

# THE FAMILY

## *Learning Outcomes*

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following.

- Define terms related to the sociology of the family..
- List the functions of families.
- Define polygamy and its two forms.
- Define monogamy.
- Apply theories to the study of families and intimate relationships.
- Analyze predictors of divorce.

In all societies, the family is the premier institution for socialization of children, adult intimate relationships, life-long economic support and cooperation, and continuity of relationships over the life-course.



## WHAT IS THE FAMILY?

A **family** is a group where the adults cooperate for the well-being of the group, it can include those related by blood, marriage, or adoption, and also those who live together in an intimate relationship. The family structures that were very common a century ago are not nearly as common today. A **family of orientation** is the family into which an individual is born. Most people grow up and start their own families. The **family of procreation** is the family an individual forms by marriage and or having children. In the U.S. around the year 1900, most families had three generations living in one home (e.g., children, parents, and uncles, aunts, or grandparents) and most participated in the manual labor that maintained the household. Today, most families fall into one of two types: the first is a **nuclear family** or a family group consisting of a mother and or a father, or both, and their children; the second most common family form is the **blended family**, or the family created by a marriage of two adults where one or both of them has one or more children from a prior relationship. Very few families are multiple generational beyond parents and their children. All the family relations past the nuclear or blended family we call **extended family** (e.g., cousins, aunts and uncles, and grand and great-grandparents).

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts annual surveys of the U.S. population and publishes them as the Current Population Surveys. Table 1 represents U.S. family types as of October 1, 2008. You will notice that marrieds were the largest proportion of family types in 2008. Never married singles were the second largest type followed by divorced, widowed, and separated.<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT ARE TYPICAL MARRIAGE STRUCTURES?

The culturally and socially preferred marriage type in the U.S. is monogamous. **Monogamy** is *having only one partner at a time*. The U.S. has sanctioned monogamous marriage since the original colonies in the 1600s. Monogamy implies a one-to-one relationship and is typically desired by most couples. **Polygamy**, *the practice of having multiple spouses at the same time*, has been preferred by certain groups not common in the U.S. People often, mistakenly, think that Mormons are a polygamous group, however they ceased polygamy as a practice in 1890. There are Mormon-splinter groups who practice polygamy today; however, it is illegal in every state in the U.S.

Table 1. Number and Percent of U.S. Family Types, 2008.<sup>2</sup>

Types	Number	Percent
Married	123,671,000	52
Never Married Single	71,479,000	30
Divorced	23,346,000	10
Widowed	14,314,000	6
Separated	5,183,000	2
Total	237,993,000	100

**Polygyny** is a marriage form permitting more than one wife at the same time and is the most common form of polygamy in the world's history. Polygyny is still common and legal in many African, Middle-Eastern, and Indian nations. It was a deep part of China's history and prior to World War II it was common for a Chinese man to have multiple wives and many children.

**Polyandry** is a marriage form permitting more than one husband at the same time. This is historically and currently rare and, if practiced, often included the marriage of one wife to a set of brothers with all having sexual access to the wife. **Serial monogamy** is the process of establishing an intimate marriage or cohabiting relationship that eventually dissolves and is followed by another intimate marriage or cohabiting relationship that eventually dissolves, etc. in a series. So polygamists have simultaneous multiple spouses at the same time while serial monogamists have multiple spouses in a sequence of relationships. **Cohabiting** means to live together in a marital-like relationship.

Traditional roles of men and women play into how the family functions in society. Typically and throughout history, families have been **patriarchal** where *males have more power and authority than females and where rights and inheritances typically pass from fathers to sons*. **Matriarchal** families are families where *females have more power and authority than males and rights and inheritances pass from mothers to daughter*. Many

families in the U.S. lean toward **egalitarian** relationships with *power and authority more fairly distributed between husband and wife*.

## WHAT ARE THE FUNCTIONS OF FAMILIES?

In studying the family, Functional Theorists have identified some common and nearly universal family functions. That means almost all families in all countries around the world have at least some of these functions in common. Table 2 shows many of the global functions of the family.

Table 2. Global Functions of the Family.

