—were more firmly established by the 1980s and early 1990s, when the late baby-boomers were moving into adulthood.

Three questions about potential change in the process and context of marriage guide the current research. First, as women are increasingly expected to work outside the home over the course of their lives and as patterns of consumption and gender role attitudes have changed, I ask whether women's economic prospects (as indicated by their earnings, educational attainment, and employment status) have become more important for marriage formation over time. Second, as women are increasingly able (and expected) to contribute to the economic maintenance of their families after marriage, I ask whether men's economic prospects have become somewhat less important for marriage formation over time. Finally, given relatively large racial differences in the economic and attitudinal context of marriage, I ask whether the nature of recent historical change in the relationship between economic prospects and marriage differs for blacks and for whites.

THEORY, CONTEXT, AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Arguments suggesting that improvements in women's economic standing are responsible for recent declines in marriage derive theoretical support from Becker's ([1981]1992) "specialization and trading" model of marriage. Borrowing ideas from the international trade literature, Becker views single men and women as trading partners who choose to marry only when both partners believe that they will be better off married than single. All else held constant, the gains to marriage are greatest when men and women specialize in the labor market and home, respectively, and trade on their comparative advantages in these tasks. Becker argues that "the gain from marriage is reduced . . . by higher earnings and labor force participation of married women, because the sexual division of labor within households becomes

less advantageous" (p. 55). Becker's theory thus implies that having a good position in the labor market will most likely increase marriage among men but reduce marriage among women, again, all else held constant.

Yet in her "career-entry" theory, Oppenheimer (1988) suggests that changing conditions in the labor market have fundamentally altered the nature of the marital bargain. Consistent with demography's historical emphasis on the perceived economic feasibility of marriage (e.g., Dixon 1971; Easterlin 1980; Hajnal 1965; Malthus [1798] 1988), Oppenheimer argues that a certain standard of living must be obtained before marriage is considered affordable. In historical periods when women are not expected to remain attached to the labor market throughout their lives, male labor market position is the key economic determinant of marriage. As women's patterns of labor force participation come to more closely resemble those of men, however, Oppenheimer argues that the characteristics considered important in a spouse become more symmetrical for husbands and wives. In particular, potential wives are increasingly evaluated on the basis of their own achieved socioeconomic status and future labor market prospects, rather than on the basis of more traditional characteristics such as religion, family background, and physical attractiveness. The "career-entry" perspective thus implies a positive effect of women's good economic prospects on marriage, as well as growth over time in the importance of women's economic prospects for marriage formation. As women's economic position improves, and as women can expect to make increasingly large contributions to the economic maintenance of their families, we might further expect that male labor market position would become somewhat less important for marriage formation. Indeed, Oppenheimer and Lew (1995) suggest that ". . . 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 desirable in other respects" (p. 109).

THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF MARRIAGE

Much evidence supports the argument that the economic context of marriage has shifted in recent decades. Income growth since 1960 was greater for women than for men, and the proportion of women in the labor force has increased dramatically since 1960, particularly among women who are white, married, or who have young children.[1] Men, however, experienced some decline in labor supply during this period (Wetzel 1995). Perhaps not surprisingly, gender role attitudes in the United States also have changed since the 1960s, with an increasing proportion of the population holding egalitarian sex role attitudes (Barich and Bielby 1996; Thornton 1989).

Changing consumption patterns also alter the economic context of marriage. As Bumpass (1990) stated in his presidential address to the Population Association of America, "[E]conomic need is a highly amorphous concept, always seeming to outstrip what we have" (p. 489). Members of the baby-boom generation may expect a high and rising standard of living based on experiences growing up in the relatively prosperous 1960s and early 1970s (Jones 1980). Recent declines in male earnings may increase the perceived necessity of a second income. To the extent that owning a home symbolizes the middle-class lifestyle, rising housing costs have further made this standard increasingly difficult to achieve for a single-earner family (Wetzel 1995). The economic costs associated with raising children have also increased in recent decades (Casper 1995; England and Folbre 1999).

Taken together, these trends suggest growth in the importance of wives' labor market position for marriage, but have ambiguous implications for husbands' labor market position. The combination of some decline in male economic standing with improvements in standing among women suggests that men's labor market position may have become less important for marriage formation. Yet changing patterns of consumption and the perceived economic requirements of supporting a family at an "ad-

[1] Although I consider entry into first marriage among single women, the changing economic roles of married men and women will affect both what is valued in a partner and the level of economic achievement perceived to be necessary before marriage.

equate" level may offset any such change in the significance of male economic prospects for marriage.

