In this article, the author argues that while Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 analysis of the black family was prescient in many respects, it also largely ignored social class variations among black families. This gave the erroneous impression that the changes occurring in the black family were related to distinctive cultural features rather than the economic position of most blacks. Over time, it has become evident that poor economic circumstances would produce comparable effects on whites just as they did for blacks when Moynihan published his findings.

Keywords: Daniel Patrick Moynihan; *The Negro Family*; teen pregnancy; social class; race

If Moynihan Had Only Known: Race, Class, and Family Change in the Late Twentieth Century

By
FRANK F. FURSTENBERG

In 1965, the year that the Moynihan Report was issued, the American family stood at the precipice of a yawning demographic divide that separated the now legendary postwar family that was in full flower at midcentury from the pluralistic model that superseded it in the final decades of the twentieth century. Although he was a true visionary who observed with remarkable clarity what was happening to the black family, Moynihan, like virtually all of the social scientists of his era, did not adequately appreciate the incipient contradictions in the prevailing family form. Incorrectly assuming that the kinship system in place—referred to at the time as the "isolated nuclear family" or "conjugal family form"—was normatively ideal (rooted in nature), functional for society, and permanent, Moynihan failed to see that the changes taking

Frank F. Furstenberg is the Zellerbach Family Professor of Sociology and a research associate at the Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania. He has written extensively on issues relating to family change over the past four decades. His most recent book, Destinies of the Disadvantaged: The Politics of Teenage Childbearing, *was published by the Russell Sage Foundation in 2007. His current research examines the well-being of middle-income families in Canada and the United States.*

DOI: 10.1177/0002716208324866

place in low-income black families were also happening, albeit at a slower pace, among lower-income families more generally.

If Moynihan had only known what was to become evident in later decades, he might well have structured his analysis and interpretation of the plight of the black family quite differently (see Moynihan, Smeeding, and Rainwater 2005). In fact, as I show in this article, Moynihan might well have been more nuanced in his interpretations had he paid closer attention to a long line of research on both black and ethnic minority families that had been carried out in the United States over the course of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Indeed, some of his critics observed as much shortly after the report was published (Rainwater and Yancey 1967).

Moynihan drew only selectively from the literature on the black family in making his case that blacks as a subgroup were uniquely challenged by economic and social conditions in the postwar period. Had he been more attentive to a tradition of research that focused simultaneously on social class and race, the report might have had far different political and social consequences, leading to alternative policy directions. Moynihan's focus on race rather than class continues to dominate policy debates about the family to this day. At least, this is the claim that I try to demonstrate in this article.

The first part sets the stage for my argument that Moynihan chose to structure his argument about the stresses on the black family primarily in terms of racial rather than social class cleavages. Then, I reexamine some of the data that he used to make his case. By updating some of the trends on family change that Moynihan observed, at least in hindsight, it is clear that many of the pressures on marriage and family formation that seemed uniquely relevant to blacks have been felt by low-income populations more generally. Then, I return to the reasons Moynihan was unable to imagine the future trends (other than the fact that he was writing in 1965) and attempt to generalize from some of his observations of why the family abandoned its postwar appearance.

The American Family in Black and White

The postwar family that we now love to love (or love to hate)

The Western family of the mid-twentieth century represented a cultural culmination of values, economic, and demographic forces that had been evident for several centuries (Coontz 2005; Goode 1960; Stone 1977). The decline of the family organized along lines of generation and gender (the patriarchal family) was steadily eroded by religious ideology, humanism, and economic and technological forces, many of which were evident at the very inception of this nation. Edward Shorter (1977) contended several decades ago that the American family was born modern. By this, he meant that the family organized around the control of males and elders took hold only incompletely when our nation was founded.

Even before industrialization, a stream of foreign travelers, de Tocqueville most prominent among them, observed that the American family drew its strength from its voluntary nature, democratic style of relationships, and low reliance on formal authority. They also noted the relatively strong boundaries around the marriage unit in the United States compared to Europe at the time. Later on, this tight family form, emphasizing marital over generational ties, was said to buffer its members from the growing demands of an industrial economy, or, in the words of Christopher Lasch (1977), the family became "a haven in a heartless world."

Even before industrialization, a stream of foreign travelers, de Tocqueville most prominent among them, observed that the American family drew its strength from its voluntary nature, democratic style of relationships, and low reliance on formal authority.

Family experts in the 1950s, when functional analysis in sociology was in its heyday, claimed that the family form that had adapted to the decline of agriculture and the rise of industry was ideally suited to provide the need, support, and socialization required to raise the next generation (Bell and Vogel 1968; Coser 1964). With Mom at home (after being displaced by the war) and Dad at work, the nuclear family was the stripped-down model for producing successful children. This commentary seemed to be widely supported by the huge boom in marriages and childbearing from the end of World War II until the early 1960s—what I have elsewhere called the "era of domestic mass production."

