

Opting out of the family? Social Change in Racial Inequality in Family Formation Patterns and Marriage Outcomes among Highly Educated Women

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Executive summary

Recent scholarship on college-educated women suggests that strategies in navigating career and family formation and resulting life course transitions and outcomes have changed considerably during the course of the 20th century (Goldin 2004). For women with postgraduate training, the problem is even worse because periods of training and career formation extend well into or even past typical childbearing ages. Delaying entry into professional or graduate school until after the children are “out of the worst” was one of the traditional strategies followed by women who graduated in the 1950s and 1960s, although career prospects for those who followed this strategy were not great (Goldin 2004). The best-documented response by women is delay of childbirth until they have established themselves in their careers. This strategy is probably perceived as the ‘safest’ with respect to career outcomes. On the downside, the inexorable advance of the biological clock may jeopardize the realization of personal goals, especially in periods and fields with considerable career uncertainties, because career stabilization, if any, occurs in one’s late thirties or early forties. On the other hand, not delaying may jeopardize the transition from school to work and result in significant financial and time pressures for parenting graduate students. Averil Clarke (2002) has shown that these trade-offs are especially difficult for black college-educated women, who face strong pressures in both labor markets and marriage markets, often resulting in an inability to realize partner and fertility preferences. However, data on the life courses of women with postgraduate degrees are sparse; this is even truer for black women. To our knowledge, there are no studies that describe change over time in the life course strategies and outcomes for representative samples of this population. This paper is a first step in documenting relevant trends and figures, based on analyses of the Current Population Survey for the period between 1970 and 2007.

Main findings:

- Black women’s share among graduate students has increased from about 50% in 1980 to 70% in 2007, and their share of persons with postgraduate training increased from 48% to 64%. In comparison, white women’s share of graduate students increased from 42% to 60%, and their share of persons with postgraduate training increased from 30% to just under 50%.
- The difference between highly educated black and white women in the proportion living with a spouse widened from 9% in the 70s to 21% in 2000-2007. Today, black women

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are twice as likely as white women to never have married by age 45 and twice as likely to be divorced, widowed, or separated.

- Racial marital homogamy declined for black males with postgraduate education but did not change for highly educated black females. In 2000-07, 4.5% of black women and 14% of black men were in interracial marriages. For whites, there was no change in racial homogamy.
- Educational homogamy increased for males and declined for females for both blacks and whites. However, black women were least likely to be married to a spouse with completed college education or more (65%, compared to 75% for black men, 76% for white women, and 79% for white men).
- Taken together, these figures indicate that the marriage market for black women became increasingly restricted. There seem to be strong barriers for interracial marriages between whites and blacks among the highly educated in general, and between white males and black females in particular. Our results confirm that “race trumps education” (Qian and Lichter 2007:87) in the intermarriage process, and that this is also, and maybe even particularly true for those with the highest educational levels in American society. As a result, black women are less likely to ever marry during their childbearing years, and more likely to marry lesser-educated men.
- Analyses of age at first birth and childlessness at age 44 show that beginning with women born in the 40s, the highly educated increasingly delayed childbirth. However, black women born before 1955 had their children earlier than similar white women, and somewhat lower levels of childlessness at age 44. For later birth cohorts, childlessness increased dramatically and surpassed the already high level of white women. Thus, 45% of highly educated black women born in the latter half of the fifties were childless at age 44, compared to 35% for white women born in the same period. We show that these differences emerge late in the fertility process. While black women are somewhat more likely than white women to experience first birth in their teens and twenties, they are much less likely than white women to experience first birth after age 33. As a result, white women are more likely to delay, rather than entirely forego, childbearing.
- Analyses of the trend in age and household structure of graduate students show that one potential life course strategy, namely, to raise children while in school, has not become more prevalent over time. However, black graduate students, and black women in particular, are more likely to live with children than whites, consistent with the analyses of the fertility process.
- Fertility of black and white women who were ever married is somewhat similar. Never being married dramatically reduces fertility for both black and white highly educated women. More than 90% of white women who were never married remained childless among all cohorts. This figure was lower for black women, ranging between 60% and 80% for cohorts born between 1956 and 1970. Despite this difference, much higher rates of black women who remain unmarried among the younger cohorts of the highly

educated largely account for the higher levels of childlessness among black women born after 1955.

- In sum, we document emerging trends in inequalities between black and white highly educated women. Black women are increasingly less likely to marry and have children; if they marry, they are more likely than any other group to marry lesser-educated men; and if they have children, they are more likely to do so while still in training, with potential consequences for educational attainment and career formation. Further research should address the causes of these trends – both in terms of black women’s decision making and in terms of the structure of career systems as well as marriage and labor markets, which seem to be especially difficult to navigate for black women.

References

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