

W. BRADFORD WILCOX
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SOUL MATES

RELIGION, SEX, LOVE, AND
MARRIAGE AMONG
AFRICAN AMERICANS AND LATINOS

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African Americans and Latinos

W. Bradford Wilcox

AND

Nicholas H. Wolfinger

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*W. Bradford Wilcox dedicates this book to Alexander, Michael,
Clara, Yonas, Simone, and, above all, Danielle*

*Nicholas H. Wolfinger dedicates this book to
the memory of Wanda Song*

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PREFACE

Soul Mates is about the intersection of two of society's most venerable and consequential institutions. Religion and family have both organized human behavior throughout recorded history. Each continues to play a central role in public life and, for many of us, private life as well. Both have also been staples of social science since the publication of seminal works by sociologists Émile Durkheim and Max Weber. Following in this tradition, we are interested in better understanding how these two institutions intersect.

Profound currents in modern family life form the context for our inquiry. Sex, love, and marriage have changed enormously over the past half-century. Perhaps most notably, Americans spend far less of their adult lives in the bonds of matrimony. Indeed, the very meaning of marriage has changed. As sociologist Andrew Cherlin has noted, marriage now represents the culmination of young adulthood, rather than one of its important early milestones. Unlike in previous generations, children are much more likely to be born prior to marriage. All of these trends are inextricably bound up with social class. Americans without

four-year college degrees are less likely to marry, less likely to stay married, and more likely to have children prior to marriage. Conversely, college-educated Americans marry more, divorce less, and typically wait to have children until they are married. Finally, race and ethnicity continue to play a huge role in modern life—few Americans have been more affected by the so-called retreat from marriage than African Americans and Latinos, a major reason why this book focuses on these two groups.

This book represents the culmination of a collaboration that spans more than a decade. Our partnership has flourished in part because we bring different things to the table. Wilcox has long studied religion, while Wolfinger specializes in the family. Wilcox usually sees the forest, while Wolfinger is oriented toward the trees (including the statistical techniques necessary to do this sort of research).

Our personal lives are just as different. Wilcox is a conservative, a Catholic, and a married father with an interracial family. Wolfinger is none of these things (he is an unmarried, childless liberal, and a nonbeliever). Contrary to expectations, we have found that such an unlikely pairing is ideal for conducting research on religion and the family. As we describe at some length in this book, our polarized nation has often left us unable to see the whole truth about the social world. Many liberals would have us believe that everything that is wrong with the American family can be explained by poverty (and perhaps, in the case of nonwhite minorities, discrimination), while many conservatives inevitably point to a combination of failed values and feckless social policies. In the course of writing this book, we have come to realize that neither side has a monopoly on the truth. Inevitably the answers lie somewhere in between. So too do the solutions. As two coauthors with different worldviews, we believe we are perfectly poised to deliver a balanced, objective account.

We start by surveying the state of marriage and family in contemporary America, and talk about the competing theories that might account for how we got where we are now. Our account emphasizes the distinctive strengths and challenges of African American and Latino families. Next we talk about the benefits—and occasional liabilities—of religious participation. Subsequent chapters cover out-of-wedlock births, getting married, and the quality and stability of American marriages. We conclude with a discussion of how social policy might strengthen American families, and how religion might provide one vehicle for change.

The result of this inquiry is a finding that can variously be described as simple, powerful, and provocative: religion is a force for good in the lives of many blacks and Latinos. People who regularly attend religious services—denomination and tradition do not matter as much—are less likely to give birth out of marriage, more likely to get married, and have better relationships whether or not they are married. At the same time, we are careful to note that religion is not a panacea. Only a minority of Americans attend church regularly. Not all attendees benefit, and many non-believers are doing just fine in their relationships.