Function	What it provides
Economic support	food, clothing, shelter
Emotional support	intimacy, companionship, belonging
Socialization of children	raising children, parenting
Control of sexuality	defines and controls when and with whom (e.g., marriage)
Control of reproduction	the types of relationships where children should be born
Ascribed status	contexts of race, socioeconomic status, religion, kinship

By far, economic support is the most common function of today's families. When your parents let you raid their pantry, wash clothes in their laundry, or replenish your checking account, that's economic support. For another young adult, say in New Guinea, if she captures a wild animal which is cooked on an open fire on the family's land, that's also economic support in a different cultural context. Some families cooperate in business-like relationships. In Quebec, Montreal there is an established pattern of Italian immigrants who help family and friends emigrate from Italy to Canada. They subsidize each others' travel costs, help each other find employment once in Canada, and even privately fund some mortgages for one another. Each participant is expected to support others in the same manner. To partake in this form of economic cooperation is to assume a very business-like relationship.

Emotional relationships are also very common, but you must understand there is a tremendous amount of cultural diversity in how intimacy is experienced in various families around the world. **Intimacy** is *the social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical trust that is mutually shared between family members*. Family members share confidences, advice, trust, secrets, and ongoing mutual concern. Many family scientists believe that intimacy in family relationships functions as a strong buffer to the ongoing stresses experienced by family members outside of the home. Christopher Lasch called the family a haven in a heartless world.<sup>3</sup>



**Socialization** of children is important so that they grow up to be fully functioning members of society. Children are born with the potential to be raised as humans. They will realize this potential if older family members or friends take the time to protect and nurture them into their cultural and societal roles. Today the family is the core of primary socialization, but many other societal institutions contribute to the socialization process as well.

Controlling sexuality and reproduction has traditionally been sanctioned within the context of a family. In some cultures, the father and mother selected the spouse of their children in many countries although it has never been that common in the U.S. Older family members tend to encourage pregnancy and childbirth within marriage or long-term relationships.

**Unwed mothers** are *mothers who are not legally married at the time of the child's birth*. Being unwed brings up concerns of economic, emotional, social, and other forms of support. When an unwed mother delivers a baby, it is often the older female family members who end up providing the functions of support for that child. Table 3 shows unwed mother births for the U.S. in 2000 and 2006. Most of the 4,266,000 live U.S. births in 2006 were to married mothers. But, about one in ten births was to teen unwed mothers and 35.8% of all mothers were unwed.

Table 3. Percentage of All Births that were to Unwed Teens and Mothers of All Ages, 2000 and 2006.<sup>4</sup>

Year	Births to Unwed Teens	Births to Unwed Mothers of All Ages
2000	11.8	33.2
2006	10.4	35.8

The last function, that of **ascribed status** is *present at birth*. You were born into your racial/ethnic, religious, and economic status. That shaped to some degree the way you grew up and were socialized. By far, in modern U.S. society, **achieved status**, or *status that comes as a result of your own efforts* is more important than ascribed status for most members of society. The degree of achievement an individual attains often depends heavily on the level of support her family provides to her.

Since marriage is very common in the U.S., it would be wise for this chapter to cover the process of pairing off and forming marriages as well as the process of divorcing and dissolving marriages that often occurs. Pairing off can be better understood by incorporating a few principles that tend to describe, explain, and help us predict how two people move from strangers to intimate partners during the pairing process.

## HOW DO WE PAIR OFF?

Numerous studies have established that homogamy is the most important predictor of how couples pair off. **Homogamy** is *the tendency to pair off with another person who is similar to us*. Most people are attracted to people of about the same beauty, about the same economic status, about the same value system, and often about the same cultural and religious background. It is not true, at least based on most research studies, that opposites attract. Typically, like-persons attract. We seek out and associate with people at the same clubs, the same workplaces, and the same universities and colleges. Individuals introduce their homogamous friends to others who are also like them. Similar people end up in similar places and organizations. **Heterogamy** is *the tendency to pair off with another person who is different in some ways from us*. Divorce research finds that the more heterogamous a couple is, the higher their risk of divorce. Risk does not mean 100% certain. There are many couples who are diverse on most of their characteristics and they are very happy and don't divorce. Homogamous or heterogamous, a good marriage takes a lot of work.

## THEORIES OF MATE SELECTION

Another explanation for pairing off is the **Social Exchange Theory**, which claims that *society is composed of ever present interactions among individuals who attempt to maximize rewards while minimizing costs*. It focuses on how rational decisions are made considering the fact that most of us want to maximize our rewards, minimize our losses, and make our final choices economically.

