Marriage, Family Systems, and Economic Opportunity in the USA Since 1850

Steven Ruggles

Marriage Trends

Age at Marriage

There are only fragmentary data about American marriage patterns before 1850. The scattered eighteenth-century community studies based on church records suggest that age at first marriage may have averaged about 23 for women and 25 for men (Wells, 1992; Haines, 1996). Benjamin Franklin (1755/1961) maintained that "marriages in America are more general, and more generally early, than in Europe" and he was probably right: Northwest Europeans of the time married particularly late, and a high percentage never married (Dennison & Ogilvie, 2013; Hajnal, 1965).

Eighteenth-century estimates of marriage age on both sides of the Atlantic are probably understated due to systematic migration censoring. In particular, community estimates derived from church records usually depend on linking baptism records to marriage records, and such estimates exclude people who left the community before they got married. Because of the competing risk of out-migration, late marriages are systematically omitted (Fitch & Ruggles, 2000; Ruggles, 1992, 1999). Conversely, however, some historical demographers have suggested that colonial American estimates could be biased upwards because the communities that have been studied may underrepresent frontier areas and the South, where marriage may have been particularly early (Hacker, 2003; Haines, 1996).

Historical demographers have argued that age at marriage rose in the USA in the first half of the nineteenth century (Hacker, 2003, 2008; Haines, 1996; Sanderson, 1979; Smith, 1979). The available evidence, however, is insufficient to verify that conjecture. More likely, American marriage age changed little in the century preceding 1850. The first reliable national estimates are based on census data.
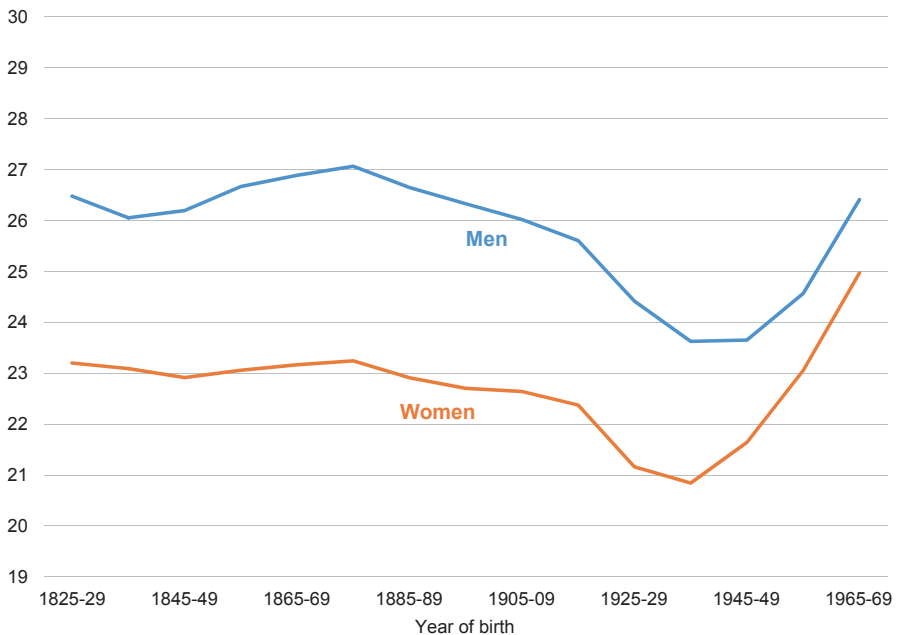
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Fig. 1 Mean age at first marriage: US persons born 1825–1969. (Source: Calculated from Ruggles et al., 2010)

The mean age at marriage for the US cohorts born in the late 1820s (and marrying around 1850) was 23.2 for women and about 26.5 for men. This is about the same as the eighteenth-century estimates for women and just a little higher for men.

Figure 1 shows the trends in mean age at first marriage in the USA for cohorts born between 1825 and 1969, based on the decennial censuses and the American Community Survey (ACS; King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010). The measure shown in Fig. 1 is the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM), a life table method that is not affected by mortality or age composition (Hajnal, 1965). Given the high-fertility, high-mortality demographic regime of the mid-nineteenth century, we could expect that census-based estimates would be about a year later than direct estimates derived from church records (Ruggles, 1992). SMAM relies on information about marital status by age, information that was first gathered by the 1880 census; accordingly, for the 1850 through 1870 period I imputed marital status following methods described in Fitch and Ruggles (2000) as modified by Hacker (2003). The estimates are confined to the free population, which means that most blacks are excluded in the period before emancipation.

For people born in the nineteenth century, fluctuations in marriage age were modest. There was a slight increase in marriage age between the birth cohorts of 1835–1839 and 1875–1879, especially among men. For the next two generations, marriage age declined gradually. The post-World War II marriage boom mainly affected people born between 1925 and 1949, who married younger than any previous
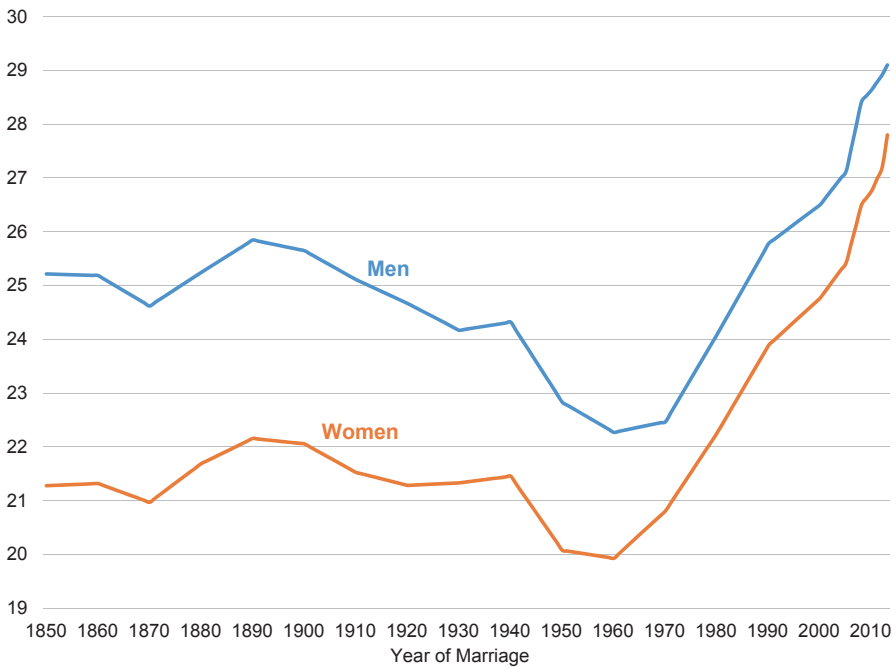
Fig. 2 Median age at first marriage: USA, 1850–2013. (Source: Calculated from Ruggles et al., 2010)

generations. After 1949, marriage age increased sharply, especially for women, and the age difference between husbands and wives narrowed. By the late baby boom generation—those born from 1965 to 1969—marriage age for women was substantially later than at any previous period, and marriage age for men was about the same as the previous peak.

Cohort measures of mean marriage age are ideal for describing shared generational experience. The disadvantage of the cohort approach is that we must wait for the cohort to pass out of the marrying ages before we can describe that experience, so the method cannot be used to describe recent change. Moreover, cohort life table measures of mean age at marriage blend the experience of multiple age-groups, blurring the impact of short-run period change.

Figure 2 provides an alternate perspective: The indirect median age at marriage for the population of each period from 1850 through 2013 (Shryock, Siegel, & Associates, 1976), calculated from marital status at single years of age. The median age is consistently a year or so younger than the mean because of the positive skew of marriage age. It better reflects the typical experience of the population, but is not directly comparable with historical or contemporary international estimates of marriage age, which generally use the mean.

The period estimates in Fig. 2 show much more fluctuation than the cohort estimates in Fig. 1, and they reveal the contours of recent changes in marriage age. Age at marriage dipped slightly after the Civil War (which ended in 1865), and then

rose steadily from 1870 to a peak in 1890. From 1890 to 1960, marriage age fell for both men and women. The drop was interrupted in 1940, the only depression year represented in the data. Following the postwar marriage boom, age at first marriage has increased at an unprecedented pace since 1960. During the past decade, the increase has accelerated sharply, reaching a peak age of 29.1 for men and 27.8 for women in 2013.

Prevalence of Marriage

The declining prevalence of marriage is occurring across all age-groups. Figure 3 shows the age pattern of percent ever married among men and women for each successive cohort born since 1935. Among the youngest cohort of women—who can only be observed through age 20–24—only 17.5 % have married, compared to 71.4 % of the same age-group in the 1935–1939 cohort.

How many of these young people will eventually marry? By fitting marriage curves derived from historical data, Goldstein and Kenney (2001) concluded that about 90 % of the younger cohorts will eventually marry. Since then, however, the young have continued to diverge sharply from historical marriage patterns, and Goldstein and Kenney's predictions are not coming true. In the context of rapid change in marriage behavior, the historically based marriage models are inadequate.

People do not have unlimited opportunities to marry, so a delay in marriage necessarily increases the chances that marriage will not occur. Empirically, it has been unusual for a cohort to forgo marriage early on but then catch up in later life. Among the 15 birth cohorts of women I have reconstructed for persons born between 1825 and 1965, there is only one in which the percentage married at age 20–24 did not accurately predict the percentage who had married by age 40–44. That exceptional birth cohort was born between 1915 and 1919; they reached age 18 between 1933 and 1938 and 24 between 1939 and 1943. Under the adverse conditions of depression and World War II during their prime marrying years, many of these women delayed marriage. In the end, however, they did catch up; only 6 % had never married by the time they reached 40–44 years old in the postwar years. If this cohort had behaved like all the others, their non-marriage would have been about 50 % higher.

There was no catch-up for the other 14 cohorts I examined: In all other periods, the percentage ever married at age 20–24 (with a log transformation) predicts almost perfectly the percentage never married by age 40–44. The scatter plot in Fig. 4 illustrates the tight relationship. We have no way of telling whether this simple relationship will hold true in the future, just as we have no way of knowing whether historically based marriage models developed by Coale and McNeil (1972) and Hernes (1972) have any relevance for the youngest cohorts.

