



# Shedding 'Light' on Marriage: The Influence of Skin Shade on Marriage for Black Females

Darrick Hamilton  
Milano--The New School for Management and Urban Policy

Arthur H. Goldsmith<sup>†</sup>  
Washington and Lee University

William Darity, Jr.  
Duke University

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## ABSTRACT

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Darrick Hamilton  
Milano--The New School for Management and Urban Policy  
72 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10011  
Office: (212) 229-5400, ext. 1514  
e-mail: hamiltod@newschool.edu

Arthur H. Goldsmith<sup>†</sup>  
Department of Economics  
Washington and Lee University  
Lexington, VA 24450  
Office: (540) 463-8970  
e-mail: GoldsmithA@wlu.edu

William Darity, Jr.  
Sanford School of Public Policy and Department of Economics  
Duke University  
Durham, NC 27514  
e-mail: William.Darity@Duke.edu

The inter-racial marriage gap that opened in the past 50 years is generally attributed to a decline in the availability of young black marriageable men. We contend that the associated shortage of desirable men in the marriage market provides those black men who are sought after with the opportunity to attain a high status spouse, which has placed a premium on having light skin shade. We provide evidence, based on data drawn from the *Multi City Study of Urban Inequality*, consistent with this hypothesis for young black women. Our theoretical analysis of the marriage market reveals that policies to increase the desire to marry on the part of young black women will enhance the importance attached to skin shade.

† corresponding author

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## **I. Overview**

Marriage rates rose throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for white and black women. By the 1950’s almost all women married at some point (Cherlin, 2005)--and virtually all children were born into two parent families.<sup>1</sup> Marriage rates declined steadily over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially for black women, and a substantial racial marriage gap opened (Saluter, 1994; Loughran, 2002; Seefeldt and Smock, 2003). Birth rates declined for married and unmarried women across all races over this period as well. However, the birth rate fell faster for married than unmarried women, so a larger share of women who gave birth were unmarried.<sup>2</sup>

This development has been particularly pronounced among black women. In 2003, 69 percent of black children were born to an unwed mother (U.S. National 2003). Several studies report that children fare better, in terms of school achievement, behavior and emotional problems, when they live with both biological parents (Amato, 2005; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; and Seltzer, 1994). This finding may largely be due to the greater resources, material and nonmaterial, that a two parent household may provide.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, academic researchers have documented a strong association between single-parent homes and an increased likelihood of poverty and welfare participation, which harms children’s prospects for economic and social well-being (Geronimus and Korenman 1992; and Hoffman, Foster, and Furstenberg 1993 provide reviews of this literature).<sup>4</sup> Thus, we are largely concerned with examining marriage outcomes because of the demonstrated effect that it has had on resource availability for children. Moreover, there is great interest among scholars and policy makers about why marriage rates for black women are so low.

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<sup>1</sup> Cherlin (2005) reports that in the mid 1950’s 95 percent of white women and 88 percent of black women married during their lifetime.

<sup>2</sup> The share of children in the U.S. born to unwed mothers was only four percent in 1950. However, the portion of women who gave birth and were unmarried rose to 11 percent in 1970, 28 percent in 1990, and 35 percent by 2003. These figures are based on data from the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (U.S. 2003a, 2003b).

<sup>3</sup> Public discourse has often advocated marriage as a means of reducing black-white disparities including poverty. However, Hirschl, Altobelli, and Rank (2003) offer evidence of a racial differential in the returns to income from marriage. They find a significantly greater return to marriage for white relative to black families.

Alternatively, investments in good schooling for children and better economic opportunities for single parent mother’s may also achieve the desired outcomes for children that are promoted by marriage proponents.

<sup>4</sup> In the early part of the 2000s, one-third of female-headed households were recorded as below the poverty line; the comparable poverty rate for married couple households was around five percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003a and 2003b).

The paucity of ‘marriageable’ black males has been offered by scholars as an explanation for the high prevalence of single mother black households and the large interracial marriage gap. Wilson and Neckerman (1986), Ellwood and Crane (1990), Darity and Myers (1995), and Mason (2006), among others, claim that a reduction in the availability of marriageable black men, due to lower employment opportunities, and high rates of incarceration, drug use, and mortality, has occurred in the past few decades. This is relevant because inter-racial marriage for black women is rare. For instance, Farley (1996) finds that 97 percent of young married black women have a spouse who is black.<sup>5</sup> Staples (1989) offers evidence that the supply of marriageable black men is limited. He points out that, although Black men constitute only six percent of the U.S. population, they account for 50 percent of prisoners; that over a third of black men in urban setting are drug or alcohol abusers, that more than half of black men of working age are jobless, and, of those who are working, a third have incomes below the poverty line. In addition, Mason (2006) provides striking evidence of demographic racial disparities in available mates for young women between the ages of 23 and 27. Using pooled data from 1991-1999 drawn from the Current Population Survey, he calculates sex ratios for the civilian unmarried population indicating that there are 71 black males to 100 black females, while there are 119 white males to 100 white females. Moreover, if we consider full-time employment as a criterion for males to be “marriageable”, then the sex ratio disparity becomes even larger. The sex ratio of unmarried full-time employed black males to unmarried black females was 46 to 100 while the comparable ratio for whites was 90 to 100.

One aspect of this paper involves an investigation of the implications of the shortage of marriageable black males on marriage markets for young black females. Presumably, as a result of their scarcity, the black males that are deemed “marriageable” will have some leverage in their ability to choose highly desired females. Thus, we expect the shortage of marriageable males to result in fewer marriages for black females as well as more leverage for unmarried black males relative to unmarried black females.

There is ample evidence that greater social status is ascribed to black women with lighter skin shade in the U.S. (see for example, Hunter, 2005; Maddox and Gray, 2002; Keith and

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<sup>5</sup> Qian (1997) finds that only around three percent of young black women, aged 20-29, marry outside of their race. Table 2 in our analysis provides updated estimates of young black female intermarriage rates based on the 2006 American Community Survey.

Herring, 1991; and Hughes and Hertel, 1990).<sup>6</sup> Thus, scarcity might embolden the remaining males in the market to act on their preference for a high status (or light skinned) spouse leading to an increase in the minimum level of lightness of skin shade for females in order for a marriage offer to be extended.

There is some evidenced from sociologists (Udry, Bauman, and Chase, 1971; Freeman et al., 1966), and historians (Bodenhorn, 2005; Bogger, 1997; Johnson, 1996; Gatewood, 1988; and Dollard, 1957) that marriage is less common among black women who are darker skinned. A lack of information on a host of variables researchers believe will theoretically influence marriage, such as family characteristics when the respondent was a youth, is a shortcoming of these studies (Michael and Tuma, 1985). Prior studies exploring the link between skin shade and marriage also typically include income and wealth descriptors as determinants of marriage. However, causality between marriage and these factors runs in both directions. Thus, previous studies examining the impact of skin shade on marriage may suffer from omitted variable and endogeneity bias.

Empirically, this paper investigates if the socialization process leading to a preference for light skin shade, *colorism* – a long standing feature of the black community in the U.S. – leads to a greater likelihood of marriage for lighter complexioned black women, especially when there is a shortage of marriageable black males.<sup>7</sup>

Also this paper compares the spousal and household characteristics of married black females to explore if *colorism* is related to lighter skin brides having spouses with “better” characteristics. Comparisons are also made of the spousal and household characteristics between black and white women who are married to black males in order to explore if inter-racial marriages is associated with an even further shortage of “marriageable” males.

In addition, this paper examines the implications of public policies aimed at promoting marriage and reducing single parent households for black females. We show theoretically that,

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<sup>6</sup> Studies of blacks in the U.S. link lighter complexion to attractiveness (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, and Ward, 1986; Hill, 2002; Hall, 1998; Russell et al., 1992; Bond and Cash, 1992; and Loury, 2006), and preferential treatment in the labor market (Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity 2006, 2007; Keith and Herring 1991).

