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IN MARITAL STABILITY AND FAMILY STRUCTURE:  
A MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Myron J. Lefcowitz

**DISCUSSION PAPERS**

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON, WISCONSIN

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## Preface

The hypothesis of this paper is that the differences between Negroes and whites in the incidence of family disorganization are a function of race as a summary statement of their differential social-ecological positions. Using the 1/1000 Census tape for 1960, multiple regressions were run for various indicators of family disorganization on race and dimensions of social-ecological position: age, region of birth, region of residence, SMSA status and mobility, years since first marriage, education, and poverty status. Comparisons were made of the relationship between race and family disorganization for the simple regression, the multiple regression without the poverty index, and the full regression.

The analysis suggests the following conclusions:

1. About half of the Negro-white differential in family disorganization can be accounted for by their differential location in the social-ecological structure, and about half of that differential is due to poverty status alone.

2. A mean difference in family disorganization between Negroes and whites does remain, but race contributes little to the variance explained by the full regression.

In terms of policy implications, this paper suggests that if we are concerned with family organization and its effect on social and economic behavior, we should not develop policies that are focused on Negroes as a group with some special characteristics of family organization. Rather we should develop policies aimed at changing the social-ecological conditions that affect family organization irrespective of race.

Introduction. The story line of this paper is very simple. It begins with the well-known empirical generalization that Negroes and whites differ with respect to marital stability and the dominance of women within the family. Starting with Frazier, attempts have been made to explain this differential by examining Negro-white differences in location within the social structure and in culture.<sup>1</sup> The implication, of course, is that these social and cultural factors are direct causes of differences in marital instability and family structure independent of race; that is, if there were no racial differences other than skin pigmentation, marital instability would still be directly related to differences in culture and social location. In brief, race leads to different life experiences and stands as a summary of different life experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Very few attempts have been made to separate out these intervening factors from the relationship between race and marital stability. In general, the Frazier hypothesis that the differential rates of family disorganization between the races are largely a function of the impact of slavery and subsequent emancipation in interaction with the urbanization of the Negro has been accepted.<sup>3</sup>

Persons in other social categories have also migrated to the cities-- although not necessarily at the same rate as Negroes--and have also been susceptible to the impact of urbanization. Therefore, we should be able to get some maximum estimate of the current relevance of the Negroes' historical situation for their greater marital instability and differential family structure, by partialing out the effects of social-ecological factors for which data are available and which affect both Negroes and whites.

One caveat is in order here. Even if we were to find that all

differences between whites and Negroes disappear, this does not mean that there were not true differences at the time Frazier was doing his analysis, or that these differences were not indeed a function of the unique development of the family among Negroes as compared with whites in the United States. When Frazier was writing, Negroes in large numbers were beginning to move from southern rural areas to the cities and to the North. The fact that the Negro family may now be going through a new historical stage justifies a re-examination of the question.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, several scholars have made systematic attempts to examine Negro-white differentials with respect to family stability and structure. Bernard and Udry, both using 1960 Census data for two different population groups, arrive independently at the conclusion that controlling for socioeconomic differences between nonwhites and whites does not significantly reduce the differential in marital stability.<sup>5,6</sup> Udry's analysis, in fact, suggests that the differential might even increase with income.<sup>7</sup> An earlier unpublished paper of mine suggests that taking family income into account does significantly reduce the differential in the proportion of female-headed families except at the very lowest income levels--that is, under \$3,000 a year.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1 shows the proportion of husband-wife families among whites and nonwhites in 1960 by poverty status of family and age of family head. Poverty status is measured by the Social Security Index developed by Mollie Orshansky, and corrected for 1959 price levels.<sup>9</sup> As can be seen, the largest difference between the races is among those families where the head is less than 25 years of age, and the family is under .7501 of the poverty line. The smallest differential is in those families where the

head is aged, and where the family income puts them at least 25 percent over the poverty line. Since poverty status is in part defined by the number of people in the household, it is possible that using the family as the unit of analysis may disguise the actual difference. As we can see in Table 2, however, the pattern of white/nonwhite differences remains substantially the same for the proportion of persons in husband-wife families as for the proportion of families.