As shown in Fig. 5, for over a century the percentage of women who had not married by their 40s fluctuated in a narrow band between 5 and 10 %. This has now changed; the marriage behavior of the 1960s birth cohorts represents a radical break with the past. On the right of the graph, I have projected into the future assuming that the historical relationship between marriage at 20–24 and at 40–44 remains
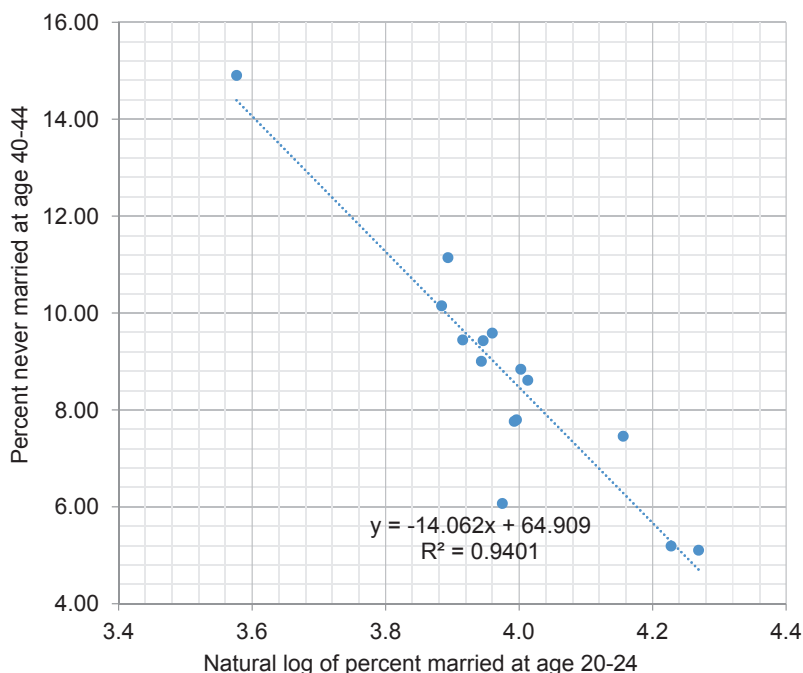
Women
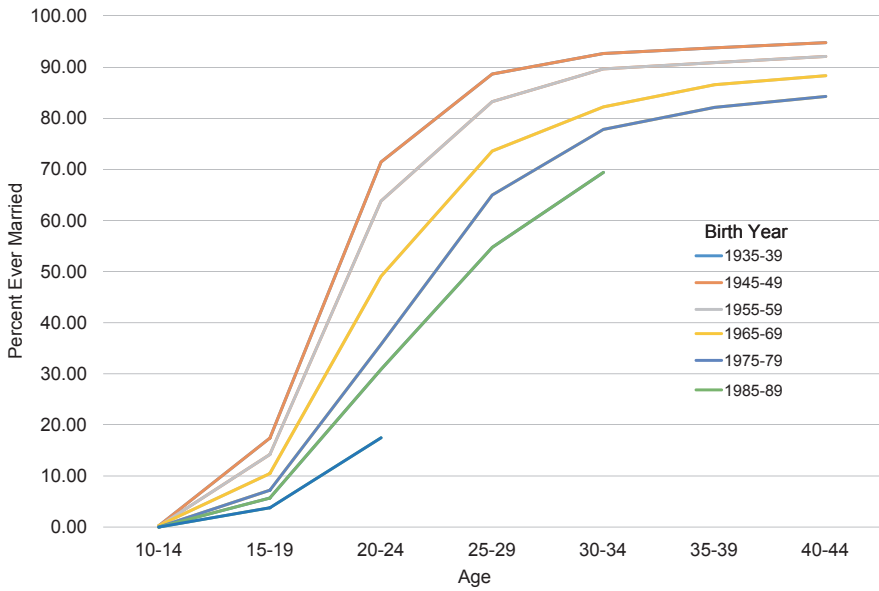
Men
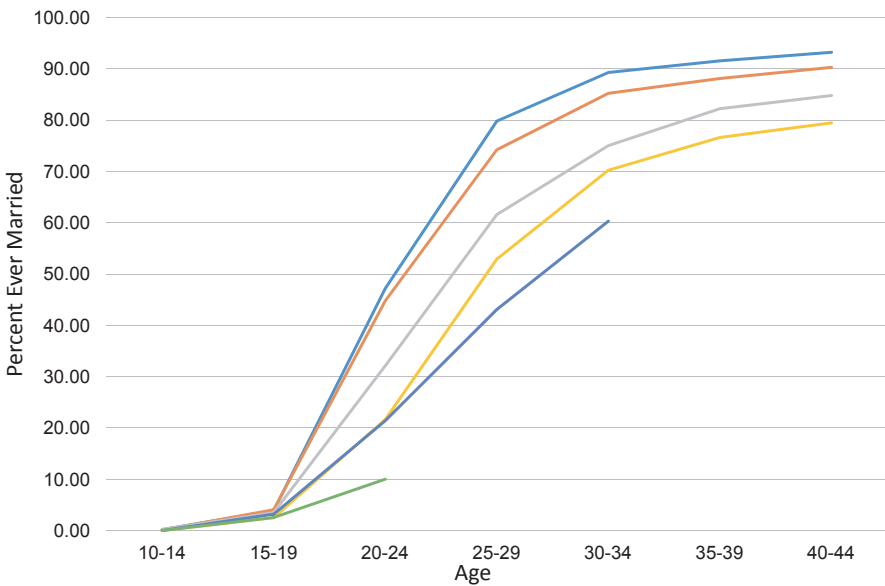
Fig. 3 *(Top panel)* Percentage of women and men ever married by age and birth cohort: USA, 1935–1989. (Source: Ruggles et al., 2010)

Fig. 4 Scatterplot of percent ever married at 20–44 and percent never married at 40–44: US cohorts of women born 1825–1965. (Source: Ruggles et al., 2010)

true. We do not know whether younger cohorts will forgo marriage at these levels, but it is plausible; the estimates are very close to the projections of Martin, Astone, and Peters (2014), who use a completely different methodology based on the ACS "married within year" variable. There is no sign that a catch-up is underway for any of the post-baby boom cohorts. Even if they were to suddenly follow a similar catch-up pattern as the 1916–1919 cohort, it is likely that the youngest cohorts would still end up with twice as much non-marriage as the highest levels observed in the American past.

Cohabitation

Is cohabitation a substitute for marriage? Figure 6 shows estimates of the percentage of men and women aged 25–29, who were either married or cohabiting with a partner between 1960 and 2012. By age 25–29, most people have finished their education and have become part of the labor force. The cohabitation estimates for the period since 2007 are based on the Current Population Survey (CPS), which added an explicit question on cohabitation in that year. The 1990 and 2000 estimates derive from the unmarried-partner census category, adjusted upwards to account for
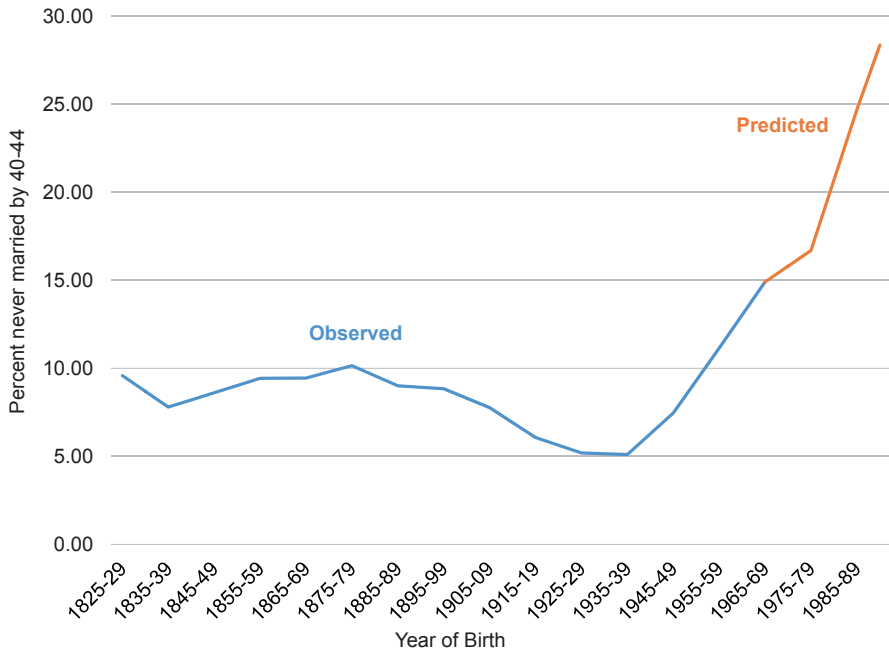
Fig. 5 Percent of women never married by age 40–44 by birth cohort: US women born 1825–1994. (Source: Ruggles et al., 2010)

underestimation (Kennedy & Fitch, 2012). The pre-1990 estimates of cohabitation are rougher, and are estimated from household configurations in census microdata (Fitch, Ruggles, & Goeken, 2005).

Cohabitation has indeed grown rapidly, but not as rapidly as marriage has declined. During the 1990s, the rise of cohabitation accounted for almost all the decline in marriage. After 2000, however, the acceleration of marital change outstripped the increase of cohabitation, and the percentage of young adults without partners grew at a rapid pace. Over the entire period from 1960 to 2012, the rise of cohabitation was only one third as great as the decline of marriage, and the number of young adults without partners of any kind roughly doubled. If one focuses on the percentage of women ever married or ever cohabiting rather than the percentage currently married or cohabiting, the rise of cohabitation does offset the decline of marriage (Manning, Brown, & Payne, 2014).

Marital Instability

People are not only getting married less often, they are also terminating their marriages at an unprecedented pace. Until recently, the standard demographic interpretation was that divorce rates peaked around 1980 and have remained steady or
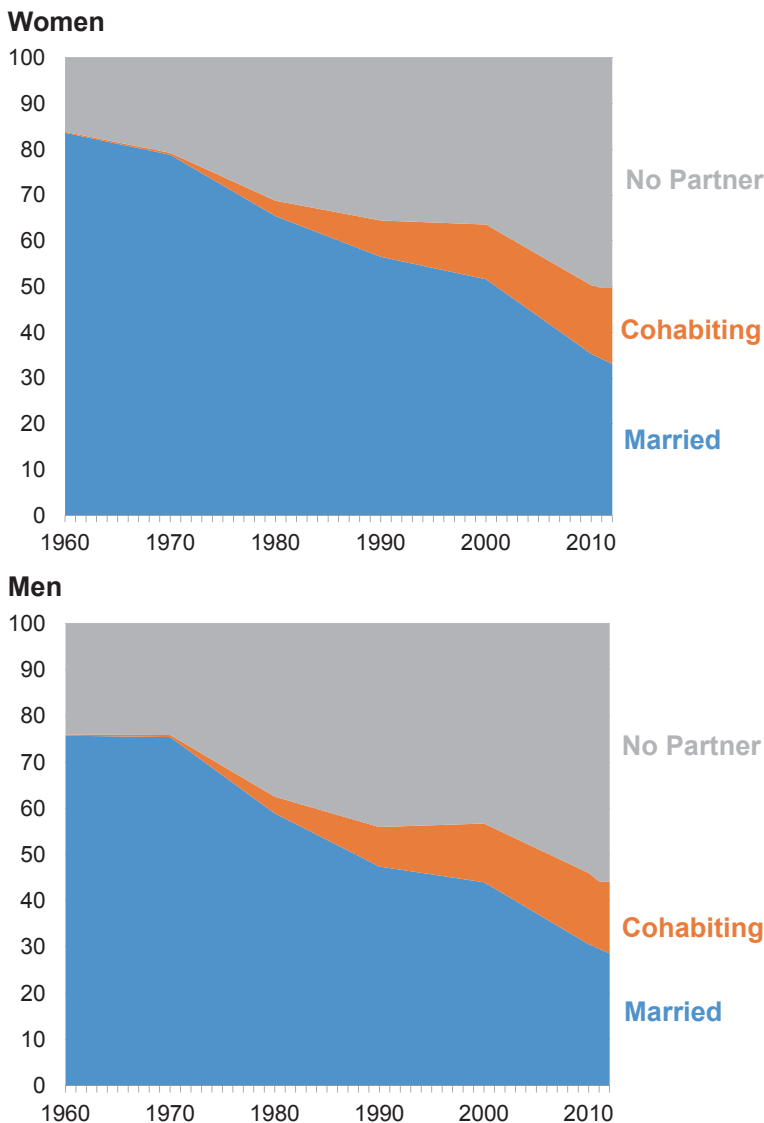
Women

Men

Fig. 6 Percentage of women and men aged 25–29 who were married or cohabiting. (Source: Calculated from Fitch et al., 2005; King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010)

declined since then. This interpretation is correct if we look only at crude rates, but if we only look at crude rates then Sweden has higher mortality than Papua New Guinea (Ruggles, 2012). Recently, Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) showed that if we adjust for changes in the age distribution of married women, a very different picture emerges. Figure 7 shows divorces per 1000 married women, controlling for
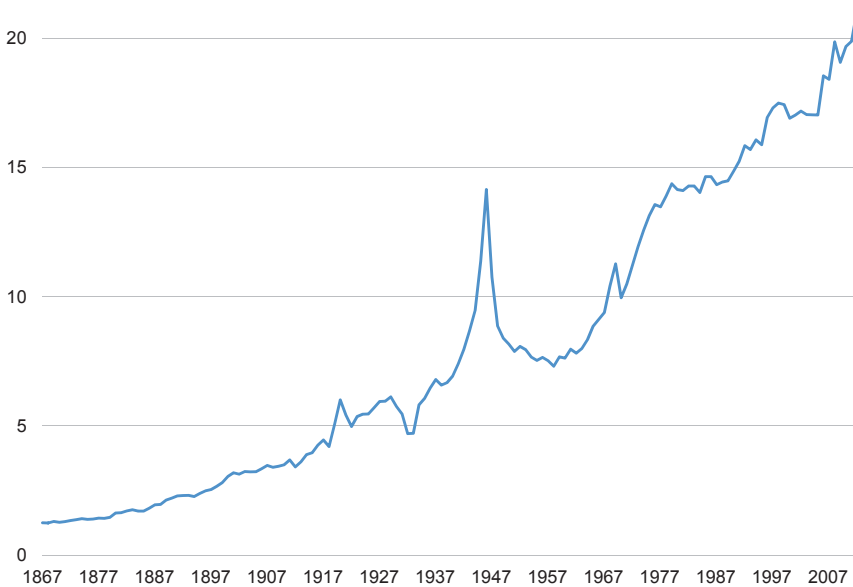
Fig. 7 Divorces per 1000 married women standardized by age: USA, 1867–2012. (Source: Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; These estimates use direct standardization for the period 1970–2012 and indirect standardization for the period 1867–1969; both periods use 2010 as the standard. The 1970–2012 estimates follow the analysis of Kennedy and Ruggles (2014), but they are adjusted to account for the differences between the death registration area and the country as a whole. Missing years were interpolated based on the fluctuations in crude rates)

the age distribution of the married population. The pattern from 1867 through the mid-1980s is similar to the well-known trends in crude divorce rates: There was a long-run gradual rise in divorce rates, punctuated by a sharp spike in 1946, a period of rapid increase in the 1970s, and stability in the mid-1950s and mid-1980s. What is very different from the usual picture is the trend after 1985. Adjusting for age, divorce is now almost 40% higher than it was in 1980 and three times as high as in 1960.

