

THE SOUTH AFRICAN FAMILY: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

HSRC Ten Years of Democracy Seminar Series

Presented by:

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INTRODUCTION

My aim in this presentation is to share with you some of the work we do on families at CYFD. Essentially, this work involves the use of information from censuses and sample surveys to describe such family formation and dissolution patterns as marriages, childbearing, divorce, widowhood etc.

Even though the essence of my topic is to address the question of whether the family has changed or continues to be what it has always been, I am afraid we do not have the ideal data to address this question directly because of the inconsistent manner in which data on families have been collected in the country. For e.g. to address questions of family change, there must be either a longitudinal or at the very least a consistent time-series data on the events that are central to the definition of the family as a social institution. But, this is hardly the case with most of the quantitative data sets that have been generated in the country since the transition.

Notwithstanding these challenges, I hope to use the limited information that I have to talk about the past and present situation of the family and hopefully shed some light on its future trajectory.

Because of the multi-dimensional nature of the family, I have chosen to speak about selected aspects of the family, namely, living arrangements, marriage, cohabitation, divorce and childbearing. Even though I use data mainly from the 1996 and 2001 population censuses, I do not hesitate to use other data sources where appropriate to address these issues.

SECTION 1: LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

First of all, I want to tackle the issue of living arrangements first because this dimension of family life has been the basis of a raging debate in South Africa giving rise to two main schools of thought in the family literature. One school suggests that the family patterns of blacks are converging towards those of whites with the nuclear family increasingly becoming the modal type in the society. The other school of thought argues that blacks are still attached to their cultural norms and values and therefore live in extended family households.

Table 1A:

Table 1A: Distribution of Persons and Households by Household Type, 1996-2001

Household Type	Proportion of all Persons		Proportion of all Households	
	1996	2001	1996	2001
One-person Households	3.60	4.08	14.97	16.21
Couple Households	4.75	4.35	9.63	8.65
Couple and Children hhs.	26.40	23.28	24.20	21.29
Couple, children and other relatives	13.31	18.61	8.57	10.65
Single-Parent households	11.58	9.97	12.79	11.7
Single-parent and other relatives	15.89	23.83	11.46	15.62
Non-related persons hhs	1.00	4.09	1.46	3.34
Head and other relatives	6.61	9.33	7.60	10.35
Couple and other relatives	2.62	2.44	2.45	2.28
Other	14.24	--	6.87	--
Total	100	100	100	100

Table 1A shows the distribution of persons and households by type for both 1996 and 2001. The principal findings are as follows:

(1) Between 1996 and 2001 there was about 22% increase in the number of households from 9.7 million to 11.8 million leading to a corresponding decline in average household size from 4.5 to 3.8 persons.

(2) These changes are reflected in the gradual but steady increase in the proportions of single-person households as well as persons living in such households during this period.

(3) But the most outstanding feature of the table is the fact that South Africa is a very family-oriented society. In other words, despite the devastating effects of death due to HIV/Aids and the disruptive consequences of labor migration, most people still find a family living arrangement, usually with close family members. For example, in 1996 81% of all persons lived in one or other type of family households compared to only 19% who lived in non-family households.

Figure 1: Distribution of households by Race of Head

Figure 1: Distribution of Persons by household type and Race of head

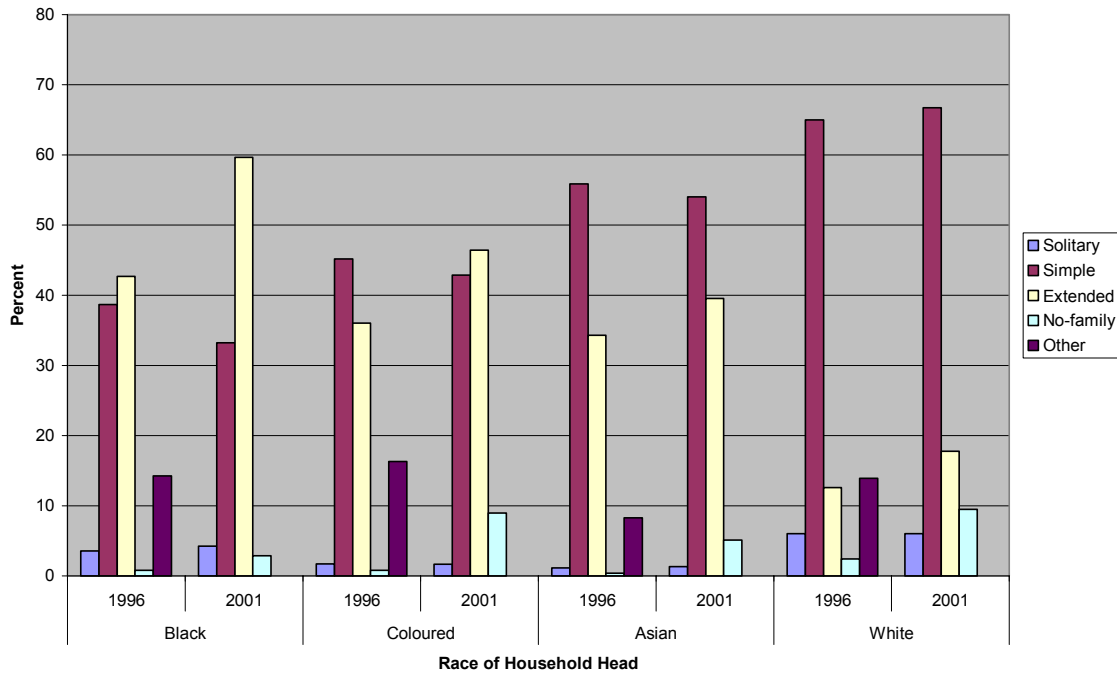


Figure 1 shows the distribution of household type by the race of the household head.

3 issues are noted here:

(1) Previous research that suggested that Africans are moving from extended family living to a nuclear family living is falsified by the data. What we see is that the Africans' cultural preference for extended family living continues to be important in spite of the onslaught of modernization and urbanization; In fact, the proportion of Africans and Coloureds who live in extended family households increased during the period under observation.

(2) The second feature is the fact that in line with its multi-cultural character, South Africa is characterized by two prominent family systems, namely extended family system which is clearly identified with Africans and a nuclear family system which is identified with Whites; Coloureds and Asians lie in between the two systems.

(3) There was a gradual increase in the proportion of whites who live in extended family households (Could be increase in divorce or economic constraints).

