

Protective effect of education on marriage differs between white and African-American women, study finds

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(Phys.org) —Married couples who have attained higher levels of education are less likely to divorce than less-educated couples, but a new study conducted at Rutgers School of Social Work points to significant racial differences.

"African-American women don't seem to enjoy the same degree of protection that education confers on marriage," said Jeounghee Kim, assistant professor at the school. "For white Americans, [higher education](#) is related to a lower chance of divorce, and this protective effect of education on marriage increased consistently among the recent generations. But for African-American women, higher education is not necessarily related to a lower chance of divorce."

In her study, published in the journal *Family Relations*, Kim observed that researchers have found the overall divorce rate has leveled off since the 1980s after more than a century-long rise. But

the rate has increasingly diverged by race and socioeconomic class, as measured by [educational attainment](#). The [divorce rate](#) has remained steady for [white women](#) since 1980, while the trend has been less stable for African-American women.

Kim separately studied white and African-American women in five-year marriage cohorts starting from 1975 to 1979 and ending in 1995 to 1999. She took into account [demographic characteristics](#) including age, [motherhood](#) status and post-secondary education (associate degree at minimum) when married, and geographic region. Kim also measured marital dissolution (within nine years of first marriage) rather than by legal divorce, which many African-American women eschew in favor of a permanent separation.

Kim's analysis revealed that the percentage of white women with some postsecondary education continuously increased throughout the cohorts. This was not the case with African-American women, whose educational attainment peaked in the 1985-1994 cohorts before declining.

Concurrently, she found the percentage of white women having marital breakups declined throughout the study period, while African-American women experienced an increase in the 1980s' cohort before declining in the 1990 to 1994 cohort.

Kim's findings were consistent with much existing literature: Women with higher levels of education, and thus greater earning potential, would make more attractive marriage partners than women without in more recent marriage cohorts. Also, their marriages tend to last longer than those of their counterparts – particularly among white women – with less education.

Kim's research raises questions as to why African-American women's higher education does not have a strong marriage protective effect. "One possibility is that college education does not translate into the higher earnings that would help protect marriage for African Americans, she said. "Another could be that educational attainment may be insufficient to address the high levels of economic inequality that even well-educated African Americans experience. Many are the first in their families to have attained a post-secondary education and do not benefit from the cushion of intergenerational wealth possessed by some white families."

A third possibility involves the gender gap in African Americans' educational attainment; there are nearly twice as many African-American women college graduates as men. "We see the increasing power of education protecting marriage within the same socioeconomic class," Kim said. "Well-educated white women may still have power to select an equally well-educated mate. Then, there may be a synergy factor – higher incomes, better and healthier lives, smarter kids – that helps sustain their marriage.

"On the other hand, the return on higher [education](#) may not be the same for many African-American [women](#), who have less chance to marry their educational equals. Also, because they are less likely to marry outside their race, their choices are limited."

Provided by Rutgers University

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