The age pattern of divorce for 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2008–2010 appears in Fig. 8. The rapid increase in marital instability has been concentrated among persons aged 35 and older, and especially among those over 50, a phenomenon Brown and Lin (2012) term the "Gray Divorce Revolution." From 1970 to 1980, divorce rates increased at every age, but the age pattern remained essentially similar. The level of divorce in 1990 was almost the same as in 1980, but there was a small shift in the age pattern: a slight decline in divorce for women in their 20s, and a slight increase for those over 40. Over the next two decades, this graying of divorce accelerated. There has been a decline since 1990 in the divorce rate of women aged 20–24. This decline probably reflects the increasing selectivity of marriage; just 13.3% of the women in that age-group were married in 2012. Among women in their 50s, the recent data show divorce rates over twice as high as the comparable rates in 1990.
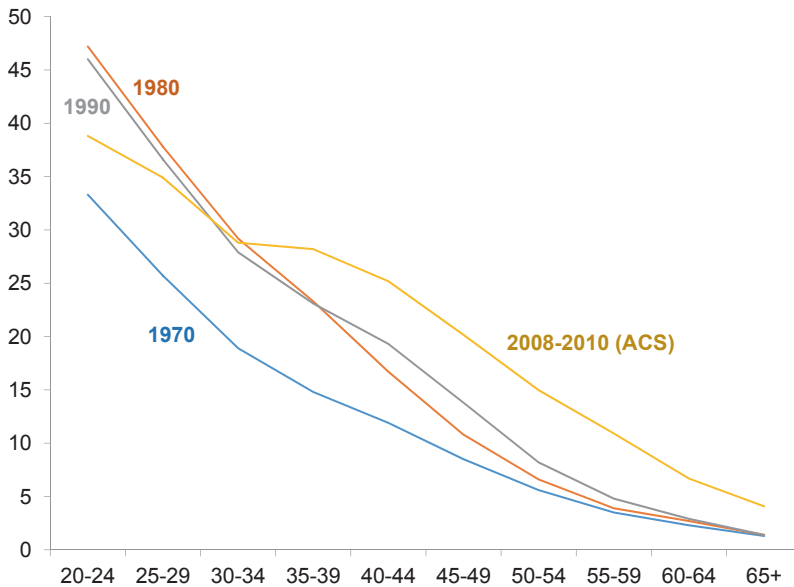
Fig. 8 Divorces per 1000 married women, by age: US Divorce Registration Area, 1970–2010. (Source: Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014)

Single Parenthood

As the marriage rate declines and marital instability rises, a growing percentage of children are residing separately from at least one of their parents. Figure 9 shows the percentage of infants (under 1 year old) residing without two married parents between 1880 and 2010. The percentage of infants without two married parents declined slightly from 1880 to a low point in the early twentieth century, owing mainly to a decline of paternal mortality. The percentage of infants with single mothers or residing without any parent increased slowly from 1920 to 1960, and rapidly after 1960. Initially, the growth occurred mainly in the percentage of infants residing with mothers only, but the last three decades have seen rapid growth in the percentage of infants only with fathers and residing with cohabiting couples.

Among the co-residing partners, the CPS reports that 78.8% were the biological parent of the infant in 2010. The percentage of infants residing with a cohabiting parent shown in Fig. 9 is consistently smaller than the percentage of births to women in cohabiting unions as estimated from the National Survey of Family Growth (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Lichter, Sassler, & Turner, 2014). This is probably because of the high instability of cohabiting unions; Kennedy and Bumpass (2008) found that most cohabiting unions dissolved within 2 years.
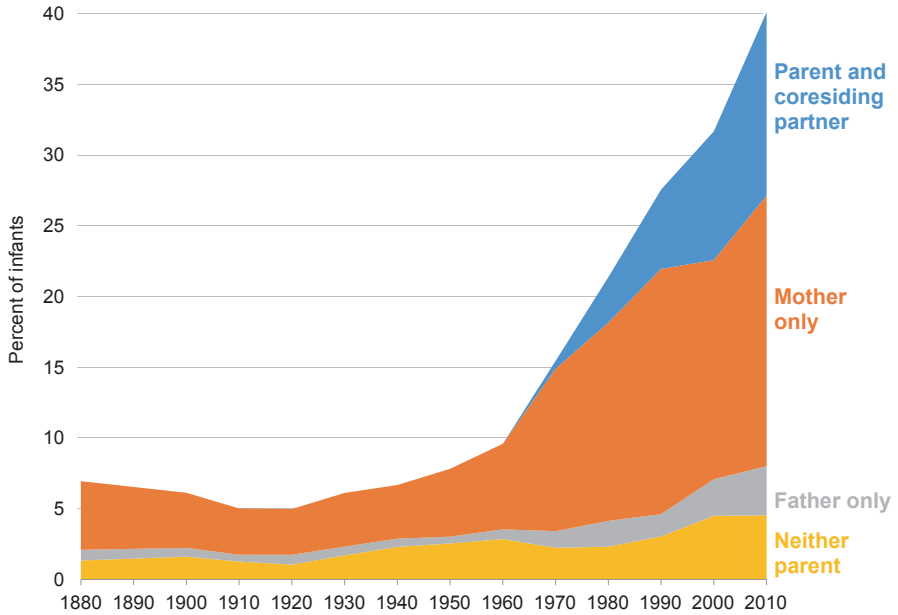
Fig. 9 Living arrangements of infants residing without married parents: USA, 1880–2010. (Source: Fitch et al., 2005; King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010; The category "parent and co-residing partner" was estimated using cohabitation variables in the 2010 Current Population Survey to adjust results from the census in 2000 and 1990 based on the "unmarried partner" category. Pre-1990 cohabitation was estimated from Fitch et al., 2005)

The Economics of Marriage

Family Economies

For most of the nineteenth century, most US production was carried out by families. In 1800, about three quarters of the population was engaged in agricultural work, and a majority of the population lived on farms until 1850. All family members who were old enough contributed to farm production, and farms depended on family labor. Among the quarter of the population that did not work on farms at the beginning of the nineteenth century, most still made their living through the family economy. Most nonfarm production was carried out by family businesses. Among the top job titles were shoemakers, merchants, tailors, physicians, butchers, grocers, bakers, and tavern keepers. In most such businesses, the family resided on the same premises as the shop, and the whole family worked in the business. Like farms, such businesses were usually handed down from generation to generation.
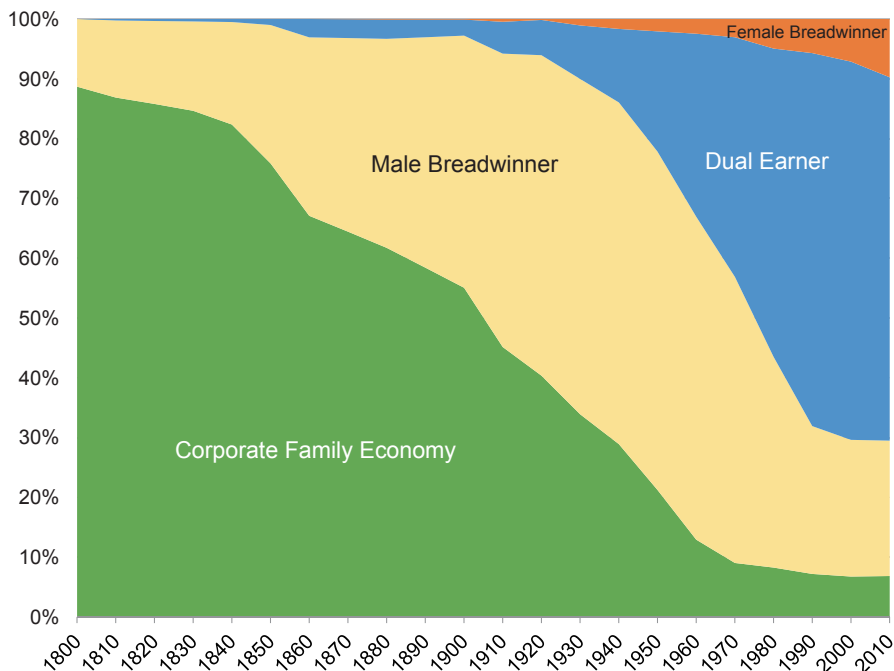
Fig. 10 Distribution of family economies: US married couples aged 18–64. (Source: Ruggles et al., 2010; Weiss, 1992; for the period since 1910, the Corporate Family Economy category was constructed using the Class of Worker variable in the census, which explicitly identifies the self-employed. For the period from 1850 to 1900, I assigned self-employed status to any occupation title that was at least 85% self-employed in 1910, and I assigned wage employment for occupations that were at least 85% wage workers in 1910. For jobs that were mixed between self-employment and wage workers, I extrapolated backwards from 1910 based on the trend in self-employment within each job title between 1910 and 1920. For the period before 1850, I assumed that the trend in farm families followed the overall trend in agricultural employment as estimated by Weiss (1992), and I assumed that the percentage of other self-employed occupations was constant)

Figure 10 illustrates the scope of change in the family economy of married couples over the past two centuries.[1] The category labeled "Corporate Family Economy" includes all families with self-employed married men, except for those with wives who had an occupation outside the family business. Most of the couples in this category had farms. Corporate families were in the majority throughout the nineteenth century, and remained important through the first half of the twentieth century.

The traditional family is not the Ozzie-and-Harriet male-breadwinner family that briefly prevailed in the mid-twentieth century (Coontz, 2005; May, 1990); the corporate family predominated for hundreds of years before. We should not idealize

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[1] This graph was inspired by a similar illustration that appears in Goldscheider and Stanfors (2014). The term "Corporate Family Economy" was apparently coined by Ryan (1981), and my characterization of change was informed by Mintz (1998).

these traditional families. They were organized according to patriarchal tradition; the master of the household had a legal right to command the obedience of his wife and children and to use corporal punishment to correct insubordination (Coontz, 2005; Cott, 2009; Mintz & Kellog, 1988; Shammas, 2002; Siegel, 1996). In most states, husbands owned the value of their wives' labor, as well as most property women brought into marriage (Shammas, Salmon, & Dahlin, 1987; Siegel, 1996). For 180 years, the authority of the patriarch was enshrined in the decennial census, which explicitly identified the head of each household; not until 1980 was the household head concept abandoned (Ruggles & Brower, 2003).

Male-breadwinner families are those in which the husband worked outside the home and the wife had no occupation listed. In some male-breadwinner households, women may have made some money, but their primary work was child-rearing and housekeeping. The male-breadwinner category represented a majority of marriages for just five decades—from 1920 to 1960—reaching a peak of 57% in 1940. According to the functionalist paradigm that dominated American sociological thought at mid-century, the stripped-down male-breadwinner family was ideally adapted to the needs of industrial society. Echoing ideas proposed by Durkheim (1893/1933), Parsons (1949) maintained that sex-role specialization was essential for marital stability. When Becker (1973, 1981) formalized the specialization concept in his theory of marriage, the equations demonstrated that overall satisfaction from unions is maximized when men work and women do not, and that such optimal arrangements maximize satisfaction for society as a whole.