It is also important to note, however, that the economic and attitudinal context of marriage differs substantially by race. Black men have seen greater erosion in their own labor market position in recent decades than have white men (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984, 1991; Wilson 1987). Historically, black women have been more likely to work for pay than have white women, even when factors such as education, family income, and number of children are controlled (Goldin 1990). Yet growth in income—particularly relative to that of same-race men—has been significantly greater for black women than for white women (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984, 1991). In addition, racial differences are reported in attitudes toward various aspects of family life (Carter 1993; South 1991). African Americans tend to place greater emphasis on economic stability in marital decision-making than do whites, and black women are found to be less willing than white women to marry a man with fewer resources than themselves (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993). Although the potentially offsetting nature of these factors leads to uncertain predictions about the expected nature of racial differences in the changing economic basis of marriage, it is clearly important to consider variation in patterns of marriage by race.

Previous Research and the Present Study

Previous studies of the economic context of marriage have focused most often on three key indicators of position in the labor market: educational attainment, employment status, and earnings. Regardless of time period, data set, or analytical technique employed, these studies generally report positive effects of good economic prospects on marriage among men (e.g., Cooney and Hogan 1991; Cready, Fossett, and Kiecolt 1991; Goldscheider and Waite 1986; Koball 1998; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim 1997; Sassler and Schoen 1999).[2] Several studies have examined the relationship between economic prospects and marriage formation separately for black men and white men (Lloyd and South 1996; Oppenheimer et al. 1997). Statistical tests generally were not performed to evaluate the significance of racial differences, however. Nor were racial differences in the nature of historical change explored.

Previous studies have drawn varying conclusions about the impact of labor market position on the marital behavior of women, with notable differences across level of analysis. Studies taking an aggregate-level approach—most often examining the proportion of married individuals in a particular local area—generally suggest that women's good economic prospects are associated with reduced marriage (Cready et al. 1997; Lichter, LeClere, and McLaughlin 1991; McLanahan and Casper 1995; Preston and Richards 1975; White 1981). Aggregate-level studies have been criticized, however, because factors that produce aggregate-level variation in marriage prevalence may not relate in the same way to marriage behavior among individuals (Oppenheimer 1997). Moreover, studies using cross-sectional data can face difficulties identifying the correct causal ordering of variables and tend to control only a very limited number of characteristics relevant to marriage formation. This may lead to biased estimation of the coefficients of interest. In contrast, individual-level studies of longitudinal data generally report no relationship or a positive relationship between various indicators of women's economic prospects and marriage formation (Cherlin 1980; Goldscheider and Waite 1986; Lichter et al. 1992; Oppenheimer and Lew 1995; Thornton, Axinn, and Teachman 1995; Waite and Spitze 1981). Although few studies directly test for significant racial differences in the effect of economic prospects on marriage formation, and none explicitly

[2] While most studies report an overall positive effect of male educational attainment on marriage, several studies instead report a negative effect of male education on marriage (e.g., Lloyd and South 1996; Mare and Winship 1991). Results from models with detailed categorical specifications of education suggest that these seemingly contradictory results may be driven by the relatively high likelihood of marriage among white men with less than 12 years of schooling (Oppenheimer and Lewin 1999).

examines racial differences in the nature of historical change in the relationship between the two, previous research does suggest that earnings may matter somewhat more for marriage among black women than among white women (Oppenheimer and Lewin 1999).

Despite substantial reason to expect historical change in the socioeconomic context of marriage, few recent empirical studies have directly investigated whether the nature and strength of the relationship between labor market position and marriage has shifted over time. Differences in sample definitions, construction of key economic variables, and analytical approaches limit the usefulness of a meta-review of prior studies for understanding change in marriage. Although two recent studies of cross-sectional variation in marriage suggest a growing propensity to marry among well-educated women relative to their less educated peers (Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Qian and Preston 1993), no research to date offers a formal test of cohort change in the relationship of economic prospects to marriage formation.