These tables suggest that with increasing affluence the distribution of family types among nonwhites begins to resemble that of whites, although the differences are not obliterated. There are other differences between Negroes and whites, moreover, that are also related to marital stability. Table 3 summarizes some of these differences for ever-married women. Nonwhites are more likely to be younger, to be nearer the time of their first marriage, to have less education, and to live in the South or in urban areas. Moreover, among both whites and nonwhites, women married more than once differ from the ever-married on the same characteristics (and presumably even more from the once-married). Thus, we have a set of social-ecological factors which appear to be differentially distributed with respect to race as well as with respect to marital stability.

Method. Since a multivariate analysis involving so many variables is extremely difficult to handle through cross-tabulation, multiple regression analysis has been used here to ascertain what happens to the relationship between race and marital stability when all these dimensions of the differential social-ecological position of Negroes and whites are taken into account.

Our sample was drawn from the 1/1000 Census tape for 1960. It consists of all ever-married women over the age of 14, plus those women who were heads of families but had never been married. (It is of some interest to note that 2.3 percent of our total sample fell into this latter category.) Because our interest is in comparing Negroes with whites, all other nonwhites were excluded from the sample.

In addition to the variables already mentioned, the following variables also were brought into the analysis: (1) the region in which the respondent was born, (2) whether the respondent moved at all between 1955 and 1960, and (3) the relationship of this migration to the respondent's 1955 SMSA status.

All the independent variables--except age, time since first marriage, education, and poverty status--were treated as dichotomous or dummy variables, and therefore assigned the values of zero or one. The possible nonlinear relationships between marital stability and the continuous variables were also taken into account in the construction of the variables. For example, age was broken into three variables so that the slopes for persons younger than 30, 30 to 50, and over 50 could be independently calculated. (See Appendix I for the definition of all independent variables.)

The definition of the dependent variables requires somewhat more discussion (see Appendix I). Marital stability was defined by present marital status and whether respondents had been married once or more than once. It is very easy to agree that persons who are currently married, with spouse present, and have been married only once, are the most stable; that those who have been married more than once, without a spouse present, are the most unstable; and that those married only

once, but without a husband present, are in between. There is some problem, however, in classifying widows--after all, a 65-year-old woman married to the same man for 40 years could hardly be called maritally unstable. On the other hand, what about those persons who are married with spouse present, but who have been married more than once--are they stable or unstable? To find out whether any differences would result from varying classifications of widows and the married-more-than-once-but-with-spouse-present, four different indices of marital stability were constructed.

Family stability was measured by dividing the sample into: those married with spouse present and both married only once; those married where either had been married more than once; and female heads of families. The first were scored as most stable, the third as least stable. One variation was also tried--dividing those women with spouse present by their own frequency of marriage only.

To examine female dominance in the family, the following indices were constructed: First, women were considered to be least dominant in a husband-wife family where the wife was not the chief income recipient; and most dominant where they were the head of the family. The husband-wife family where the wife was the chief income recipient was scored as intermediate to the two extremes. The second index was basically the same, except that the relative earnings of husbands and wives were used to differentiate the husband-wife family: where the husband's income was greater than the wife's she was considered to be less dominant; where it was equal to or less than the wife's she was considered to be more dominant; and, as before, women who were the sole heads of their families were considered to be most dominant.



I want, at this time, to make it clear that I completely agree with any objections to the adequacy of these definitions of stability and female dominance. We are all familiar with those households where the husband brings home all the bacon, but the woman wears the pants. What I would claim, however, is that the Census data used to operationalize these concepts are the best available. It behooves those of us who would criticize it to produce more adequate information. In the meantime, let us see what the available data tell us.

Results. The basic strategy used in the analysis started with the relationship between race and the various indicators of marital and family stability and female dominance, and investigated what happened to that relationship as different variables were introduced into the regression. Here, the coefficient of race and the partial correlation of race with the dependent variables tell our main story. Two subplots also were developed. One was to ascertain the effect of poverty status by introducing it last into the regression; the second was to look at the change in  $R^2$ . The results, shown in Table 4, indicate that:

1. The coefficient of race and the partial correlation of race with the dependent variables are both reduced by approximately half when fully regressed.
2. About half of that decrease is accounted for by poverty status alone.