Most family sociologists, like most sociologists of the era, explained the family as a product or adaptation to postindustrial conditions. Talcott Parsons (1964), in several essays on the American family that were widely read in the 1950s and early 1960s, claimed that the bilateral nuclear family system in the West was uniquely equipped to cope with the industrial economic system that had become paramount in the first half of the twentieth century. Dad was the instrumental leader of the family who managed the outside world and connecting his children to the economic system; Mom was the expressive leader, who helped to protect

Dad from the pressures of the economic world and managing the home front. William J. Goode (1963), elaborating on the Parsonian thesis, contended that the conjugal form of the family—based primarily on marriage rather than extended kinship—rendered the family geographically mobile and flexible to respond to economic opportunities.

The framing of the Moynihan Report

It is impossible now to imagine just how pervasive this view was among family scholars in the 1950s and early 1960s, but suffice it to say that Moynihan was greatly influenced by this cultural template in his analysis of the breakdown of the black family. Divorce and nonmarital childbearing were undermining the partnership between parents, but also Moynihan noted how matriarchal practices fostered by slavery, economic exclusion, and racial discrimination were weakening the position of men and boys in black families:

> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is too out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (Moynihan 1965, chap. 4)

Moynihan assembled a truly remarkable set of data to demonstrate that black families were buckling under the pressures of unemployment, urban ills, and ensuing marital instability. Whereas in the first decade after the Second World War, blacks, if anything, settled down into marriage earlier, there were troubling signs that the institution of marriage was losing its grip in the succeeding decade from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s. By contrast, there appeared to be no such trend in the white population. Moynihan concluded that this divergence was the result of the declining employment among black men, the rising rates of delinquency and crime, and a cultural change within black communities that decreased commitment to mainstream patterns of family formation.

Moynihan not only drew on demographic data to bolster his argument that the black family was in crisis, but he also cited a number of studies that had been carried out over the course of the century on the black family. Moynihan relied on numerous historical studies and accounts of black family life by W. E. B. Du Bois, Franklin Frazier, and others to make the case that the black family had been uniquely affected by a series of social and economic shocks from slavery to Reconstruction and beyond into the twentieth century. Moynihan concluded that economic pressures and racial segregation in the postwar period were creating undue stresses on the already stressed black family. The black family was especially susceptible to these pressures because of its unique history of slavery and its aftermath that had shaped black culture in ways that undermined marriage and family formation. The report itself, I argue, played a powerful role in directing attention on low-income black families, helping to establish the conventional wisdom that the black family system was and still is distinctively different from the rest of the population.

The Moynihan Report in historical context

Recently, I undertook a review of the major qualitative studies on the black family in the past century (Furstenberg 2007). My readings spanned the period beginning with the classics of Du Bois—the community study in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) and his later writings on *The Negro American Family* (1908)—as well as the earliest and best-known ethnographic studies conducted from the 1930s through the early 1960s that preceded the Moynihan Report and the work produced in the wake of its publication during the last third of the twentieth century. I paid particular attention to a cluster of family practices revolving around sexual behavior, family formation, marriage practices, and gender relationships. Virtually all of the ethnographic community studies have extensive discussions of these behaviors that would later become a focus of attention in the Moynihan Report.

From Du Bois's foundational work to Frazier's (1939) monumental historical accounts of black family life beginning in the 1930s, which helped to lay the groundwork for the earliest ethnographic studies of black communities in both the rural South and the urban North, research in the first half of the twentieth century emphasized the influence of social class in shaping family patterns. Indeed, most of the authors of empirical studies closely adhered to the pioneering community research that had been carried out by such luminaries as Robert and Helen Lynd (1929), Lloyd Warner and his associates (Warner and Lunt 1941), and August Hollingshead (1949) on white communities, examining family life through the lens of social class.

Du Bois was explicit in observing that differences among blacks in Philadelphia varied sharply by "social station." Influenced by Du Bois's writing, Frazier, too, structured his historical account of black families by noting that experiences during slavery and Reconstruction created different opportunities for blacks in the twentieth century, which resulted in a pronounced stratification system operating within black communities much as existed in white communities. Research by Hortense Powdermaker (1939), Drake and Cayton (1945, 788), Hylan Lewis (1955), Allison Davis (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner 1941), and John Dollard (1937) among others all embraced a tradition of community research growing out of the Chicago School of sociology that paid close attention to social stratification.

I could not find a single study in my review of the literature that did not report powerful class differences within black communities that paralleled the stratification reported among families in predominately white localities. While the patterns of family life by social class bore a distinct resemblance especially at the lower end, the distribution of families across the social class spectrum, of course, varied enormously for whites and blacks. Nonetheless, descriptions of family life were cast in remarkably similar terms. Drake and Cayton (1945) observe that "all serious students of Negro communities since Du Bois have been concerned with the nature of social stratification among Negroes."

At the top of the social ladder, upper-class black families were very sensitive to propriety, manners, and the acquisition of culture, a cluster of habits that Drake and Cayton (1945) referred to as "the home-centric upper-class." Bourgeois

sensibilities, as Frazier previously noted in his trenchant writings about the upper class, were marked by a strong commitment to achieving in the American status system and took some pains to distance themselves from families beneath them. The more socially concerned upper-class families were interested "in trying to speed up the processes by which the lower class can be transformed from a poverty-stricken group isolated from the general stream of American life, into a counterpart of middle-class America" (Drake and Cayton 1945, 563).

