

## Introduction

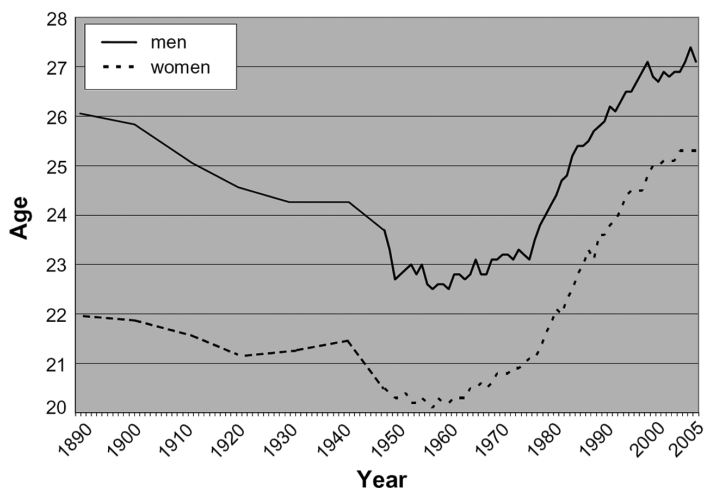
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As the title suggests, a central theme of this book is one of diversity. We document diversity in men's, women's, and children's experiences of family and marriage—over time, across cultures, and especially today within the United States. We describe a variety of perspectives that provide different lenses on the questions of why people marry and the consequences of those choices for parents, their children, and society at large. We also present evidence suggestive of continuing and potentially increasing diversity of those experiences and consequences into the future.

This book is divided into four parts. The first includes chapters examining motivations for marriage and the role of marriage in society from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. The second presents empirical work that contrasts several emerging family types with the traditional married nuclear family. The third examines current policy efforts to promote healthy and stable marriages. The fourth discusses the future of marriage, given recent changes in the social, economic, and demographic context in the United States.

Family forms are becoming increasingly diverse. Some demographers have characterized the dramatic changes in family structure and behavior over the past forty years as the “second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe 1995). These changes include delays in marriage and increases in divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation. The changes have not occurred equally for all groups, however. The retreat from marriage and increases in nonmarital childbearing are concentrated among racial and ethnic minorities and the less educated, and these differences in marriage

Figure I.1 Median Age at Marriage, 1890–2005



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Note: Figures for 1947 to present are based on Current Population Survey data. Figures for years before 1947 are based on decennial censuses.

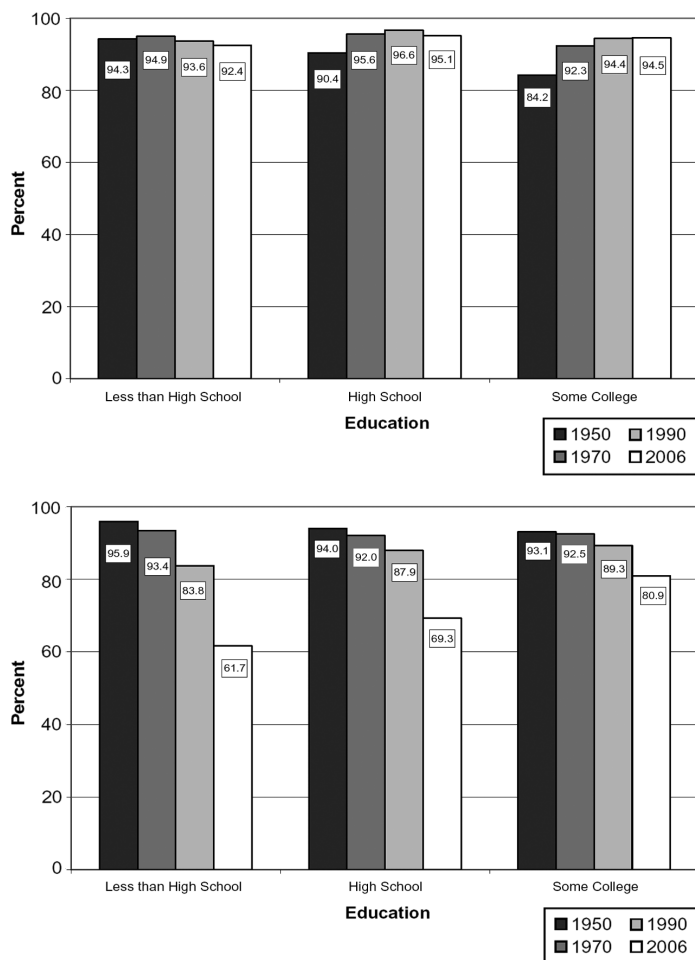
outcomes have contributed to the increase in inequality over the last thirty years (McLanahan 2004).

