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ABSTRACT

This paper examines differentials in marital instability among black women under the age of 45 using data from the 1970 National Fertility Study. The analysis is, in part, a replication of the analysis reported for the white population in Larry L. Bumpass and James A. Sweet, "Differentials in Marital Instability: 1970," American Sociological Review, December 1972, pp. 754-766. We also examine black/white differences in marital instability and find that only a small fraction of this differential is due to compositional differences in measured socioeconomic characteristics. Finally, we demonstrate that the black/white differential is heavily affected by the measure of marital instability that is used because there are wide differences in the rate of remarriage and in the conditional probability of divorce after separation as well as differences in the incidence of disruption.

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In a recent article (Bumpass and Sweet, 1972), we have documented differential marital stability among whites on the basis of data uniquely appropriate for the study of marital disruption. In the present paper, that analysis is extended to the black population. We first examine differentials in separation and divorce among blacks, comparing these differentials to those among whites (sociological discussion of the independant variables developed in that paper will not be repeated here except when relevant to differing patterns between whites and blacks); we then briefly consider the extent to which aggregate black-white differences in marital instability result from composition differences on the variables considered. The paper concludes with a methodological analysis of alternative definitions of instability, with particular focus on the measurement of black-white differences.

Data and Methodology

Our analysis is based on data from the 1970 National Fertility Study; data which, while designed for the analysis of fertility, are the most appropriate extant for marital stability analysis.

The study of differentials in marital disruption has been seriously hampered by a number of inadequacies in the data. Statistics from the Divorce Registration System cover divorces, but not separations. Census data measure the prevalence of divorced and separated persons in the population, but do not permit the unambiguous identification of remarried persons who were previously divorced. Small scale sample survey data have suffered from a number of problems, in particular from nonrepresentative samples. The 1970 National Fertility Study conducted by Norman B. Ryder and Charles F. Westoff interviewed a national sample of ever-married women under the age of 45. As in previous studies, the women were asked to give complete marital histories including dates of all marriages, separations, divorces, and deaths of spouses. In addition the women were asked to report a number of individual characteristics and characteristics of their first husbands as they were at the time of their first marriage. Hence, we have for the first time a set of data almost ideally suited for the study of differentials in marital instability. As in the 1965 study, blacks were oversampled to provide adequate numbers for separate analysis.

Differentials in Marital Instability within the Black Population

Table 1 presents the results of a regression analysis of marital instability in relation to a number of characteristics of the wife at first marriage. Thirty-five percent of the black women in our sample had experienced separation or divorce in their first marriage (N=1155). This compares with 15 percent in our white sample (N=5442).

The first column of Table 1 shows the crude or unadjusted rate of separation or divorce expressed as a deviation from the total sample mean (.350). The second column shows the net effect of the variable in question after controlling for the length of time between the date of first marriage and the date of interview in an additive regression model. To attempt to take into account the non-linear function which relates marital instability to marriage duration, duration is entered in the equation as a set of dummy variables as shown in the bottom panel of Table 1. The third column shows the net effects of the variable after additively controlling for duration and all other variables shown in the table. Thus we are attempting to sort out the effects on marital disruption of such correlated variables as age at marriage, education, premarital pregnancy, and religion. The last column presents, where relevant, the net effect comparable to those in column 3 for the white population as reported in our earlier paper.

Age at First Marriage

Black women who married for the first time at age 14-17 have rates of marital disruption that are more than 14 points higher than those who first married at ages 18-21. Those women who first married at ages 22 and over have rates that are 9 to 15 points lower than those for women marrying at ages 18-21. When other correlated variables are included in the model, the differential is reduced only slightly, but the major discontinuities between 14-17 and 18-21 and between 18-21 and 22 and over remain. This pattern is very similar to that among white women, except that for the white sample rates of marital instability decline more continuously with increasing age. Very high rates of marital instability among women married before age 18 are more significant among blacks since nearly a third of the black women were married at such young ages, compared with about one-fifth of the white women.

Education at the Time of First Marriage

We demonstrated in the earlier paper that while there is a large zero order effect of education on the marital instability of white women, this effect is virtually all the result of correlated variables such as age at marriage. After controlling for these other variables we found only small differences between 0-8 and 9-11 years of education and between 9-11 and 12 and no difference between the 12 and higher levels.

For the black sample there is much less of a gross differential

in marital instability than for whites, with only about six points separating the rates of women with 13-15 years from those with less than nine years of education. The very small sample of black women with 16 or more years of education has a rate of marital disruption that is 19 points below the mean. After controlling for all other variables in the model the differentials among education categories are reduced. There seems to be no difference between the 0-8 and 9-11 groups, and a difference of 7 points in the expected direction between the 9-11 and 12 groups. The women with 13-15 years of schooling have the highest rates of all, and the college graduates the lowest. We see no ready explanation of the higher rate of dissolution among black women who attended but did not complete college.