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the model developed could be applicable to other cursory attributes similar to skin shade. For instance, beauty, body type and other characteristics associated with black females will become more important in the marriage markets as a result of the male leverage created by the shortage of marriageable males. Oftentimes it is difficult to operationalize these cursory characteristics using survey data. However, the presence of the skin shade attribute in the *MCSUI* data set allows us to investigate skin shade as a sorting mechanism for black female marriages.

in periods characterized by shortages of black males, policies aimed at increasing marriage may have the unintended social consequence of exacerbating *colorism* (i.e. creating a greater emphasis on substantive but superficial characteristics like a woman's skin shade). Moreover, given the preponderance of evidence that marriage is assortative (Blackwell and Lichter, 2000; and Qian and Preston, 1993), we empirically examine whether *colorism* is more common for black women in demographic groups where black men are more scarce.

## II. Origins of *Colorism*

*Colorism* is the form of discrimination in which human beings are accorded different social and economic treatment based on skin color. In her entry on *colorism* for the second edition of the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Meghan Burke (2008, p.17) observes, "Colorism is the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of one's skin. The practices of colorism tend to favor lighter skin over darker skin, although in rare cases the opposite practice also occurs." She further reports (Burke 2008 p.18) that out of 312 cultures across the globe, at least 51 treat skin shade as a salient dimension of beauty standards. Moreover, in all but four of these 51 cases, lighter skin is preferred over darker.

The cultures where lighter skin complexion is preferred to dark are as diverse as the USA, Jamaica, and India. For example, matrimonial advertisements in India are notorious for specifying a desire for the bride to be "wheatish" or "fair" in complexion (Prashad, 2000, p.97); thus, the skin shade preference may also have a greater gender specificity in some contexts.

The genesis of light over dark or the preference for whiteness can be explained readily in societies across the Americas where the racialization process was achieved via colonialism and the enslavement of African peoples (Williams, 1942). Its persistence can be understood readily there as well. As the critical race theorists have established, in those societies whiteness functions as the equivalent of a property right that provides access to an array of social advantages both tangible and intangible (see for example, Harris 1993; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Seiler 2003). Goldsmith, Hamilton and Darity (2007) have demonstrated that there are significant earnings penalties associated with being a darker skinned male in U.S. labor markets, while Hersch (forthcoming) has shown that recent immigrants that are darker skinned and shorter

suffer a wage penalty in those same labor markets. Thus, colorism functions as a specific type of racism associated with the stigmatization of persons with darker skin and the privileging of those with lighter skin.

But colonialism and slavery do not explain the presence of light skin shade preference everywhere. Watatsuma (1967) has provided evidence of a female beauty norm in 12th century Japan that privileged light skin, long before Japan had exposure to European colonialization. Regardless, there are significant numbers of societies where the more beautiful woman is considered to be the woman with lighter skin. This phenomenon, necessarily, will have manifestations in markets for marriage.

### **III. Search Theory and the Marital Status of Black Women in the U.S.: The Role of Skin Shade**

The convention in economics is to examine family formation using a search-theoretic framework (Becker, 1973 and 1981; Becker, Landes, and Michael, 1977; Keely, 1977; Grossbard-Shechtman, 1993; and Burdett and Coles, 1997) where marriage is an outcome from a process where individuals maximize their utility by searching for suitable partners among a distribution of potential spouses. A fundamental insight of this perspective is that the attributes of suitors and a person's own characteristics influence both the likelihood of receiving a marriage proposal and whether the proposal is acceptable. In this framework a desirable partner is a person who offers social and economic status (Burdett and Coles, 1997). However, the influence of greater status on the likelihood of marriage is ambiguous. Persons with greater status are expected to receive a larger number of marriage proposals, promoting marriage, but they are also expected to establish a higher standard for an acceptable partner--which reduces the likelihood of marriage. We extend this standard model of marriage to account for the influence of complexion to better understand the link between skin shade and marriage for black women in the U.S., and to better understand the implications of policies aimed at promoting marriages.

Suppose the characteristics of a potential husband can be summarized by a single index  $\varepsilon$ , which is revealed to a prospective spouse. Women are assumed to prefer high- $\varepsilon$  males to low- $\varepsilon$  males, and thus search for marriage partners over a known distribution of males,  $F(\varepsilon)$ . Women are presumed to obtain utility each period from being single,  $U^S$ , and marriage offers

arrive with probability of  $q$  per period, given an investment of  $c$  in search. Following Mortensen's (1986) dynamic programming approach, the marriage search problem entails a sequence of single-period decisions over whether to accept a proposal or continue searching in the next period. Any marital offer valued above  $\varepsilon_r$  is accepted while offers below  $\varepsilon_r$  are rejected in favor of further search. In the literature  $\varepsilon_r$  is referred to as the *reservation* ( $r$ ) level of the characteristic index  $\varepsilon$  and is typically limited to a potential spouse's wage. Given this framework, the probability of accepting a marriage proposal,  $p_m$ , or exiting single-status for a female is

$$(1) \quad p_m = q[1 - F(\varepsilon_r)], \text{ where } 0 \leq F(\varepsilon_r) \leq 1$$

The likelihood that a woman will receive a marriage offer depends on her personal characteristics including age, race, religion, health, and education, as well as values, attitudes and personal physical attributes. The vector  $X^f$  accounts for these factors. We assert that skin shade,  $s$ , is an additional determinant of  $q$ , the probability of receiving a marriage proposal. Moreover, as  $s$  increases (i.e. the skin shade of a woman lightens)  $q$  also increases.

In addition,  $X^f$  and  $s$  are also determinants of a women's reservation towards marriage,  $\varepsilon_r$ . Women with lighter skin shade, and more preferred values of  $X$  are expected to enter the marital search process with a higher reservation characteristic index (i.e. hold a higher minimum standard for an acceptable mate). Thus, Equation (1) can be rewritten to explicitly account for skin shade.

$$(1') \quad p_m = q(s, X^f) \left[ 1 - F(\varepsilon_r(s, X^f)) \right]$$

The partial derivative of Equation (1') with respect to skin shade reveals how lighter skin shade influences the likelihood of accepting a marriage offer,

$$(2) \quad \frac{\partial p_m}{\partial s} = [1 - F(\varepsilon_r)] * \frac{\partial q}{\partial s} + q * \frac{\partial [1 - F(\varepsilon_r)]}{\partial s}$$

Inspection of Equation (2) reveals that, on the one hand, as skin shade lightens the probability of receiving a marriage offer rises,  $\frac{\partial q}{\partial s} > 0$ , which for a given  $\varepsilon_r$  increases  $p_m$ . But, on the other hand, lighter skin shade also raises the reservation level of characteristics

established by the woman,  $\frac{\partial \varepsilon_r}{\partial s} > 0$ , which in turn reduces the likelihood of accepting a marriage proposal,  $\frac{\partial [1 - F(\varepsilon_r)]}{\partial \varepsilon_r} < 0$ . These are potentially offsetting influences on the probability of marriage, so the theoretical effect of lighter skin shade on the likelihood of marriage is ambiguous. If the increase in the frequency of offers associated with lighter skin shade dominates the corresponding rise in  $\varepsilon_r$ , then black women with lighter skin shade are expected to be more likely to marry.

Most of our analysis focuses on a sample of young women under the age of 30 years. As people age the incidence of marital offers is expected to fall. Older marriage searchers who recognize this development have an incentive to “settle” by adjusting  $\varepsilon_r$  downward to enhance their likelihood of marriage. Incentives to do so are the thinning supply of potential partners, a diminishing value of being single, and an increasing social pressure to marry. In addition, over time the cumulative frequency of offers increases, thereby increasing the likelihood of a suitable offer.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the influence of skin shade on having ever been married is expected to fall with age. Therefore, if an intra-racial marriage gap due to skin shade exists, it may be confined to younger persons.