Try this: Go to the cafeteria and pick the person you find to be the least attractive. Ask him/her on a date and pay for everything. At the end of the date give him/her a kiss. Why do this you ask? Why would anyone in his right mind make such an effort to suffer in this way? We typically won't do these things because it would reverse the social exchange approach of maximizing rewards while minimizing costs. In the real world, we want more physical attraction, fun, affection, status, economic support, friendship, social belonging, and even popularity from our dating experiences. If you are really fortunate, you might have a date every so often that ranks high on all of these rewards, but we never truly get the perfect catch in a partner. Mostly because we are not perfect ourselves, we tend to pair homogenously with those much like ourselves (average people attract to other average people).

Another major principle that influences who you might pair off with is called **propinquity**, or *the geographic proximity of two potential mates to one another*. Ask most couples you know where they met and you'll probably hear something like "We met at school, work, or church." Still others are introduced by friends. You can't meet someone if he/she is not near you. Of course the Internet makes it possible and increasingly common for people who live far away from each other to meet.

What about online match-making sites? These are relatively new but they actually reduce the influence of propinquity in the acquaintance process. Eventually couples typically

spend time together before they make any long-term commitments. Finally, **filtering** is *the process of eliminating potential mates from the pool of eligibles in the market place.*

How many students attend your college or university? If you are looking for a female mate take that number and multiply it times 0.6 (in the U.S. about six out of ten college or university students are female). This equals the likely number of females in your market place. If you are looking for a male mate multiple by 0.4. Knock another 20% off the estimate because some will be married or already in relationships and that's the estimated market place total.

Now, how many people do you come into contact with each day? If you don't know then count the number of potential mates you see for two days. Don't forget to add in those you interact with at work or in other places, your roommate's friends and families, and club members). This is your pool of eligibles. Were there some you passed or have in the same class that you didn't count because you know it wouldn't work? If yes, this is what filtering is about—you filter out based on your best judgment and on Social Exchange principles.

Another factor in the pairing process is the **sex ratio**, or *the number of males per 100 females in a given population.* The U.S. sex ratio for young adults is out of balance—meaning that there are more males per females in the 18-29 age group. In 2000 the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that there are about 105 to 114 males per 100 females in this age group which means 5-14 extra males per 100 females.<sup>5</sup>

In 1970 Murstein developed a theory of marital selection which has been very useful in understanding how people move from being strangers to the point where they choose to marry or cohabit. The **Stimulus-Value-Role Theory of Marital Choice** states that *as people find someone they are attracted to, they initiate contact, spend time together comparing values and establishing compatibility, and eventually either break things off or make commitments toward marriage or cohabitation.*<sup>6</sup>

For example, a young man might see a young woman at a party and ask his friend if she's single. Eventually he moves over to her side of the room and introduces himself. If, after the forces of homogamy, propinquity, filtering, and social exchange support their interaction, they might go out together in the near future. After enough quality interactions in groups with friends and alone by themselves where they feel compatible and similar, they might eventually decide to date exclusively or “steady.” Over time this may lead to a proposal or a decision to cohabit. The original and continuing stimulus helps to establish similar values and eventually leads to semi-permanent or permanent roles.

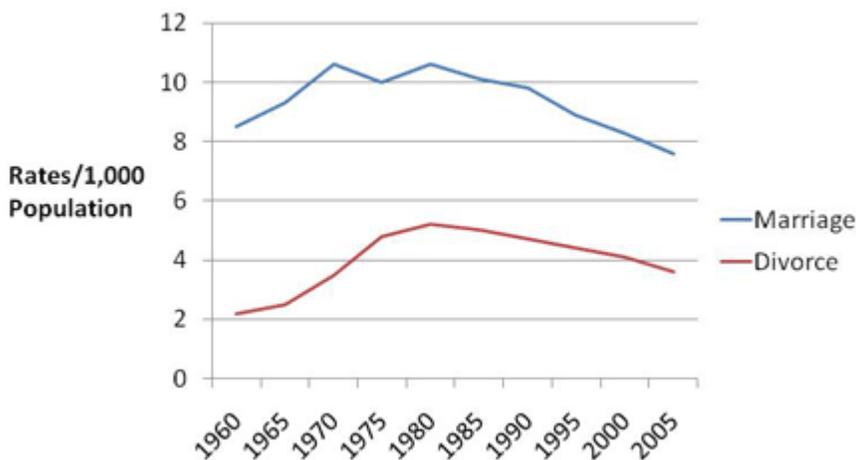
## **WHAT PREDICTS DIVORCE IN THE U.S.?**