The depiction of lower-class life rendered by Drake and Cayton (1945) in their landmark book *Black Metropolis*, perhaps the most notable ethnographic study of an urban, black community carried out in the first half of the twentieth century, bears an uncanny resemblance to the qualitative studies of black family life that were to follow. In a discussion of the "The Hazards of Marriage," Drake and Cayton assert that Bronzeville was "suffering from social disorganization." Citing Frazier, the authors conclude that the legacy of the economic conditions since the Depression had created a high level of instability in lower-class black families, including "high rates of desertion, illegitimacy, and divorce as well as a great deal of violent conflict within the average lower-class household" (p. 582).

Lower-class families were said by the informants of Cayton and Drake (1945) to have a "loose" family life; the poor raised "immoral children," with low ambitions. The poor were promiscuous, drank excessively, were boisterous in public, were violent, and were emotionally unstable. Relationships between men and women were often conflict-ridden and highly unstable. Drake and Cayton discuss how men had become increasingly dependent on women. "Lower-class men are thus in a weak economic position vis-à-vis their women and children. . . . Since she pays the piper, she usually feels justified in calling the tune" (p. 583). Men often compensated by trading love for a living.

Nevertheless, Drake and Cayton (1945, 363) point out that "three out of every five lower-class men and women in Bronzeville claim that they are married." The authors assert, however, that many of these marriages are likely common-law unions that were imported from the South, which long had less concern for "the formalities of law and church." Drake and Cayton describe a "good" man in the lower class as someone who works when able and does not spend money frivolously on gambling, drink, and other women. A good woman is sexually satisfying, loyal, and does not take up with other men. "Some couples manage to stick it out and maintain a stable, unbroken home, but this is not the typical lower-class pattern" (p. 587).

The class gradient of family patterns so vividly depicted in Bronzeville by Drake and Cayton recurs in study after study regardless of date or location. I could find no important substantive differences in descriptions of family life of upper-, middle-, and low-income residents of rural community studies conducted by Powdermaker (1939); Dollard (1937); Davis, Gardner, and Gardner (1941); or Lewis (1955). Clearly, the predominance of lower-income families in black communities made family formation more precarious and marital relations more hazardous, but all writers noted the significant role played by middle- and upper-income black families in setting standards of propriety for family formation.

I also discovered that the family standards reported in black communities bore a notable resemblance to the family practices in white communities carried out during the first half of the twentieth century (see also Jarrett's [1992] discussion of more recent community research.) Hylan Lewis in his community study, *The Blackways of Kent* (1955), for example, undertook his examination of a Piedmont community under the direction of George Simpson, a leading student of race relations in the 1950s. While no explicit comparisons were drawn in the analyses between Lewis's findings and the work in white communities that were being carried out at the same time, Lewis notes that his results about lower-class family patterns are similar to findings in a nearby mill town inhabited by whites. He writes, "It seems clear that both the mill village and the Negro society have cultures that retain significant rural features; both are derived in part from the anxieties of low-status." (p. 320)

A decade before Moynihan, Lewis warned of the dangers of a black subculture "evolving a natural character all of its own based on a 'tough cultural situation' that Negroes face" (p. 311).

Bringing back social class

By this time, the noted anthropologist Oscar Lewis, in a series of studies, had proposed the idea that low-income families throughout the world adapted to their conditions in similar ways. During the same era, research on family life in the Caribbean revealed kinship arrangements that permitted a great deal of sexual latitude, de-emphasized the importance of marriage, and created a strong emphasis on matrifocal lineage. The social anthropologist Hyman Rodman (1971), one of the researchers working in this area, would later argue that the lower-class patterns of family life reflected a "value stretch." While low-income families did not reject marriage as a preferred form, they were forced to settle for less by their limited means. In a similar vein, William J. Goode (1960) proposed that in the absence of tangible inheritance, the rationale for marriage was undermined.

Moynihan was well aware of this literature and borrowed from Oscar Lewis the notion of a "culture of poverty," even though he did not employ the term explicitly in his review. By this, Lewis meant that low-income families created a culture that became an impediment to social mobility because it exposed children to a matrilineal form of family life that threatened to become self-perpetuating. Like his colleague, Lee Rainwater, Moynihan came to believe that lower-class culture in the black community was relatively autonomous and resistant to change, a point that was heatedly debated after the report's publication.

In my examination of qualitative studies of black family life, I discovered a clear shift in the attention of researchers following the publication of the Moynihan Report. Class-comparative studies almost disappeared in the period

immediate afterward. During the late 1960s and 1970s, a series of brilliant ethnographic accounts of lower-class communities were carried out by writers such as Camille Jeffers (1967) Eliot Liebow (1968), Ulf Hannerz (1969), Lee Rainwater (1970), Joyce Ladner (1971), and Carol Stack (1974), providing rich accounts of lower-class family life describing how low-income families adapted to their circumstances. In one way or another, all of these studies were motivated by Moynihan's argument that low-income families were embedded in poverty communities that shaped the nature of sexual practices, union formation and dissolution, and childrearing patterns.