#### **IV. Empirical Procedures and Findings**

##### **A. Data**

Data from the *Multi City Study of Urban Inequality (MSCUI)* are used to estimate the influence of skin shade on the likelihood of ever being married for black women. The *Multi City Study of Urban Inequality* is an interview-based survey of 8,916 persons administered in the cities of Los Angeles, Boston, Atlanta, and Detroit beginning in 1992. *MCSUI* respondents varied by race and ethnicity and *MCSUI* interviewers identified and coded the race of survey participants. In conducting the survey, attempts were made to “race match,” by assigning interviewers of a certain race to respondents of that same race.

*MCSUI* interviewers graded respondents on skin shade, using a Likert scale. Prior to conducting interviews, the orientation of interviewers included training to establish consistency

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<sup>8</sup> There is ample evidence that one of the most important determinants of ever being married is age (Loughran, 2002).

in the coding of respondent skin shade. The interviewers used three categories--“dark,” “medium,” and “light”-- to describe the complexion of blacks who participated in the survey.

### **1. Summary Statistics: Marital History and Skin Shade**

We restrict the analysis to females who are at least 16 years of age. In addition, persons were excluded from our sample if they did not report information on the full set of variables used in our empirical model of family formation. Unfortunately, *MCSUI* participants residing in Detroit were not asked the full range of questions. For these individuals we do not have information on several factors expected to influence marriage. Thus, we conduct two analyses; one without observations from Detroit, which is our primary sample, and one with Detroit observations to explore the robustness of our core findings..

Our primary sample contains 1579 observations of black females. In our descriptive statistics we also include information on white females for comparative purposes. There are 1155 observations of white females. In the sample of black females, 13 percent (210) are light skinned, 45 percent (701) are classified as medium skinned, and 42 percent (668) are listed as dark skinned. Table 1 provides marital history summary statistics for the entire sample of black females; black females disaggregated by skin shade, and white females. Equivalent information for young women, those aged between 16-29 years of age, are presented in Panel B. There are 329 young black women in our sample, 137 are dark skinned (42 percent), 139 medium skinned (42 percent), and 53 light skinned (16 percent).<sup>9</sup>

Panel A of the table reveals that the average white woman is more likely to have been married at some point in her life (84 percent) than the typical black woman (68 percent). Moreover, there is little difference in the percentage of women who had ever married across each of the black skin shade groups. Similarly, white women are more likely than black women to be presently married or presently on their first marriage than black women, but there is little variation in either of these outcomes for black women of different skin shades. In addition, the share of never married women with children under the age of 18 is virtually the same for white women and black women in the different skin shade groups.

However, when we examine only young (16-29 year old) women, Panel B, both the inter and intra-racial disparity in marriage outcomes are much more pronounced. In this young

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<sup>9</sup> There are no substantive differences in these summary statistics when Detroit observations are included. These results are available from the authors upon request.

sample, those more likely to be impacted by the shortage of “marriageable” black males, 55 percent of light skinned black females had been married, but only 30 percent of those with medium skin shade and 23 percent of the dark skinned females had ever been married. The ever married rate for young white women, 50 percent, is slightly less than the rate for young light skin black women, but the difference is not statistically significant. Similarly, light skinned black women are more likely to be presently married or presently on their first marriage than white women or darker skinned black women. Although, the difference is not statistically significant in comparison to white women, the gap is statistically significant in comparison to the two darker skinned black women groups. Twenty percent of light skinned black women have a child under the age of 18 but have never been married whereas 38 and 35 percent of medium and dark skinned black women have such a child and have never been married. Nine percent of young white women have a child and have never been married and this rate is statistically different from the comparable rate for light skinned black women

Lastly, regardless of whether we examine our sample across all age groups or our sample of young women, age at first marriage, conditional on the woman having been married, does not vary much across race or skin shade. The average age ranges from 21 to 23.

The unconditional means we report for young black women suggest a connection between marriage and skin shade--as skin shade lightens the incidence of marriage rises. Later in this paper, we conduct a more rigorous and systematic examination of the link between skin shade and marriage using probit analysis to determine if lighter complexion enhances the likelihood of ever having been married after controlling for other determinants of family formation. However, before doing this, in the next section, we examine the “quality” of marriages as measured by spousal and household characteristics for married black women.

### **B. Spousal and Household Characteristics of Married Black Women<sup>10</sup>**

According to the search theoretic model of marriage described above, light skinned black women (i.e. relatively high status women) are expected to hold a greater “reservation” towards marriage, as exemplified by their higher  $\varepsilon_r$ , than their darker skinned counterparts. In other words, lighter skinned black females should have spouses and households with better characteristics in comparison to lower status darker skinned black females.

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<sup>10</sup> We are particularly grateful to an anonymous referee for strengthening our paper by encouraging us to include this section which examines the relationship between spousal “quality” and skin shade for women.

In order to empirically examine this phenomenon, we turn to census data, the 2006 *American Community Survey (ACS)*. Unfortunately, the limited number of light skinned females, the limited number of *presently married* medium and dark skinned black females, and missing information on spousal characteristics constrains our ability to examine this phenomenon using the *MCSUI* data.<sup>11</sup> Using the 2006 *ACS* census data we are able to overcome some of these sample size issues. However, a shortcoming of the *ACS* data is that it does not provide a direct measure of skin shade in the same manner as the *MCSUI*. Nonetheless, we proceed by using self-reports of race from the *ACS* to proxy for skin shade. We assume that females who self-report to be racially black and no other race (nonmixed black) generally will be darker than those who self-report to be “mixed” black and white. Beginning with the 2000 decennial census, data collected by the U.S. census allowed for multiple responses with regards to self-reports on race. This allows us to construct a “mixed” category based on whether respondents selected both black and white in response to the race question. Further, if the respondent added another race response in addition to black and white we also categorized them as “mixed.”<sup>12, 13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, Panel B of Table 1 reveals that out of the 53 young light skinned black females, 48 percent are presently married, which leaves only 25 observations of married young light skin females to draw spousal and household characteristics. Although we have more young medium and dark skinned black females, 139 and 137, respectively, they have much lower likelihoods to be presently married, 18 and 19 percents. As a consequence, there are only sample sizes of 26 and 25 medium and dark skinned presently married females from which to detect differences in spousal characteristics. Moreover, as a result of missing observations on spousal characteristics, we are often left with only 15 to 17 observations of young black light, medium or dark skinned females to compare spousal characteristics. Thus, we are unable to detect statistically significant differences between the spousal characteristics of the various skin shade groups. Furthermore, we are also unable to detect statistically significant differences when we extend this analysis to black women of all ages using the *MCSUI* data, because of similar issues of sample size, likelihood of presently married, and missing spousal information.

<sup>12</sup> For robustness we created three additional definitions of mixed-race in order to examine differences in spousal and household characteristics. First, we constructed categories where individuals were classified as mixed-race if they self-reported to be racially black and any other race regardless of whether it included white individuals or not. For example, this classification of mixed race also included those who self-identified as being black and Chinese. Second, we construct a measure of mixed-race based on a combination of self-reports regarding race and ancestral origin. Census data includes a self-reported ancestral origin question where the overwhelming majority of respondents who self-report to be racially black also self-report Afro or African American ancestral origin. However, a small number of racially black individuals also self-report a “white” ancestral origin or an ancestral origin from a nation-state located in Europe. We follow Darity, Hamilton and Dietrich (2002) and define mixed-race individuals as those who self-report black race along with “white” ancestry or ancestry from a European nation state. This method of defining mixed-race status was particularly useful for decennial census data prior to 2000 when individuals were not permitted to self-identify multiple races. Finally, we construct a third definition of mixed race individuals based on meeting any of the previous definitions. These various methods of defining mixed race individuals did not produce substantive differences from the results presenting in Tables 2.