I use multiple sources of longitudinal data to systematically examine the nature and direction of cohort change in the relationship of economic prospects to the formation of first marriages. This improves the ability to examine the roots and meanings of contemporary patterns of marriage and provides insights into the likely direction of continued change in family life. I test several hypotheses about how the relationship between marriage and economic prospects may have changed between the early and late baby-boom cohorts examined. First, I hypothesize that the importance of women's economic prospects (as measured by earnings, educational attainment, and employment) for marriage formation will have grown between the early and late baby-boom cohorts, with these effects becoming increasingly positive over time. The combination of improvement in women's economic position with some decline in men's economic position suggests that men are decreasingly expected to be the sole breadwinner for their families after marriage. I therefore expect that male economic prospects will have become less important over time for marriage. Finally, I expect that change in the economic basis of marriage may differ by race. The direction of these differences is uncertain, however, because of offsetting effects in the economic and attitudinal contexts of marriage.

DATA

Data for the present study come from three sources: the Young Men (NLSM), Young Women (NLSW), and Youth (NLSY) cohorts of the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience. The Young Men's (NLSM) and Young Women's (NLSW) samples are used to investigate marriage among members of the early baby-boom cohort (born from 1950 to 1954), while data from the Youth sample (NLSY) are used to investigate marriage among members of the late baby-boom cohort (born from 1961 to 1965). The early baby-boom cohort (NLSM and NLSW samples) largely includes marriage experiences from the late 1960s through the 1970s, while the late baby-boom cohort (NLSY sample) largely includes marriage experiences during the 1980s and early 1990s. The primary focus of these NLS cohorts was to examine the labor market experiences of young adults (Center for Human Resource Research 1997), making these data ideal for my investigation. Further, all three survey groups include oversamples of blacks, which facilitates the investigation of racial differences in the changing relationship between economic prospects and marriage.

The NLSY sample was interviewed annually from 1979 through 1994, the NLSM sample was interviewed annually from 1966 to 1971, and then in 1973, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1980, and 1981. The NLSW sample was interviewed annually from 1968 through 1973, and then in 1975, 1977, 1978, 1980, 1982, and 1983.[3] The 16 years of data analyzed in this project for each cohort reflect first marriages formed by primary respondents between the ages of 17 and 34. For the Young Men's (NLSM) and Young Women's (NLSW) samples, date of first marriage was

[3] Although the Youth and Young Women's samples were also interviewed in subsequent years, these data are not used in the current analysis. The Young Men's sample was not reinterviewed after 1981.

not asked in every interview year. Thus the analytical sample for the early cohort is limited to men who responded in 1976, and to women who responded in either 1978 or 1983, when more complete marital histories were collected. I retain the cross-sectional sample and the oversample of blacks in all surveys. Because of data limitations, the samples are restricted to blacks and whites, with Hispanics coded by race rather than ethnicity.[4] To minimize problems from left-censoring of important economic covariates associated with marriage formation, I further limit the analysis to individuals under age 19 at first interview. The analytical samples include a total of 3,631 women and men in the early cohort and 4,920 women and men in the late cohort. All descriptive statistics are weighted to adjust for design issues, such as the oversampling of blacks, and for differential nonresponse to the interviews (Center for Human Resource Research 1997).

It is desirable to have information collected at as many time points as possible for an event-history analysis of marriage. While the Youth sample (NLSY) was interviewed annually from 1979 through 1994, the Young Men's (NLSM) and Young Women's (NLSW) samples were interviewed somewhat less regularly. Wherever possible, the annual measures are constructed from retrospective questions about activities during the noninterview year. This approximation is generally feasible for measures of school enrollment, for example. In other cases, where these retrospective questions were not asked, missing data are generally imputed from the previous interview year.[5] A variable indicating a noninterview year for the early baby-boom cohort (NLSM and NLSW) is included in all models.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to examine cohabitation using the NLS data because, like most surveys conducted prior to the mid-1980s, the relevant questions were not asked consistently. Data on cohabitation prior to the 1980s that are available from other surveys were primarily obtained retrospectively (Smock 2000), although little is known about the quality of retrospective reporting on cohabitation. The lack of information on cohabitation is a drawback of using the NLS data, but the generally brief duration of cohabitation for most couples should lead to relatively small differences in estimations of the timing of first marriages versus first unions of any type. Indeed, fully half of cohabitations end within 16 months, and only one in ten couples is still cohabiting (and unmarried) after five years (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). It is important to keep in mind, however, that the present study sheds light on just one piece of the broader union formation process—entry into a legal marriage.