To summarize: Whatever race means in relation to marital stability and female dominance, half of that meaning is a summary statement of the relationship between location within the social-ecological system and marital stability--with poverty status being particularly relevant.

(It is of interest here that Lee Rainwater, in his comments on the Bernard article, states that if the battery of traditional demographic variables was taken into account, "Perhaps then the average difference between homogenized white and Negro categories could be reduced by as much as half.")<sup>10</sup>

3. A mean difference between Negroes and whites with respect to the dependent variables does remain, given the conditions included in the regression. (In all cases the  $t$  ratio is highly significant.) This difference could result from many factors. Urbanization may indeed have a larger impact on Negroes than on whites as Frazier has suggested. (Movers are more likely than non-movers to be maritally unstable. We are unable to tell, however, whether the differential is larger for Negroes than for whites.) Rainwater has suggested group process variables (e.g. community support of norms with respect to marital fidelity). Bernard has posited cultural and social-psychological variables such as goal-striving and self-esteem. Who knows? Perhaps the mere fact that Negroes are less likely than whites to be Catholics is a factor.

4. What may be a more important question is whether the mean difference in marital stability between Negroes and whites, given the social-ecological conditions, is socially relevant. We can see in Table 4 that the  $R^2$  is negligible when race is the only variable in the regression, and that it increases greatly with the introduction of the other variables. The removal of race would, therefore, have a negligible effect on the explained variance. An estimation of this effect can be found in Table 4.

Conclusion. What, then, do our results indicate about the Negro-white differential in the incidence of family disorganization? The social-ecological positions of the races do account for half of the mean difference between them in marital stability and in female dominance, as measured by Census data. Once all factors are "controlled," race still remains a statistically significant factor with respect to marital stability. At no point does race alone account for much of the variance in marital stability. What is left of the relationship between race and marital stability, therefore, although statistically significant, seems hardly socially relevant. Thus to a large extent, race stands as a summation of social-ecological position. Of course, the latter is itself a function of the patterns of discrimination and prejudice in our society.

Certain implications of the analysis not reported in this paper seem worthy of further investigation. There is some suggestion that persons who move are more likely to be maritally unstable than others. It is not possible on the basis of the present research to determine whether this is a consequence of differential migration by race, or whether family disorganization causes migration. Additional regressions will be made to ascertain this relationship. Similar regressions will also be done on men in order to control for the fact that the income of female-headed families may be a consequence of their marital instability rather than vice versa. Finally, data from the Survey of Economic Opportunity will be analyzed for trends during the 60's and for testing some causal hypotheses by looking at persons whose marriages were disrupted during 1966.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939).

<sup>2</sup>See Lee Rainwater, "'Marital Stability and Patterns of Status Variables': A Comment," Journal of Marriage and the Family, November, 1966, p. 442.

<sup>3</sup>"The widespread and continued family disorganization among Negroes in cities. . . is one of the results of the impact of the urban environment upon the simple and loose family organization of the Negro folk." E. Franklin Frazier, "The Negro Family in Chicago," in Ernest W. Burgess and Donald J. Bogue, Contributions to Urban Sociology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 404.

<sup>4</sup>See Jessie Bernard, Marriage and Family Among Negroes (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966).

<sup>5</sup>Jessie Bernard, "Marital Stability and Patterns of Status Variables," Journal of Marriage and the Family, November, 1966. The analysis was done on men in the 45-to-54-year age bracket.

<sup>6</sup>J. Richard Udry, "Marital Instability by Race, Sex, Education, and Occupation Using 1960 Census Data," The American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 72, No. 2, September, 1966. Data for the age group 25-34 were calculated.

<sup>7</sup>J. Richard Udry, "Marital Instability by Race and Income Based on 1960 Census Data," The American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 72, No. 6, May, 1967.

<sup>8</sup>Myron J. Lefcowitz, "Poverty and Negro-White Family Structures," paper prepared for the White House Conference "To Fulfill These Rights," November, 1965.

<sup>9</sup>Mollie Orshansky, Social Security Bulletin, January and July, 1965.

<sup>10</sup>Rainwater, op. cit., p. 444.