Status of First Pregnancy

Premarital pregnancy, when it results in an unintended marriage, is believed to raise the risks of marital disruption (Christensen and Meissner, 1953). We have classified all women in our sample into one of four categories with respect to their first birth:

1. Those who reported the date of first birth as prior to the date of first marriage, i.e., an illegitimate first birth,

2. Those who reported a first birth between marriage and the end of the seventh month after marriage,
3. Those who reported a first birth after the beginning of the eighth month of marriage,
4. Those who have not yet had a first birth by the time of the interview. This group does not include all women who were childless in their first marriage. Those whose first child was born in a second or subsequent marriage would be included in group 3.

Contrary to the findings of previous studies we found only a very small increase in marital disruption associated with having had a first birth in the first seven months of marriage (premarital pregnancy). Marital disruption was, however, considerably higher for those women who had had a first birth prior to the date of their first marriage.

We find the same pattern among black women. There is no (net) difference between women with a premarital pregnancy and those whose first pregnancy occurred subsequent to marriage. Women with a premarital birth have higher rates of marital disruption than women with a first pregnancy subsequent to first marriage, five points higher among blacks compared with a nine-point difference among whites.

Women who have never had a child by the time of interview have a disruption rate (controlling for all other factors) that is four points above that of women with a legitimately conceived first birth.

We place no particular causal interpretation on this finding since the causal relationship between fertility (particularly childlessness) and marital disruption is so complex (see Cohen and Sweet, 1971). Whether this group has markedly lower fertility because of their marital disruption, or higher marital disruption because of their childlessness is unknown.

Wife's Religion While Growing Up

Because of smaller sample size and the greater denominational homogeneity among blacks, we are able to examine only a few broad religious categories. The only finding of interest here is the high rate of marital instability among women classified as "fundamentalist" (9 points above the mean). The rates for Baptists and other Protestants are very close to the sample mean.

Residence While Growing Up

We classified white women by region of origin and farm vs. nonfarm residence and found that women with farm origin have slightly lower rates of marital instability than that of persons of nonfarm origin, and that women from the "Deep South" were substantially below the mean. Since large proportions of the black population are persons of Southern origin who are now residing in the Northern regions, and since there has been much sociological speculation on the "disruptive" consequences of such migration, we have constructed a variable by cross-classifying region of origin by region of residence. Farm vs.

nonfarm residence is additively controlled by introducing an additional dummy variable into the model. It has virtually no effect, net of the region variable.

The highest rates of marital disruption are found among persons who are from the non-Southern states, and who have remained in the non-Southern states (9 points above the mean). The lowest rates are for persons who have grown up in the "Deep South" and who continue to live in the Southern states (12 points below the mean).

Persons who left the South and lived in the non-Southern states at the time of enumeration have rates of marital disruption that are almost as high as those for the indigenous non-Southern blacks. The Southern blacks staying in the South have, however, very low rates of disruption. Marital disruption rates (ceteris paribus) are 19 points lower among Deep South blacks remaining in the South than among Deep South blacks who have left the South. The differential is smaller, but still substantial (9 points) for persons with an "Other South" origin.

These patterns are consistent with a number of explanations: 1) The conventional explanation, developed by Frazier and more recently suggested by Moynihan, is expressed in terms of the disrupting effect on family patterns of the radical change to urban life from the folk culture of the black rural South (Frazier, 1948). 2) It is also possible that women experiencing marital disruption in the South may have been more likely than others to leave the South. Since we do not have residence at time of disruption, this would inflate

our measures of the disruption rates of migrants and deflate those of nonmigrants among persons of Southern origin. 3) It is, of course, also possible that marital disruption and long distance migration are not causally related to each other, but rather that they are both the results of some third factor which is not measured in this study.

One process is not consistent with the observed pattern or at least does not help to explain it. To the extent that women of Southern origin experienced marital disruption in the North and then returned to the South, they would add to the rate of disruption of the Southern origin, Southern residence group, and not the the Southern origin, non-Southern residence group.

Family Status at Age 14

For blacks as for whites, marital disruption is associated with having grown up in a family in which the parents were not living together for reasons other than death. The differential was 7 points for whites and 6 points for blacks. We have no control on other aspects of the respondent's social origins. The possibility remains that the effect which we attribute to marital instability in the family of orientation reflects instead a net effect of family's income, mother's education or some other measure of origin status. However, this would have to be an effect independent of the respondent's education.

First Husband's Marital History

For whites, the first marriages of women to previously married husbands resulted in a rate of disruption that was more than 16 points above that for women marrying a previously unmarried man. For blacks there is essentially no difference between the two groups.