Table 1B: Multivariate Analysis of Nuclear Family Living

TABLE 1B: MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF LIVING IN A NUCLEAR-FAMILY HOUSEHOLD

Variable	Coefficient	Odds Ratio	100(e ^b -1)
Race:			
African	-1.282***	0.28	-72%
Coloured	-1.304***	0.26	-74%
Asian	-1.088***	0.34	-66%
Gender:			
Female	-0.43***	0.65	-35%
Age:			
10 to 19	1.188***	3.28	228%
20-29	0.937***	2.55	155%
30-39	1.247***	3.47	247%
40-49	0.992***	2.7	170%
50-59	0.414***	1.51	51%
60-69	0.044	1.04	4%
Education:			
No schooling	-0.076	0.93	-7%
Primary	-0.101	0.9	-10%
Matric	-0.089	0.91	-9%
Employment status:			
Employed	-0.032	0.97	-3%
Pensioned/Disability	-0.482***	0.62	-38%
Scholar	-0.108	0.9	-10%
Marital status:			
Divorced/separated	0.24*	1.27	27%
Living together	0.96***	2.61	161%
Married	0.461***	1.58	58%
Single	0.1	1.11	11%

MODEL X² =2683.79
DF=21

Reference categories: Race=White; Gender=Male; Age=70+ years; Education=Post-Matric;
Employment status=Unemployed; Marital status=Widowed/Widower

*p<.05; ***p<.0001

This was done to confirm the univariate and bivariate analysis in Table 1A and figure 1 respectively.

(1) This basically confirmed our finding about cultural preference as far as living arrangements are concerned; after controlling for several socioeconomic characteristics of the individuals, we found that Africans, Coloureds and to a limited extent, Asians are much more likely to live in extended family households compared to Whites.

(2) Households headed by women are likely to be extended than those headed by men.

(3) Household size is decreasing with time as households headed by younger persons are much more likely to be nuclear than those headed by older persons, especially persons in the 30-39 age range.

(4) Households headed by pensioners and disabled persons are more likely to be extended highlighting the dependence of people on social grants for survival.

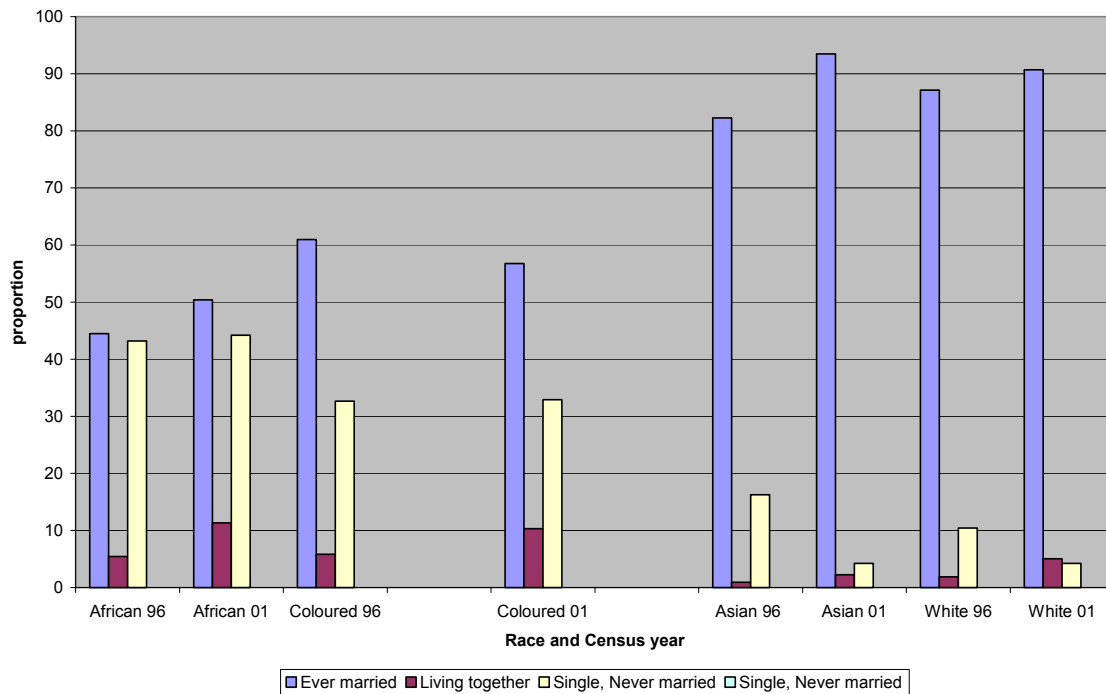
(5) Education has no effect on household structure as some theories seem to suggest (e.g. modernization theory).

SECTION 2: MARRIAGE

Marriage is an important family event since normatively it marks the inception of the family formation process. In fact, in South Africa, this is evidenced by the fact that the bulk of childbearing (two-thirds) occurs within the context of marriage **(See Figure 2: Parental status and marital status)**. What is the state of

marriage in the country? To answer this question, I had to use data from the 1997 October Household Survey (OHS) since the two censuses did not have any

FIGURE 2 : PARENTAL STATUS AND MARITAL STATUS



information on event history that would enable me to capture the dynamic nature of marriage¹.

¹ Since the OHS asked a question about **age at first marriage**, it enabled me to use survival analysis (The Life Table Technique) to model marriage patterns in the society. For example, using current marital status would not consider those who were single at the census date but would marry eventually; survival analysis considers everybody regardless of marital status.