VARIABLES AND METHODS

I use logistic regression analysis to estimate discrete-time hazard models of the effects of economic prospects on entry into first marriage. This approach permits the estimation of effects of fixed and time-varying covariates on entry into marriage, and avoids the assumption of proportional hazards (Allison 1995). The dependent variable in the analysis is a dichotomous indicator of whether a marriage occurred in the interval between two given years, with time-varying independent variables fixed at the beginning of the interval. Data are organized into person-year records, with one record for each annual interval in which respondents were at risk of first marriage, including intervals in which a first marriage occurred. For this analysis, the risk of marriage is assumed to begin at age 17. Because the focus of this analysis is on the comparison of coefficients between cohort models, the models themselves are kept relatively simple, with few complex variable or model specifications.

Table 1 shows the mean values of the independent variables, separately by race and sex. This analysis uses three well-established measures of standing in the labor market to reflect economic prospects: earnings, educational attainment, and employment status. Both a continuous measure of logged earnings (wage and business income) and a dummy variable for zero earnings in the prior year are constructed, based on the as-

[4] It is not possible to identify Hispanic ethnicity in the NLSM sample, and ethnicity is not ascertained until the 1993 interview in the NLSW sample.

[5] A variety of approaches to dealing with missing data were considered, with substantive results robust to choice of method.

Table 1. Sample Means by Race and Sex for Variables Used in Analysis of Transition to First Marriage: Men and Women, Age 22, from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Young Women (NLSW), Young Men (NLSM), and Youth (NLSY)

	White Women		Black Women		White Men		Black Men	
Independent Variable	Early Cohort	Late Cohort	Early Cohort	Late Cohort	Early Cohort	Late Cohort	Early Cohort	Late Cohort
Earnings (log)	.74	.75	.71	.72	.80	.79	.79	.75
No income	.16	.11	.26	.28	.03	.05	.06	.11
Educational attainment:								
Less than 12 years	.10	.08	.32	.17	.10	.13	.28	.22
12 years	.48	.45	.43	.47	.38	.45	.42	.49
13 to 15 years	.29	.28	.19	.30	.31	.28	.17	.22
16 or more years	.12	.16	.03	.05	.12	.12	.03	.04
Currently enrolled in school	.13	.19	.12	.16	.20	.21	.11	.13
Currently employed	.65	.70	.52	.51	.72	.69	.65	.55
Service in military	—	—	—	—	.12	.07	.13	.10
Family Background Variables [a]								
Two-parent family at age 14	.87	.80	.60	.45	.86	.79	.63	.50
Family head's job is professional or managerial	.29	.29	.04	.07	.26	.28	.04	.06
Mother's education:								
Less than 12 years	.31	.25	.66	.49	.36	.22	.68	.45
12 years	.45	.48	.14	.31	.43	.51	.11	.33
13 or more years	.20	.24	.05	.12	.16	.22	.04	.14
Residence								
Lives in South	.27	.29	.55	.57	.24	.27	.51	.49
Lives in SMSA	.70	.69	.73	.73	.61	.63	.51	.66
Number of cases	1,203	1,474	517	877	1,440	1,608	471	961

Note: Sample means are weighted.

[a] Measured at the time of the first interview.

sumption that having some earnings is qualitatively different from having no earnings.

Consistent with other national data, the NLS cohorts show some growth over time in women's earnings and some decline in men's earnings, particularly among black men. Consistent with national trends in education, some decline over time is seen in the completed education of young white men, likely reflecting the opportunity to postpone service in the Vietnam War by extending one's time in school (Bernhardt et al. 1999; Mare 1995) and the related higher rates of military participation among less educated men. To distinguish effects of accumulated education from time spent in school, I constructed an additional measure indicating current school enrollment. A dummy variable indicates employment at the time of interview. For men, an additional measure indicated whether respondents were on active duty in the military (these men are coded 0 on the employment variable), as military service has been found to impact marital transitions in prior research. Given the timing of the Vietnam War, it is not surprising that substantially more early-cohort than late-cohort men were enlisted in the military at age 22.