There has been considerable debate about whether individuals are tending forgo marriage altogether, or whether due to increases in the age of marriage and in the likelihood of divorce they are just spending less of their life cycle being married. Data clearly show that both men and women remain single for a longer period of time. In 2005 the median age of marriage in the United States was twenty-seven for men and twenty-five for women (see figure I.1). The age at marriage has increased substantially since the 1950s, when half of women married during their teen years. As the figure shows, however, the 1950s were an anomaly. At the end of the nineteenth century, the age of marriage was closer to what it is today; in 1890 the median age of marriage was twenty-two for women and twenty-six for men.

Figure I.2 sheds some light on the question of whether marriage is delayed or avoided. The figure shows the proportion of white and black women who were ever married by age 45–50 by education level over time (this is a good proxy for ever marrying, because first marriage is unlikely after these ages). The top panel shows that marriage propensities have increased for white women. Since 1950, the likelihood of ever marrying remained almost constant for those with less than a high school education,

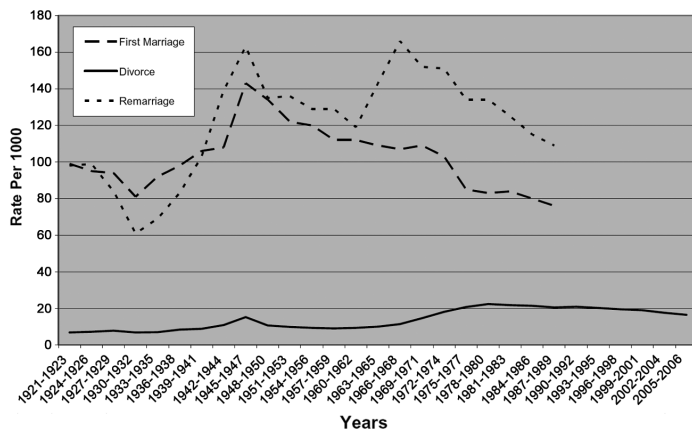
but this likelihood increased for white women with more education (by about 6 percentage points for women with a high-school degree and 10 percentage points for women with some college). In contrast, the lower panel shows that marriage propensities decreased substantially over time for black women of all education levels. The decline was largest for black women with less than a college education (from 96 percent to 62 percent),

Figure I.2 Panel A (top): Percent of White Women Aged 45–50 Ever Married by Educational Attainment; Panel B (bottom): Percent of Black Women Aged 45–50 Ever Married by Educational Attainment



Source: Author's calculations from the IPUMS files for the U.S. decennial census and the American Community Survey

Figure I.3 Marriage and Divorce Rates per 1000 Women at Risk



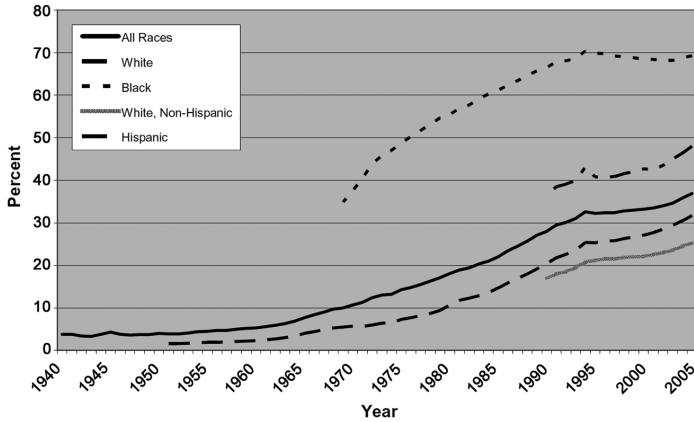
Sources: 1921–1989 from the U.S. Census Bureau (1992); 1990–2004 from the editors' tabulations of multiple years of the NCHS Vital Statistics Report and Current Population Survey March Annual Social and Economic Supplement