<sup>13</sup> There are two major limitations with using self-reported race as proxy for skin shade. First, there is substantial variation of skin shade regardless of whether individuals self-identify as racially black or mixed black and white. For example, biological sibling pairs may vary in skin shade, but not racial ancestry. This is empirically exhibited

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the spousal and household characteristics for black females with a married spouse present in comparison to mixed black and white females with a married spouse present. The table consist of results for black females aged 16 to 29, and black females aged 28 to 43. The young female results based on the 2006 ACS sample allows us to examine married females who correspond in *age* to the young females we examine when skin shade is identified using the *MCSUI* data, while the older female results allows us to examine married females that correspond to the *cohort* of young females between the ages of 16 and 29 in the *MCSUI* that were surveyed between 1992 and 1994.

The table indicates that there are 2491 young black females with a married spouse present in comparison to 113 mixed black and white females; and for our older sample there are 11118 black females with a married spouse present while there are 224 mixed. Hence, for every young married female in our mixed sample there are about 22 females in our black only sample; and for the older group the ratio is about 50 to one.

Panel A of Table 2 describes the racial and ethnic mix of marriage for black in comparison to mixed females. The first row of the panel reveals that only a few of the observations in our sample end up married to a mixed black and white race spouse; less than one percent for both black females aged 16 to 29 and those aged 28 to 43, and respectively seven and twelve percents for mixed females aged 16 to 29 and 28 to 43. This is not surprising given that so few individuals self-report multiple races on the census.<sup>14</sup> The next row indicates that for both the young and older group of married black females, the vast majority, about 90 percent, are married to a spouse that self-reports to be racially black. In contrast, twenty-four percent of the younger and thirty percent of the older mixed black and white married females have a black

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by Rangel (2007) using data from Brazil, where he finds gradations in skin shade between sibling pairs with the same biological parents. Second, the use of self-reported measures of race may not match perfectly with societal perceptions of individual race. This is empirically exhibited when examining Latino self-reports of race in the U.S. Cruz-Janzen (2001), Darity, Hamilton, and Dietrich (2002), Darity, Dietrich and Hamilton (2005), and Golash-Boza and Darity (2008) all provide examples of an aversion for Latinos to self-identify as racially black regardless of the respondents skin shade and the proportions of African ancestry of individuals located in the respondents country of origin. Despite these measurement issues, we expect for there to be at least a general tendency for individuals who racially self-identify as black to be darker in complexion than those who self-identify as mixed black and white.

<sup>14</sup> Only 2.4 percent of all 2000 census respondents identified two or more racial categories (see Elizabeth M. Grieco and Rachel C. Cassidy, Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: Census 2000 Brief, issued March 2001, Table 1. (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/cenbr01-1.pdf>)).

Based on the current authors' calculations from the above cited report, less than one percent of all respondents identified multiple racial responses that included black. Further, of all the respondents that included a black racial response, 2.7 percent included a white racial response and 4.8 percent included any additional racial response including or not including white.

spouse. This is consistent with assortative marriage; black females tend to marry black males, while in comparison to black females, mixed females have a greater tendency to marry mixed males. Of course, the choice to marry mixed males is constrained by the demographically low number of self-reported mixed race individuals.

Similar to the mixed race category, few black or mixed females are married to a Latino spouse; however, mixed females are far more likely than their black peers to marry a Latino.<sup>15</sup> Further, Panel A indicates that only eight and five percent of black females, for both the younger and older cohort, are married to a white male.<sup>16</sup> This is consistent with the low inter-racial marriage findings by Farley (1996) and Qian (1997). On the other hand, fifty-three percent of the married mixed females aged 28 to 43, who correspond in cohort to our primary *MCSUI* sample from 1992-1994, married a white male. Further, the statistic is even higher, 65 percent, for the younger, 16 to 29 year old cohort. Thus the conventional finding in the social science literature that black females do not inter-marry, does not hold for all black females. Indeed, black females who self-report mixed heritage do inter-marry. Moreover, by 2006, for both the age cohorts of 16 to 29 and 28 to 43, mixed black and white females were a lot more likely to be married to a male that self identified as racially white (nonblack), than to a male who self-identified as racially black (nonwhite)—2.7 times more likely for the younger cohort, and 1.7 times more likely for the older cohort. Hence, mixed black females may have access to a larger pool of “marriageable” males, since they inter-marry at a much greater rate than non-mixed black, presumably darker complexioned females.

In addition to a greater pool of potential mates, if, as the theory presented above suggests, society ascribes higher status to lighter complexioned individuals, then mixed females (presumably lighter complexioned) are more likely to marry higher status mixed, Latino and white males than their black (presumably darker skinned) counterparts. Therefore, this evidence is consistent with the theory that lighter skinned black females have a greater reservations towards marriage,  $\varepsilon_r$ , in comparison to non-mixed black females. In other words, light skin

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<sup>15</sup> The Latino category is not mutually exclusive from the racial categories. Latinos can belong to any race.

<sup>16</sup> Note that the category of white includes whites mixed with any other race except black. Unlike the other categories in the panel, the reference for this category excluded all spouses who did not offer at least one self-report of being black. Thus, the reference did not include Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, or ‘other’ race if they did not report multiple racial responses including black. This allows us to compare the relationship between propensity for black or mixed black and white females to marry a white male without confounding the category with Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American or ‘other’ races.

females may perceive themselves to have a higher social status which may lead them to require similarly higher status spouses as measured by skin shade. Next, Panel B, Spousal Characteristics, will offer additional evidence as to whether mixed raced black females marry males with more favorable characteristics in comparison to non-mixed black females.

We examine differences in spousal characteristics based on education, employment, occupation and income. The first measure of education is a distributional measure divided into three categories; high school dropouts, high school graduates/General Equivalency Diploma (GED) recipients, and those with more than a high school education. The second educational measure is whether the spouse attained at least a bachelor's degree. The first employment measure indicates whether the spouse reported being employed or not. Included in the not employed category are observations whose husbands are either actively or not actively seeking employment. Our next measure, DISCONNECTED, attempts to avoid confounding due to school enrolment in the previous measure by examining if the spouse is not employed or in school (i.e. "idle" or "disconnected" from human capital development).<sup>17</sup> In order to examine differences in occupations, we utilized three measures; an indicator of managerial or professional specialty occupational membership, a census defined continuous measure of occupational prestige based on 1950 normalized median occupational earnings (OCCSCORE), and a recoded distributional measure of OCCSCORE in order to capture any threshold effects (see Ruggles et al., 2008; and Darity, Dietrich and Guilkey, 2001 for detailed description of OCCSCORE). The distributional measure is divided into three categories based on all workers in the entire 2006 ACS census; the bottom 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of OCCSCORE, the middle 50<sup>th</sup> percentile, and the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile. Finally, we construct two measures of spousal total income; one is a continuous measure and the other is a distributional measure constructed similar to the OCCSCORE distributional measure (i.e. bottom 25<sup>th</sup>, middle 50<sup>th</sup>, and top 25<sup>th</sup> percentiles based on all survey respondents).

Table 2 reveals that, for the younger cohort of married black and mixed black and white females, there is not a great deal of difference in spousal education, occupational prestige and income. The couple of cases where we are able to detect a statistically significant advantage for the spouses of mixed race females are related to employment and occupation. Although not statistically significant, there is a five percentage point difference (85 versus 90 percent) in

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<sup>17</sup> See Edelman, Holzer, and Offner (2006) for a discussion of the causes and extent of "disconnection."

spousal employment status in favor of mixed females. Moreover, 12 percent of the spouses of black females reported being “disconnected” from work or school while only seven percent of the spouses from the mixed sample reported “disconnectedness”; and this difference is statistically significant. The distributional measure of OCCSCORE yielded a second measure of statistical significance. Twenty-seven percent of the spouses of mixed females rank in the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of OCCSCORE in comparison to 19 percent for black non-mixed females; and based on a chi-squared test, these distributions of OCCSCORE for the two groups are significantly different from one another.