FIG 2A: LIFE TABLE ANALYSIS OF TIMING OF MARRIAGE

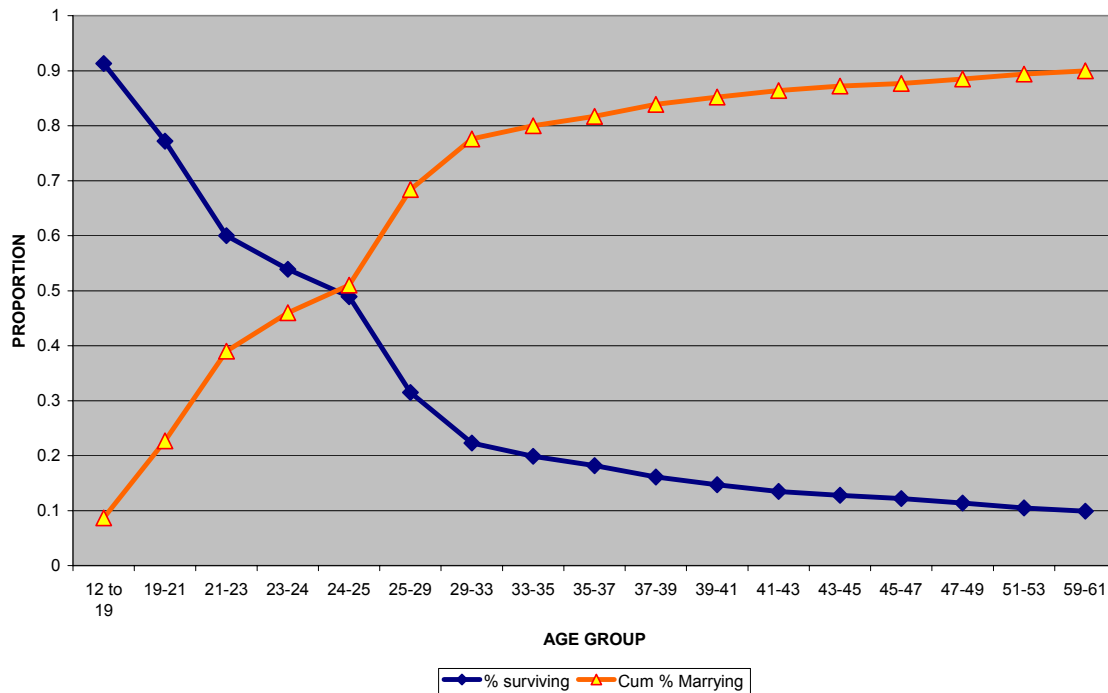


Figure 2A: shows both the survival functions and the cumulative proportions of women marrying at various ages in the country as a whole.

As the graph shows several findings emerge from this analysis:

- (1) Compared to most countries in Africa and in fact most developing countries, South African women marry rather late. The median age at first marriage is 24, that is, by their 24th birthday 50% of South African women have married².
- (2) This delay in marriage has in turn impacted negatively on the prevalence of marriage to the extent that the universal marriage pattern which characterizes most African societies is not the case in South Africa. Take the case of Ghana, where by their 25th birthday 95% of the women have entered into a marital union;

² In Ghana for example, the Median age at first marriage is 18 years.

in South Africa by their 25th birthday, only 68% of the women have married, with 90% of the women marrying only on their 59th birthday!

(3) On the whole, 11% of South African women do not marry at all, that is, by the time they reach menopause (their 49th birthday), 11% of women are still single in the country.

Figure 2B: Cumulative Proportions marrying at various ages by Race groups.

This next graph shows marriage patterns by race groups³.

(1) White and Asian women marry about a year earlier than their African and Coloured counterparts; the median age at first marriage for white and Asian women is 24 compared to a median of 25 for African and Coloured women.

(2) The higher marriage rates for Whites and Asians is further evidenced by the fact that whereas by their 29th birthday 93% of white and Asian women have married, African and Coloured women have to wait till their 63rd birthday for 90% of them to marry.

(3) Finally, the popularity of marriage amongst Whites and Asians is evidenced by the fact that by their 49th birthday, only 2% of them remain single compared to 12% of Africans and Coloureds who remain single by age 49.

³ Because of their similar socioeconomic characteristics, Africans and Coloureds were combined into one group while Whites and Asians were combined into one group.

FIG 2B: LIFE TABLE ANALYSIS OF MARRIAGE BY RACE GROUPS

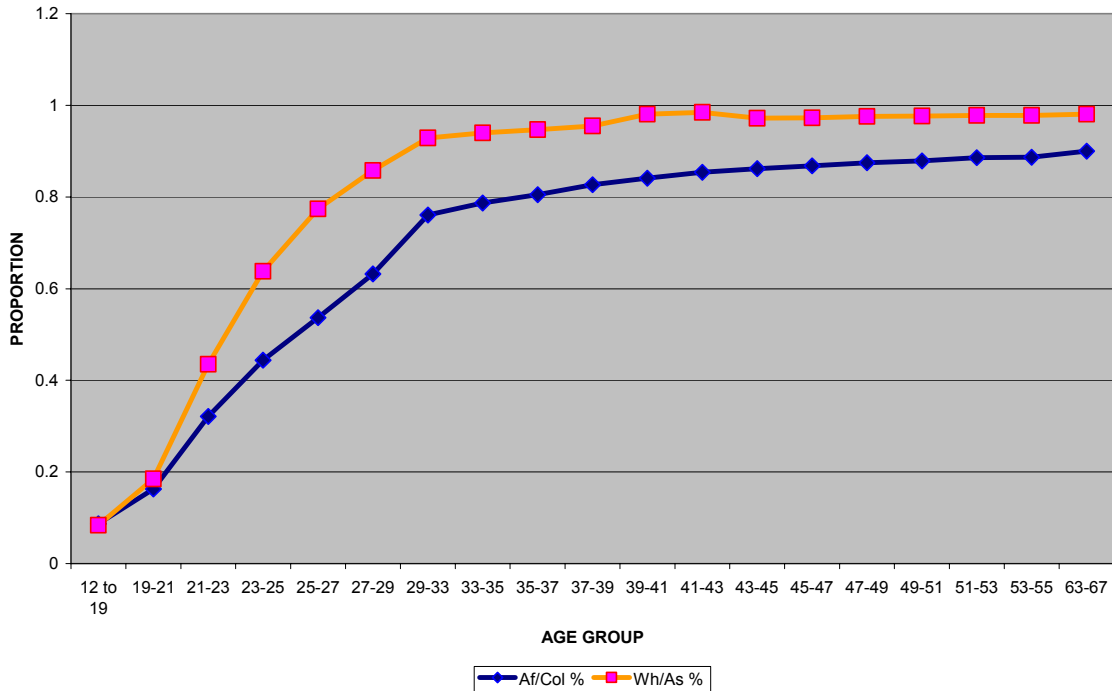


Figure 2C: Cumulative Proportion Marrying By Race and residence.

(1) After controlling for the effect of residence, the difference in marriage rates between Whites and Asians on the one hand and Africans and Coloureds on the other, remains with both rural and urban whites and Asians marrying earlier and more often than their African and Coloured counterparts.

(2) While amongst whites and Asians, there are virtually no difference between rural and urban residents in terms of both timing and prevalence of marriage, urban Africans and Coloureds tend both to postpone marriage and marry less often than their rural counterparts.