Collectively we have published six books. *Soul Mates*, our seventh, is by far our most ambitious undertaking to date based on the evidence we have marshaled: six national data sets, interviews with 25 clergy and 60 ordinary adults, and a year of ethnographic fieldwork, a period Wilcox spent living in Harlem and attending black and Latino churches there, in the Bronx, and Brooklyn. We also conducted focus groups in Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, and New York. An endeavor of this magnitude could not have come to fruition without the assistance of many people. Chuck Stokes performed all analyses of the Add Health data and also helped out with the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY).

Jeffrey Dew also conducted analyses of the NLSY. This book would not have been possible without their help. John Bartkowski, David Blankenhorn, Kathryn Edin, Christopher Ellison, Michael Emerson, Jennifer Glass, the late Norval Glenn, Tim Heaton, Sara McLanahan, the late Steven Nock, David Popenoe, Mark Regnerus, Christian Smith, and Jeremy Uecker provided valuable feedback or counsel on various parts of this project. Andy Roth kindly read the entire manuscript, and it is vastly improved as a result. Wolfinger is lucky to have such a great friend and colleague.

We thank Sonja Anderson, Mary Caler, David Franz, Young Kim, Tony Lin, David Morris, Sam Richardson, and Alta Williams for research assistance. Betsy Stokes provided valuable editorial assistance. We are indebted to their tireless efforts on behalf of this project.

At Oxford, special thanks are due to Cynthia Read. This book would have stillborn without her support and considerable patience.

Support for this research was provided by the Lilly Endowment, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the John Templeton Foundation, the Bodman Foundation, the Baylor Institute for the Studies of Religion, the Louisville Institute at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, the Center for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society at the University of Pennsylvania, the US Department of Health and Human Services (Grant 90XP0048), the William E. Simon Foundation, The Project on Lived Theology at the University of Virginia, and The Spiritual Transformation Scientific Research Program, sponsored by the Metanexus Institute on Religion and Science, with support from the John Templeton Foundation.

At the University of Virginia, Neal Grandy and Katherine Shiflett provided valuable assistance in navigating the administrative

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terrain of sponsored research. Cindy Brown and Bill Ernest did the same at the University of Utah. Wolfinger also thanks Sandra Earl, Sandy Stark, and Ashley Johnson for superb administrative support.

Above all, we are grateful for the counsel and forbearance of our families and friends throughout the process of researching and writing this book. Thanks especially to Mom and Dad, Amy, Andy and Liz, other Andy, Eric, the House family, Jack, Jessica, John, Korey and Sharif, Lori and Mick, Matt, Sasha, Sergie, Tim and Donna, and to Danielle, Mom, Pam, Bill, and the kids for your support over the long haul. Without your love and support, none of this would have been possible. Raymond Wolfinger, Nick's father, died as this book was going to press. He will be missed.

SOUL MATES

Introduction

In 1994, David Hernandez decided to get out of the drug business in Spanish Harlem and turn his life over to Jesus Christ.¹ After his brother was killed by younger rivals seeking to expand their turf, David realized it was time for a change. “It was a tragic moment in my life, and I was searching for answers,” he said. “Before, I had the view that I should make money, get ahead as fast as you can.” After his brother died, he put his faith in God, joining a vibrant Bronx-based Pentecostal church called Victory Chapel that serves mostly second- and third-generation Puerto Rican Latinos. Ironically, David then joined the New York Police Department (NYPD) (he had never been arrested while dealing drugs).

David’s religious awakening proved momentous not only for himself but for Marianne, his live-in girlfriend at the time. She had been in and out of relationships with men and grown distrustful of the opposite sex: “I was tired of disappointments; I was in a lot of pain.” But after attending Victory Chapel, Marianne responded to an altar call, went to the front of the church, and accepted Jesus Christ into her life. She and David are now happily married, have three school-age children, and are regulars at Victory Chapel.