In contrast from the younger cohort, the older cohort of black and mixed females exhibited many cases of statistically significant and large differences in spousal characteristics. Perhaps, by the time the spouses of mixed females age past 28, enough time emerges so that the avoidance of being “disconnected” from work or school, and the occupational advantage held when they were younger manifests in even larger occupational advantages as well as other socioeconomic advantages. The husbands of mixed race black females were six percentage points more likely to be employed, five percentage points less likely to be “disconnected”, and 11 percentage point more likely to be employed in a managerial or professional occupation than non-mixed black females. In addition, both the continuous and distributional measures of OCCSCORE reveal a statistically significant advantage for the spouses of mixed race females. The distributional advantage for the spouses of the older mixed females is not only manifest by a higher share in the top quarter of the OCCSCORE distribution, but also by a lower share (11 versus 19 percent) in the bottom quarter of the distribution. In terms of income, the spouses of mixed females earn 21 percent more than the spouses of black non-mixed females (\$54,971 versus \$43,697). In addition, slightly over half of the spouses of mixed females are in the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of income earners whereas about 40 percent of the spouses of non-mixed females are in this category. Unlike occupational prestige and income, the table reveals that there is not a great deal of an educational advantage for spouses of mixed females. Nonetheless, the overall distribution is somewhat better for the mixed group.

Next, we turn our attention to a comparison of the overall household status--as measured by homeownership, household income, and family poverty. Married mixed females between the ages of 16 and 29 were eight percentage points (50 versus 42 percents) more likely to own or be in the process of owning their home than comparable non-mixed black females. However, for

the older cohort, there is virtually no difference between the two groups; roughly 70 percent of both groups are homeowners.

The reverse is true when comparing household income differences for the younger and older cohorts. There are no significant differences in both the continuous and distributional measures of household income for the younger groups, but there are significant differences in both measures for the older cohort. For the young cohort, there is only about a seven percent but statistically insignificant advantage for the mixed group in terms of household income. That advantage for the mixed group more than doubles to 16 percent for the older cohort (\$90,209 versus \$76,047) and is statistically significant. Moreover, the distribution measure of household income also favors the mixed group in the older sample.

Finally, we examine three measures of poverty which allow us to examine family well-being while implicitly controlling family size. The first measure, at or below the poverty line, indicates if the female's family meets the federal standard for being in poverty. In 2006, the black poverty rate was 23.1 percent.<sup>18</sup> We compute substantially lower statistics for 16-29 year old married mixed and non-mixed black female households, seven and 12 percents respectively. For the older group the comparable rates are even lower, three and seven percents. Regardless of whether we examine the mixed or non-mixed group, married black females are far less likely to be in poverty than blacks overall. Nonetheless, racially mixed black females that are married are significantly less likely to be in poverty than their non-mixed black female counterparts for both the younger and older cohorts. This is also true when we include the working poor by examining families at or below two times the federal poverty line. The last measure of poverty is a distributional measure which includes both ends of poverty; the bottom 25<sup>th</sup> percentile (i.e. low well-being) and top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile (i.e. high well-being) of the poverty measure. For the young cohort, the mixed black female group has a slightly, but not statistically significant, more favorable distribution of family well-being than non-mixed females. The same is true for the older cohort, only now the difference is statistically significant.

In general, the Table 2 results from all three panels are consistent with our hypothesis that lighter skinned black females have a higher  $\varepsilon_r$ , reservation towards marriage, than darker skinned females. This is really pronounced for the older mixed females, 28-43, whose spousal economic characteristics are substantially higher than the spousal characteristics of non-mixed

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<sup>18</sup> See [www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/hstpv2.htm](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/hstpv2.htm).

black females. Moreover, if inter-racial marriage is an indicator of access to a greater pool of marriageable males, than the results of the tables is also consistent with lighter skinned females having a higher  $q$ , probability of marriage proposal.

The next analysis, which is presented in Table 3, provides a comparison of the spousal and household characteristics of black and white females who have a black spouse present in their household--males who self-identified as black or mixed black and something else. The black female category in the tables includes self-identified black females including those who offered multiple responses to the race question (i.e., black nonmixed and black mixed combined), whereas the white female category includes those offering multiple responses only if those responses did not include black (i.e. white plus any other nonblack race). The table allows us to examine if the pool of “marriageable males” for black females is further diminished by black males with “better” characteristics marrying outside their race.<sup>19</sup>

Table 3 shows that 521 (19 percent) of the total younger black or white females married to a black husband are white. For the older group, 1451 (12 percent) of the total 11972 indicated that they are white. Based on the 2006 ACS, the younger cohort analysis generates a greater tendency of black males marrying white females than the older one, which is suggestive that inter-racial marriages may be on the rise. Next, we turn our attention to differences between the characteristics of black males married to white as opposed to black females.

For the young sample, there is only one indicator—the distributional measure of spousal occupational prestige (OCCSCORE)—of spousal or household characteristics in which there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Moreover, it is ambiguous which group has spouses with better characteristics; white females have black spouses that are about two percentage points more likely to be in the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of OCCSCORE, but this group of spouses is also five and a half percentage points more likely to be in the bottom 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of OCCSCORE.

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<sup>19</sup> This analysis was also performed for black females disaggregated by those who offer only one racial identification (black non-mixed) and for those who offer a black and white identification (mixed black status as in Table 2), both in comparison to white females, all of whom are married to black or mixed black husbands. The Table 3 results are not substantively changed when comparing non-mixed black to white females. Yet, when comparing mixed black and white to white females, we are unable to detect any statistically significant differences between the two groups. Perhaps our inability to detect statistically significant differences is related to the small sample sizes of the category of mixed black and white females that are married to black males. There are only 37 observations of this group aged 16 to 29, and 99 aged 28 to 43.

For the older sample, there are substantial differences between the spousal and household characteristics of the black and white female samples with white females having spouses and living in household with better characteristics than their black female counterparts. About nine and a half percent of black males married to black females are high school dropouts, whereas six percent of those married to white females are dropouts. In contrast, about 68 percent of black males with white females wives have more than 12 years of schooling; the comparable figure for those married to black females is 57 percent. Finally, 25 percent of black and 28 percent of white females have black spouses with a bachelor's degree and the difference between the groups is statistically significant.

There are no statistically significant differences in spousal employment or "disconnectedness". But, like education, there are statistically significant differences in the occupational characteristics of the spouses of the two groups. The black husbands of white females have a better distribution of OCSCORES than those with black wives. Moreover, 31 percent of the black males with white wives are managerial or professional workers, whereas 26 percent of those with black wives are in this class of workers. In addition, black husbands married to white females have significantly higher incomes as well (\$45,765 versus \$42,811).

Finally, Panel B displays differences in overall household characteristics between the two groups. The two groups are virtually the same in terms of homeownership rates, but, differ in terms of income and family poverty. The average household income for black males with white wives is \$79,217 and about 27 percent are of these husbands are in the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile of household income. In contrast, black males with black wives have on average about \$75,135 in household incomes and about 24 percent rank in the top 25<sup>th</sup> percentile. A similar proportion of the two household types are at or below the poverty line; but, if we compare the two households based on being at or below twice the poverty line, 24 percent of those with a black wife are poor as opposed to 21 percent with a white wife. In addition, black male and female households have a more negatively skewed distribution of poverty than black male and white female households.

In sum, we find considerable evidence that, for the older cohort of black females, which corresponds to our primary *MCSUI* sample from 1992 to 1994, black male husband characteristics are significantly worse if they are married to a black, as opposed to a white female. This is consistent with a reduced pool of "better quality", more "marriageable" black males as a result of higher status males tending to marry white females. However, although the

ratio of younger, 16 to 29 year old, white female to black female households with black male spouse is higher than it is for the older households, black male characteristics for the younger females are not significantly different from those married to younger white females.