All but lost in these accounts was the comparative focus on intraethnic and intraracial class differences and interethnic and interracial class similarities that characterized the family literature before the 1960s. By the late 1960s, the social science literature was dominated by discussions of whether a culture of poverty existed and, if it did, what policy remedies were available to change the values of the poor families in ways that would permit them to enter the mainstream American social system. Conservative social scientists argued that the problem was culture, while liberals maintained that the root of the problem was structural (Banfield 1968, 1984).

This debate continued up until the publication of William Julius Wilson's book on *The Truly Disadvantaged* in 1987, which in some sense represented a peace offering to the warring sides. Wilson acknowledged the existed of what he called a "ghetto specific culture" that represented an adaptation to poverty in response to the growing racial segregation of American urban areas. Wilson also noted the declining opportunities for families in high-poverty communities for employment, adequate education, and services that might permit mobility.

In the past decade and a half, I found evidence that there may again be a shift in the focus of qualitative studies on black family life, indicating a return to the class-comparative perspective. There appears to be evidence that social scientists are returning to cross-racial and ethnic comparisons as well as more studies of class variations within race/ethnic groups (Anderson 1999; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Lareau 2003; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). This work reflects a growing reality based on social demographic studies that white patterns of sexual behavior, family formation, and gender relations among lower-income families increasingly resemble the family patterns that troubled Moynihan nearly a half century ago.

Converging Black and White Family Patterns

The narrowing divide in teenage and nonmarital childbearing

For a decade or two after the publication of the Moynihan Report, public attention initially focused on the level of teenage childbearing and nonmarital childbearing among women in their teens and early twenties. At first, the issue of early and out-of-wedlock childbearing, consistent with Moynihan's observations, was primarily seen as a pattern of family formation occurring almost exclusively

among African Americans. It so happened that I began collecting data on a cohort of teenage mothers in Baltimore, the very year that the Moynihan Report appeared. The early findings of my research seemed to support the concerns that Moynihan had voiced.

From interviews with pregnant teens and their parents, I learned that virtually all of the whites in the sample had plans to marry or had already wed by the time that they were interviewed. By contrast, the black teens and their parents were openly ambivalent about the potential benefits of marriage, though more than half eventually married the father of the child. Many black participants, especially the parents of the pregnant teens, were skeptical that early marriage would confer any advantage to their daughters. They preferred for them to remain in school and test the father's commitment to the relationship.

In fact, their assessments were realistic. Of the marriages contracted by the mostly black participants in the first five years of the study, half dissolved. Over time, 80 percent of the mothers who married the child's father and an even higher percentage of those who married a surrogate ultimately separated. I had less success in following the whites in the sample because they married and often moved out of Baltimore, but it appeared that they had somewhat lower rates of marital instability. Consistent with national data, however, they still suffered relatively high rates of dissolution as well.

These doubts about marriage among the black women in my study were reflected in national trends showing a steep decline in teenage marriage and a rising level of nonmarital childbearing among black women younger than twenty occurring in the 1960s (Moore, Simms, and Betsey 1986; O'Connell and Moore 1980). Among all teenagers in 1969, the first year in which racial comparisons can be made, blacks were about ten times more likely than whites to have a child out of wedlock. Of all white teens, less than 1 percent had a child out of wedlock, compared with nearly 10 percent of black teens (Ventura and Bachrach 2000). From the vantage point of the time, there was little reason to question Moynihan's view that out-of-wedlock childbearing among teens demonstrated a striking racial difference in family formation patterns.

Yet, as I have observed in greater detail in a recently published book on the topic of the politics of teenage childbearing, the racial disparity in nonmarital childbearing became less and less pronounced over the decades since the Moynihan Report was published (Furstenberg 2007). The difference between the *rate* of teenage childbearing (per thousand unmarried teens) outside of marriage among blacks and whites (which now constitutes almost all births among women under the age of twenty) has steadily declined over time, as shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Indeed, it dropped from a twelvefold difference in the 1960s to slightly more than two to one in the most recent decade. In 2004, the last year for which data are available, approximately 6 percent of black teens and nearly 3 percent of white teens had a child outside of marriage.