but there was still a 10-point decline in marriage probabilities for black women with some college. In the past, blacks and women with less education were more likely to be married than were whites or women with more education, but the opposite is true today. As several of the chapters in this book emphasize, over time marriage has become increasingly selective of those with higher socioeconomic status.

The increase in divorce rates is another factor contributing to the decline in marriage (see figure I.3). The substantial increase began in the late 1960s, but aggregate divorce rates have been fairly flat since 1980, with a small decline in recent years. Divorce propensities also reflect the divide between high and low socioeconomic groups. The likelihood of divorce has fallen slightly for non-Hispanic whites but has continued to rise for blacks (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). Figure I.3 also shows that remarriage rates have fallen over time. Again remarriage rates have fallen faster for blacks than for whites (Bramlett and Mosher 2002).

The delay in marriage has not been matched by a similar delay in fertility, especially for black women and those with lower education. Essentially marriage and childbearing are less closely connected now than in the past, resulting in an increasing number of births outside of marriage. This behavior has been the focus of much debate by policymakers and pundits alike. In 2005, almost seven in ten black children and about one in four

Figure I.4 Percent of Births to Unmarried Women: United States, 1940–2006



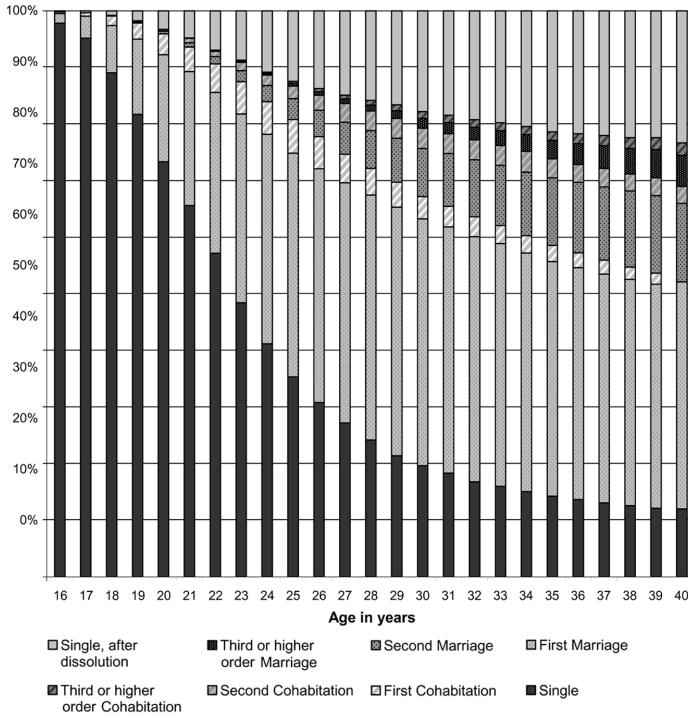
Source: Ventura and Bachrach 2000, table 4, 28–31, and multiple years of NCHS Vital Statistics Report

white non-Hispanic children were born to nonmarried parents (Figure I.4). The enormous rise in nonmarital childbearing began in the 1960s, and the percent of births that are nonmarital has almost quadrupled since 1970. Unlike the other demographic behaviors discussed earlier, however, the numbers for blacks and whites are beginning to narrow. The proportion of births outside of marriage reached a peak for blacks in 1994 and has remained fairly constant for more than a decade, while this proportion for whites continues to increase.

Another change in family structure has been the rise of nonmarital cohabitation. Estimates based on the 2000 U.S. census show that there are nearly 5.5 million cohabiting couples in the United States today, which represents a more than 1,000 percent increase since 1970. It is estimated that about 40 percent of cohabiting households include children (Fields and Casper 2001; Simmons and O’Connell 2003). This varies by race, such that 35 percent of white cohabiting couples, 54 percent of black cohabiting couples, and nearly 60 percent of Hispanic cohabiting couples have children in the household (Fields and Casper 2001). Indeed, evidence from the National Survey of Family Growth estimates that 40 percent of nonmarital births are births to unmarried cohabiting couples (Chandra et al. 2005).