As prior research has found that family background characteristics are related to

marriage formation (e.g., Michael and Tuma 1985), several family background variables are included in the analysis, all measured at the time of first interview. These include dummy variables indicating whether the respondent was living in a two-parent family at age 14, whether the respondent's father (or head of household) was employed in a managerial or professional occupation, as well as a categorical measure of the respondent's mother's educational attainment. Consistent with national trends, data from the National Longitudinal Surveys indicate decline over time in the proportion of young people growing up in two-parent families and some increase in the level of mothers' educational attainment. Finally, as various local-area characteristics have been found to be related to marriage in prior research (e.g., Lichter et al. 1992), dummy variables are included in the models for current residence in the South and in a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA). Mean values are assigned in the case of missing data on earnings, and separate indicators of missing data on this and other variables are included in all models, as appropriate (see note 5). With the exception of family background variables, all explanatory measures are time-varying.

RESULTS

The first stage of the analysis investigates change over time in the relationship between economic prospects and marriage formation among women. Beginning with marriage among white women of the early baby-boom cohort, shown in the first column of Table 2, results indicate that although high earnings are associated with an increase in the odds of marriage, this effect is not statistically significant. With respect to education, having at least 16 years of schooling is associated with 52 percent greater odds (exp[.42]) of marriage than having 12 years of schooling. Consistent with previous research, current school enrollment is significantly associated with delay in marriage among white women of the early baby-boom cohort—student status is associated with a 58-percent reduction in the odds of marriage. This is not surprising given the potential incompatibility of the role of student with the responsibilities associated with marriage and a family (Thornton et al. 1995). No statistically significant effects are found for family background variables in the early cohort, but a positive effect on marriage is associated with living in the South or outside of an SMSA.

The focus of the analysis lies in identifying how these effects have changed over time. Compare the first column in Table 2 with the second column, which shows a parallel model for white women in the late baby-boom cohort. Although the pattern of effects in the two cohorts of white women is generally similar, the effect of women's earnings on marriage formation increases over time as predicted. The level of women's earnings was not significantly related to marriage in the early baby-boom cohort of white women, yet significantly stronger effects are observed among white women in the later cohort. Indeed, each unit increase in logged earnings is associated with a 21-percent increase in the odds of marriage for the later cohort of women, while having no earnings is associated with a 32-percent reduction in the odds of marriage.

To determine if change in marriage has proceeded in a similar fashion by race, the last two columns of Table 2 estimate a parallel set of models for black women. Despite important racial differences in the economic and attitudinal contexts of marriage, patterns of change in marriage are similar by race. As observed for white women, only the effect of earnings has changed significantly over time, with growth in the importance of earnings for marriage formation observed among black women. Yet several significant racial differences are noted in the general pattern of women's marriage. For example, having accumulated fewer than 12 years of schooling (relative to having exactly 12 years) is associated with increased marriage among white women in both cohorts, but has no significant effects on marriage among black women.[6] In explaining a similar finding in

[6] Although the size of the effect of having 16 or more years of education is smaller for the late cohort of black women than for the early cohort, the difference between these coefficients is not statistically different from zero.

Table 2. Coefficients for Women from the Logistic Regression of Transition to First Marriage on Selected Independent Variables: National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY) and Young Women (NLSW)

	White Women				Black Women			
	Early Cohort		Late Cohort		Early Cohort		Late Cohort	
Independent Variable	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Earnings (log)	.07	(.04)	.19*†	(.04)	.01	(.06)	.22*†	(.05)
No earnings	−.25	(.13)	−.38*	(.13)	−.19	(.17)	−.59*	(.15)
Educational Attainment								
Less than 12 years	.24*	(.12)	.36*	(.11)	−.01	(.15)	−.04‡	(.15)
13 to 15 years	.41*	(.11)	.23*	(.10)	−.27‡	(.23)	.03	(.13)
16 or more years	.42*	(.16)	.41*	(.11)	.85*	(.26)	.37*	(.19)
Currently enrolled in school	−.87*	(.10)	−.71*	(.09)	−.25‡	(.16)	−.09‡	(.14)
Currently employed	.03	(.09)	−.01	(.09)	.14	(.16)	.08	(.13)
Family Background Variables								
Two-parent family at age 14	−.16	(.11)	.02	(.08)	.22‡	(.14)	.14	(.10)
Family head's job is professional/managerial	−.11	(.09)	−.06	(.08)	−.09	(.36)	.07	(.21)
Mother's education:								
12 years	−.06	(.09)	.00	(.08)	−.12	(.19)	−.06	(.11)
13 or more years	−.21	(.12)	−.21*	(.10)	−.25	(.31)	−.31	(.18)
Residence								
Lives in South	.27*	(.08)	.41*	(.07)	.07	(.14)	.35*	(.11)
Lives in SMSA	−.26*	(.08)	−.22*	(.08)	−.03	(.15)	−.15	(.12)
Constant	−3.87*	(.80)	−4.14*	(.51)	−3.71*	(.89)	−4.66*	(.58)
Log-likelihood	−2,673		−3,446		−1,049		−1,720	
Number of person years	6,794		10,185		4,122		8,230	

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. For mother's education the omitted category is "less than high school"; for respondent's education it is "12 years." Models also contain controls for age and indicators for missing data.