Two factors have produced the gradual convergence in levels of nonmarital childbearing among teens. Since the 1960s, black teens have actually *decreased* their rates of teenage fertility, while the rate among white teenagers has steadily

FIGURE 1
BIRTHRATES FOR UNMARRIED WHITE WOMEN BY AGE GROUP, 1965-2005

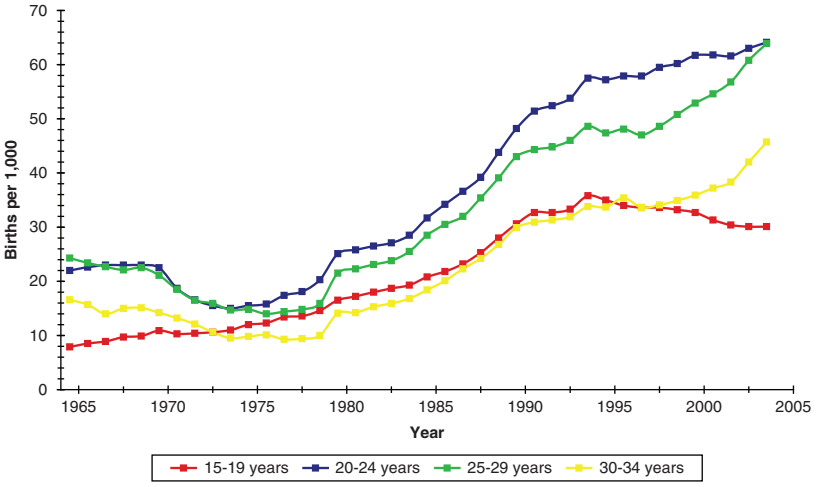


FIGURE 2
BIRTHRATES FOR UNMARRIED AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
BY AGE GROUP, 1965-2005

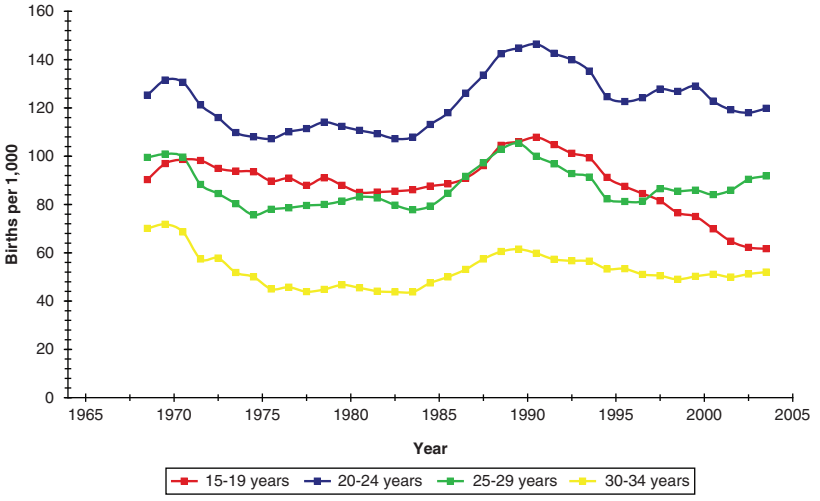
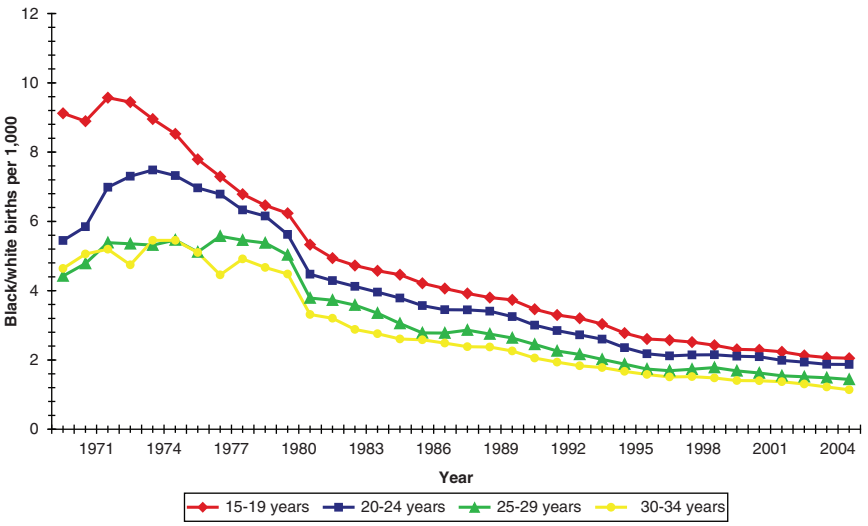


FIGURE 3
RATIO OF BLACK TO WHITE BIRTHS FOR UNMARRIED WOMEN BY AGE GROUP, 1969-2005



risen until the middle of the past decade, when it has effectively plateaued (see Figures 1 and 2). A number of different potential sources underlie this incompletely understood demographic change. First, just as happened among blacks in the period of late 1950s and early 1960s, white teenagers who became pregnant began to perceive that early marriage was a precarious solution to a premarital conception (Edin and Kefalas 2005). The partners of soon-to-be mothers did not look as appealing as they once had when skilled blue-collar jobs with union wages were more plentiful.

At the same time, the pressure on white women to complete their schooling before marriage and become economically self-sufficient, no doubt, increased as well. There is also strong evidence that the stigma associated with nonmarital childbearing began to decline for young white women just as it had for blacks beginning in the 1950s. The cultural logic that had drawn many white women into shotgun weddings collapsed. Younger white women who would have once married upon learning that they were pregnant now join the ranks of single mothers when they become unintentionally pregnant.