FIG 2C: CUMULATIVE % MARRIED BY RACE AND RESIDENCE

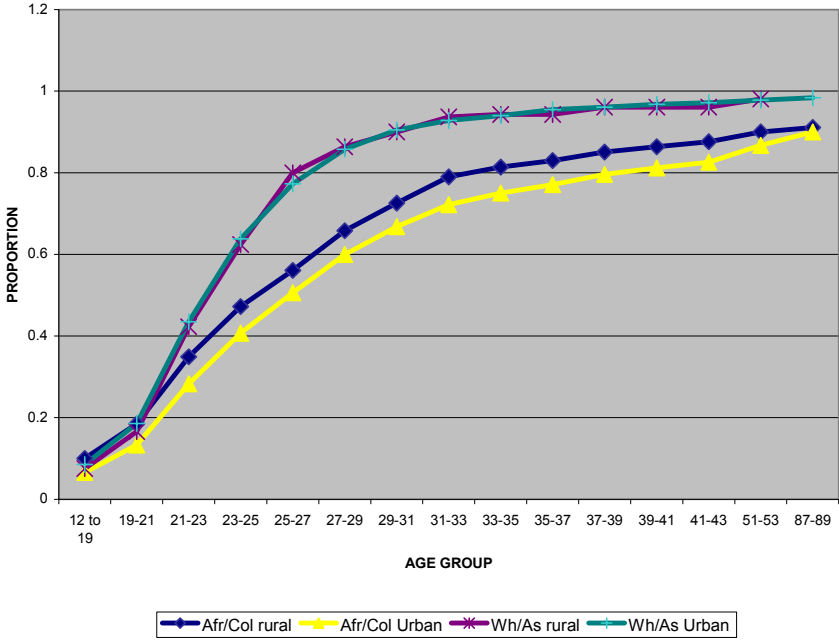
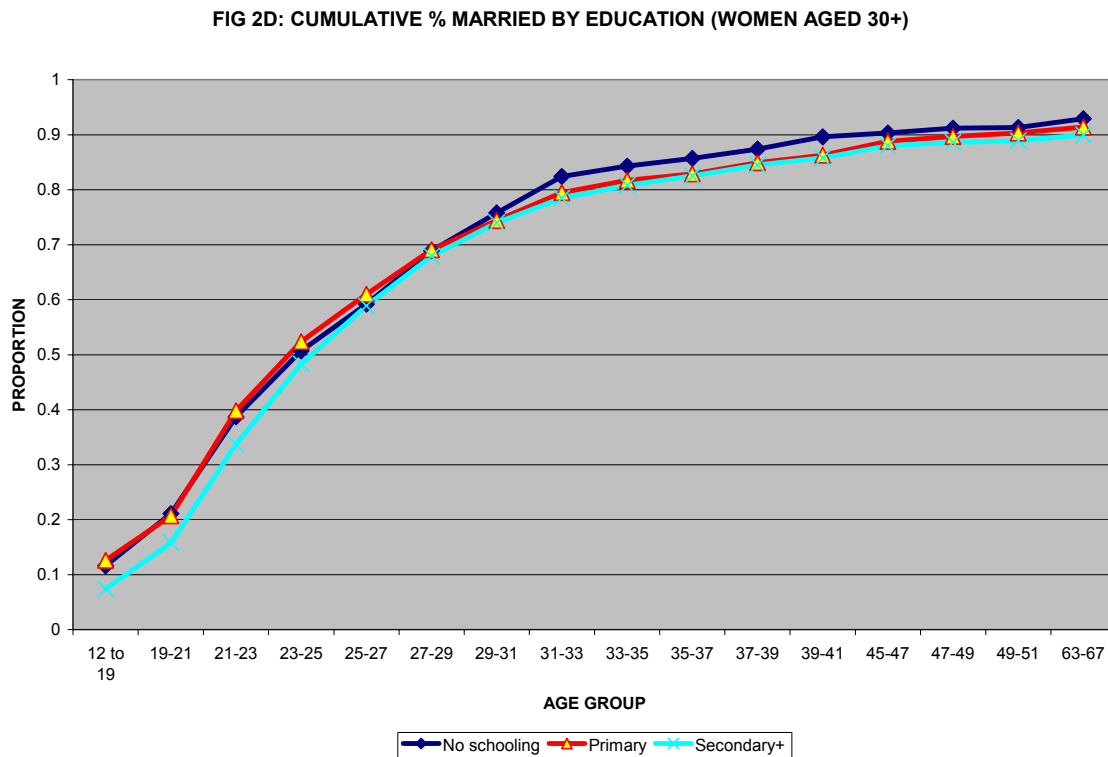


Figure 2D: Cumulative Proportion Marrying By Education (age 30+)⁴.

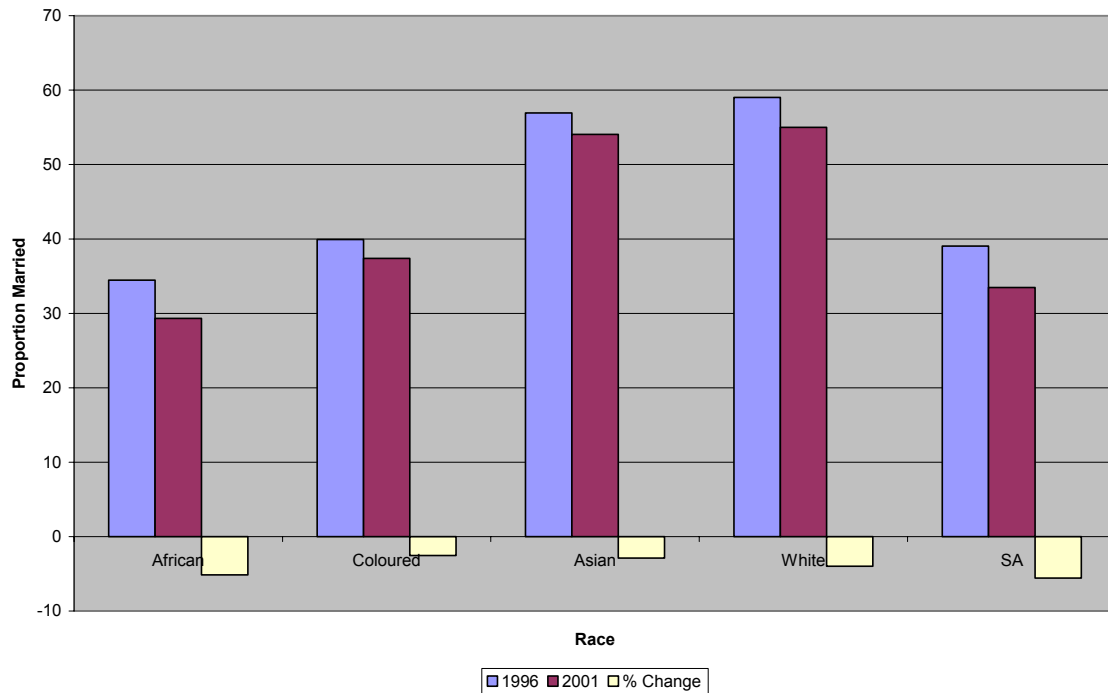
(1) Women with no schooling enter into marriage earlier than those with tertiary education. In other words, modernizing forces like urban living and formal education appear to exert a downward pressure on marriage.