Michael and Latisha Brown live across the city in Brooklyn, where they attend Faith Deliverance Church, a large African

American Pentecostal church. They first met while working at a McDonalds in 1989, but they did not begin to date until the early 1990s. Soon they moved in together. At the time, Michael and Latisha were not particularly sure where their relationship was headed. Michael was finishing up a degree at Brooklyn College, and they both partied a lot—in Latisha’s words, they were “club heads”—and were living well beyond their means, accruing debt on fourteen different credit cards.

By the fall of 1995, Michael began to get serious about Latisha. He told a friend he was going to propose. The following winter, Michael recalls, “We went down to Zale’s Jewelers and I put down an engagement ring, and I proposed to her on February 14, 1996. We had just given our life to Christ about two weeks before, and we were married in August that year.”

Latisha remembers things a little differently. She said she promised to follow Christ that winter because she wanted to marry Michael. “He [Michael] was like the best thing I had until then,” she said. “So I kind of lied to say I believe in Christ and all that. I just repeated everything the preacher said.” But when she and Michael began attending church and reading the Bible together, Latisha decided to make the faith her own. In April 1996, she made her own heartfelt personal profession of faith. Four months later, Latisha and Michael tied the knot. Ten years later they are happily married, work hard (she as a clerk in the Fire Department, he as a dispatcher for a taxi company), keep a tight eye on their weekly budget, and are pillars of their local church.

These two stories show how religious faith and church-going are related to marriage and family life among African Americans and Latinos in the United States. For some couples, as for the Hernandezes, the religious beliefs, moral norms, and social networks associated with their faith help foster successful

marriages. In social-science terms, religion appears to exercise a causal role in shaping the relationships of churchgoing couples. For others, such as the Browns, a burgeoning interest in getting or staying married can fuel a desire to find a spiritual home where both family and “decent” living are valued and reinforced. In the language of the social sciences, these couples are self-selecting into religious communities that legitimate their commitments to family and mainstream American values. For most of the couples who form connections between their faith and family life, the link is reciprocal. Religious faith fosters a strong family orientation, and family commitments drive people to deepen their reliance on their faith and religious communities.

These stories suggest that religious faith and churchgoing are bulwarks of marriage and family life, and decent living more generally, in the Latino and black communities. In this book we find that married and unmarried minority couples who attend church together are much more likely to enjoy happy relationships—and the unmarried more likely to get married—in comparison to similar couples who do not regularly darken the door of a church. Our book shines a much-needed spotlight on thriving minority couples and on how religion often undergirds their success. These topics have been largely ignored in academic and journalistic treatments of black and Latino family life.²

But this book also shows that religion is not a silver bullet when it comes to addressing the challenges facing African Americans and Latinos. Infidelity, domestic violence, and divorce can all be found among the ranks of black and Latino churchgoers. Religious faith and religious participation offer no guarantees of a happy family life. Needless to say, this is true for Americans of every creed and color. What is more, religion does not influence the sexual behavior and nonmarital childbearing of African Americans and Latinos as much as it does for whites.

Nor does religious participation reduce the likelihood of divorce for black and Latino couples. Our book also suggests that minority women who attend church by themselves—that is, without their husband or partner—do not experience any benefit in the quality of their relationships.

What kinds of challenges confront ordinary Latinos and African Americans in their marriages and family lives? Many minority couples face the same tribulations as do white, middle-class couples—juggling work and family responsibilities, coping with the ups and downs of married life, and trying to successfully raise their children. But the black and Latino singles and couples examined in this book are also more likely than Anglos to struggle with making ends meet, racial or ethnic discrimination, and, for recent immigrants, the difficulties of learning a new language and customs. Equally important, Latinos and especially African Americans are more likely than whites to have been caught up in the family revolution—marked by unprecedented levels of nonmarital childbearing, divorce, single parenthood, and multiple-partner fertility—that swept across the United States over the last half-century.