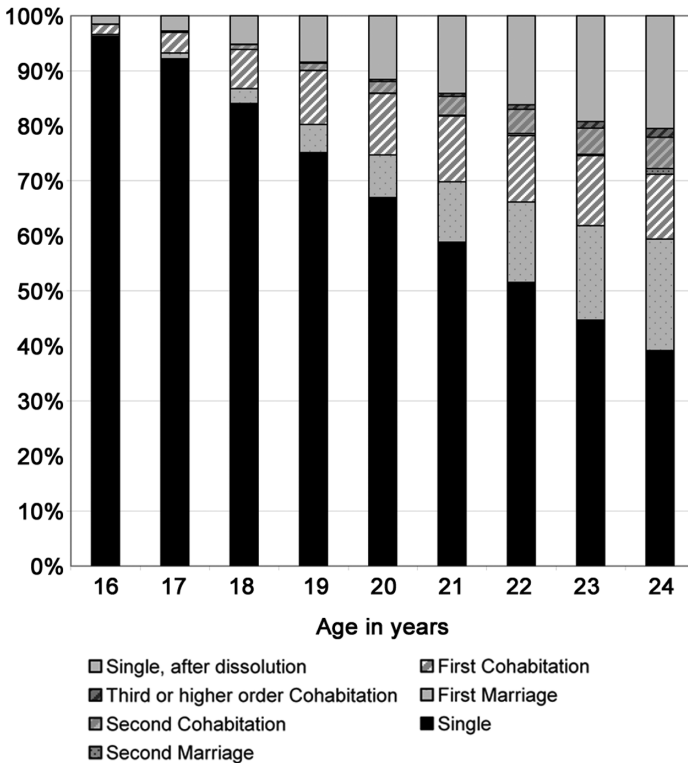
Individuals also experience diversity across the life course. Today, many men and women spend their life course in various family structures, moving back and forth between being single, cohabiting, married, remarried,

Figure I.5 Family-structure experiences from ages 16 to 40: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) 1979 Cohort



divorced, and/or widowed. Figure I.5 illustrates the dynamic nature of family life for a cohort of young men and women born between 1957 and 1964 using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) data. This graph depicts the family structures of these young men and women from ages sixteen to forty, using longitudinal data collected between 1979 (and retrospective data from before 1979) and 2004. The figure illustrates that by age twenty-three, half the sample had entered into a first union, most residing in their first marriage. Ten years later, by age thirty-three, only 16 percent had never entered a union. Meanwhile, 46 percent were still in their first union, yet 20 percent were single after a marital or cohabitation dissolution, and 18 percent were in their second, third, or higher-order marital or cohabiting union. Seven years later, at age forty, only 12 percent had never entered a union, 39 percent were in their first marriage, 23 percent were single after a union dissolution, and 26 percent were in their second, third, or higher-order marital or cohabiting union. At midlife, only 51 percent had yet to experience a union dissolution.

Figure I.6 Family-structure experiences from ages 16 to 26: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) 1997 Cohort



A cohort comparison of the NLSY79 and a more recent cohort of men and women who were born between 1980 and 1984 (the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997) highlights how in the future these trends may be exacerbated. In figure I.6, we compare data from the NLSY97 collected between 1997 and 2004 with data from the older cohort shown in figure I.5. By age twenty-four, both cohorts have similar percentages of respondents who have yet to enter a union—41 percent of the NLSY79 cohort and 39 percent of the NLSY97 cohort. However, the rest of the family structure experiences are quite different. By age twenty-four, 43 percent of the original NLSY79 cohort was in their first union, with 86 percent of these unions being first marriages and 14 percent being first cohabitations. On the other hand, by age twenty-four only 32 percent of the NLS97 cohort members were in their first union, with 62 percent in their first marriage and 38 percent in a first cohabitation. Thus, fewer of the NLSY97 are in their first union at age twenty-four, and they are more likely to be in a cohabiting

union than are men and women from the original NLSY79 cohort. In the NLSY79 cohort, only 5 percent were in a second union by age twenty-four, while in the NLSY97 cohort, 9 percent were in a second or even third union. Finally, both the number of twenty-four-year olds who were single after dissolving their union (11 percent versus 21 percent) and the number ever dissolving a union (16 percent versus 29 percent) almost doubled between the 1979 and 1997 cohorts. Given the levels of union instability already present by the age of twenty-four in the NLSY97 data, the trends outlined here are likely to continue.