(2) This tendency for marriage postponement and a decrease in its incidence is reflected in **Figure 2E** which shows that for all race groups there was a general decrease in the marriage rate between 1996 and 2001.

⁴ The analysis was limited to women aged 30+ to make education invariant. Since education was measured as the “current” education, we don’t know the status of education at marriage date so by limiting to those age 30+ hold it constant.

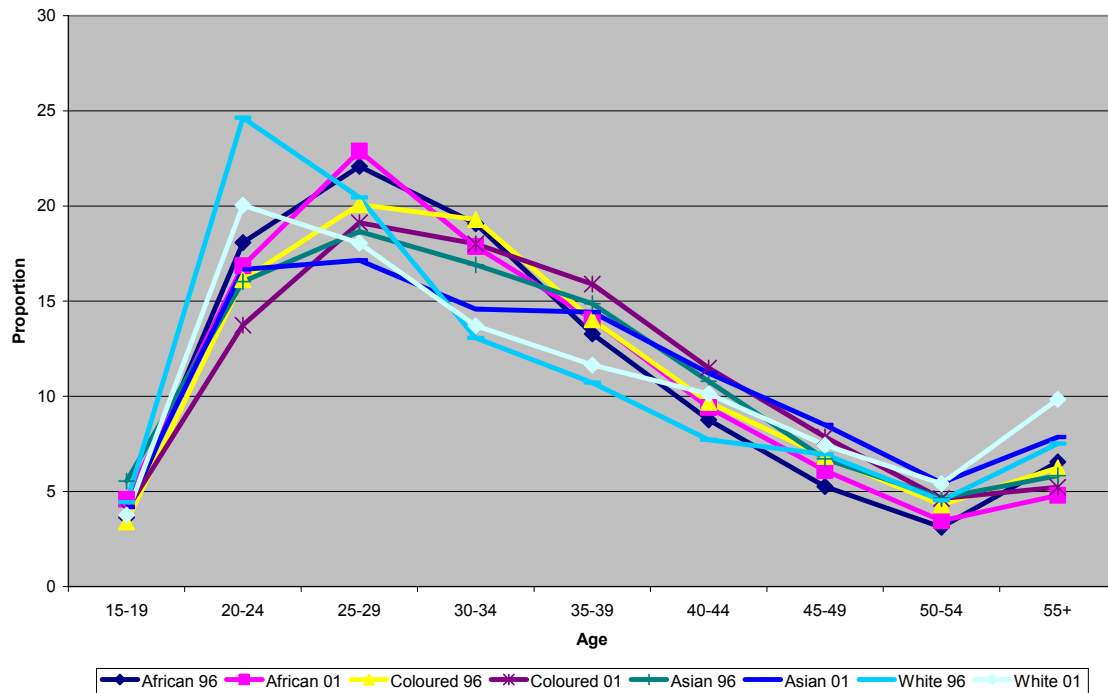
Figure 2E : Percent Change in Marriage Rates, 1996-2001



Cohabitation:

(1) Part of the explanation for the general tendency towards postponing or even outright rejection of marriage may lie in the increasing popularity of cohabitation especially, amongst the younger generation of South Africans. As **Figure 2F** shows, living together without formal marriage has been increasing steadily, especially amongst women in the 20-34 year age range, and especially amongst Africans; the rate of cohabitation decreased amongst white women in the 20-24 age group from 25% to 20% during the five-year period but increased steadily amongst those 30+ years of age.

FIGURE 2F : COHABITATION RATES (SA, 1996-2001)

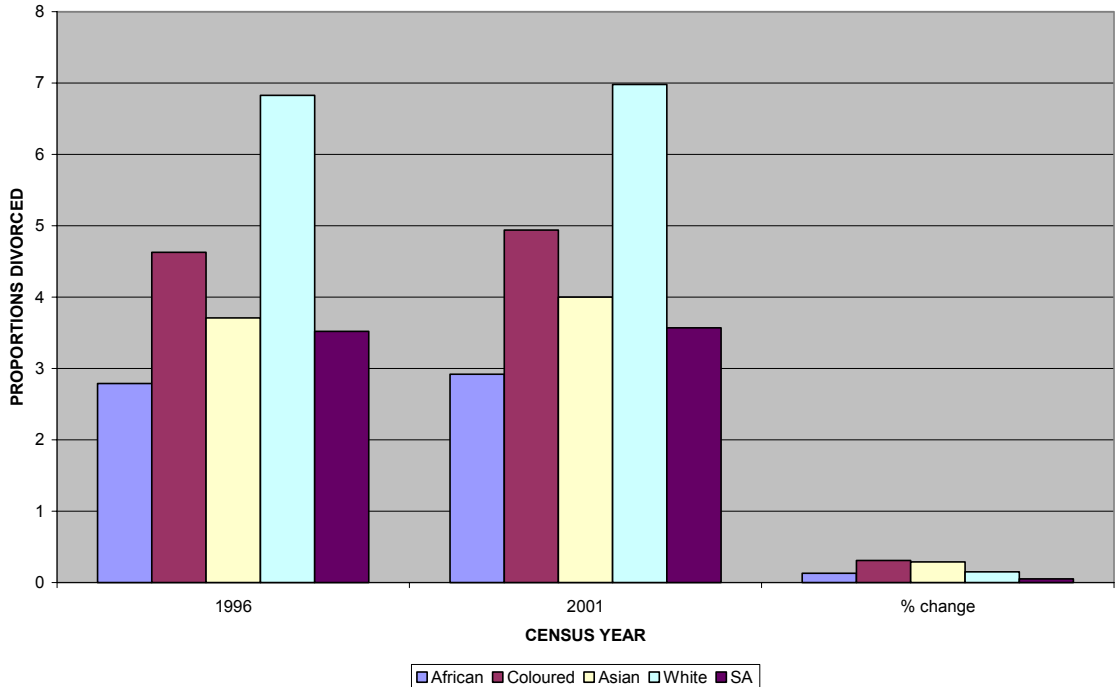


Divorce:

Even though South African women may be relatively slower to marry, once they tie the knot they tend to be committed to the institution of marriage⁵. However, since 1996 there has been a gradual but steady increase in the divorce rate for all race groups, with the sharpest increase being observed for whites and the lowest for Asians as shown in **Figure 2G**.