AFRICAN AMERICANS, LATINOS, AND THE FAMILY REVOLUTION

Before understanding how religion is related to marriage and family life among Latinos and blacks, we must first get some sense of the size and scope of the family revolution that has so altered the contexts of courtship, childbearing, and marriage in the United States in recent years. The family revolution is characterized by four features. First, and foremost, marriage has been deinstitutionalized as the anchor of the adult life course and of

family life itself: marriage is less likely to guide and govern the lives of men and women as they move into adulthood and, in particular, as they engage in childbearing, parenting, and romantic relationships.³ Second, at the cultural level, family-centered beliefs and norms that used to prioritize the welfare of marriages, children, and families have given way to individualistic beliefs and norms that stress the importance of personal fulfillment, individual advancement, and equality at all costs.⁴ Concurrently, structural factors like deindustrialization and falling wages have eroded the economic foundations of the American family.⁵ Consequently, when familistic and individualistic beliefs clash, the latter are much more likely to triumph than they were fifty years ago. In a word, the moral authority of the family is much diminished in recent years.

Third, the family has less influence over social life than it once did, with many of its functions being subsumed by the market or the state. Cooking, leisure, and the provision of care are all increasingly likely to occur outside the home. Fourth, given these cultural and social shifts, it is no surprise that people are less involved in family life over the course of their adult lives: they are having fewer children, spending a smaller share of their adult lives in a marital union or with minor children in their household, and investing less in their spouses than they once did.⁶ As a consequence of this family revolution, the family is less of a force in people's lives nowadays; the family is also more fragile insofar as ties between parents, and between parents and children, are more likely than they once were to be formed outside the bonds of marriage and to be sundered by divorce or the breakup of a live-in partnership.⁷

Judging by trends in marriage, cohabitation, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing, the family revolution has been particularly consequential for African Americans and, to a lesser extent,

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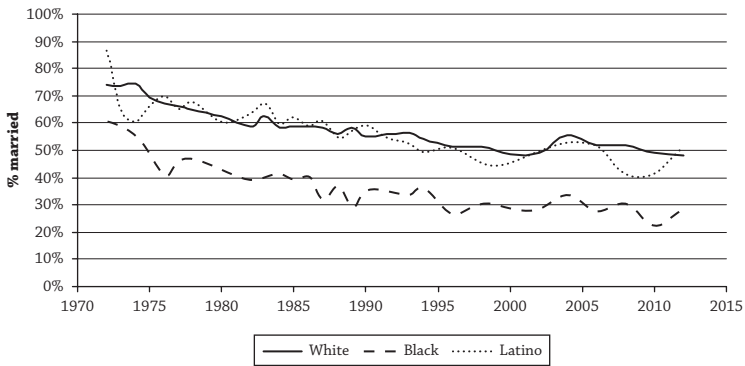


Figure 1.1 Trends in Marriage, Adults Aged 20–54, by Race/Ethnicity.

Source: General Social Survey, 1972–2012.

Latinos. As figure 1.1 makes clear, marriage rates fell from 1970 to the present, especially for African Americans. Fifty-four percent of blacks were married in the 1970s (averaged over the decade). This figure dipped to 25 percent by the second decade of the twenty-first century. For Latinos, the corresponding figures are 72 and 47 percent. Second- and third-generation Latinos living in the United States are less likely to be married than are their first-generation peers.⁸ White marriage rates witnessed a similar decline to those of Latinos, falling from more than 70 to 49 percent.

From 1970 to 2011, the number of cohabiting couples rose more than fifteenfold, from about 500,000 to more than 7.5 million couples.⁹ In 1995, only 2 percent of Latino householders were cohabiting; by 2012, the number was 9 percent. Among African Americans, the corresponding figures were 3 percent in 1995 and 6 percent in 2012; for whites, also 3 and 6 percent.¹⁰

The divorce rate is also higher now than it was in 1970, though it has declined a bit since 1981.¹¹ Currently, 21 percent of blacks who have ever been married are divorced, compared to 12 percent