Nonmarital childbearing rates among teenage blacks are now substantially lower than they were when Moynihan published his report. A host of changing conditions, including policies that were designed to make teenage childbearing less attractive, greater availability of effective contraception, and, most particularly, the perceived threat of AIDS and STDs, led young black women to become more

adept at managing sexual relationships and avoiding unwanted pregnancies. There is evidence, too, that young men became aware of the requirement of paying child support for the children whom they sired and began to exercise more responsibility in their sexual relationships.

In the intervening decades since the publication of the Moynihan Report, the complexion of teenage childbearing has changed radically in ways that make blacks and whites look far more similar today than they once appeared. In part, I would argue that their behavior has become more similar because their conditions have become more alike in the past forty years. White teenagers no longer are inclined to use marriage as a safety net when faced with an unintended pregnancy, while black women have become less likely to become pregnant due to greater contraceptive vigilance.

Narrowing differences in nonmarital childbearing among older women

Over the past several decades, teenage childbearing has become a smaller and smaller component of the total number of nonmarital births in a given year (Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore 2001). When I began the Baltimore study, teenagers accounted for a large and growing share of all nonmarital childbearing. This occurred in part because of the huge baby boom population that came of age in the 1960s but also because rates of nonmarital childbearing were growing among teenagers faster than among older women. Whereas marriage—even for pregnant women—was declining among teens, marriage rates continued to be robust for a decade or so among older women, especially when they experienced an unplanned pregnancy.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, teenagers produced half or more of the share of all nonmarital births. Since then, the share of nonmarital births occurring to teenagers has steadily declined (Elo, Berkowitz-King, and Furstenberg 1999). Teenagers now account for less than a fourth of all nonmarital births, less than half the share they made up just thirty years ago. Part of this shift in the age distribution of nonmarital childbearing can be explained by the aging of the baby boomers. Teens are now a smaller proportion of all women of childbearing ages. More important, however, older women themselves have become increasingly susceptible to having children out of wedlock. In fact, women over the age of twenty-five have experienced the largest growth in the share of all nonmarital births and now produce almost two-fifths of all nonmarital births in the United States.

Of course, this demographic shift in nonmarital childbearing among older women need not have changed the racial distribution of nonmarital births, but the same pattern of racial convergence evident among teenagers occurred among older women. Whites have now become more likely to defer or postpone marriage indefinitely when pregnancy occurs than they were forty years ago. This trend is evident among both women who never married and those who previously married. Among all women of childbearing ages, the rate of nonmarital childbearing has quadrupled, rising from about fourteen per thousand in 1970 to almost forty-six

per thousand in 2004, despite the fact that the rate of nonmarital fertility among black women has declined by a third—from ninety-six to sixty-seven per thousand (Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura 2006; Ventura and Bachrach 2000).

Explaining the narrowing gap

What could possibly account for this remarkable reversal in the racial distribution of nonmarital childbearing over the past several decades? Obviously, the explanation requires understanding both why and how blacks have managed to decrease their nonmarital childbearing and understanding why white nonmarital fertility has grown. I do not as yet have the answer, but I am willing to speculate on some of the reasons for this reversal of trends.

In an important paper about premarital fertility that explores these trends, Scott South (1999) also notes the striking trend toward racial convergence in an analysis of data from the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics, demonstrating that it is not a product of changing demographic conditions within the racial groups. Consistent with earlier studies, South reported sharp class differences in the risk of early childbearing, but he also found that over the life course, the effect of natal family resources eventually declined (though not maternal education). In other words, over time, women's own social class status waned in influence, and life circumstances became more prominent predictors of their likelihood of having a nonmarital birth.

South's (1999) findings are provocative because they suggest that the growth of nonmarital childbearing has been largely at the bottom of the income distribution. By dichotomizing income, roughly at the median, South's findings suggest that the growth of nonmarital childbearing has primarily occurred among lower-income whites in the bottom half of the income distribution. Although higher-income whites have more births, their share of the nonmarital births has not risen over time. Nonmarital births among the better off were extremely rare in the 1960s and early 1970s, and today, they are still proportionally just as rare.

This analysis is completely consistent with work done by Ellwood and Jencks (2005) and Goldstein and Kenney (2001) on marriage trends over roughly the same period of time. Trends in marriage have revealed a pattern bifurcated by socioeconomic status as measured by educational level. Among the less educated, levels of marriage and marital stability have trended sharply downward, whereas rates of marriage and marital stability have remained relatively constant among women who have completed college.

These findings, like those on nonmarital childbearing, indicate a diverging family system. Marriage itself has become more of a luxury good, affordable and sustainable among the better-educated and the more affluent. For those with more limited means, cohabitation that may or may not eventuate in marriage has become an increasingly common practice, especially among white couples. It has long been known that cohabitational unions are less stable. A growing number of less affluent whites who have children may start out as couples, hoping to move toward marriage, but most are unable to sustain the weak bonds of a more

provisional and perhaps conditional childbearing relationship. Lower-income blacks may be both less willing to start out as a couple than whites, but in time, both blacks and whites with limited means end up as single parents.