⁵ In fact a marriage in South Africa is much more likely to be dissolved through death than through divorce.

FIGURE 2G : DIVORCE RATES, 1996-2001



Interracial marriages:

One of the trends that we have been studying in our work is the rate at which people from different racial backgrounds are marrying each other as a measure of racial integration. Among some of the findings are the following:

(1) The overall proportion of interracial couples increased by 4.2% from 6.4% to 10.6%.

Table 2A: Parameters for Patterns of Inter-marriage

TABLE 2A: PARAMETERS FOR PATTERNS OF INTERMARRIAGE

	Estimate	Z-Value	Exp	Years until Homogamy reaches 0
Race Specific Homogamy				
African	8.90	32.01	7332.0	
Coloured	4.89	19.19	133.0	
Asian	6.25	20.92	518.0	
White	7.56	26.19	1919.8	
African-Coloured Inter-marriage	1.84	17.65	6.3	
Change in Race Specific Homogamy				
African	-.56	-3.83	.57	80
Coloured	-.21	-1.47	.81	116
Asian	-.70	-4.02	.50	45
White	-.93	-5.57	.39	41

(2) A vast majority of people are married to someone in the same racial group in each year. For example, between 1996 and 2001 there was a 17 percentage point increase in the number of marriages between Africans.

(3) But there were still slight increases in interracial marriages during the five-year period. For example, marriages between Coloured men and African women increased by about 1%⁶.

(4) The number of Asian/Asian and White/White marriages decreased by 14% and 25% respectively (Apparently homogamous Asian and White couples are leaving the country).

(5) When we used age as an indicator of trends over time, we found that intermarriage rates are increasing by about 3% per year relative to the overall rate.

(6) Education increases the odds that an African or Coloured person of either sex would marry an Asian or White, while lower education increases the odds that other groups will marry Africans.

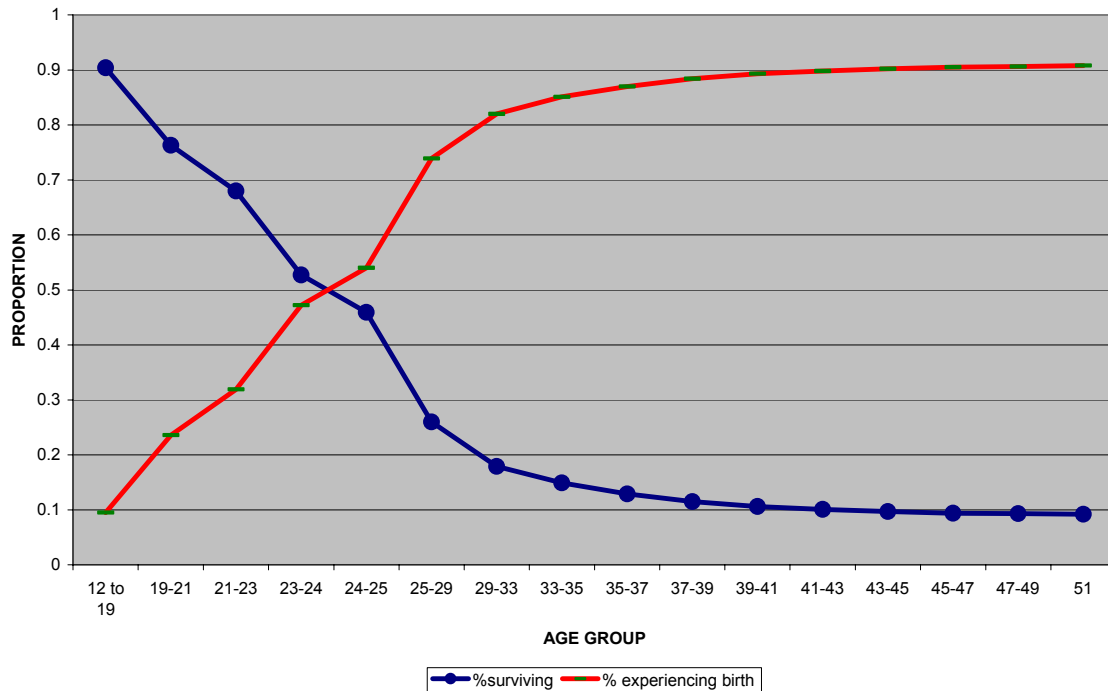
SECTION 3: CHILDBEARING

The last section of my presentation looks at childbearing as a family event. The importance of childbearing for the survival of the family institution cannot be overemphasized; in fact it has been observed that motherhood is experienced by over 90% of the women in the world (Rindfuss & Hirschman, 1981). Here too, to get a total picture of the childbearing experience, I used data from the 1996 census which asked about the age at first birth from the female respondents.

⁶ Relative to the number of such marriages in 1996, this is a substantial change.

Figure 3A shows both the survival function and the cumulative proportion of women having a first child for the whole country.