### C. Empirical Model

The reservation characteristic level a woman adopts,  $\varepsilon_r$ , and the frequency of marriage offers she receives,  $q$ , are expected to depend on her characteristics (Loughran, 2002) including skin shade. Therefore, we estimate the probability of ever having been married using a probit model to determine if a link exists between skin shade and family formation for black females in the U.S. The reduced form model we estimate, using *MCSUI* data on black females, is specified as follows

$$(3) \quad p_{m,i} = \alpha + \beta(Light_i) + \lambda(Dark_i) + \gamma(X_i) + \mu_i$$

where  $p_{m,i}$  is whether or not a person has ever been married and  $i$  is an index across individuals.<sup>20</sup> *Light* and *Dark* are indicator variables that reveal if the interviewer rates the observation to be “light, or “dark.” Persons with medium skin shade are the reference category. The vector  $X$  contains all of the other observed exogenous determinants of family formation. The error term,  $\mu_i$ , captures the impact of unobserved individual characteristics on the propensity to have ever been married, it is assumed independently, identically and normally distributed with mean zero and variance equal to one.

$X$  includes information on a person’s age, schooling level, health status, if they resided outside the U.S. when 16 years of age, parents education level, and if the respondent remembers attending church regularly as an adolescent.<sup>21</sup> Additional retrospective information pertaining to family characteristics when the respondent was a youth were collected from respondents allowing  $X$  to also contain variables indicating; if the respondent was raised in an dual parent households, the respondent’s high school performance, and if the respondents family was on

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<sup>20</sup> Persons who report they are in a nonmarital cohabiting relationship are treated as unmarried because cohabitation relationships are generally short lived with about half ending within a year (Cherlin, 2005). We take this approach because nonmarital cohabiting relationships are typically very different from traditional marriages in length and in childrearing. See Rindfuss and VandenHeuval (1990) for a comparison of cohabiting and marriage relationships. Those interested in what causes a person to enter into or exit from a nonmarital cohabitation relationship are encouraged to see Brien, Lillard, and Stern (2004).

<sup>21</sup> Age is accounted for by a series of age cohort indicator variables to allow us to control for cohort generational effects associated with marriage formation. For more information on how age is constructed, please see our variable definitions in Appendix Table 1.

welfare when they were young.<sup>22</sup> Variable definitions for the components of  $X$  are presented in Appendix Table 1. In addition, descriptive statistics for all of the elements of  $X$ , *for respondents 16-29 years of age*, are reported in Appendix Table 2 in a series of panels corresponding to; human capital, demographic factors, and family and personal characteristics as a youth.

#### **D. Skin Shade and Marriage: Intra-Racial Findings**

Table 4 is a summary table that presents the likelihood of ever being married for black females who are light skinned relative to those with medium skin shade and for individuals who are dark skinned relative to the same medium skinned reference group, based on our estimates of  $\beta$  and  $\lambda$  from Equation (3). The results presented are partial derivatives (marginal contributions) of the skin shade coefficients rather than the actual likelihood function coefficients, where the partial derivatives are evaluated at the mean values of all the included covariates. In addition, we report an *F-Statistic* for a test of the difference in the impact on ever married for persons who are light skinned relative to dark skinned. These results, when data from Detroit are excluded, are presented in the left hand side, of Table 4; our findings when Detroit data are included are presented in the right hand side of the table. Findings when black females of all ages are included in the data analysis are presented as well as our results for a subsample that only contains young black females. Finally, estimates of the partial derivative of ever being married with respect to each of the variables included in Equation (3) are presented in Appendix Table 3.<sup>23</sup>

Columns 2 and 4 of Table 4 present our findings for the impact of skin shade on ever having been married when *MCSUI* respondents of all ages are included.<sup>24</sup> Inspection of these results reveals that skin shade does not exert a significant influence on the likelihood of ever marrying for black females using the pooled sample.

##### **1. Age and the Skin Shade Marriage Relationship**

It is possible that – in our pooled age sample which controls for age using a series of cohort indicators – the influence of skin shade on marriage is masked. There is ample

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<sup>22</sup> We include variables in  $X$  to account for who raised the respondent because Kobrin and Waite (1984) provide evidence, using data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Education and Labor Market Experiences, that persons not in dual parent households during their teenage years are less likely to marry later in life.

<sup>23</sup> In addition, Appendix Table 4 presents Equation 3 finding estimated separately by the three skin shade groups.

<sup>24</sup> The specification of the pooled age model and the young age model are identical except for how age is specified. In the pooled model, a series of dummies are entered to capture age cohorts in increments of ten years each, whereas in the young sample model a continuous linear and quadratic term is entered to control for age.

evidence that one of the most important determinants of ever being married is age (Loughran, 2002). This may be due to a reduction in the reservation level for the characteristics of a potential spouse or the higher overall accumulation of offers as one ages. Thus, in a cross-sectional analysis, the impact of skin shade on marriage may only be empirically detectable in a young sample, where reservations toward marriages are relatively higher and the accumulation of marriage offers are relatively lower.<sup>25</sup> To explore the notion that skin shade influences the likelihood of ever marrying for young black women we estimate Equation (3) using a subsample of young persons between the ages of 16 and 29. The results from this exercise are reported in Columns 3 and 5 of Table 4.

Light skinned black females are 14.8 percent more likely to have married than black females with medium skin shade, and the difference is statistically significant. Dark skinned black women and black women with medium skin shade are equally likely to have ever married. However, black women with dark complexion are significantly less likely to have married than black women with light complexion. Thus, the likelihood of ever having been married is significantly smaller for non-light skinned black women between the ages of 16 and 29.<sup>26</sup>

These results are robust to the inclusion of Detroit observations. By including data from Detroit our sample of young women grows from 328 observations to 394. However, the inclusion of these additional observations is not without costs. Since the Detroit participants were not surveyed on all the questions used in our specification of Equation (3), the inclusion of Detroit observations results in a reduction in the number of covariates in the vector  $X$ . Therefore, when data from Detroit are included we are unable to control for whom the respondent lived with as a youth, their high school performance, and whether their family received public assistance when the respondent was young. Nevertheless, the same pattern of findings emerges indicating that our findings are robust to model specification and sample size.

In the next section we develop a model of the marriage market, from the perspective of black females. This framework facilitates our examination of the impact of a decline in the

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<sup>25</sup> In addition, if the shortage of “marriageable” black males is a more recent phenomenon, it is possible that skin shade may have had a smaller effect on marriage for older cohorts.

<sup>26</sup> Note that our findings of a statistical association between skin shade and marriage are limited to women under the age of 30. If we were to expand our definition of “young women” to include women under age of 40 or under the age of 35, we are no longer able to detect statistically significant skin shade findings. In the preceding paragraph of the text of this paper, we provide an explanation for our inability to detect significant skin shade effects in the pooled age sample, which we also believe to be applicable when our definition of “young” is expanded to include those under 40 or 35.

supply of desirable male marriage partners on the level of marriage, and the distribution across skin shade groups, for black women.

## V. A Model of the Marriage Market

We specify a marriage market, from the perspective of black women, which is comprised of a supply of offers to marry from men,  $S_m^{off}$ , and a demand for offers,  $D_f^{off}$ , on the part of women. In a conventional supply and demand framework, price is used as the indicator of *value* of the output for both consumers and producers. In our framework marriage is the indicator of output and we specify skin shade as the indicator of *value* (price) of marriages. In this scenario, black women purchase marriage with their skin shade and black men offer marriage in exchange for skin shade. Of course there are many other attributes that men bid for in exchange for marriage and that women bid with in exchange for marriage. These other factors are accounted for by including them in the  $X$  vector in our analysis. Furthermore, we understand that women are not solely demanders of marriage and men are not solely suppliers of marriage, that the roles may on some occasions be reversed. Nonetheless, the framework of treating women as consumers of marriage and males as producers of marriage, along with pricing marriage with skin shade, allows us to examine how marriages are rationed off to black women based on a cursory characteristic such as the complexion of their skin. In addition, the framework allows us to examine the theoretical implications of various policies designed to increase the marriage rate of black females.