No doubt other factors are implicated in the rise of nonmarital childbearing among lower-income and less educated white women. Over the decades, a growing proportion have experienced parental divorce during childhood; that experience may have made them more wary of marriage just as it did among black women several decades earlier. The experiences of one generation do affect the next, though most research shows that the "transmission" of family instability is modest and could not adequately account for the large-scale retreat from early marriage and the growth of cohabitation. More likely, high rates of marital instability have a direct effect on the children of divorce and affect the attitudes and behavior of children who have grown up in intact families.

We are beginning to witness a sharp divergence in family formation strategies by social class. Young adults from all social strata realize that establishing educational and work credentials are an essential stage in the early part of the life course and may be incompatible with the decision to create a permanent partnership. Among the better-educated and more affluent, cohabitation makes good sense as a way of testing the waters. Less educated couples, too, are inclined to delay. However, they are both less adept at managing their sexual relationships and more inclined to experience an unintended pregnancy. In all likelihood, they are less willing and able to get an abortion when a pregnancy occurs. Abortion has become both more stigmatized and less accessible since the early 1980s, especially to the lower income women. Add to this volatile mix the difficulty of finding a marriageable partner, and one has created the conditions for high levels of nonmarital childbearing among those with limited resources.

Social class has always influenced patterns of family formation. This is not to ignore the racial differences in marriage and fertility that Moynihan wrote about four decades ago. However, these racial differences have waned as a growing number of black women have begun to exercise greater control over their fertility and as white women have started to experience the same sorts of constraints that blacks were feeling about their prospects of forming a lasting marriage when Moynihan focused on their plight. Perhaps it is time then to recognize that Moynihan's contribution to understanding the situation of the black family was historically rooted in the era in which he was writing. Were the Moynihan Report written today, it would, no doubt, be framed more by the disparate conditions created by social class than by racial differences.

Conclusion

Even conceding that the family circumstances of blacks and whites looked very different when Moynihan published his report, I have claimed that he might have been able to do a better job of unpacking the racial differences that he

observed in the family had he paid closer attention to the qualitative research produced by social scientists in the decades leading up to his report. Family life was highly structured by social class conditions even within racial groupings. Low-income blacks and whites had much in common, but Moynihan chose to cast his analysis and interpretation of the problems that blacks were experiencing as due to the cultural legacy of slavery and discrimination rather than to the chronic economic conditions that made family formation hazardous. This is not to say that African Americans do not have a greater vulnerability but that much of the vulnerability that they have experienced is due to precarious economic circumstances rather than their disadvantaged historical circumstances or the heritage of family forms from Africa.

[Moynihan] might have been able to do a better job of unpacking the racial differences that he observed in the family had he paid closer attention to the qualitative research produced by social scientists in the decades leading up to his report.

As more and more lower-income whites have faced the same set of precarious economic conditions, they have begun to exhibit the same patterns of family formation behavior as African Americans. The advantages that marriage ostensibly confers become more apparent than real in an era of great inequality, and fewer are willing to commit to or able to maintain stable unions whether they take the form of marriage or de facto marriage. As a result, efforts to promote marriage without changing the economic and social conditions that foster stable unions are destined to be ineffective. There is nothing wrong with attempting to provide skill training for young couples, but such efforts will yield little if low-income couples continue to experience chronic unemployment, underemployment, time pressures due to the need to work extra hours, lack of supportive services, and the like.

I have ignored altogether in this article the circumstances of the Latino population because they were not a part of the Moynihan Report. However, they provide an instructive case for the argument that I have advanced. Growing evidence indicates the Latino population is experiencing a change from a marriage-oriented population among the foreign-born to an American pattern of family formation among the second generation and among those born abroad but reared

in the United States. Among Mexicans, in particular, rates of nonmarital childbearing have risen to levels that exceed those of whites and are beginning to approach those of African Americans.

This pattern suggests that it is insufficient to have strong cultural values about marriage if the economic and social conditions that foster marriage are not maintained. Mexicans, like lower-income blacks and whites, are finding it difficult to form and maintain stable unions that survive the vicissitudes of stressful conditions that continue to undermine the family. To be sure, the story of change over the past forty years is not strictly an economic one. Gender relationships, premarital sexual practices, and social and cultural influences have all played a part in reshaping the family. However, the continuing pattern of class difference, which was in evidence when Moynihan wrote his report, has become more pronounced over the passing decades and cannot be ignored by either scholars or policy makers. Four decades later, it appears that Moynihan's analyses of the reasons that the black family was in crisis has a much wider application than he believed in 1965.

References

Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city.* New York: Norton.

Banfield, Edward C. 1968. *The unheavenly city revisited*. Boston: Little, Brown.

———. 1984. *The democratic muse: Visual arts and the public interest.* New York: Basic Books.

Bell, Norman W., and Ezra F. Vogel. 1968. *A modern introduction to the family*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press.