FIGURE 3A: LIFE TABLE ANALYSIS OF FIRST BIRTH IN SOUTH AFRICA

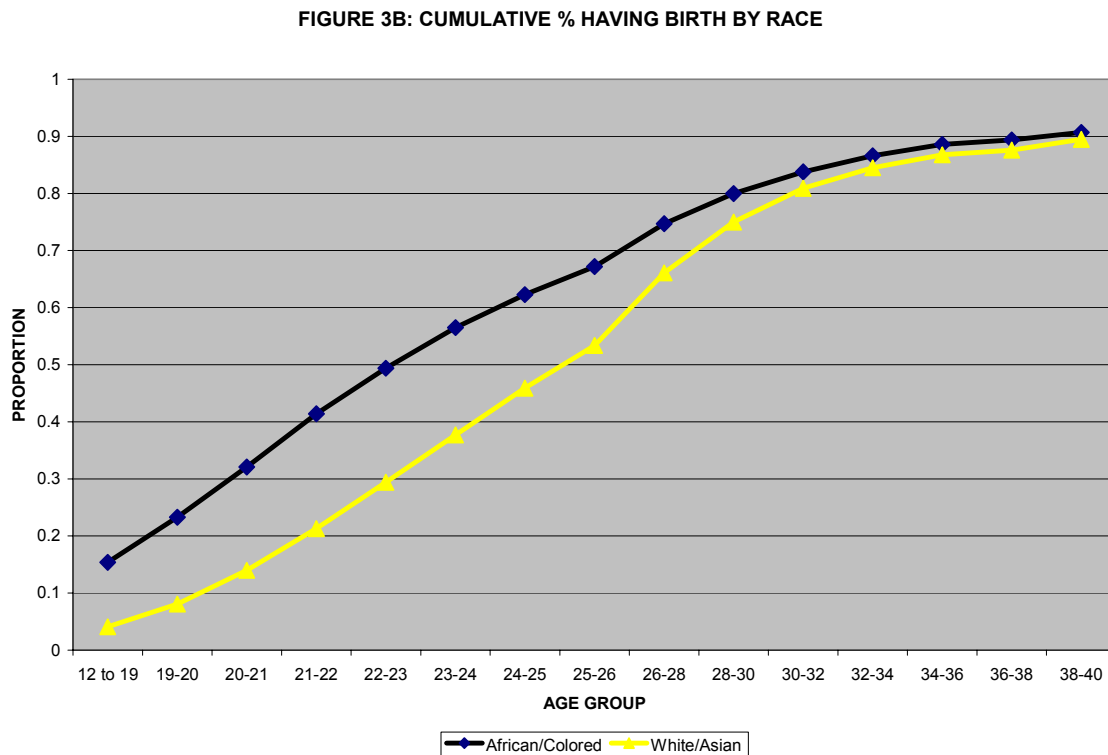


(1) Just like the timing of marriage, childbearing occur relatively late in South Africa. The median age at first birth is 24 years⁷.

(2) The effect of this late entry into parenthood is that the overall rate of childbearing is relatively low if one compares SA with other sub-Saharan African countries. For example, while by their 20th birthday 62% of Ghanaian women have already borne their first child, the proportion for SA women is about 24% by their 20th birthday.

⁷ The fact that the median ages at first marriage and first birth tend to overlap suggests a high incidence of both pre-marital conception and pre-marital birth in the population.

Figure 3B shows the cumulative proportion having first birth by race.

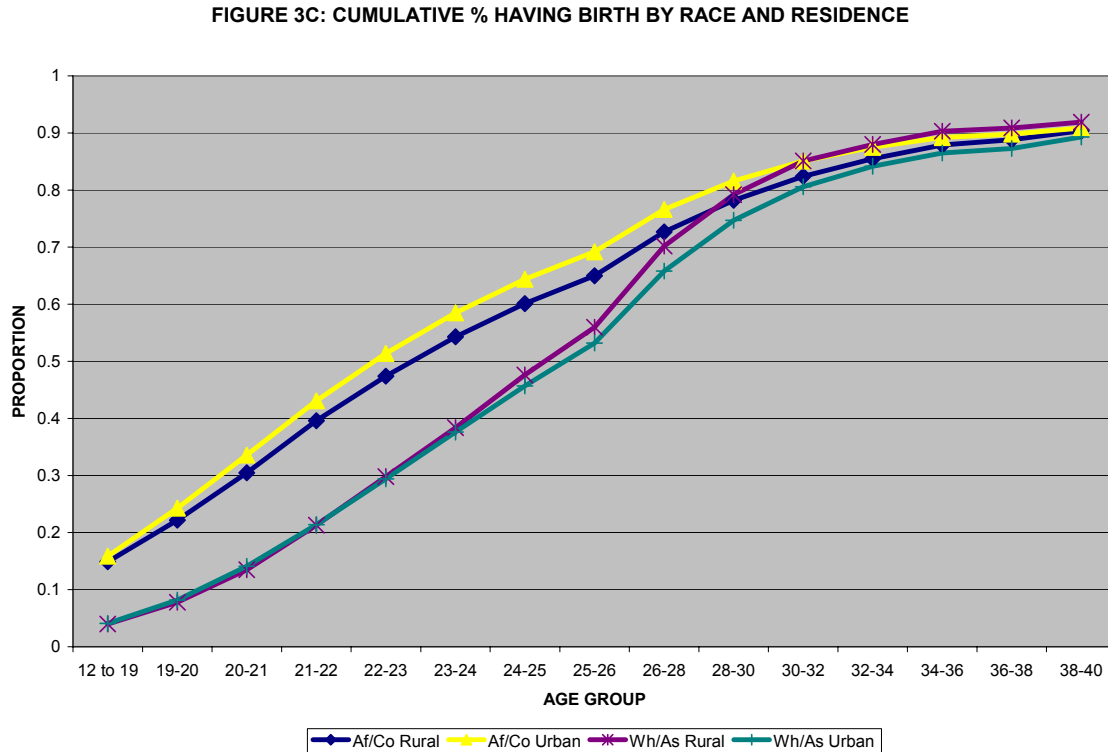


This graph clearly shows the differential family formation and dissolution patterns of the race groups in South Africa.

(3) We find for instance that while Africans and Coloureds marry later than Whites and Asians, they enter parenthood much earlier than the latter group. For example, the median age at first birth for Africans and Coloureds is 22 years compared to 25 years for Whites and Asians. Moreover, by their 20th birthday, almost one-third (32%) of Africans and Coloureds have had their first child compared to only 14% of Whites and Asians by the same age.

(4) What this means is that the incidence of pre-marital births tends to be higher amongst Africans and Coloureds than among Whites and Asians.

Figure 3C shows the timing and prevalence of birth by race and residence:

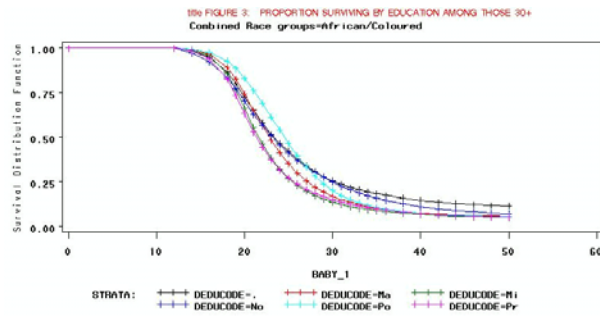


- (5) We see that after controlling for the effect of residence, Africans and Coloureds still initiate parenthood earlier than Whites and Asians which also means that they have higher levels of fertility.
- (6) Even though amongst older whites and Asians, rural residents are much more likely to initiate parenthood earlier than their urban counterparts, these differences are disappearing amongst the younger generation.
- (7) Younger urban Africans and Coloureds initiate parenthood earlier than their rural counterparts, while there is no difference in the onset of parenthood between rural and urban whites and Asians at the younger ages.