† Significantly different from the early cohort coefficent at $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests)

‡ Significantly different from the white (within-cohort) coefficient at $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests)

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests)

their own research, Oppenheimer and Lewin (1999) suggest that the least educated white women may prefer to marry at an earlier age, but are hesitant to do so given their poor economic position. School enrollment also has significantly stronger marriage-delaying effects for white women than for black women in both cohorts. Finally, living in a two-parent family at age 14 has a stronger positive effect on marriage formation among black women than among white women in the early cohort, although this effect itself is not statistically significant even among black women.

In the next stage of the analysis, I investigate whether economic prospects have become less important over time for marriage formation among men. The first column of Table 3 displays results for white men in the early baby-boom cohort. Early cohort white men's earnings display the expected positive relationship to marriage formation, with

Table 3. Coefficients for Men from the Logistic Regression of Transition to First Marriage on Selected Independent Variables: National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY) and Young Men (NLSM)

	White Men				Black Men			
	Early Cohort		Late Cohort		Early Cohort		Late Cohort	
Independent Variable	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Earnings (log)	.27*	(.04)	.26*	(.04)	.29*	(.08)	.26*	(.06)
No earnings	−.61*	(.21)	−.74*	(.20)	−.85*	(.35)	−.41	(.21)
Educational Attainment								
Less than 12 years	.05	(.11)	.28*	(.10)	−.27	(.15)	−.20‡	(.15)
13 to 15 years	−.03	(.09)	.26*†	(.10)	.17	(.20)	.20	(.14)
16 or more years	−.03	(.12)	.42*†	(.11)	.37	(.34)	.74*	(.19)
Currently enrolled in school	−.21*	(.09)	−.68*†	(.11)	−.40*	(.19)	−.40*	(.19)
Currently employed	.44*	(.10)	.14†	(.10)	.14	(.19)	.43*	(.15)
Service in military	.39	(.42)	.63*	(.22)	−1.06	(.63)	.85*†	(.32)
Family Background Variables								
Two-parent family at age 14	−.05	(.10)	.08	(.08)	.12	(.14)	−.04	(.10)
Family head's job is professional/managerial	−.13	(.08)	.04	(.08)	−.02	(.46)	−.33	(.24)
Mother's education:								
12 years	−.06	(.07)	−.13	(.08)	−.08	(.20)	.00	(.12)
13 or more years	−.25*	(.11)	−.31*	(.11)	−.73	(.43)	.13‡	(.17)
Residence								
Lives in South	.18*	(.08)	.33*	(.07)	.39*	(.17)	.22*	(.11)
Lives in SMSA	−.28*	(.08)	−.36*	(.08)	−.17	(.15)	.08‡	(.14)
Constant	−4.50*	(.55)	−4.74*	(.47)	−6.18*	(.12)	−6.07*	(.69)
Log-likelihood		−3,413		−3,483		−1,023	−1,619	
Number of person years		10,057		13,653		3,717	9,780	

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. For mother's education the omitted category is "less than high school"; for respondent's education it is "12 years." Models also contain controls for age and indicators for missing data.

† Significantly different from Early Cohort coefficent at $p < .05$ (two-tailed test).

‡ Significantly different from white (within-cohort) coefficient at $p < .05$ (two-tailed test).

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed test)

each additional unit of logged income associated with a 31-percent increase in the odds of marriage; having no income is associated with 46 percent lower odds of marriage. Although no significant effects are found for early cohort white men's accumulated education, school enrollment is associated with a 19-percent decrease in the odds of men's marriage, and employment is associated with 55 percent greater odds of marriage. No statistically significant effect of military service is found on marriage among early cohort white men, while having a college-educated mother is associated with delayed marriage. Finally, similar to the findings for women, residence in the South and living outside of an SMSA are associated with relatively earlier transitions into first marriage among white men in the early baby-boom cohort.