Black-White Differences in Marital Instability

We now turn our attention to summary measures of the black-white differences in marital instability, first considering compositional effects and then differences depending upon type of measure employed.

The proportion having experienced marital disruption in their first marriage by the time of observation is .341 for blacks and .154 for whites, a difference of .187. To what extent does this difference result from differential composition in major variables affecting stability? Any legitimate comparison should adjust for the time elapsed since first marriage, and this control (in a simple additive regression model) reduces the difference to .176, reflecting a longer average time since marriage of the black population. We have found marked negative age at marriage differentials in both populations, and after adjusting for compositional differences in elapsed time since first marriage and age at marriage the difference shrinks further to .155. Finally, when we also control on education, status of first birth, region of origin, family status at age 16, and farm residence, the black-white difference becomes .137. Thus only about

a quarter of the observed zero order differential in marital instability between whites and blacks is accounted for by compositional differences on variables included in this analysis.

We have no direct information on whether the higher rates of disruption of blacks is due to their more unstable employment situation and greater degree of poverty. However, we will be able to examine the extent to which the racial differences result from differences in husband's occupation at marriage.

Black-White Differences with Alternative Measures of Marital Instability

The detail on marital disruption available in the National Fertility Study data makes possible an evaluation of the effects of various measures on measured black-white differences. We will discuss sequentially several measures prevalent in the literature and then examine the effect of the various measures on black-white differentials.

Ever Disrupted

Much of our current knowledge of differentials in marital instability derives from data on current marital status collected in the decennial censuses (Udry, 1966, 1967; Bernard, 1966; Goode, 1966; Hillman, 1963). The most adequate measure developed from Census data divides persons who have ever been married into two groups: those whose first marriages are still intact and those whose first marriages are no longer intact. The primary limitation

of this procedure is that marriages disrupted by death are included in the measure of instability. While this is appropriate for some purposes, it is inappropriate for analyses of factors affecting instability for reasons of discord. If two groups differ in the level of mortality or in the distribution of age of husband for women of a given age, the group with the higher mortality level or with the older husbands will have a higher level of measured marital instability.

Currently Separated or Divorced

Often in comparisons of marital instability it has not been possible to identify persons who have remarried after experiencing divorce. Thus, comparisons are made of the proportion of all ever-married persons who are currently separated or divorced. This, then, gives the group which has a lower incidence of remarriage, or a longer average duration before remarriage, a higher measured rate of marital instability.

Ever Divorced

Data from the divorce registration system do not include persons who "separate" but never become divorced. To the extent that persons in different groups have different conditional probabilities of divorce given separation, or different average lengths of separation before divorce, the differential in their rates of marital disruption will be distorted.

Effects of Measures

Sweet (1972) has discussed these distortions in great detail in an earlier paper. Here we simply want to examine the degree to which these considerations affect measured black-white differentials in marital instability. Table 2 shows the proportions of the sample experiencing marital disruption for four alternative measures of marital disruption. In each case we show three proportions--the crude rate, the rate adjusted for duration since first marriage, and the rate adjusted for a number of characteristics including education, age at marriage, and status of first pregnancy.

In Table 2 there are two types of comparison: the absolute difference between the proportions for the two groups and the relative difference or the ratio of the black rate to the white rate. It is clear that the measured racial differential in marital instability is heavily dependent upon the definition of disruption employed. With varying definitions of disruption, the ratio of black to white disruption rates ranges from 1.5 to 4.0 in the unadjusted figures and from 1.2 to 3.5 with all other variables controlled. The black crude rate of separation or divorce in first marriage (incidence) is about 2.25 times the white rate. This is reduced to 1.8-1.9 when additional controls are introduced. The black rate of current separation or divorce (prevalence) is four times the white rate, reducing to 3.5 times after standardizing for composition. The black rate of ever being <u>divorced</u> is only 1.5 times the white rate, reducing to 1.2 times after standardizing.

The discrepancy among these comparisons can easily be understood. Higher ratio of black to white instability is greater with the "ever-disrupted" definition than with the separated or divorced definition as a consequence of both the higher mortality of black men and the greater age differential between black husbands and wives. Among women whose first marriage was disrupted, 84.9 percent of the black and 88.6 percent of the white first marriages ended in separation or divorce. Of the ever separated or divorced, 73.4 percent of the black women and 41.3 percent of the white women were currently separated or divorced at the time of observation. This reflects primarily differences in the rate at which blacks and whites remarry, although it may also be the result in part of the differences in timing of remarriage.

Of the separated or divorced, 59.9 percent of the black and 88.4 percent of the white women have been divorced. This reflects the greater conditioned probability of divorce given separation of whites, and is due also to the longer period between separation and divorce. The differential may be due in part to the greater remarriage probabilities for white women.