Figure 1 depicts the demand and supply of marriage with the quantity of marriages measured on the horizontal axis and skin shade, which increases with lighter skin hue, measured on the vertical axis. The quantity supplied of marriage offers from men is expected to rise as the skin shade of females in the market lightens (i.e. an upward movement along the supply of offers curve,  $S_m^{off}$ , in Figure 1).<sup>27</sup> The quantity of marriage offers from men is expected to rise (i.e. a rightward shift of the marriage offer curve ( $S_m^{off}$ )), if there is an increase in the number of marriageable males or if there is an improvement in the non-skin shade related characteristics of

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<sup>27</sup> Researchers have found a connection between skin shade and perceptions of beauty (Hill 2002; Bond and Cash 1992; Loury 2006). Moreover, Buss (1989) finds that although both men and women prefer physically attractive spouses, this preference is consistently found to be stronger in men than in women.

females ( $X_f$ ). Both increases in the number of marriageable males and improvements in female marriage related characteristics lead to increases in the probability that males make offers, and as a result lead to a rightward shift in the supply of marriage offers.<sup>28</sup>

On the demand side, the quantity demanded of marriages is expected to fall (i.e. a movement up and to the left along the demand curve ( $D_f^{off}$ )) as the skin shade of women lightens. Women are presumed to establish a minimum acceptable level over the characteristics of suitors,  $\varepsilon_r$ . If women become more selective in evaluating offers,  $\varepsilon_r$  rises, they are effectively seeking fewer offers or only those from more desirable suitors. Women with lighter skin shade are expected to recognize the value men ascribed to them by virtue of their skin shade providing them with an impulse to hold a higher minimum standard for potential marriage partners leading to a greater value of  $\varepsilon_r$  and a decline in the quantity demanded of marriage offers – which results in a movement (back) along the demand for offers curve ( $D_f^{off}$ ) in

Figure 1.

The demand for marriage offers is expected to rise (i.e. a rightward shift in the demand for marriages ( $D_f^{off}$ )) if there is a *ceteris paribus* improvement in the characteristics of males ( $X_m$ ), or if female tastes and preferences for marriage increase ( $T_f$ ).<sup>29</sup> In addition, women with more valued personal characteristics ( $X_f$ ), such as greater education, aside from skin shade, will hold a higher minimum acceptable standard for suitors resulting in a decline in their demand for marriage offers (i.e. leading to a leftward shift of ( $D_f^{off}$ )).

The marriage market will gravitate to equilibrium at Point A where the level of female marriages is,  $M_A$ , and the women married have skin shade at least as light as  $s_A$  (for ease of

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<sup>28</sup> Improvement in the males own characteristics ( $X_m$ ) could also shift the supply of offers schedule. Although, not the focus of this analysis, males may also have reservations towards marriage. This reservation may also be a function of the males own characteristics. Hence, if there is a *ceteris paribus* improvement in a male's characteristics, the minimum characteristic of a female for which they are willing to marry may rise leading to a reduction in the number of marriage offers such males are willing to extend.

<sup>29</sup> Geary (1998) asserts that women, relative to men, throughout the world prefer as marriage partners individuals who will provide economic security. Extensive evidence that female choice of a spouse is influenced by the quantity and quality of resources that a prospective husband can offer is provided by Buss (1989).

exposition the female subscript is suppressed in representing the market equilibrium). The model predicts that young women with skin shade darker than  $s_A$  go unmarried.

### A. Shortage of Black Marriageable Men and the Marriage Market

The marriage market is depicted in equilibrium at Point  $A$  in Figure 1. This equilibrium hypothetically corresponds to the situation in the mid 1950's in the U.S., a point in time where there was little if any inter-racial marriage gap. In subsequent decades Wilson and Neckerman (1986), Ellwood and Crane (1990), Bulcroft and Bulcroft (1993), and Darity and Myers (1995) claim that a reduction in the availability of marriageable black men, due to poor quality schooling, lack of labor market opportunities, and high rates of incarceration, drug use, and mortality among black men, has occurred. We depict this development as an inward shift in the supply of marriage offers curve to black females from  $(S_m^{off})$  to  $(S_m^{off'})$  in Figure 1, which results in a shortage of marriage offers equal to line segment  $\overline{BA}$  at  $s_A$ . Given the  $\overline{BA}$  shortage that resulted from the reduction in marriageable males, the market equilibrium female skin shade  $s$  will be bid up to eliminate the shortage. The quantity supplied of marriage offers on the part of males increase from Point  $B$  to Point  $C$  on  $S_m^{off'}$  due to the rise in  $s$ .

On the demand side, as the minimum acceptable level of lightness of skin shade for females lightens, those remaining women in the marriage market with the prerequisite skin shade hold higher reservation characteristic levels for male suitors so the quantity demanded of marriage declines from Point  $A$  to Point  $C$  on  $D_f^{off}$ . A new equilibrium will ultimately be established in the marriage market at Point  $C$  with fewer marriages,  $M_C < M_A$ , and those married will be lighter in complexion,  $s_C > s_A$ , a black woman must be no darker than  $s_C$  to become married.<sup>30</sup> Since there is not a well documented equivalent shortage of “marriageable”

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<sup>30</sup> Darity and Myers (1995) and Lichter et. al (1991) provide evidence linking a shortage of marriageable black men to low rates of marriage for black women. For instance, Lichter et al., (1991) find that among young women who expect to marry in the next five years, that a shortage in the quantity and quality of available men in the local area reduces women's transition to first marriage. In addition, Lichter et al., (1991) find little evidence that women's economic circumstances, measured by employment status and educational level, influence their likelihood of marriage when economically attractive men are in short supply. Rather they report that under such circumstances it is a non-economic factors, such as status, that influences marriage.

white males, it is likely that the decline in the supply of marriageable black males is a major contributor to the growing inter-racial marriage gap for women.<sup>31</sup>

In the next section we discuss how the assortative nature of marriages makes the impact of the shortage of marriageable males on the relationship between marriage and black female skin complexion more acute. Below we describe our procedure to evaluate this hypothesis.

## **B. Assortative Marriages and Marriage Markets**

There is ample evidence of the assortative nature of marriage leading to a set of separate marriage markets or spheres based on personal characteristics such as education, race and family background (Blackwell and Lichter 2000, Qian and Preston 1993).<sup>32</sup> From a young women's perspective her talents, background, and features affect both the level of her reservation characteristic index and the marriage market in which she takes part. It is conceivable that a pair of marriage markets are defined by a particular characteristic, such as education, deemed important to potential spouses. For any characteristic there is a favorable outcome (highly educated; well educated parents) and a less desired or valued outcome (less educated, poorly educated parents). Therefore, her characteristics, and hence the characteristics she expects in a suitor, influence whether she participates in a marriage sphere with relatively few marriageable men. In our view, preferred characteristic marriage markets are ones where marriageable men are more likely to be scarce, and hence are the marriage spheres where a light skin marriage premium will be more pronounced.

### **1. High versus Low Status Marriage Markets and the Influence of Skin Shade on Marriage: An Empirical Assessment**

To empirically examine whether light complexion enhances the likelihood of marriage for young black females, first, we select a particular characteristic, such as family formation as a youth, from those contained in the vector  $X$  in Equation 3. Then we partition the data into two groups or marriage markets according to this variable such as black females who were raised by both of their parents (*High Status Marriage Market*) and black females who were not raised by both of their parents (*Low Status Marriage Market*). The next step is to estimate Equation 3 for each of the sub-samples with at least 50 observations, after eliminating the characteristic variable used to separate the data but keeping the other individual characteristic

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<sup>31</sup> Lichter et al, report that at age 28, for each unmarried black women there are 0.374 black men with adequate earnings (i.e., above the poverty line) to make them an attractive partner while for white women at the same age there are 0.762 men.