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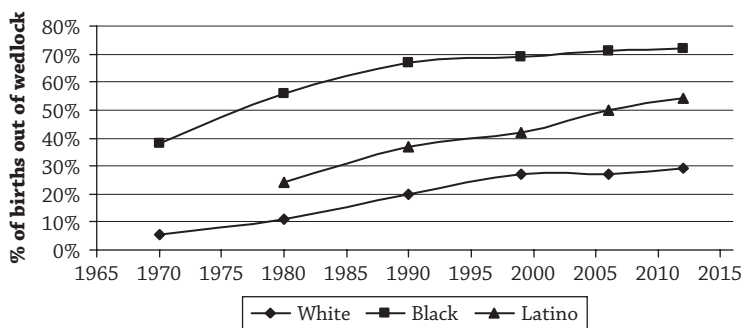


Figure 1.2 Trends in Nonmarital Births, by Race/Ethnicity.

Sources: B. E. Hamilton, J. A. Martin, and S. J. Ventura, "Births: Preliminary Data for 2006," National Vital Statistics Reports, vol. 56, no. 7 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2007); B. F. Hamilton, J. A. Martin, S. J. Ventura, "Births: Preliminary Data for 2012," National Vital Statistics Reports, vol. 62, no. 3 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2013).

of Latinos and 14 percent of whites. But here again, foreign-born Latinos are least likely to be divorced (9 percent), whereas more acculturated native-born Latinos are actually more likely to be divorced (16 percent) than are whites.¹² Moreover, foreign-born Latinos are disproportionately likely to marry their live-in partners and less likely to dissolve their cohabiting relationships.¹³

As figure 1.2 indicates, nonmarital childbearing has also risen for all Americans over the last half-century. In 1960, only 5 percent of children were born out of wedlock; in 2011, 41 percent of children were born outside marriage. Nonmarital childbearing is highest among blacks and Latinos. From 1980 to 2011, the percentage of children born outside of wedlock rose for blacks from 56 to 72 percent and for Latinos from 24 to 53 percent; by comparison, for whites it rose from 9 to 29 percent over this same period. Moreover, Latinas who were born and raised in America have higher nonmarital birth rates than Latinas who were born outside of the United States.¹⁴

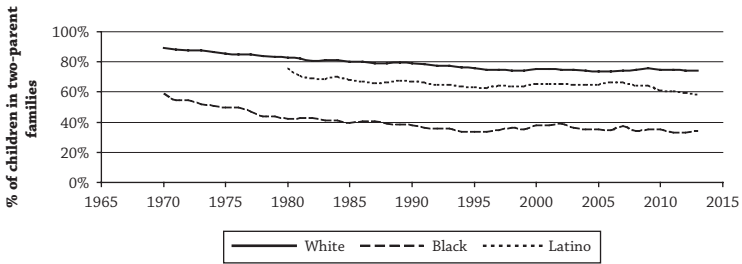


Figure 1.3 Trends in Child Residence in Two-Parent, Married Families, by Race/Ethnicity.

Sources: US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March Demographic Supplement, 1970–2013. Figures refer to children living with two married parents and exclude multi-racial/multi-ethnic children.

One of the most important consequences of the family revolution is that children are more likely to spend time living outside of a two-parent, married family. From 1970 to 2013, the percentage of children living without two married parents more than doubled, from 15 to 36 percent.¹⁵ As figure 1.3 shows, 66 percent of black children, 42 percent of Latino children, and 26 percent of white children lived outside of a two-parent, married family in 2013. Given current levels of divorce, an even higher percentage of children in each of these racial and ethnic groups will ultimately spend time outside a two-parent, married family. Most of these children end up in families headed by single mothers, while others reside in families headed by single fathers, grandparents, or foster parents.¹⁶

The family revolution of the last half-century has dramatically altered dating, marriage, and family life for adults and children in the United States, especially among African Americans and Latinos. What are the forces driving this revolution? Many liberal social scientists contend that structural changes in the American economy have been the primary forces behind this