Overall, the trends and changes described in this introduction highlight the considerable diversity in experiences of marriage and indicate that there remain many unanswered questions about contemporary marriage and family life. Our intention when developing this book was to have a mix of reviews of theory and the literature (see part 1 and chapter 5), original empirical research (see part 2), and thought pieces (see parts 3 and 4). This mix gives our readers both breadth and depth into the multitude of issues and perspectives that mark contemporary research on marriage and family.

The chapters in part 1, *Perspectives on Marriage*, examine motivations for marriage and the role of marriage in society from various disciplinary perspectives. It begins with a chapter by Arland Thornton that provides a broad overview of marriage historically and cross-culturally. Thornton points out that marriage institutions and norms for northwestern European countries and their North American overseas populations have differed from many other countries going back more than six hundred years. In particular, northwestern European countries had a more individualistic orientation, nuclear family structures, older ages at marriage and higher rates of nonmarriage, and less parental control over marriage. Thornton also describes social changes in the Western world, including industrialization, increasing wages for women, and the development of the birth-control pill, that have contributed to the decline in marriage.

Contrasting and complementing the historical and cultural approach is the sociobiological framework outlined in the chapter by Bobbi Low. She focuses on the evolutionary and ecological reasons for both similarities and differences in marriage and family institutions among humans. Low uses examples from other species to shed light on the importance of ecological constraints in explaining human mating and parenting behaviors. She points out that male-female conflicts of interest and tensions between mating and parenting efforts are universal among humans and animals. For example, polygamy is the norm for most mammals, including humans,



because males generally maximize genetic fitness by mating and females maximize genetic fitness by investing in their children's survival. Because males and females are likely to succeed in mating and raising families by doing different things, the evolutionary model can also explain why parents teach boys and girls different skills.

Paula England's chapter provides another perspective on gender conflict. She approaches the question from a sociology-of-gender framework. Her chapter addresses two questions. First, she applies the gender perspective to gender inequality in marriage. Specifically, she summarizes the empirical evidence on how normative and economic factors affect power within marriage, looking at outcomes such as the distribution of housework, consumption, and violence. England then turns to her second question: whether marriage promotes or diminishes gender equity. She argues that the effect of marriage on gender equity depends on social class. For example, women with more education are more likely to delay marriage and establish careers, leading to greater gender equity. In contrast, women with less education also delay marriage, but are more likely to have children outside of marriage. Because the costs of childbearing are disproportionately born by women, nonmarriage combined with children can lead to more gender inequity.

Chapter 4, by Paul Amato, concludes this part with a social-psychological perspective. He suggests that there is less agreement about the nature of marriage now than in the past. He describes three competing marriage schema that operate today: institutional, companionate, and individualistic. Although most marriages contain aspects of each of these stylized types, Amato suggests that over time young adults have placed less importance on the structural aspects of marriage such as children, religion, and home and, increasingly, have moved closer to the individualistic model of marriage focusing on happiness and finding a "soul mate." However, these cultural shifts are not uniform across socioeconomic class, and over time more educated individuals are becoming more conservative about marriage while the less educated are becoming less conservative. This shift in attitudes mirrors the change in behavior, described above: divorce among the more educated has declined over time and the retreat from marriage is concentrated among those with less education.