Parsons and Becker never provided empirical evidence of either functional efficiency or satisfaction flowing from the male-breadwinner family. Not all members of those families agreed that the arrangement was ideal. Many wives in male-breadwinner families, Friedan (1963) argued, felt devastating boredom stemming from a family system that "has succeeded in burying millions of women alive." The male-breadwinner system did not last long; it had already begun to decline when Parsons published "The Social Structure of the Family" in 1949, and represented only about a third of marriages by the time Becker published his *Treatise on the Family* in 1981.

Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, the number of married women working outside their families began to increase, and the pace of change accelerated in the middle decades of the century. Dual-earner families have now predominated for almost a half century. Over the past several decades, female-breadwinner families have emerged as a significant new form, and now account for a tenth of marriages.

Labor Markets and Family Systems

The transitions from corporate families to male-breadwinner families to dual-earner families resulted from largely exogenous changes in labor markets. In the mid-nineteenth century, there were few alternatives to family labor. Figure 11 shows the
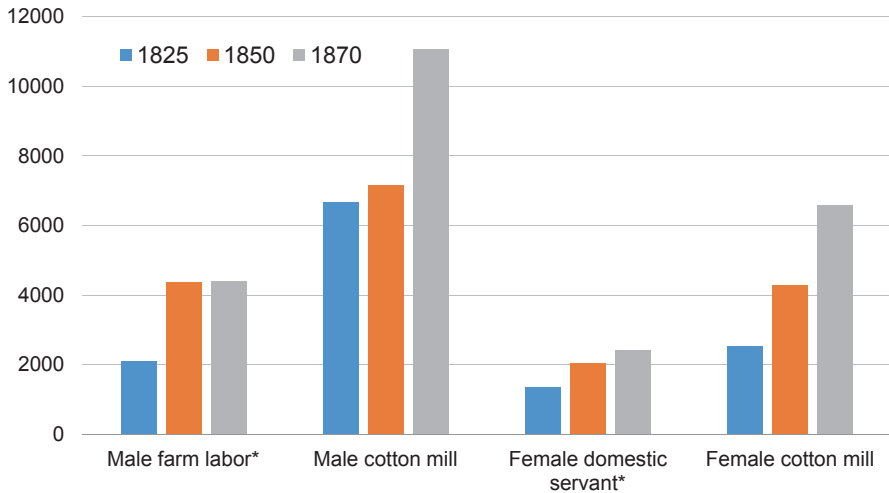
Men
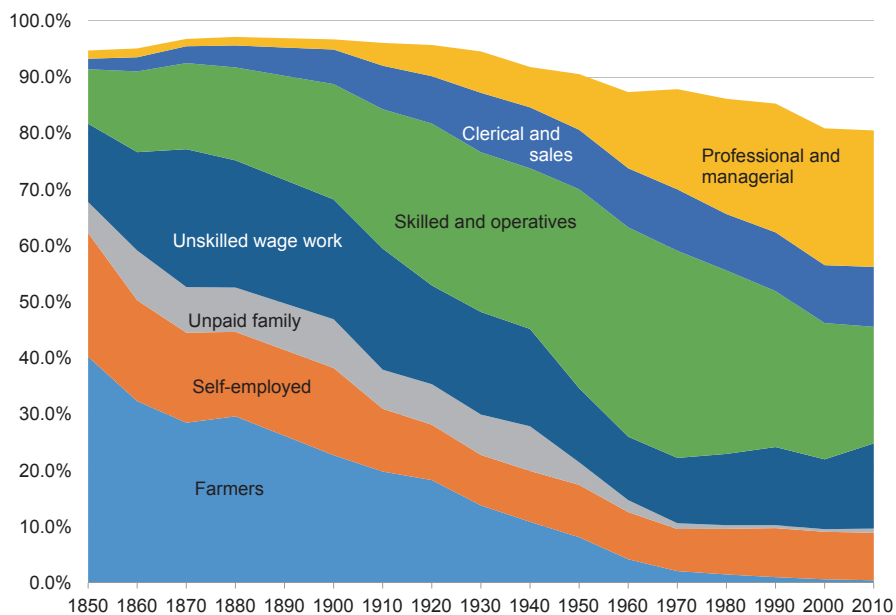
Women
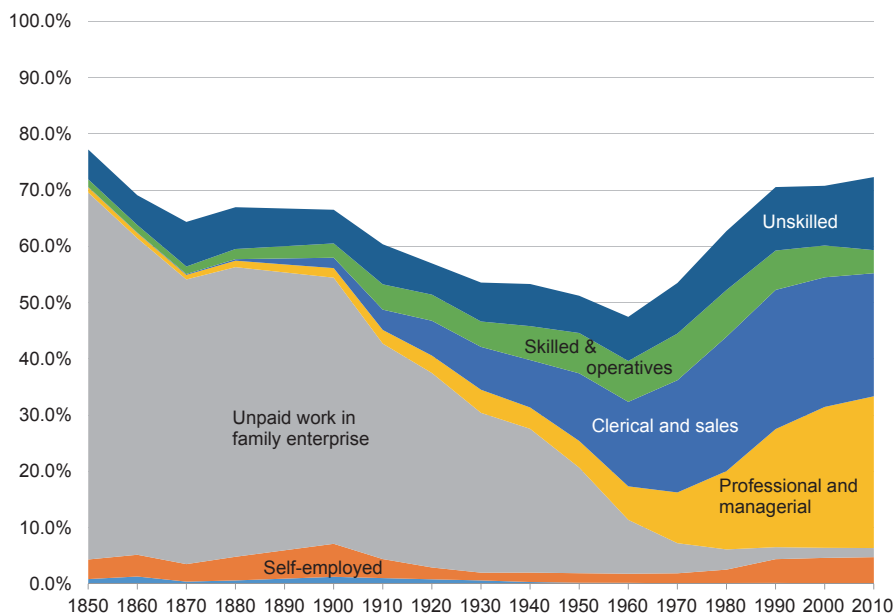
Fig. 11 *(Top panel)* Distribution of work: US free men and women aged 18–64, 1850–2010. (Source: Ruggles et al., 2010)

* Excludes bed and board

Fig. 12 Annual wages for selected occupations: New England, 1825–1870 (2013 dollars). (Source: Lebergott, 1960)

distribution of employment for free working age men and women since 1850. The white area at the top of each graph represents persons with no clear labor market activity. Almost 70% of the men in 1850 were farmers, proprietors of their own businesses, or family members working on those farms or businesses. There were relatively few wage-labor jobs available, and about half of them were unskilled laborers, who generally did not make enough money to start a family. There were as yet few factory jobs; in the skilled workers and operatives category, the most important jobs were miners, sailors, machinists, and overseers of slaves.

Wage-labor opportunities were far worse for mid-nineteenth century women than they were for men. The only significant category of female wage-labor employment was unskilled work, which almost exclusively meant work as domestic servants. Self-employment opportunities were also limited; most self-employed women were seamstresses or launderers. The tiny professional and managerial category—accounting for less than 1% of the adult women in the mid-nineteenth century—consisted almost entirely of teachers, who were rarely paid a living wage. The best jobs available for women were the 1.3% in the skilled worker/operative category; these were factory workers, and four fifths of them were located in New England and the Mid-Atlantic states.

New England was the best place to be a wage worker since it had the most advanced industrial sector and labor was in short supply; in the mid-nineteenth century, New England had one of the best-paid workforces in the world (Lebergott, 1984). Even in New England, however, it was difficult to make enough money as a wage worker to live on, much less support a family. Figure 12 shows estimates of New England wage rates for unskilled workers and textile factory workers between 1825 and 1870. The amounts are expressed as 2013 dollars, although that is not

especially meaningful considering the radical changes in the distribution of prices during the past two centuries. Nevertheless, we can safely draw the conclusion that farm laborers and domestic servants, the main forms of unskilled labor, could never have supported themselves on their cash wages; instead, they relied on room and board from their employers, and marriage was not ordinarily an option. Factory workers made much more, and wage rates for mill workers shot up over the middle years of the nineteenth century. The number of factory jobs grew rapidly; there were only a handful of mills in 1825, but by 1850 there were over a million manufacturing workers, and there were 6 million by 1900 (Lebergott, 1984). In the late nineteenth century, clerical jobs for men also grew rapidly, followed by professional and managerial positions in the early twentieth century.

The growth of well-paid wage-labor job opportunities for men undermined the economic underpinnings of patriarchal authority. Once sons had the option of leaving home for the high wages and independence of town life, they had little reason to remain at home under the control of their fathers (Ruggles, 2007). By 1910, the number of male-breadwinner families exceeded the number of corporate families, and the percentage continued to grow until World War II.

Detailed information on the wages of the entire population is available beginning in 1940, and the trends for young men and women appear in Fig. 13. The top panel of Fig. 13 shows the median wages in 2014 dollars of full-time employees aged 25–29; the lower panel is the same, but includes all men and women aged 25–29, not just full-time workers.

The three decades after World War II were a golden age of wage labor for young men. After a brief postwar recession, growth accelerated as the USA came to dominate the world economy. The availability of labor was sharply constrained; immigration had been restricted since 1924, and fertility levels during the depression were the lowest that had ever been recorded, so the new cohorts entering the labor force were small. The demand for entry-level workers drove starting wages up. As shown in Fig. 13, median income for full-time employed men more than doubled in the postwar era, to a peak of $53,000.

The postwar boom in demand for wage labor accelerated the shift away from corporate families, but the percentage of male-breadwinner families began to decline rapidly as the dual-earner marriages grew explosively. Women made considerably less than men, and at first their wages rose more slowly, so the gender gap in wages expanded from 1940 until the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, median full-time wages for women aged 25–29 rose dramatically, from $13,600 in 1940 to $36,500 in 1973 as the percentage of women working full time increased from 25 to 40%. When we look at all men and women—shown in the lower panel—women do not register until 1968, since that was the first year that more than half of 25–29-year-old women were in the wage-labor force.

Before the 1920s, women generally left wage-labor employment when they married, and marriage bars restricting women's employment remained widespread until the 1950s (Goldin, 1990, 1991). Unprecedented demand for wage workers created pressure to overcome institutional barriers to change (Costa, 2000; Goldin, 1990; Oppenheimer, 1970). As the economy heated up and the marriage boom reduced the supply of single women, the marriage bars disappeared.