Figure 3: Proportion Surviving by Education among women 30+

(1) This shows that even after controlling for education, Africans and Coloureds initiate parenthood earlier than Whites and Asians.

(2) Within each racial group however, educated women tend to delay parenthood and hence have lower levels of fertility than the less educated women.



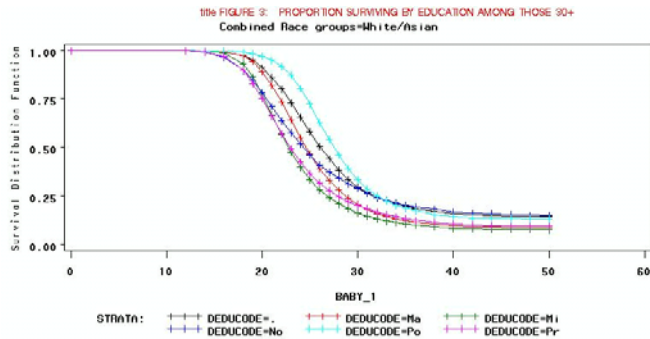
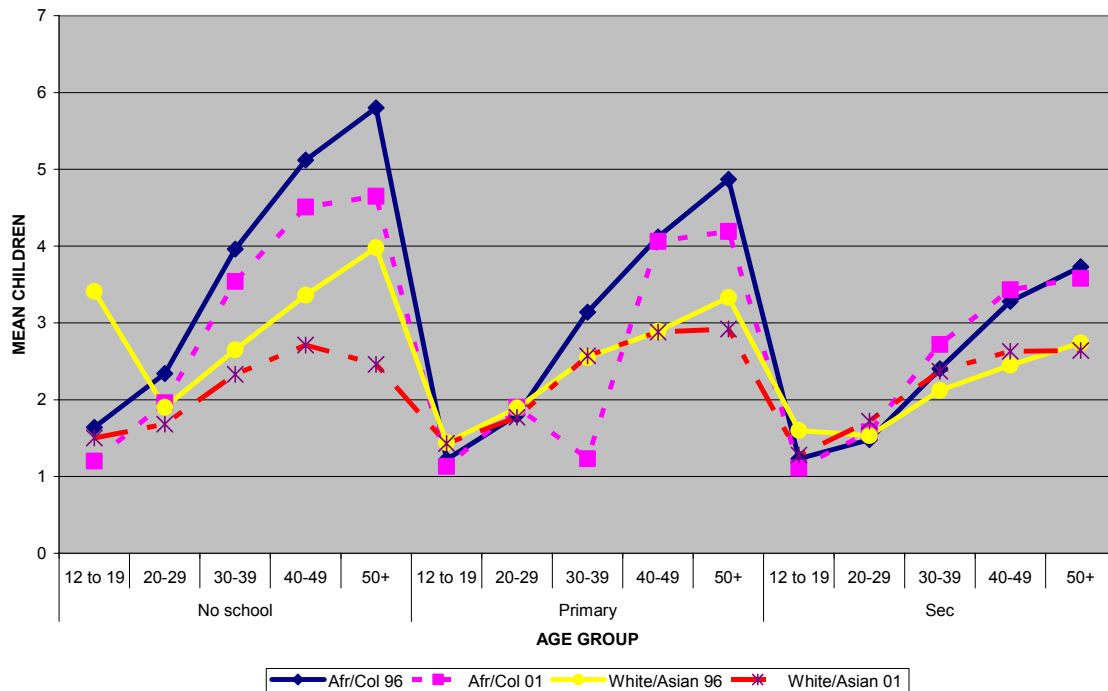


Figure 4 shows the Mean number of children ever born by race and age of the mother during the period. The essential findings are:

- (1) A steady decline in the overall fertility levels in the country.
- (2) In line with their relative early entry into parenthood, Africans and Coloureds have larger family sizes compared with Whites and Asians
- (3) Younger and more educated women have a tendency to have smaller family sizes compared with their older and less educated counterparts.

FIGURE 4: MEAN CHILDREN EVER BORN BY RACE GROUP



Conclusion and Discussion

My aim in this presentation was to examine the question as to whether the family has changed or maintained its basic characteristics in the ten years since the democratic transition. To answer this question, I used mainly the 1996 and 2001 censuses and some of the survey data that have become increasingly available since the transition.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these analyses:

(1) The most obvious conclusion is that unlike many sub-Saharan African countries, South Africa is characterized by the juxtaposition of two family systems, namely an extended family system clearly identified with Africans and Coloureds.

In this family system, marriage does not only occur late but its incidence in general is low. Also this family system is characterized by early entry into parenthood and relatively larger family sizes.

(2) The other family system is the nuclear family which is mainly identified with Whites and to some extent, Asians. This family system is characterized by early marriage and almost universal marriage pattern, but rather late entry into parenthood and smaller family sizes.

(2) The cultural preference for these two family systems is evidenced by the fact that in the face of such modernizing forces as formal education, wage employment and urban living, the two family systems have persisted over the years.

(3) On the whole, the universal marriage pattern which characterizes most sub-Saharan African countries is not observed in South Africa because of a relatively late age at first marriage.

(4) One explanation of the lower marriage rates lies in the increasing popularity of unmarried cohabitation amongst the younger generation of women and the gradual but steady rise marital dissolution through divorce.

(5) Childbearing is still an important family life course event but also occurs relatively late in the country.

(6) The relatively late entry into parenthood has naturally exerted a negative impact on childbearing in that today, with a total fertility rate of 2.9 children per woman, the country has the lowest fertility rate in the region.

I think what I have sought to do in this work is to provide evidence to support the fact that the family as a social institution in South Africa is undergoing a great transformation although this transformation is not necessarily linear in the sense of it shifting from some typical “traditional” pattern to a typical “Western” pattern. Rather the evidence suggests that while such modernizing forces as formal education, urban living and wage employment are shaping family patterns, crucial cultural traditions that ensured the viability of the family for certain groups, have largely persisted. The family is thus alive and well in the society.

Thank you.