In the U.S., states have the power to allow for marriages and divorces. The state you reside in regulates when and how you must apply for and be allowed to marry. Your marriage license is proof of your compliance to the state's laws. If a couple who has been married decides to end their legal status as a married couple, the state laws allow for **divorce**, or *the*

*legal dissolution of a marriage.* The U.S. historically had low divorce rates which spiked briefly after World War II, declined until the late 1960s, rose sharply until the mid-1980s, and finally declined gradually and continue to do so today. Figure 1 shows divorce rates for each of the five year segments between 1960 and 2005.

The power held by states to legalize the economic, social, spiritual, emotional, and physical union or disunion of a couple is not only traditional, but also enduring in U.S. history. Centuries ago fathers, clan or kinship leaders, religious leaders, and community members had the right to marry couples; these rights are now afforded to the state. States don't get involved in the spiritual or physical union, they just license it or legalize it the same way they license drivers or certify the legal sale of property. The most common **divorce rate** used by the U.S. Census Bureau is *the number of divorces/1,000 population*. Another **divorce rate** is *the number of divorces/1,000 married women*. The divorce rate that most hear about is the **predictive divorce rate** which is *the percent of people who had married in a given year who will divorce at some point before death*. The National Center for Health Statistics reported that in 2001, 43% of marriages break up within the first 15 years of marriage.<sup>7</sup> That was the highest official scientifically-based divorce risks estimate ever reported. So for example of those who married in the year 2001, about 43% are predicted to divorce at some point before their 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is estimated that close to half of them will divorce before one of them dies.

Figure 1. United States Marriage and Divorce Rates per 1,000 Population, 1960-2005.<sup>8</sup>



Years of research on divorce yields a few common themes of what puts a couple at more or less risk of divorce. Everyone is at risk of dying as long as they are alive; likewise, everyone is at risk of divorcing as long as they are married. Just as there are some things that can be done to minimize the risk of death, there are things individuals can do to minimize the risk of divorce (Table 4 lists some of these actions).

Some researchers find that early age at marriage is the single biggest predictor of divorce. They argue that this might be because individuals continue to change up until their late

20s. Try to remember who you thought was attractive your senior year in high school. Would you still find that person attractive today? Often those who marry in their teens outgrow one another because of their changed tastes. When marital data are collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, it often shows that those marrying in their teen years have the highest rates of divorce.

Most unwed mothers end up marrying the biological father of their babies. These marriages end in divorce more than marriages for non-pregnant newlyweds because the existence of children at the time of the wedding is often associated with higher divorce rates. These couples don't have a partner-only phase in which they can get to know each other. They have the additional strain of becoming parents at the same time as becoming partners.

Table 4. Actions Individuals Can Take to Minimize the Odds of Divorce.

Wait until at least age 21 to marry. Avoid marrying as a teenager because this raises your risk of divorce by 2 to 3 times.
Don't marry out of duty to a child. Those who become pregnant before marrying have a greater risk of divorce.
Become proactive by maintaining your marriage with preventative efforts designed to avoid break downs. Find books, seminars, and a therapist to help you both work out the tough issues.
Never cohabit if you think you might marry. Decades of studies show that cohabitation contributes to higher divorce risks among those who eventually marry.
Remain committed to your marriage. It takes hard work to make a lasting happy marriage.
Do your homework when selecting a mate. Take your time and realize that if you marry at age 25, you might be with this person for another 70 years.

Family scientists have borrowed from the physics literature a concept called entropy which is roughly defined as the principle that matter tends to decay and reduce toward its simplest parts. For example, a new car, if parked in a field and ignored, would eventually rust and decay. A planted garden if left unmaintained would be overrun with weeds, pests, and yield low, if any, crops. **Marital entropy** is the principle that *if a marriage does not receive preventative maintenance and upgrades it will move towards decay and break down*. Couples who take ownership of their marriage and who realize that marriage requires much work experience more stability and strength when they nurture their marriage. They treat their marriage like a nice car and become committed to preventing breakdowns rather than waiting to repair them after they occur. These couples read about and study research on happy marriages, they discuss their relationship with each other, and they are committed to the hard work it takes to make a good marriage.