Full-time employees
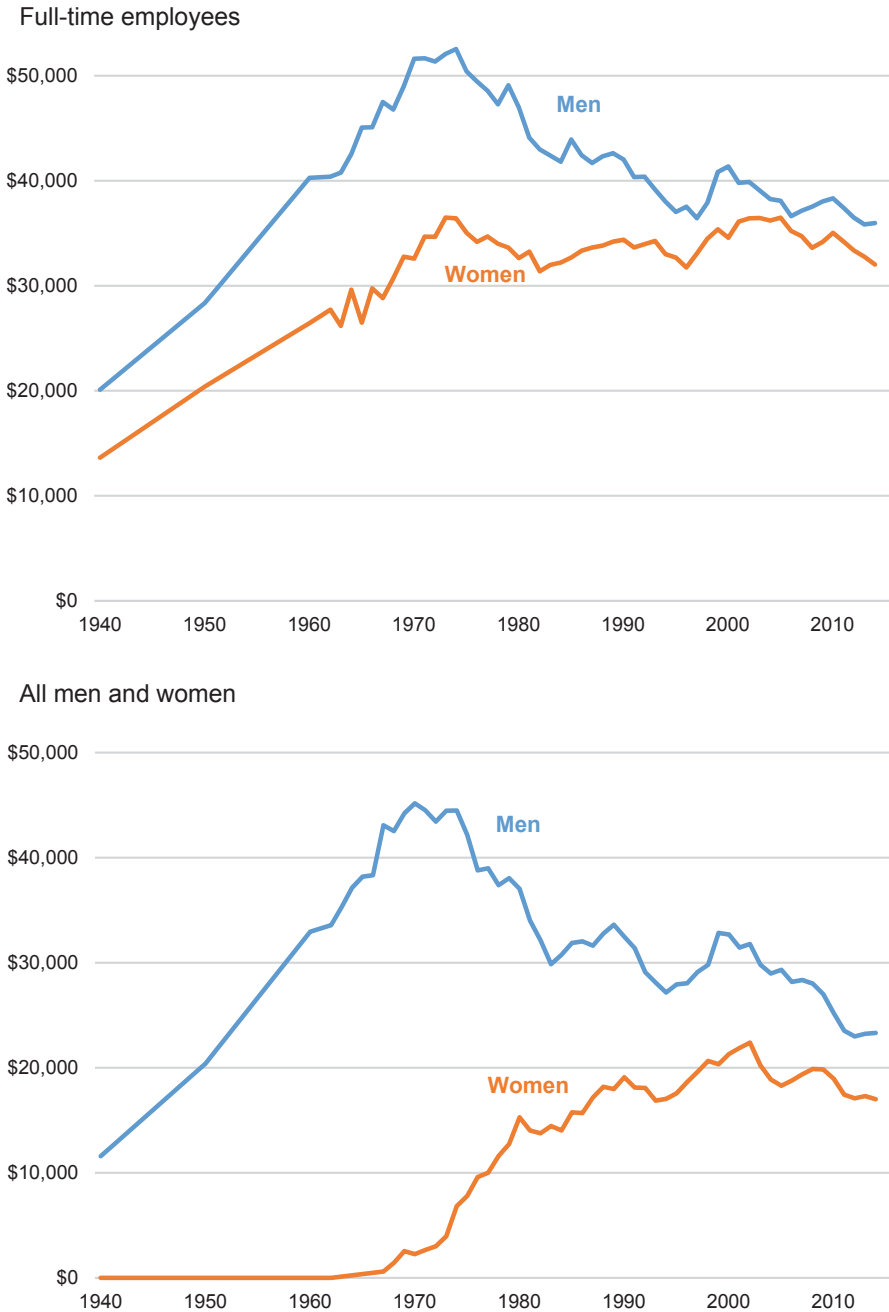
All men and women

Fig. 13 Median wages of men and women age 25–29, 1940–2013, in 2013 dollars. (Source Ruggles et al., 2010; King et al., 2010. All graphs based on income data use the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) decennial data for the period 1940 through 1960 and IPUMS Current Population Survey (CPS) data for the period since 1962, deflated with CPI-U. The CPS data are adjusted to account for the exclusion of group quarters residents who are not enumerated in the CPS.

Dissatisfaction of women with the male-breadwinner system helped to fuel the supply of married women's employment. The desperate boredom of housewives Freidan described was compounded by technological and demographic change. The increasing use of laborsaving household devices—especially washing machines—together with parity-specific fertility limitation, meant that women in male-breadwinner families had more available time in the second half of the twentieth century than in the first half. As married women flooded into the paid workforce, the stigma that had surrounded married women's participation in wage labor quickly disappeared.

After the mid-1970s, the golden age of youth opportunity collapsed. The last four decades have been disastrous for young men. The median wages of all men aged 25–29 fell almost in half, from $45,000 in 1974 to just $24,000 in 2013. Part of the reason is that fewer young men were working full time than in the 1960s and 1970s. By 2013, a third of men aged 25–29 worked less than 30 h, more than double the level of the late 1960s.

Women fared slightly better. The percentage of women aged 25–29 earning at least $25,000 rose until 2000. This was mainly because the percent of these women working at least 30 h went from 40 % in 1974 to a peak of 59 % in 2000. Full-time women's wages declined in the late 1970s but recovered some ground in the 1990s, and are now just a few percent lower than in 1974.

As Easterlin (1966, 1978, 1987) anticipated, the decline in wages for young men and stagnation for young women was partly a consequence of demography. The massive baby boom generation entered the workforce between the late 1960s and 1980s, and this ended the postwar era of tight labor. The mass entry of married women into the workforce extended the era of growing competition for entry-level jobs. The percentage of women competing in the wage-labor workforce—especially married women—continued to rise until 2000. The rise of married women's employment was at least in part a response to declining male wages; for many families, the dual-earner marriage was essential to maintain income.

Easterlin's ideas about wage competition, however, cannot help explain the continued stagnation of wages after 2000. The cohorts entering the workforce after 2000 were comparatively small, and the percentage of women competing for jobs actually began to decline. Structural changes, however, have helped keep wages low (Massey, 1996; Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2012). Increasing inequality meant that the productivity gains flow to capital rather than to workers. The rapid decline of wages was enabled by the eroding power of labor unions, declining value of the minimum wage, the computerization of production, and the shift of manufacturing and clerical jobs to developing countries. The growth of inequality over the past several decades hit young people the hardest, since they are competing for the jobs at the bottom of the economic ladder.

When male earnings peaked in the mid-1970s, there were still more male-breadwinner families than dual-earner families. The sharp decline of men's earnings and the comparative stability of women's earnings created powerful new incentives for wives to enter the workforce. By 2000, 70 % of the marriages were either dual-earner or had female breadwinners, and just 23 % had solely male breadwinners.

Marriage and Male Economic Opportunities

Malthus asserted that "it is clearly the duty of each individual not to marry until he has the prospect of supporting his children" (1826, p. 269). Marriage was delayed in the eighteenth-century Northwestern Europe because couples had to either inherit a farm or build up sufficient resources to establish an independent household (Berkner, 1972; Hajnal, 1965, 1982). There is a consensus among demographers that in Western society, entry into marriage has required meeting a socially determined minimum threshold of resources (e.g., Banks, 1954; Easterlin, 1987; Hacker, 2008; Oppenheimer, 1994; Watkins, 1984).

Many studies have demonstrated that the strong connection between poor male economic circumstances and late marriage has continued (Cready, Fossett, & Kiecolt, 1997; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005; James, 1998; Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Lloyd & South, 1996; Testa & Krogh, 1995; Wilson & Neckerman, 1987). Oppenheimer (1988) showed historical fluctuations in the US marriage age have been closely associated with fluctuations in male economic opportunity. She further argued that by the 1990s, rising inequality and the growing difficulty of the career entry process for young men had led to delayed marriage (Oppenheimer, 1994; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997).

The relationship between male occupation type and the percentage marrying by age 25–29 for the period 1850 through 2010 is shown in Fig. 14. In most periods, and especially in the nineteenth century, farmers were more likely to have married than were any other occupational group. That is not because farmers married early;
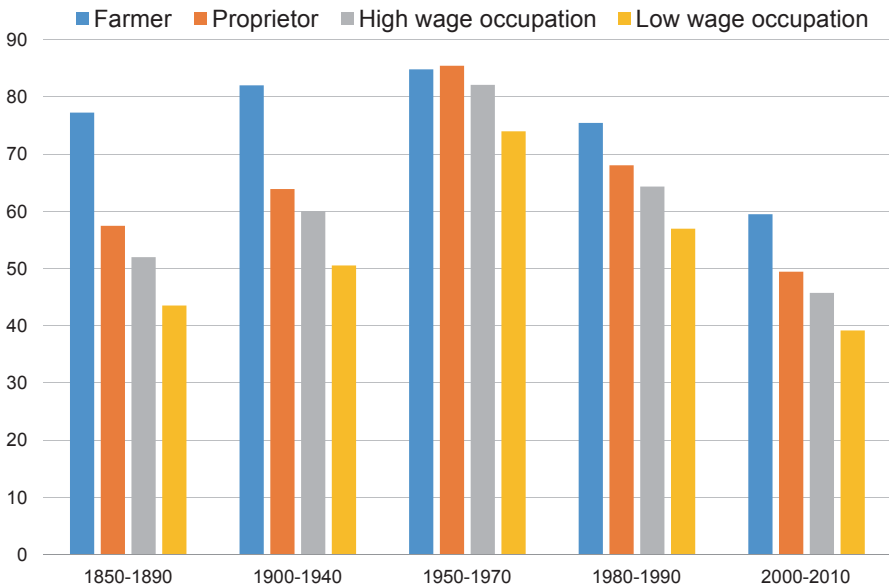
Fig. 14 Percent ever married by occupation type: US men aged 25–29, 1850–2010. (Source: Ruggles et al., 2010)
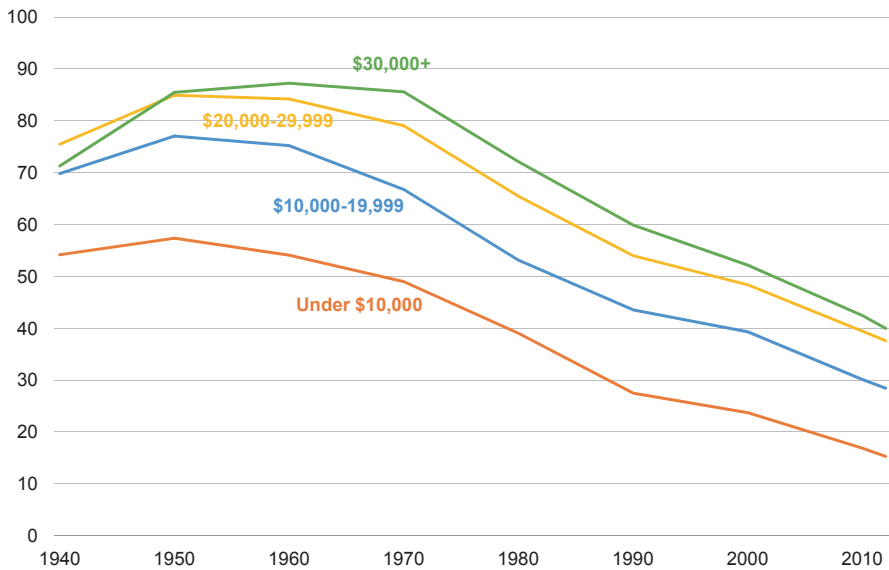
Fig. 15 Percent married with spouse present by income group: US men aged 25–29, 1940–2012. (Source: Ruggles et al., 2010)

on the contrary, future farmers typically delayed marriage while they waited to inherit a farm or build up sufficient resources to homestead or buy a farm. Once a farm was acquired, having a wife was essential: farms could not operate without female labor. Thus, becoming a farmer enabled one to marry but also required one to marry. The second highest percentage married in most periods was among self-employed proprietors; butchers, bakers, and candlestick-makers also needed wives to operate their businesses. Like the farmers, such proprietors often needed to wait until they could inherit or build up the capital needed to establish a business.

As jobs paying good wages began to open up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, men could increasingly afford to marry at an earlier age. In all periods, young men with higher-income occupations (those paying at least $2500 in 1950) were more likely to have married than were those with low-income occupations (including the jobless). Unlike farming or other self-employment, wage labor did not require that marriage be delayed for inheritance or capital accumulation. The average age of skilled workers in 1870 was 28, compared with an average age of 42 among farmers. When young men were in demand, they could achieve comparatively high wages early in life. We can safely infer that the growth of good wage-labor jobs in the first half of the twentieth century was the major reason for the gradual decline of marriage age from 1890 to 1930.

The marriage boom after World War II was fueled by the surge in wages for young men. Even unskilled workers could command wages sufficient to support a family. The differential levels of marriage between occupational groups largely disappeared during the marriage boom years from 1950 to 1970 as shown in Fig. 14. Even those with the worst class of occupations earned enough for most to marry. Figure 15 shows the relationship between wages and marriage for 25–29-year-old

men since 1940. There is a clear relationship between young men's earnings and marriage. Since 1990, men making $25,000 or more were married more than twice as often as those with incomes under $10,000.

Easterlin (1966) argued that the salient threshold in marriage decisions is not the absolute level of income but relative income, defined as the income of young men relative to expectations they formed in their parental home during their teenage years. Easterlin used several measures of relative income over the course of his career (Macunovich, 1998). In his best-known analyses, he calculated relative income as the average income of families with heads aged 14–24 divided by the average income of families aged 35–44, 5 years previously (Easterlin, 1966). This measure had the advantage that it could be calculated from published statistics, but it had several disadvantages. Except for the very peak of the marriage boom, few men became household heads at age 14–24, introducing selection bias that makes the measure unrepresentative of the population. The focus on family heads means that the unmarried are largely eliminated; this is a problem because the people who are already married are unrepresentative of persons eligible to marry. Moreover, focusing on such a young age-group means that many people with high future expected earnings are still in school, and therefore do not contribute to earnings. Easterlin's measure focuses on family income, not individual earnings, which is the theoretically salient issue in male marriageability. Finally, the measure uses means rather than medians, so because of skewed income distributions it is disproportionately affected by the wealthy.