Coontz, Stephanie. 2005. *Marriage, a history: From obedience to intimacy, or how love conquered marriage*. New York: Viking.

Coser, Rose L. 1964. *The family: Its structure and functions*. New York: St. Martin's.

Davis, Alison, Burleigh Gardner, and Mary Gardner. 1941. *Deep South: A social anthropological study of caste and class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dollard, John. 1937. *Caste and class in a southern town*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Drake, St. Claire, and Horace R. Cayton. 1945. *Black metropolis: A study of Negro life in a northern city*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.

Du Bois, W. E. B. 1899. *The Philadelphia Negro*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

———. 1908. *The Negro American family*. Atlanta, GA: Atlanta University Press.

Edin, Kathryn J., and Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I can keep: Why low-income women put motherhood before marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Elo, Irma, Rosalind Berkowitz-King, and Frank F. Furstenberg. 1999. Adolescent females: Their sexual partners and fathers of their children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:74-84.

Ellwood, David T., and Christopher Jencks. 2005. The spread of single-parent families in the United States since 1960. In *The future of the family*, ed. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Timothy Smeeding, and Lee Rainwater, 25-65. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Frazier, E. Franklin. 1939. *The Negro family in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Furstenberg, Frank F. 2007. The making of the black family: Race and class in qualitative studies in the 20th century. *Annual Review of Sociology* 33:429-48.

Goldstein, Joshua R., and Catherine T. Kenney. 2001. Marriage delayed or marriage forgone? New cohort forecasts of first marriage for U.S. women. *American Sociological Review* 66:506-19.

Goode, William J. 1960. Illegitimacy in the Caribbean social structure. *American Sociological Review* 25:21-30.

———. 1963. *World revolution in family patterns*. New York: Free Press.

Hamilton, Brady E., Joyce A. Martin, and Stephanie J. Ventura. 2006. *Births: Preliminary data for 2005*. Bethesda, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/prelimbirths05/prelimbirths05.htm.

Hannerz, Ulf. 1969. *Soulside: Inquiries into ghetto culture and community*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hollingshead, August B. 1949. *Elmtown's youth: The impact of social classes on adolescents*. New York: Wiley.

Jarrett, Robin L. 1992. *A comparative examination of socialization patterns among low-income African-Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, and whites: A review of the literature*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, Center for Urban Affairs and Public Policy.

Jeffers, Camille. 1967. *Living poor: A participant observer study of priorities and choices*. Ann Arbor, MI: Ann Arbor Publishers.

Ladner, Joyce A. 1971. *Tomorrow's tomorrow: The black woman*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal childhoods: Race, class and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lasch, Christopher. 1977. *Haven in a heartless world: The family besieged*. New York: Basic Books.

Lewis, Hylan. 1955. *Blackways of Kent*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Liebow, Elliot O. 1968. *Tally's corner*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Lynd, Robert S., and Helen M. Lynd. 1929. *Middletown: A study in contemporary American culture*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Moore, Kristin A., Margaret C. Simms, and Charles L. Betsey. 1986. *Choice and circumstances: Racial differences in adolescent sexuality and fertility*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. 1965. *The Negro family: The case for national action*. Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor.

Moynihan, Daniel P., Timothy M. Smeeding, and Lee Rainwater, eds. 2005. *The future of the family*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

O'Connell, Martin, and Maurice J. Moore. 1980. The legitimacy status of first births to U.S. women aged 15–24, 1939–1978. *Family Planning Perspectives* 12:16-23, 25.

Parsons, Talcott. 1964. *Essays in sociological theory*. Rev. ed. New York: Free Press.

Pattillo-McCoy, Mary. 1999. *Black picket fences: Privilege and peril among the black middle class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Powdermaker, Hortense. 1939. *After freedom: A cultural study of the deep South*. New York: Viking.

Rainwater, Lee. 1970. *Behind ghetto walls*. Chicago: Aldine.

Rainwater, Lee, and William L. Yancey. 1967. *The Moynihan Report and the politics of controversy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Rodman, Hyman. 1971. *Lower class families: The culture of poverty in Negro Trinidad*. New York: Oxford University Press.

South, Scott. 1999. Historical changes and life course variation in the determinants of premarital childbearing. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:752-63.

Shorter, Edward. 1977. *The making of the modern family*. New York: Basic Books.

Stack, Carol B. 1974. *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a black community*. Chicago: Aldine.

Stone, Lawrence. 1977. *The family, sex and marriage in England 1500–1800*. London: Weidenfield and Nicholson.

Terry-Humen, Elizabeth, Jennifer Manlove, and Kristin A. Moore. 2001. *Births outside of marriage: Perceptions vs. reality*. Washington, DC: Child Trends. www.childtrends.org.

Ventura, Stephanie J., and Christine A. Bachrach. 2000. Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940–1999. *National Vital Statistics Report* 48 (16): 1-39.

Warner, W. Lloyd, and Paul S. Lunt. 1941. *The social life of a modern community*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Wilson, William J. 1987. *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.