In summary, we have examined differentials in the separation and divorce rates of first marriages among blacks, and compared these to differentials among whites. The majority of the racial differential in marital instability is not explicable in an additive model involving the variables considered here, although variables not included (such as poverty status) might substantially alter this

finding. We find differentials in marital instability depend heavily on the definition employed. The measure we have used here including separations and divorces but excluding widowhood seems the most appropriate for most marital instability analyses.

Table 1. Differentials in marital instability[a] by selected characteristics of the wife, for black and white, ever-married women under the age of 45 in 1970: adjusted and unadjusted deviations from the grand mean

	BLACK				WHITE	
	Deviation from Grand Mean				Deviation	
	Unadjusted	Net of Duration[b]	Net of Other Variables[c]	Number of Cases	Net of Other Variables	Number of Cases
Wife's Age at Marriage						
14-17	.101	.089	.077	362	.109	1111
18-19	-.046	-.030	-.016	309	.006	1791
20-21	-.036	-.030	-.022	201	-.042	1278
22-24	-.124	-.109	-.111	137	-.076	814
25-29	-.180	-.173	-.174	59	-.069	320
30+	**	**	**	18	-.129	52
Wife's Education at Marriage						
0-8	.048	.004	.026	181	.041	397
9-11	.053	.048	.022	464	.011	1174
12	-.067	-.051	-.048	353	-.009	2538
13-15	-.013	.019	.043	110	-.002	876
College, 4+	-.191	-.166	-.070	44	-.010	454
Status of First Pregnancy and Birth						
Premarital birth	-.003	.015	.024	274	.088	171
Premarital conception	-.006	.004	-.029	215	.002	602
Post-marital conception	.001	-.022	-.026	504	-.018	3851
No first birth	-.060	.009	.036	131	.062	790
Wife's Religion While Growing Up						
Protestant:						
Fundamentalist	.110	.101	.093	74		
Baptist	-.014	-.014	-.011	766		
Other Protestant	-.006	-.003	.005	236		
Other religion, N.A.	.081	.087	.042	72		
No religion	**	**	**	7		
Wife's Family Status at 14						
Lived with both parents	-.028	-.024	-.013	173	-.006	4403
One or both parents had died	.009	-.016	-.017	715	-.017	458
Other	.070	.075	.046	267	.056	581

Table 1 (cont.)

	BLACK				WHITE	
	Deviation from Grand Mean				Deviation	
	Unadjusted	Net of Duration[b]	Net of Other Variables[c]	Number of Cases	Net of Other Variables	Number of Cases
Region of Origin by Region of Residence						
Deep South-South	-.095	-.109	-.116	224		
Deep South-Nonsouth	.087	.068	.077	165		
Other South-South	-.054	-.043	-.043	362		
Other South-Nonsouth	.048	.034	.044	103		
Nonsouth, U.S.-Non-south	.087	.096	.092	284		
Nonsouth, U.S.-South	**	**	**	11		
Non U.S.-South	**	**	**	1		
Non U.S.-Nonsouth	**	**	**	4		
Farm Residence, 6-16						
Farm	-.011	-.039	-.013	354		
Non-farm	.005	.017	.006	800		
N.A.	**	**	**	1		
First Husband's Marital History						
Not previously married	-.001	.001	-.001	1033	-.013	5029
Previously married	.003	-.008	.012	122	.154	413
Time Since 1st Marriage						
<2 years			-.235	87	-.172	443
2-3 years			-.132	103	-.088	538
4-5 years			.010	104	-.010	510
6-7 years			-.028	74	-.025	480
8-9 years			.034	91	.007	433
10-11 years			.005	91	.022	457
12-14 years			.087	122	.062	641
15-19 years			.075	196	.051	918
20+ years			.031	252	.040	992
		N = 1155			N = 5442	
		Grand mean = .350			Grand mean = .154	

a. Proportion with first marriage ending in either separation or divorce.
b. Time since first marriage at interview.
c. All variables in the table were included in this model. Each of the variables makes a statistically significant addition to the explained variance at the .05 level. All except wife's education are significant at the .01 level.

Table 2. Black-white differences in marital instability for four alternative measures of marital instability

	Race Alone	Race and Duration	All
First Marriage Ended in Separation or Divorce			
Black	.341	.331	.288
White	.153	.154	.160
difference	.188	.176	.128
ratio	2.23	2.15	1.80
Currently Separated or Divorced			
Black	.256	.253	.237
White	.064	.064	.067
difference	.192	.189	.170
ratio	4.00	3.95	3.54
Ever Disrupted			
Black	.411	.395	.352
White	.175	.176	.182
difference	.236	.219	.171
ratio	2.35	2.24	1.93
Ever Divorced			
Black	.209	.197	.175
White	.137	.138	.141
difference	.072	.060	.034
ratio	1.53	1.43	1.24

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