A relative income measure that remains faithful to Easterlin's logic but takes advantage of newer data sources to avoid these measurement issues can be seen in Fig. 16. This measure is the median wages of men aged 25–29 as a percentage of median wages of men aged 45–49, 10 years earlier (that is, when the younger men were teenagers). The measure peaks in 1944, when men aged 25–29 were making almost twice as much as their fathers had made a decade earlier. After 1948, this relative income measure fell precipitously, accelerating after 1970 and reaching a plateau in the early 1980s. For the past three decades, men aged 25–29 typically earned only 60% of what their fathers had made a decade earlier, and since 2010 only half as much.

An alternative measure appears in Fig. 17, which compares the wages of 25–29-year-olds to the wage rates of their fathers 25 years earlier, when the fathers were about 25–29. Parents might use such a comparison to evaluate the marriageability of potential sons-in-law. By this indicator, relative income peaked in 1958, when young men made almost four times as much as their fathers had a quarter century before. Again, relative income collapsed in the 1960s and 1970s, and since the mid-1980s young men have been making less than their fathers had at the same age.

Relative income does not necessarily have to be judged by comparison with parents. It can also be assessed by comparing current income to an ideal based on the affluent. Figure 18 compares the relative income of young men to the income of the top 1%. This measure peaked in 1970, when 25–29-year old men were making almost 13% as much as the average income of the top 1%; by 2012, it was down to 2.7%.
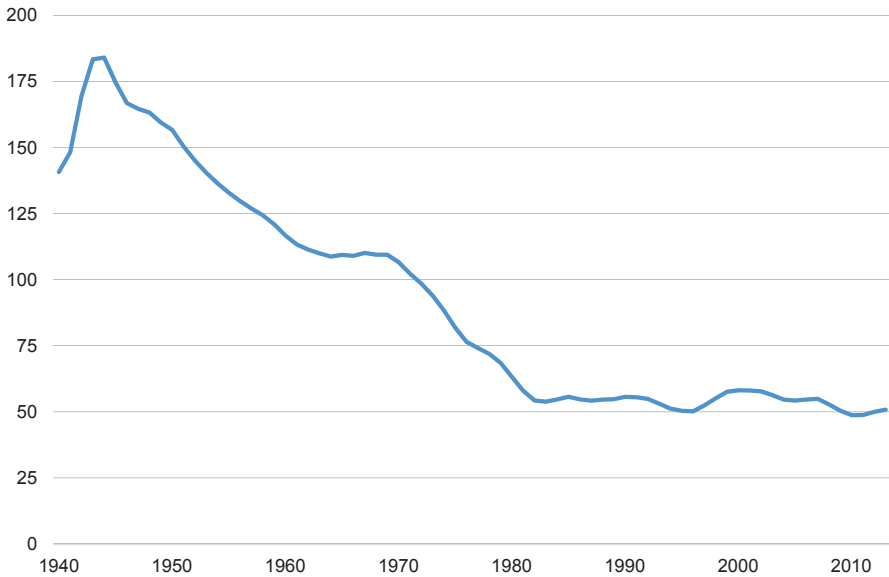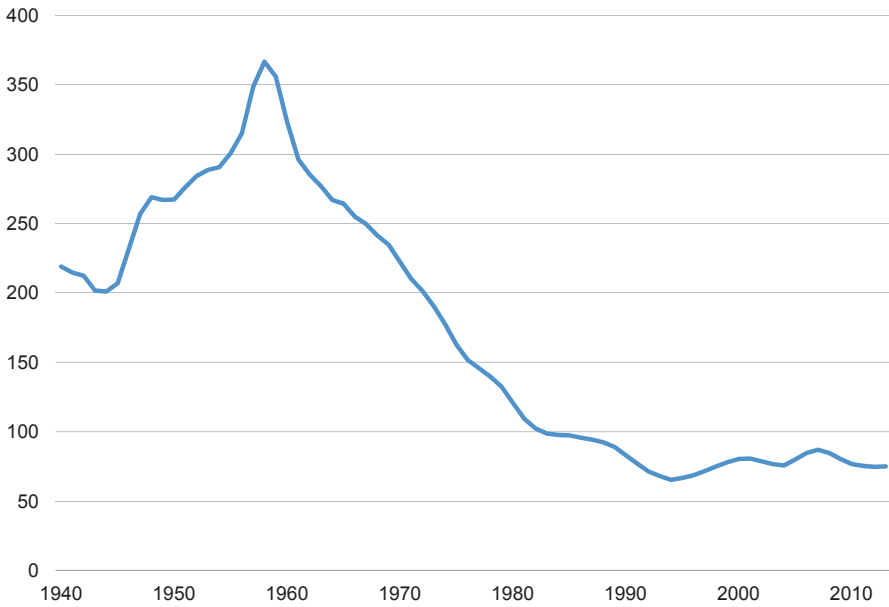
Fig. 16 Median income as a percentage of paternal wage income in teenage years: US men aged 25–29. (Source: King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010; 3-year moving average. Nonwage income assumed to be a constant proportion of total income between 1940 and 1950. Pre-1940 income for the older generation was estimated by assuming that trends for that age-group paralleled trends in an index of money wages (David & Solar, 1977) adjusted for unemployment (Weir, 1992). Accordingly, estimates for the first decade shown should be viewed as approximate)

The spectacular decline in the position of young men is the principal driver of the decline of marriage since the 1960s (Oppenheimer 1994, 1997, 2000; Oppenheimer & Lew, 1995). Wilson and Neckerman (1987) defined men as eligible to marry if they were employed and not incarcerated (see also Darity & Myers, 1995). Even by this minimal standard, the percentage of eligible young men has declined almost 20% over the past four decades. If eligibility includes making enough money to support a family of four at the poverty line—about $25,000 in 2014 dollars—then the percentage of eligible men has declined from 78% of the 25–29-year-olds in 1970 to 47% in 2012. Because of the rise of the dual-earner family, it is no longer expected that men's wages will entirely support a family. That does not, however, mean that the rise of female wage-labor participation has had a countervailing influence on the decline of marriage.

Marriage and Women's Economic Opportunities

The late twentieth century rise of women's wage-labor participation was a profound and unprecedented social transformation. The trend is summarized in Fig. 19. Once again I focus on women aged 25–29, when they were still of prime marriage age and most had finished school. Women who had not married by age 25–29 often worked

Fig. 17 Median wage income as a percentage of median wage income in the previous generation (25 years previously): US men aged 25–29. (Source: King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010; on the estimation of pre-1950 income, see Fig. 16)
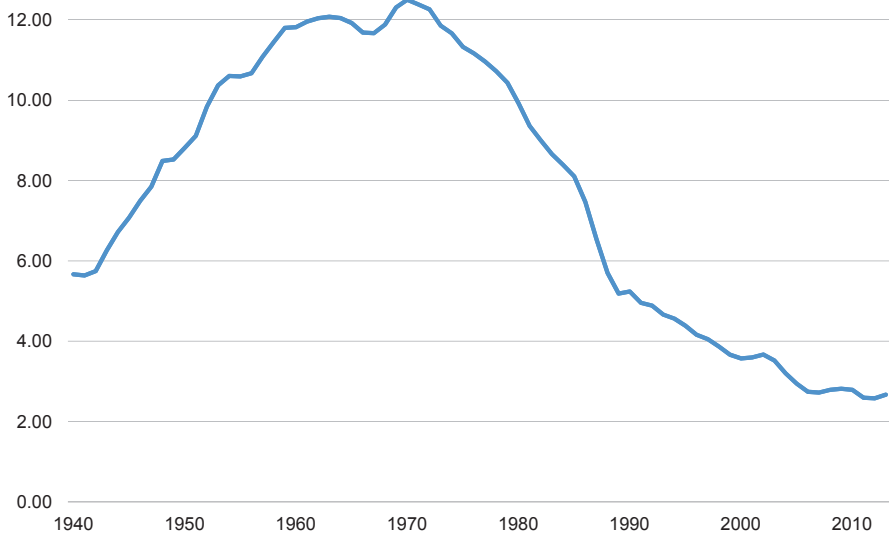
Fig. 18 Median wage income as a percentage of the income of the top 1%: US men aged 25–29. (Source: Alvaredo, Atkinson, Saez, & Piketty, 2012; King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010)
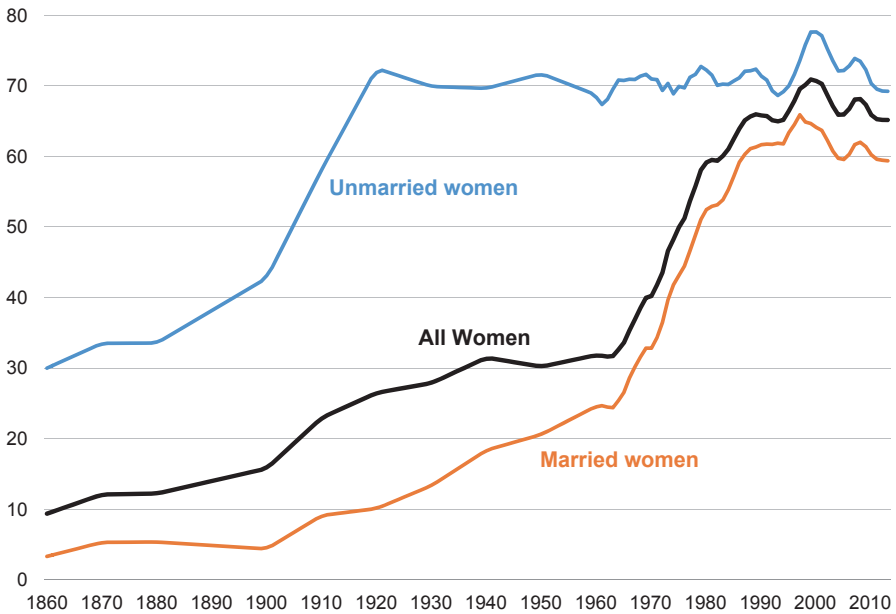
Fig. 19 Percentage of women aged 25–29 employed in wage or salary work: USA, 1860–2013. (Source: King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010)

for wages even in the nineteenth century, and the percentage rose rapidly after 1900. Wage work for married women was rare in the nineteenth century and rose gradually during the first half of the twentieth century. The initial takeoff in married women's employment occurred in the mid-1950s and was among older women whose children were in school or grown. As shown in Fig. 19, the takeoff for younger married women, most of whom had small children, took place after 1964.

The initial rise in women's employment reflected the rapid expansion of demand in the tight labor market of the postwar years (Costa, 2000; Goldin, 1990; Oppenheimer, 1970). The early rise of married women's employment was also a response to dissatisfaction with the male-breadwinner family: For many middle class women in particular, working made their marriages more tolerable. After the mid-1970s, the decline in male wages became a major impetus for married women's employment. Dual incomes were increasingly needed just to maintain family income. In addition, rising marital instability increased the incentives for many women to maintain employment as a safety net (Genadek, Stock, & Stoddard, 2007; Ono & Raymo, 2006; Özcan & Breen, 2012; Schoen, Rogers, & Amato, 2006).