<sup>32</sup> Brien (1997) argues that a feature of a higher level of education is that it moves a person into a different marriage market.

variables in the model. We are able to investigate the link between skin shade and ever married for three paired-subgroups (only the favored outcome is listed); lived with both parents at 16 years of age, family did not receive public assistance when 16, family attended church as least monthly as well as two unpaired subgroups (at least a high school graduate, not a foreign resident at age 16) or situations where we only have sufficient observations for the more valued level of the marriage related characteristic.

Table 5 is a summary table that presents our findings on the marginal contribution of skin shade on ever having been married for each of the characteristic based marriage markets identified above using data on young black females. The intra-group evidence reveals no statistically significant differences in the likelihood of ever being married between alternative skin shade groups for each of the three *Low Status Marriage Markets*. However, young black women with light complexion were significantly more likely to have been married than dark skinned black women for each of the five *High Status Marriage Markets* evaluated. Moreover, in three of these marriage spheres light skinned young black women are significantly more likely to have been married than those black women with medium skin shade. For instance, among young black women who were raised by both parents, those with light skin shade are 28 percent more likely to have ever been married than those with medium skin shade. Similarly, among women who did not grow up in a welfare recipient household, those with light skin are 20.5 percent more likely to have married than individuals with medium skin shade. In this case we use receipt of welfare as a youth as an indicator (or proxy) for the status of female respondents. We find that in the *High Status* (non receipt of welfare as a youth) strata, skin shade is highly relevant determinant of whether the female respondent has ever married.

Our results are consistent with the hypothesis that skin shade is a more important determinant of ever being married for young women in *High Status* marriage markets, markets where there are likely to be proportionately fewer marriageable men. We now turn to an analysis of policies intended to promote marriage, especially those targeted toward expanding marriage among black women, using the marriage market we developed. Our goal is to assess alternative policies to determine if they exacerbate or mitigate the link between skin shade and marriage.

## **VI. Marriage Promotion Policies and the Skin Shade Marriage Link**

Policies that increase the demand for marriage on the part of women and/or policies that increase the supply of marriage provided by men can increase the level of marriage. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there existed large socioeconomic racial disparities, yet little if any of these disparities were attributed to inter-racial marriage gaps for females. However, a great deal of the inequities that exist in more recent decades, particularly as it relates children, have been attributed to the high incidence of black single family households, and the inter-racial marriage gap. We contend that this gap emerged as the supply of black marriageable men fell. Thereby reducing the level of marriage for black women from  $M_A$  depicted in Figure 2, which hypothetically represents the number of marriages for black females around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to  $M_C$ , which hypothetically represents the number of marriages in more recent decades. In response a reasonable policy goal might be to return the level of marriage for black women back to  $M_A$ .

#### **A. Promoting the Demand for Marriage**

A hallmark of the George W. Bush administration has been a penchant for allocating federal dollars to promote marriage. Through the Federal Administration for Children and Families, the administration has spent over 200 million dollars on efforts to persuade teenagers to seek marriage or develop a stronger taste ( $T$ ) for marriage. Moreover, the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) reauthorization legislation passed by congress in 2006 includes \$500 million, to be spent over the next 5 years, for the constellation of programs that the administration has dubbed its *Healthy Marriage Initiative* (Meckler, 2006).<sup>33</sup> The 2006 welfare legislation has made marriage promotion a primary tool for poverty reduction with a keen focus on women given that they are the main demographic of TANF recipients. According to Mink (2002), the Bush administration plan includes an “...arsenal of marriage promotion...(for) mothers who are unmarried and poor—disproportionately mothers of color.”<sup>34</sup>

Figure 2 depicts the marriage market for young black women following the decline in marriageable black men ( $M_B$ ) and prior to this decline ( $M_A$ ). If the *Healthy Marriage Initiative* including the welfare reauthorization legislation is successful in inducing a rise in tastes for marriage on the part of females ( $T_f \uparrow$ ) then these programs will drive up the demand for

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<sup>33</sup> See Rector and Pardue (2004) for a description of President George W. Bush’s *Healthy Marriage Initiative*.

<sup>34</sup> Although monies spent towards marriage promotion is not exclusively directed towards females, the use of TANF as a vehicle of disbursement implicitly yields a bias towards promoting pro-marriage attitudes for females.

marriages by black women from  $D_f^{off}$  to  $D_f^{off'}$  as shown in Figure 2. This development will create a shortage of marriage offers equal to line segment  $\overline{CE}$  at  $s_C$ . The marriage market will gravitate to a new equilibrium at point  $D$  that returns the level of marriage for black females to its level prior to the decline in marriageable men ( $M_D = M_A$ ). However, a possible unintended consequence of this strategy will be an increased relevancy attached to skin shade in the sorting of which females end up married. The equilibrium complexion of skin shade rises from  $s_C$  to  $s_D$ . Now, black women with a complexion darker than  $s_D$  will be unmarried.<sup>35</sup>

### **B. Promoting the Supply of Marriage Offers**

An alternative means of expanding the level of marriage for black women, which is also capable of reducing the inter-racial marriage gap, is to enlarge the supply of marriageable men. This can be accomplished over time by improving educational opportunities, reducing labor market discrimination and other barriers of employment to black males, initiating policies aimed at reducing the incarceration of black males (particularly non-violent offences), and creating environments that better promote personal and healthy development for young black men.<sup>36</sup> Government initiatives can also increase the available stock of marriageable black males in the near term through; tax subsidies for low wage workers engaged in full time employment, government funded job based training for part-time employees with low skills, paid internships for high school drop outs that return to school, and advances in the minimum wage. Policy initiatives that advance the supply of marriageable men have the potential to increase the supply of marriages from  $S_m^{off'}$  back to  $S_m^{off}$ .

Both demand side and supply side policy initiatives have the potential to restore the black female marriage markets back to the marriage levels ( $M_A$ ) of the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>35</sup> A demand promotion policy directed at black females in response to a shortage of marriageable black males will presumably drive up the importance of other, both substantive and superficial, female characteristics in addition to skin shade that are associated with marriage.

<sup>36</sup> Angela Davis (2003) believes that major reform of the prison system in the U.S. has the potential to expand the supply of productive young males and hence to enlarge the pool of marriageable black males. She advocates a variety of alternatives to imprisonment aimed at “reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance”(Davis, 2003, p.107) such as those adopted by the Netherlands. She does not envision prison like substitutes, such as electronic surveillance bracelets, but rather a transformation of schools to better serve the needs of students and decriminalization of drugs linked to the provision of free community-based programs to address those with drug problems.

however one way that the two policy approaches differ is with regards to their effects in the distribution of the black females that actually get married and their impact on the sorting mechanism of marriages. Furthermore, in addition to marriage promotion, policies aimed at increasing the supply of marriageable black males should have other benefits such as a better educated and more productive workforce. Moreover, by restoring the supply of marriage offers to its level prior to the decline in the marriageable men means that women with skin shade lighter than  $s_D$  will be married or only women darker than  $s_D$ , and  $s_D < s_C < s_A$ , will remain unmarried.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The inter-racial marriage gap that opened in the past 50 years is generally attributed to a decline in the availability of young black marriageable men. We contend that the associated shortage of desirable men in the marriage market provides those black men who are sought after with the opportunity to attain a high status spouse, which has placed a premium on having lighter skin (i.e intensified colorism in marriage markets for black females). We provide evidence, based on data drawn from the *Multi City Study of Urban Inequality* and the *American Community Survey*, consistent with this hypothesis for young black women. Moreover, our findings suggest that the importance of skin shade on the likelihood of marriage is greater in those marriage spheres or markets where the supply of marriageable men is expected to be more limited.

Our theoretical analysis of the marriage market for young black women reveals that policies to promote a greater desire to marry on the part of women will enhance the importance attached to skin shade and possibly other superficial characteristics in determining marriage prospects. Thus, if policy makers want to reduce the number of out-of-wedlock births, and simultaneously generate a distribution of marriage that is less dependent upon skin shade and other superficial characteristics, then a better strategy would be to enlarge the supply of marriageable men.

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