Part 2, Contemporary Families, contrasts emerging family types with the traditional two-biological-parent nuclear family. Rachel Dunifon focuses on single-parent families. Over the past forty years the percent of all children living in single-parent households has increased from 12 percent

to 29 percent. Consistent with one of the main points of this book, Dunifon shows that there is considerable diversity in the prevalence and experience of single-parent families across different racial, ethnic, and educational groups, and there is diversity in the route through which single parenthood occurs (divorce or nonmarital childbearing). Dunifon also points out that the household composition differs across single parent families. For example, 12 percent of children in single-parent households also live with grandparents, and 40 percent of children are predicted to spend some of their childhood living in a cohabiting family. Studies generally show that children who live in a single-parent household have worse outcomes than those living with two biological married parents, but there is little consensus about the mechanisms that lead to these worse outcomes. Dunifon concludes that understanding the role of different mechanisms is complicated by the fact that single-parent families are diverse.

Chapter 6, by Wendy Manning, Pamela Smock, and Cara Bergstrom-Lynch, looks at cohabitation. The authors analyze data about young adults' views about cohabitation as a setting in which to raise children. They found a range of attitudes. The most important advantage of cohabitation over single parenthood that respondents mentioned was being able to raise a child together, sharing financial support and other caretaking responsibilities. The comparison between cohabitation and marriage was more complex. Some respondents believed that marriage and cohabitation were not much different as a setting in which to raise children, while others believed that marriage provided benefits such as security, commitment, financial resources (e.g., access to health insurance), and social recognition, and helped to defined social roles, especially for stepparent families.

Chapter 7, by Claire Kamp Dush, compares outcomes for children living in two family types that have never had a family structure transition: stable married-biological parent and stable single-mother families. By the age of fourteen, only half of white children and less than half of black and Hispanic children were still in the family structure in which they were born. Overall, the family structure experiences of the children varied greatly by race and other socioeconomic characteristics. Matching the two samples on a variety of characteristics, she finds mixed evidence regarding the advantage of two-married parent families over single-mother families among these stable families. Her results suggest that research on the consequences of different family structures needs to carefully distinguish family structure from family stability.

Chapter 8, by Megan Sweeney, Hongbo Wang, and Tami Videon, compares outcomes for adolescents in stepfamilies with those in single-parent families. The authors emphasize the importance of taking into account the diversity of these families, specifically focusing on whether the stepfamily is formed through cohabitation or through marriage and whether the stepfamily is preceded by a divorce or by a nonmarital birth. Their results show the complexity of the relationship between stepfamily formation and adolescent outcomes. For example, stepfamily formation following a divorce is associated with higher levels of adolescent depression and sexual risk taking, but the greater economic and parenting resources available in stepfamilies partly mitigate those negative outcomes. Stepfamily formation following a nonmarital birth is associated with the positive outcome of less involvement in selling drugs.

Chapter 9, by Gary Gates and Adam Romero, describes the characteristics of same-sex couples who are raising children, documenting considerable geographic, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity among this largely understudied population. The data show that about a quarter of same-sex couples are living with a child under age eighteen. Contrary to popular perceptions, the prevalence of these households is greater among nonwhites and more economically disadvantaged groups. These disadvantages are exacerbated by the fact that gay and lesbian couples are not eligible to receive federally mandated benefits that are linked to marriage, such as health insurance and social security. This chapter also points out the importance of the stepfamily context in understanding outcomes of children living with same-sex parents. Although much of the recent literature that examines this topic focuses on intentional parenting by lesbian couples, Gates and Romero show that many of the children living in same-sex couple households are from previous heterosexual relationships.

The chapters in part 3 focus on the policy arena. Beginning with welfare reform in 1996, which stated in its preamble the goal of encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families, the federal government has shown a strong policy interest in promoting marriage. Subsequent to welfare reform, the Administration on Children and Families developed the Healthy Marriage initiative. Chapter 10, by Virginia Knox and David Fein, describes the Supporting Healthy Marriage Program, a marriage-education program targeted to low-income families. Compared to middle-income families, these couples face additional challenges (among them health issues, depression, drug abuse, poverty, and unemployment), and programs designed for middle-income families have been substantially

modified to address these challenges. The model behind the Supporting Healthy Marriage Program was developed collaboratively by psychologists who were involved in earlier marriage education efforts and economists and sociologists who have expertise in antipoverty programs and the provision of other social services. The chapter describes the challenges of implementing the model across a large number of communities and rigorously evaluating outcomes. Both a process and impact evaluation will be done as the program unfolds.