As the participation of women in the wage-labor force increased, the wage difference between men and women shrank. Full-time women's wages at age 25–29 as a percentage of men's wages are shown in Fig. 20. The growth of women's pay lagged well behind that of men in the 1950s and the early 1960s; the ratio between them reached a low point in 1966. From then on, the wage disparity shrank. At least after 1974, most of this reduction occurred because of declining wages for men rather than rising wages for women. It also reflected the growing educational attainment and work experience of women, as well as a reduction in overt discrimination.
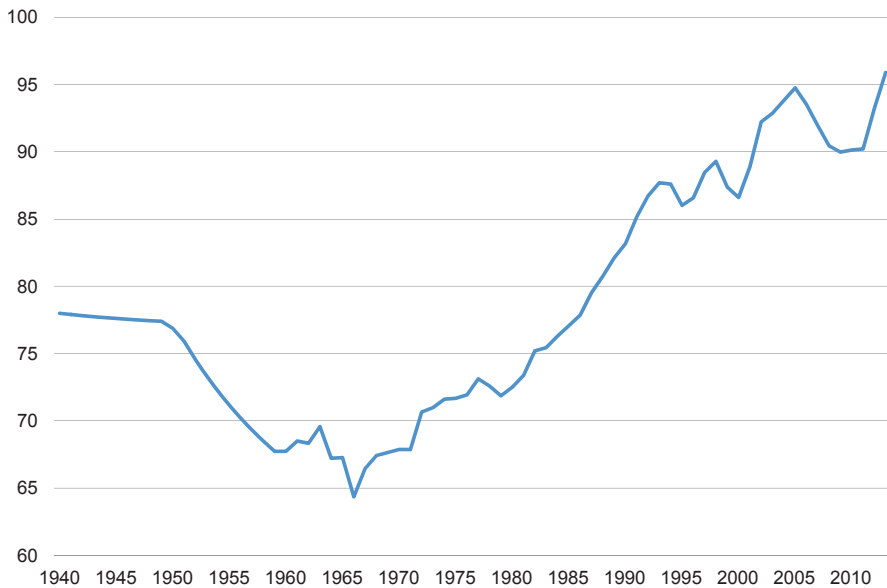
Fig. 20 Women's median wages as a percentage of men's median wages: US full-time wage earners aged 25–29, 1940–2013. (Source: King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010)

According to Becker's (1981) theory of marriage, the returns to marriage are reduced when female wages rise and when married women work outside the home; the result is reduced overall utility for both husbands and wives. From the outset, however, the predictive power of the specialization and trading model fared poorly. Shortly after Becker first proclaimed that the male-breadwinner family provides optimal utility for all involved, the great majority of people abandoned that form of marriage. As Ferber (2003) dryly expressed it, "To the extent that the purpose of theory is to assist our understanding and interpreting observed events, Becker's theory, whatever its merits in other respects, was rather untimely."

A few pages after concluding that male-breadwinner families maximize the returns to marriage, Becker advanced the argument that multiple-wife marriages maximize utility for women, because they increase the demand for women (Becker, 1974). Becker's endorsement of polygyny highlights a fundamental flaw of the specialization and trading model: it does not recognize power relationships within marriage, and assumes that an altruistic family head will make decisions that represent the best interests of the family as a whole (Folbre, 1986; Sawhill, 1977). From today's perspective, it seems extraordinary that a theory with such blatantly sexist assumptions and implications was ever taken seriously.

One of the problems with Becker's theory is that many women did not actually find their subordinate role in the male-breadwinner family to be entirely optimal. Men may have found it pleasant to have an unpaid domestic whose chief role was to meet their needs, but we have no reason to believe that women found it equally satisfying to work as unpaid servants. Demographers who see a close connection

between female wage labor and postponed marriage have usually favored an alternative theoretical mechanism that avoids Becker's problematic idea that role specialization is intrinsically valuable for both men and women. I have termed this the "Economic Opportunity" hypothesis to distinguish it from Becker's "Role Specialization" hypothesis (Ruggles, 1997b; Schoen et al., 2002). Rather than reducing the utility of marriage for women, the expanded availability of jobs may simply have provided alternatives to marriage (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986, 1991; Ross, Sawhill, & MacIntosh, 1975). Under this mechanism, the rise of female wage labor could contribute to the declining frequency of marriage even if married women's employment did not reduce the absolute returns to marriage.

There is an empirical support for the hypothesis that expanding economic opportunities for women contributed to the initial increase in marriage age. Studies from the 1970s to the 1990s showed a strong inverse association between local levels of employment and earnings for women and the percentage of women marrying (Cready, Fossett, & Kiecolt, 1997; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993; James, 1998; Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991; Lloyd & South, 1996; Mare & Winship, 1991; McLanahan & Casper, 1995; Preston & Richards, 1975; White, 1981). Individual-level longitudinal analyses have consistently found that women with career plans have tended to postpone marriage. Using data from 1940 to 1960, Mare and Winship (1991) found that expected employment discouraged marriage among white women but had no effect for blacks. Young women in the late 1960s and the early 1970s who planned to work later in life had substantially lower marriage rates than women who planned to be housewives (Cherlin, 1980). Similarly, Goldscheider and Waite (1986) concluded that "the recent decline in marriage rates should not be seen as resulting primarily from increased barriers to marriage but from decreases in women's relative preference for marriage because of their increased options outside of marriage" (p. 107). Teachman, Polenko, and Leigh (1987), again using data collected in the 1970s, found that women who aspired to have a professional career at age 30 had substantially reduced marriage rates compared with women who had lower aspirations.

Current income and earnings for single women—as opposed to their career aspirations—do not appear to have much effect on marriage. A few studies, mostly using data from the 1980s and later, have found small *positive* associations between the employment or earnings of single women and their likelihood of marriage, suggesting that rising women's employment might actually encourage marriage (Lichter et al., 1992; Oppenheimer & Lew, 1995; Teachman et al., 1987). Sweeney (2002) compared two cohorts, one born from 1950 to 1954 (who mostly married in the 1970s and the early 1980s) and the other born from 1961 to 1964 (who mostly married in the 1980s and early 1990s). She found that women's earnings had a significant positive relationship with marriage in the younger cohort, but not in the older one. This suggests, Sweeney argues, that in recent decades women's wages have become a positive asset that makes women more attractive partners and helps to stabilize unions.

The recent positive association between women's earnings and their likelihood of marriage could also be a by-product of assortative mating. Male earnings are more closely correlated with marriage than are female earnings (Smock & Manning, 1997; Xie et al., 2003). Because of assortative mating, high-income women have access to a more marriageable pool of potential spouses than do low-income women. As Sweeney (2002) suggests, ideally models should control for the earnings of potential husbands, but in practice that is hard to measure. It is entirely possible that within each economic stratum, women may delay marriage if more attractive alternatives are present, even if women in higher strata marry more often than women in lower strata.

Growing economic opportunities had different consequences for different women. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the net effect of growing career opportunities for women was probably to reduce entry into marriage. Before the mid-twentieth century, many women accepted subordinate roles in male-breadwinner and corporate families because the alternatives to marriage were terrible: There were few jobs open to women that paid sufficiently to support independent living. The new wage opportunities in the mid-twentieth century gave women an alternative to marriage, and reduced the pressure to find a spouse as quickly as possible. Large numbers of women had the potential for at least a brief period in which they were independent of the control of either fathers or husbands. Moreover, among women stuck in bad marriages, work opportunities opened an avenue of escape (Ruggles, 1997a, b). In recent years, the net effect of women's economic opportunity has probably reversed. The great majority of women work for wages. Like affluent men, affluent women are attractive potential partners. The ability of affluent women to pay for childcare and house cleaning services mitigates some of the burdens of traditional marriage, potentially increasing the relative attractiveness of marriage.

Educational attainment is a strong indicator of earning potential. For both women and men, the relationship between educational attainment and marriage has reversed over the past 70 years (Torr, 2011). In 1940 and 1950, the highest level of marriage was among young adults who had not completed high school, and the lowest level of marriage was among those with postgraduate education (See Fig. 21). By 2010, precisely the reverse was true: there was a strong *positive* association between education and marriage.

The comparatively high levels of marriage among educated women since 2010 could be taken as evidence for the increasing attractiveness on the marriage market of women with high earnings potential. The fact that the same trend is evident for men, however, suggests an alternative explanation. In absolute terms, marriage rates for the highly educated—both women and men—have declined dramatically, and now are the lowest since 1940. Among the poorly educated, however, the drop has been far steeper. The driving force is declining opportunity for the uneducated, and especially for uneducated men. Men without a high school diploma could once earn enough to marry, but those jobs have evaporated (Cherlin, 2009, 2014).
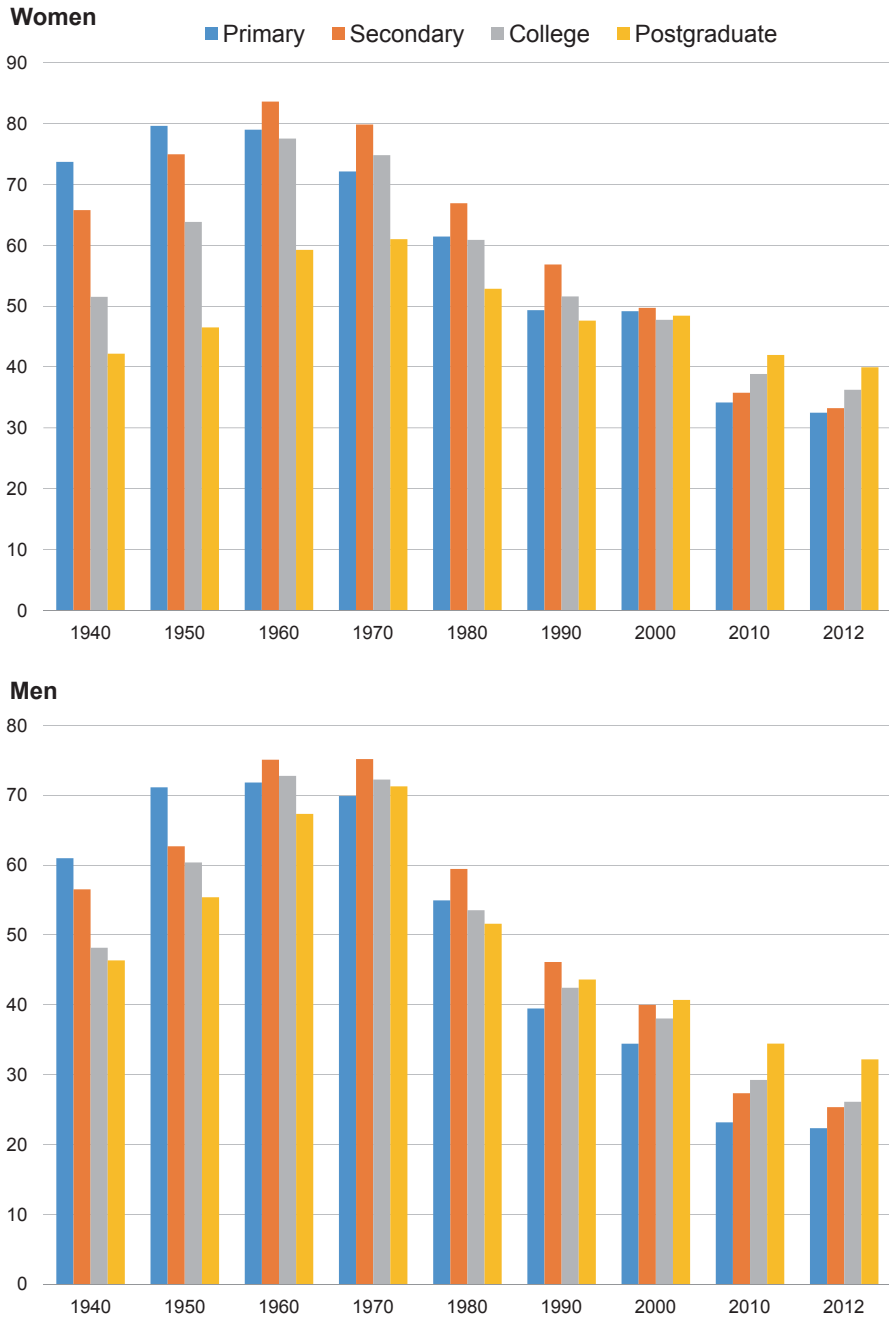
Fig. 21 Percentage of women and men married with spouse present at age 25–29, by educational attainment: USA, 1940–2012. (Source: King et al., 2010; Ruggles et al., 2010)

## Shifting Attitudes and the Second Demographic Transition

There is substantial evidence of a broad shift in attitudes towards marriage in the 1960s and 1970s (Cherlin, 1981, 2004). One major stimulus of attitudinal change was the growing accessibility of effective fertility control. The pill, the intrauterine device (IUD), and perhaps the most importantly legalized abortion dramatically reduced the proportion of marriages resulting from unplanned pregnancies (May, 2010). This in turn contributed to delayed marriage and childbearing, increased educational attainment among women, and increased female labor force participation (Akerlof, Yellin, & Katz, 1996; Bailey, 2006; Goldin & Katz, 2002; Myers, 2012). The availability of contraception and abortion contributed to new attitudes towards premarital sex. In 1969, 75 % of the Gallup respondents said that premarital sex was wrong; by 1982, only 38 % of the General Social Survey respondents agreed (Harding & Jencks, 2003). For many, the increasing availability of sex outside of marriage reduced the incentive to marry.