To investigate how the process of marriage has changed over time among white men, the second column of Table 3 displays a parallel model for white men in the late baby-boom cohort. In short, little evidence is observed of decline in the importance of white men's economic prospects for marriage. Instead, with respect to educational attainment, I find evidence of growth over time in the importance of male economic characteristics for marriage, with men with at least 13 years of schooling significantly more likely to marry than those with less schooling. This may reflect the increased importance of education for determining men's overall economic prospects in the later cohort (e.g., Duncan, Boisjoly, and Smeeding 1996; Morris and Western 1999). Interestingly, the marriage-delaying effect of school enrollment has increased over time, with enrollment associated with 50 percent lower odds of marriage among white men in the late cohort. This change may reflect the decreased expectation that wives will manage home responsibilities while husbands continue their schooling, making marriage and enrollment less compatible for the later cohort of men. The only suggestion of some decline in the importance of male economic prospects for marriage is found for employment status, although it is important to keep in mind that this effect is net of earnings in the past year. This change may further be related to the differing composition of the population of men who were *un*employed (and not on active duty in the military) for men in these two cohorts given the timing of the Vietnam War. Although a significant positive effect of military service on marriage is observed for the late cohort of white men, this does not reflect a statistically significant change over time.

I next consider racial variation among men in marriage formation; results for black men are shown in the last two columns of Table 3. The effect of earnings on marriage is similarly stable over time for black men and for white men. Although the effect of having no earnings is not statistically significant for the late cohort of black men, the cohort difference is not statistically significant. But several other significant racial differences in men's marriage emerge. For example, while having accumulated fewer than 12 years of schooling is associated with increased marriage among white men from the late cohort, this effect is significantly less positive (and the difference is in fact in the negative direction, although not statistically significant) among similar black men. In addition, having a highly educated mother or living in an SMSA delays marriage more among white men than it does among black men in the late cohort.

Although no other coefficients in the model differ significantly by race, we do observe several racial differences in the patterns of change over time in men's marriage. For example, although school enrollment increased its marriage-delaying effect over time among white men, no significant change is observed for black men, likely reflecting continuity over time in the expectation that black women will not specialize in housework while black men work in the labor market or are at school. There is also no evidence that the effect of employment on marriage has declined over time among black men, although again, the effects of employment on marriage do not differ significantly by race for either cohort. Military service increased in importance for marriage among all men, but change over time was statistically significant only for black men. Prior research suggests that volunteered military service increases black men's likelihood of marriage more than military service resulting from the draft (Testa and Krogh 1995), which may help explain this finding given the different character of military service for the two cohorts of men examined here.

DISCUSSION

In her seminal theory of marriage timing, Oppenheimer (1988) argued that the economic underpinnings of marriage were shifting. As women have been increasingly expected to remain attached to the labor market throughout their lives, and as men's ability to independently support their families has eroded, Oppenheimer suggested that women's position in the labor market would become an increasingly important determinant of marriage formation. Such change might further lead to a de-emphasis on male labor market position for marriage. If sup-

ported empirically, such patterns would weaken the credibility of Becker's ([1981] 1992) theory as a model of contemporary marriage. Although Becker's theory emphasizes the economic specialization of spouses, an arrangement that no longer describes the majority of married-couple families, his theory has influenced a large and diverse group of social scientists who attribute recent declines in marriage to improvements in women's labor market position.

The present study supports Oppenheimer's theory, showing strong growth over time in the importance of women's earnings for marriage formation. This pattern was observed both for black women and white women. Considered together with often weak and inconsistent findings from prior studies regarding the relationship between women's employment and marital disruption (Oppenheimer 1997; Sayer and Bianchi 2000; White and Rogers 2000), my analysis suggests that Becker's specialization and trading model may not provide an appropriate understanding of contemporary marriage. I have found, however, little evidence of erosion in the importance of male economic prospects for marriage among either black men or white men. My results suggest that the effect of employment status on marriage may have diminished somewhat over time among white men. But the importance of male earnings for marriage has not waned, and some growth in the importance of educational attainment for marriage is observed.

Although I have identified only limited racial variation in the effects of economic prospects on marriage, a notable difference is observed with respect to the effect of having fewer than 12 years of schooling. This result suggests that future efforts to understand racial variation in marriage would benefit from a careful consideration of educational subpopulations.