Chapter 11, by Michael Johnson, focuses on a critical issue that needs to be considered as marriage education programs are developed: the problem of domestic violence. Johnson suggests that it is important to distinguish between intimate terrorism and situational couple violence, different types of domestic violence that might have different implications for marriage interventions. Intimate terrorism is used as a way of gaining control over one's partner. It is problematic for marriage-education interventions, because it is generally less responsive to interventions, and participation in the program may pose a danger to the victim. In contrast, situational violence is a result of specific conflicts between the couple, and the types of relationship skills taught by marriage-education programs may be particularly useful in reducing this type of violence. Thus the challenges marriage-education programs face are screening procedures to identify different types of violence (and protecting victims for whom participation in such programs might pose a danger) and developing targeted strategies for each type of violence.

The chapters in part 4 discuss the future of marriage, both in terms of the meaning that marriage has and could have in people's lives and the impact of racial and ethnic diversity in the United States on marriage patterns in the future. In chapter 12, Steven Nock notes that as marriage has become less universal, it has also become more selective of individuals with higher education and other socially valued characteristics. He states that as marriage rates decline, "the symbolic importance of marriage increases." In addition, he suggests that employers in the labor market also value the qualities that are signaled by being married: fidelity, commitment, maturity, independence, and responsibility. Thus, as marriage becomes more selective, its value as a signal of quality to employers increases and labor-market inequality between married and nonmarried individuals will increase. Nock argues that this is likely to be true for men, but because labor-market attachment is generally less for women with children and fertility is higher in marriage, the argument may not fully carry over to women.

In chapter 13, Tamara Metz draws from the political-science literature to ask whether marriage promotes our values of liberty, equality, and stability. She suggests that marriage, as a state-established and state-supported institution, falls short on several grounds. Specifically, she argues that supporting families is an important social goal, because one of their main functions is to provide intimate caregiving by raising children, caring for the elderly, helping family members who have fallen on hard times, and so forth. The institution of marriage privileges one type of family, which violates equality and reduces an individual's freedom to choose a nonmarital family type. Metz then proposes an alternative: to abolish the state establishment of marriage and instead create an intimate caregiving union status that protects both marital and nonmarital families.

Chapter 14, by Shirley Hill, looks at the marriage experiences of African Americans. Hill argues that both historical and current class, racial, and gender inequalities have made marriage less viable for blacks and have produced a gap between the cultural support for marriage and the reality of low marriage rates in this population. Racial discrimination not only affects employment prospects of black males but also leads to anger, which undermines emotional connections between husbands and wives. The economic reality that black women have to work outside the home also conflicts with the ideal of the male as primary breadwinner, producing additional family conflict. These issues lead to the question of whether marriage is as beneficial for black families as it is for white families. The data show, however, that there is strong ideological support for marriage among blacks, and Hill argues that addressing class, racial, and gender inequality is essential to increasing marriage among black families.

The book ends with a chapter by Daniel Lichter and Warren Brown that highlights the issue of how racial and ethnic diversity will shape the future of the family. The chapter points out that Hispanics and Asians represent an increasing share of the population in the United States, and that future patterns of marriage and fertility will reflect the changing composition of the population. Lichter and Brown first present a projection showing that if the marital behavior of each racial or ethnic group did not change over time, projected changes in the composition of the population by 2050 would have little effect on the marital distribution in the population. This result occurs because the lower marriage rates of Hispanics are offset by the higher marriage rates of Asians. The authors caution, however, that the assumption of unchanging marital behavior for each racial or ethnic group is unlikely to hold. The chapter ends with a discussion of how factors such

as intermarriage, assimilation, and discrimination could alter the marriage behavior of different groups.

Overall, this book contributes to the literature on marriage and family by highlighting the diversity and complexities of modern American marital and family life. The chapters in this book point out several unanswered questions regarding marriage and family in the United States. We hope our readers are stimulated and motivated by the many interesting questions that remain.

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MARRIAGE *and* FAMILY