The *Inner American* study (Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981, 2002) conducted representative surveys in 1957, right at the peak of the marriage boom, and again in 1976, when marriage was in retreat. Women were asked what they thought of other women who did not want to marry, even if they had the chance to do so. In 1957, 66 % of the respondents described such unmarried women negatively (e.g., self-centered, immature, and neurotic) compared with only 44 % in 1976. Among never-married women, the drop was steeper, from 71 to 38 %. Men were similarly asked to judge what they thought of men who did not marry, and the change was in the same direction but smaller, from 67 to 50 %.

Does the change in attitudes mean that marriage declined because of reduced stigma against remaining single, or does it mean that the stigma declined because more women were choosing to remain single? The answer has to be a little of both. The rise of married women's employment, marital dissolution, nonmarital fertility, and cohabitation could never have occurred without massive attitudinal change. Attitudinal change, however, was at least partly driven by changing behavior.

Changes in behavior and changes in social norms are mutually reinforcing (Axinn & Thornton, 2000). Following the arguments of Oppenheimer (1970), Goldin (1990), and Costa (2000), let us assume that married women's wage-labor participation initially began to rise because of exogenous market pressures. Working wives who disapproved of married women's work experienced cognitive dissonance, and their attitudes probably shifted. More broadly, the friends and relatives of working wives probably also increasingly came to see married employment as acceptable behavior. The declining stigma of married work would have encouraged additional married women to seek employment. Thus, shifting behavior led to shifting norms, which in turn further accelerated shifting behavior.

A comparison of attitudes to married women's work with actual work behavior among ever-married women under age 45 appears in Fig. 22. In 1970, the National Fertility Survey asked such women if they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home
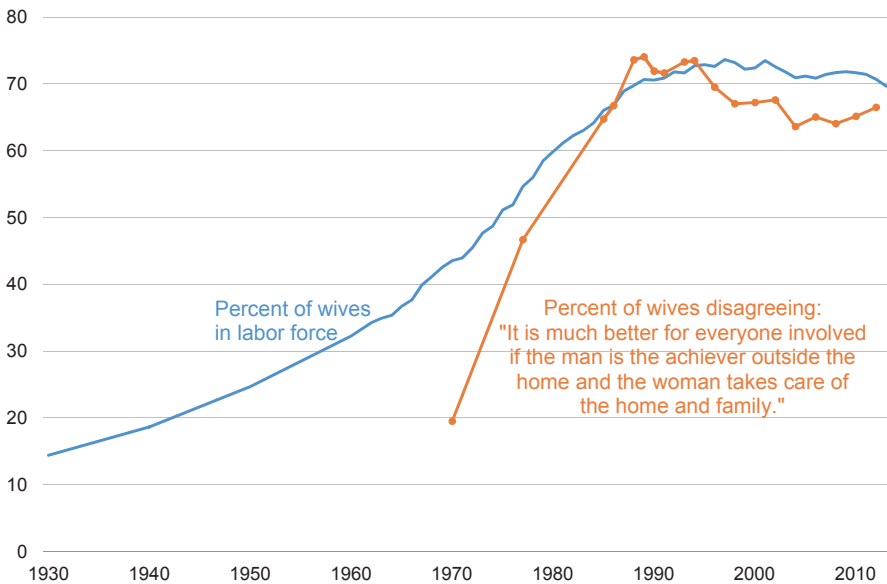
Fig. 22 Comparison of attitudes to married women's work and actual work behavior: Married US women under age 45. (Source: Ruggles et al., 2010; King et al., 2010; Ryder & Westoff, 1975; Smith, Hout, & Marsden, 2013)

and the woman takes care of the home and family" (Westoff & Ryder, 1975). Only 18.5% of the ever-married women disagreed, even though 41% of such women were actually employed. In 1977, the question was repeated in the General Social Survey, and by then 48.1% of the ever-married women disagreed, which was just below the percentage actually working (Smith, Hout, & Marsden, 2013). The next time the question was asked was in 1985, and by then 67.8% disagreed with the idea that married women should stay home, which was significantly higher than the percentage actually working. The initial change in behavior took place at a time when there was still strong disapproval of married women's work among married women, and probably even stronger disapproval among men. Once three-quarters of married women joined the labor force, the shift in attitudes stalled. Indeed, between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of married women who supported the male-breadwinner model of the family actually increased (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman 2011).

Demographers have increasingly recognized an independent role of cultural change in the transformation of the family. The broad intellectual movement sometimes called the "cultural turn" spread from the humanities to the social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s (Nash, 2001), leading some demographers to rethink causal mechanisms. When the Princeton Fertility Project failed to identify a clear spatial association between fertility levels and economic development in the late nineteenth-century Europe, many demographers concluded that cultural explanations had been overlooked in the study of fertility (Coale & Watkins, 1986). Caldwell

(1982) argued that family change was stimulated by new values that place a premium on individual satisfaction, and Preston (1986) made a compelling argument that demographers had neglected the role of cultural change.

The most ambitious cultural argument was articulated by Lesthaeghe (1983, 1995, 2010), who argues that the entire spectrum of recent family change results from the spread of ideas developed by the late eighteenth-century philosophers. According to the theory, the humanistic ideas of the enlightenment "redefined the position of the individual relative to his universe and, in the process, legitimized the principle of individual freedom of choice" (Lesthaeghe, 1983, p. 412). Over the next two centuries, these new individualistic ideas trickled down from the intellectual elite to the masses. The advance of individualism was especially rapid in two periods: first, between 1860 and 1910, and second, between 1945 and 1970. The acceleration of change in these periods, Lesthaeghe argues, was stimulated by economic growth: "Rapid increases of income fuel individual aspirations" and allow "individuals to be more self-reliant and more independent in the pursuit of their goals, which ultimately stimulates self-orientation and greater aversion to long-term commitments" (1983, p. 430).

The result in the first period of rapid change was the first demographic transition, leading to fertility decline across Europe and North America. In the second period, the result was the second demographic transition (SDT), leading not only to below-replacement fertility in Europe but also to the decline of marriage and the rise of married women's employment, divorce, cohabitation, and unmarried fertility (Lesthaeghe, 2010; van de Kaa, 1987). Just as the first demographic transition spread from Europe around most of the world during the twentieth century, SDT theorists argue that the second transition is now spreading as well (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Esteve, Lesthaeghe, & Lopez-Gay, 2012; Lesthaeghe & Neidert, 2006).

In essence, the SDT theory argues that the family is dissolving because everyone has become more self-interested and autonomous in family decision-making. At one level, the SDT theory may be regarded as purely ideational; once the seed of individualism had been planted by Voltaire, Rousseau, and Adam Smith, it was inevitable that the new ideas would grow and spread as an autonomous force through all spheres of life, crushing traditional communal values. At another level, however, it is essentially a structural argument. Although individualistic values had existed in the West for 200 years, most people were constrained from acting on them by economic circumstances. Economic development after World War II meant that residents of developed countries achieved financial security. With their material needs satisfied, people were free to pursue existential and expressive needs through self-actualization. Thus, at its core the SDT theory relies on a structural stimulus to produce cultural change: Rising affluence made it possible for people to pursue individual self-interest, and thereby led to the rejection of existing familial norms.

SDT theory is consistent with some aspects of the US family change. In particular, it provides a plausible contributing explanation of the rise of married women's employment and marital instability in the 1950s and 1960s and the early decline of marriage rates in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Some middle-class married women started working for individualistic motives, including escape from the "devastating boredom" of the male-breadwinner marriage. Some women, newly able to support

themselves, were able to terminate unsatisfactory marriages and achieve independence. Moreover, the rise of marriage age during the decade after its low point in 1959 at least partly reflects intentional delay of marriage by women who no longer had to rely on the support of husbands or fathers to maintain a basic standard of living. In all these situations, decisions were sometimes motivated by a desire for self-fulfillment and individual autonomy.

The other major changes I have described, however, do not fit the SDT model. If self-actualization were the source of family change, then the change would be concentrated among people who had achieved at least a minimal level of financial security. For the past four decades, however, it has been the people at greatest economic risk—both men and women—who have been the least likely to marry and the most likely to cohabit, divorce, and have children without a co-residing partner. As McLanahan (2004) stressed, young people are facing diverging destinies. Among the college-educated and the affluent, the impact of family change is muted. Marriage is still feasible; marital instability is declining; and cohabitation and unmarried fertility can be managed without hardship. It is among those with deepest economic stress and with the least education that the transitions associated with the SDT theory predominate. It is not plausible that massive numbers of impoverished single mothers are actively choosing a path of self-fulfillment.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of the SDT theory is that it does not recognize the role of shifting power relations within the family. Women lacked individual liberty under the corporate family and the male-breadwinner family not because they were ignorant of individualistic ideas, but because they had no means of escape from domination by men. Enlightenment individualism simply did not extend to women: Rousseau felt that women should be "closed up in their houses," where they "must receive the decisions of fathers and husbands" (Blum, 2010, p. 51).

Discussion

The American family was transformed over the past two centuries by tectonic shifts in the structure of the economy. The transition from corporate families to male-breadwinner families was a consequence of the rise of wage labor in the industrial revolution. The transition from male-breadwinner families to dual-earner families reflects the massive increase in wage labor among married women following the Second World War. The decline of the corporate family led to a profound shift in generational relations, as family patriarchs lost control over their wage-earning sons. The decline in the male-breadwinner family led to an equally profound shift of gender relations, as men lost control over their wage-earning wives and daughters.

In the last half century, continuing structural changes have undermined the dual-earner family. The massive decline of relative earnings among young men, together with the long stagnation in earnings among young women, is the most obvious explanation for the unprecedented decline in marriage since the mid-1970s. The declining prospects of youth not only reduce transitions to marriage but also contribute to high marital instability, single parenthood, and cohabitation (e.g., Carlson,

McLanahan, & England, 2004; Duncan, Huston, & Weisner 2008; Heaton, 2002; McLanahan, 2004, 2009; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Martin, 2006; Orbuch et al., 2002; South, 2001; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006).

Easterlin (1987, p. 165) argued that both the decline of marriage and the rise of married female wage labor "reflect chiefly the struggle of the baby boomers to maintain their economic status relative to their parents." That interpretation is persuasive but incomplete. The initial rise of married women's employment was not a response to declining male wages, since male wages were still going up rapidly when it occurred. Instead, from the 1950s to the 1970s, married women's growing employment reflected labor shortage, and probably also reflected women's widespread dissatisfaction with male-breadwinner marriages. The growing availability of jobs for women in turn contributed to the postponement of marriage and rise of divorce in the 1960s and 1970s.

Gender role conflict further contributed to the decline of marriage (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004; Furstenberg, 1996; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, in press). What shifted the balance of power within marriages was not simply ideology. When second-wave feminism burst onto the scene around 1970, the male-breadwinner family was already disappearing. The timing suggests that the rise of married women's employment undermined the economic basis of male authority and led to the rise of feminist ideology (Chafetz, 1995; Evans, 2003). The gender role expectations of men shifted too, but they continued to lag behind the expectations of women from the 1970s to the1990s (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). With new economic opportunities available, many women chose to forgo marriage to men who continued to treat them as subordinate.

Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård (in press) cite research from time-use studies to argue that male attitudes are catching up: Men are increasing their time spent in childcare and (to a lesser extent) in housework. This leads Goldscheider and her coauthors to project a highly optimistic vision of gender equality within families. This gender revolution, they predict, will lead to increased union formation, increased commitment of partners, increased union stability, and a return to replacement-level fertility in Europe. Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Lappegård focus on Sweden, and perhaps their vision can be realized there under the benevolent protection of the welfare state. In the USA, the vision of new union stability may similarly be achieved among the educated and affluent, but for most young people, the future is not as bright.

The fading of marriage may be benign for the economically secure, but it is not working well for those at the bottom. For people without resources, the fragmentation of families exacerbates insecurity. Economic inequality is the central cause of the decline of marriage, and it is fraying the fabric of society. In the long run, the only way to address the problem is to institute fundamental reforms that turn back the tide of inequality and ensure that young people—both men and women—have opportunities to earn a living wage.

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