This study contributes to a larger literature identifying gender asymmetry in family change. While a substantial transformation has occurred in the economic character of what it means to be a wife—with women's position in the labor market of growing importance to their marriage behavior, and wives increasingly expected to work outside the home—there is limited evidence of transformation in the *economic* character of what it means to be a husband (Nock 1998). It is possible that growth in the cost of raising children and in perceptions of what is needed to maintain an "adequate" standard of living have contributed to maintaining the importance of male earnings for marriage, despite the growing importance of women's own economic contributions to their families. How and whether expectations are redefined regarding husbands' and wives' *noneconomic* contributions to their families, particularly with respect to the division of household labor and childcare, will likely affect the desirability of marriage for future generations of women. As Goldscheider and Waite (1991) argue, "[I]t seems increasingly clear that the road to 'new families' will lead through men, who must decide whether they want homes, families, and children enough to share responsibility for them" (p. 195).

While this analysis improves our understanding of recent changes in the economic foundations of marriage, it suffers from a number of limitations that future research should address. For example, because I have focused on historical change, little attention is paid to more complex specifications of variables and models within each cohort. I have not addressed how the effects of covariates may vary with age or the potentially complex interactions among covariates. Because of the need to construct identical variables across cohorts, my analysis also did not take advantage of the full wealth of data available from each individual data source.

More broadly, I have offered separate analyses of the marriage behaviors of men and of women, marriage itself is a two-sex arrangement. It is clear that economic prospects affect not just individual desire and readiness for marriage, but also attractiveness to potential mates (e.g., Lloyd and South 1996; Wilson 1987). These two very different—albeit related—types of effects on marriage should be distinguished. For example, the fact that women with the highest earnings are most likely to marry could suggest either that women with high earnings feel more ready for marriage or that women with high earnings make desirable marriage partners. While both explanations suggest change in the economic basis of women's role in marriage, a one-sex approach, such

as that taken here, cannot distinguish between them. More research is needed to better understand change both in the characteristics desired in mates and in the factors determining "readiness" for marriage.

In addition, I have examined *absolute* earnings, but not earnings relative to a potential spouse. This is important, as Becker's ([1981]1992) theory implies that the benefits of specialization within marriage will be positively related to the gap between male wages and female wages. For example, if high-earning women have become better able to attract high-earning husbands, growth over time in the relationship between women's *absolute* earnings and marriage will not necessarily imply growth over time in the importance of women's *relative* earnings (i.e., relative to potential male partners' earnings) for marriage. (This is implied, however, by the assumption that all else is held constant.) Studies of divorce that test Becker's theory have more easily incorporated measures of *relative* earnings than have studies of marriage, largely because of the greater ease of assessing the earnings of actual husbands rather than potential husbands. It is important that future research on marriage formation similarly address this admittedly complicated issue, especially given the persistence of Becker's theory in studies of the family.

Despite these limitations, the results presented here clearly suggest that the economic context of contemporary marriage is dominated more by concerns about the affordability of marriage than by efforts to maximize the benefits of specialization. This is not surprising, given that the majority of young women in recent cohorts continue to work in the labor market after marriage. For Becker's ([1981]1992) model of specialization and trade to produce optimal benefits within marriage, the partner specializing in the labor market must be able to earn enough to support his family at a desirable standard of living. Women must view marriage as a secure long-term contract, such that their specialization in domestic labor does not leave them economically vulnerable should their marriages end before old age. In light of declining male earning power, growing perceptions of economic "need," and high rates of marital disruption, these old rules simply do not apply to the current regime of marriage.

In conclusion, my results suggest that continued growth in women's position in the labor market should not further reduce the likelihood of marriage among young people. Instead, improvements in the earnings of both women and men can be expected to *increase* the likelihood of marriage. Yet understanding the likely nature of future pathways to family formation will require considering marriage in the larger context of union formation. There is evidence that women's earnings are more important than men's earnings for transitions from singlehood into cohabitation among high school graduates (Clarkberg 1999), yet prior research also suggests that men's (but not women's) economic resources are significantly related to the transition from cohabitation into marriage (Smock and Manning 1997). Clearly the relationship between economic resources and union formation is complex, and our ability to understand how cohabitation fits into the larger family system in the United States is hampered by the fact that its meaning seems to be in a period of transition (Seltzer 2000; Smock 2000). My research provides evidence on one piece of this puzzle—entry into marriage—and demonstrates that, like cohabitation, the nature and meaning of marriage has been changing over time.

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