## IS COHABITATION THE SAME AS MARRIAGE?

Cohabitation has been studied extensively for the last two decades, especially the contrast between cohabiting and married couples. Clear findings consistently show that cohabiting

and marriage are two different creatures.<sup>9</sup> Those who cohabit tend to establish patterns of relationships that later inhibit marital duration. In other words, people who cohabit then later marry are much more likely to divorce than those who never cohabited. Some researchers claim this is due to the idea that those who cohabit are low-committers and even when they marry the commitment level is less than for those who do not consider cohabitation.

Many individuals struggle with completely surrendering their single status. They mentally remain on the marriage market in case someone better comes along. Norval Glenn (1991) argued that many individuals see marriage as a temporary state while they keep an eye open for someone better.<sup>10</sup>

Robert and Jeanette Lauer studied commitment and endurance of married couples and identified 29 factors among couples who had been together for 15 years or more.<sup>11</sup> They found that both husbands and wives reported as their number one and two factors that “My spouse is my best friend” and “I like my spouse as a person.”<sup>12</sup> The Lauers also studied the levels of commitment couples had to their marriage. The couples reported that they were in fact committed to, and supportive of, not only their own marriage but marriage as an institution.

## **POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON MARRIAGE**

Keeping a positive outlook on your marriage is essential. As was mentioned above, as long as a couple is married they are technically at risk of divorce, but not all divorce risks are created equally. Newly married couples have a great deal of adjustment to work through, especially during the first 36 months. They have new boundaries and relationships to establish. They have to get to know one another and negotiate agreements about the who, what, why, and how of their day-to-day lives together. The longer they stay together the lower their risk of divorce.

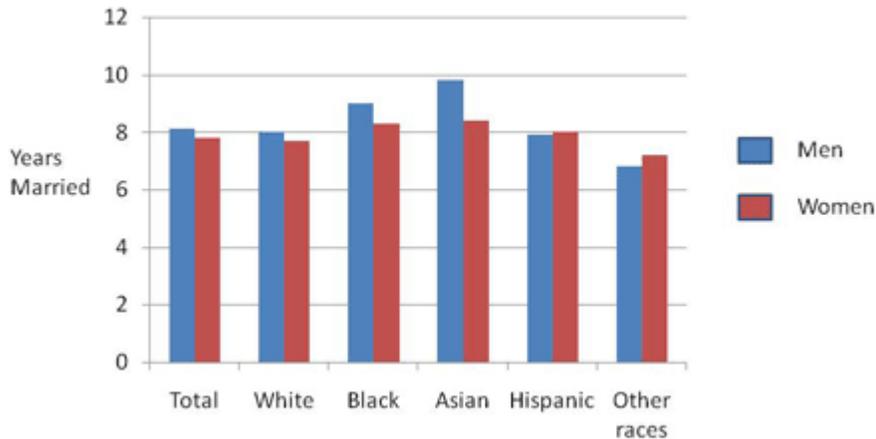
In Figure 2 you can see the median duration of marriage for divorced people 15 years old and older by sex and race/ethnicity. These data are exclusively for those who ended up divorcing. Those who do divorce can expect a median of about eight years of marriage.

A positive outlook for your marriage as a rewarding and enjoyable relationship is a *realistic* outlook. Some couples worry about being labeled naïve if they express the joys and rewards their marriage brings to their lives. Being realistic means understanding there will be challenges and being proactive in meeting those challenges.

“Doomed, soaring divorce rates, spousal violence, husbands killing wives, decline of marriage,” and other gloomy headlines are seen in electronic and print news stories. The media functions to disseminate information and its primary goal is to make money by selling advertising. The media never have claimed to be random or scientific in their stories. They don’t really try to represent the entire society with every story. In fact, the media is more likely to be biased by the extremes, based on the nature of stories that are

presented to viewers. Many media critics have made the argument for years that the news and other media use fear as a theme for most stories so that we will consume them.

Figure 2. United States Median Duration of Marriage for Divorced People 15 Years and Over by Sex, Race/Ethnicity, 2004.<sup>13</sup>



Doing your homework cannot be emphasized enough in the mate selection process. The old adage, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, truly does apply to mate selection. Taking your time, understanding yourself, waiting until you are 20 something or older, and finding a good friend in your spouse can make all the difference in the marital experience you have. There is a current trend of delaying age at first marriage. In 2005, the U.S. median age at marriage was about 27 years for men (Washington, DC was 29.9 years and Utah was 24.6) and 25.5 for women (Washington, DC was 29.8 years and 22.1 for Utah).<sup>14</sup>

Marriage is very popular among U.S. adults, in part because it does offer many rewards that unmarried people don't enjoy. Marriage has become socially controversial in part because of the intense political efforts to legalize marriage for same-sex couples. Regardless of your moral position on the issue of same-sex marriage, you can see the political quest for it as an indicator of just how rewarding it is to legally be a married couple. There are numerous studies and books on the benefits of marriage to married individuals. Table 5 lists 10 categories of these known benefits.

Keep in mind as you think about this that a toxic marriage has never been shown to be better than being unmarried or never married. It would be unwise to marry carelessly or to stay in a detrimental relationship. It would also be unwise to think that once you marry you are at the end of your problems. A newlywed once told her mother that "Now that I'm married I'm at the end of all my problems." Her mother wisely replied, "Which end, dear?"

Marriage requires preventative, proactive, consistent, and timely maintenance to be rewarding and satisfying. The bottom line is that the burden of your marital quality falls to you and your spouse.

Table 5. Ten Benefits of Being Married in Contrast to Being Single.<sup>15</sup>

Better physical and emotional health
More wealth and income
Positive social status
More and safer sex
Life-long continuity of intimate relationships
Safer circumstances for children
Longer life expectancy
Lower odds of being crime victims
Enhanced legal and insurance rights and benefits (tax, medical, and inheritance)
Higher self-reported happiness

<sup>1</sup> See Table UC1. Opposite Sex Unmarried Couples by Labor Force Status of Both Partners: 2008 retrieved 30 March 2009 from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2008.html>

<sup>2</sup> Taken from Internet on 30 March 2009 from Table A1. Marital Status of People 15 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Personal Earnings, Race, and Hispanic Origin/1, 2008 <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam/cps2008.html>

<sup>3</sup> Lasch, C. (1977) Haven in a heartless world. Basic Books.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from Statistical Abstracts of the US on 30 March 2009 from Table 87. Births to Teenage Mothers and Unmarried Women and Births With Low Birth Weight—States and Island Areas: 2000 to 2006 <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/09s0087.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Taken from Internet 31 March 2009 from A.C.E. Revision II: Adjustment for Correlation Bias <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/pdf/pp-53r.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> See Murstein, B.I. (1970) Stimulus-value-role: A theory of marital choice, Journal of Marriage and the Family 32, 465-81

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/01news/firstmarr.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Taken from Statistical Abstracts of the United States on 27 March 2009 from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2008/2008edition.html>, Table 77, Section 2

<sup>9</sup> See studies by Lawrence Ganong and Marilyn Coleman

<sup>10</sup> See “The Recent Trend in Marital Success in the United States” by Norval D. Glenn. Journal of Marriage and the Family, Vol. 53, No. 2, May, 1991, page 268

<sup>11</sup> Marriage and Family: The Quest for Intimacy, 2009, Cengage

<sup>12</sup> See “Til Death Do Us Part: How Couples Stay Together 1986 by Robert Lauer and also Google: Lauer and Lauer and Kerr various years

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/marriage/data/sipp/us-remarriage-poster.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Taken from the Internet on 2 April, 2009 from R1204. Median Age at First Marriage for Men: 2005 and R1205. Median Age at First Marriage for Women: 2005

[http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GRTTable?\\_bm=y&-\\_box\\_head\\_nbr=R1204&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2005\\_EST\\_G00\\_&-lang=en&-format=US-30](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GRTTable?_bm=y&-_box_head_nbr=R1204&-ds_name=ACS_2005_EST_G00_&-lang=en&-format=US-30) and

[http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GRTTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=01000US&-\\_box\\_head\\_nbr=R1205&-](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GRTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-_box_head_nbr=R1205&-)

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<sup>15</sup> © Paul Cheney 2009