

# UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM: ISSUE 4

A survey of recent family research and clinical findings prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families' 14th Anniversary Conference at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, April 8 and 9, 2011.

Edited by [Joshua Coleman](#), Co-Chair, Council on Contemporary Families, and [Stephanie Coontz](#), Co-Chair and Director of Research and Public Education, Council on Contemporary Families.

[The Council on Contemporary Families](#) aims to increase communication among family researchers and practitioners while helping the press and public access accurate information and best-practice findings about how today's families work.

Our 14th anniversary conference, [\*\*\*TIPPING POINT? WHEN MINORITY FAMILIES BECOME THE MAJORITY: How Does it Change Our Theory and Practice?\*\*\*](#) will detail some of the latest research and clinical findings on multiracial identities, reshaping of racial boundaries in relationships, ethnic and class perspectives on parenting, transitions to adulthood, paid and unpaid work, and sexual diversity. Consider how much our family landscape is changing:

- Last year, for the first time, births to “minorities” exceeded births to non-Hispanic whites. Four states -- California, Texas, Hawaii, and New Mexico – already have a “majority minority” population, meaning that minorities accounted for more than 50 percent of the population.
- Among American children, the multiracial population has increased almost 50 percent, to 4.2 million, since 2000, making biracial and multiracial individuals the fastest growing youth group in the country.
- Today, 36.7 million of the nation’s population (12 percent) are foreign-born, and another 33 million (11 percent) are native-born with at least one foreign-born parent. This means one in five people is either a first or second generation U.S. resident.
- Meanwhile, among all Americans, non-Hispanic whites as well as minorities, the chance of experiencing a major loss of income or out-of-pocket medical expense above what you can cover in savings increased by a third between 1985 and 2007, and may have grown by as much as 50 percent once we take into account the ongoing impact of this recession. The gap between lower- and higher-income Americans has been widening, leading to greater inequality in income, housing security, access to higher education and even the [chances of marrying](#) and the risk of divorce.

This issue of “Unconventional Wisdom” briefly summarizes a few of the findings CCF researchers and practitioners are studying about the way this racial, ethnic, and class diversity is playing out in family strategies, parenting, child outcomes, sexuality, and other intimate relations. We asked conference participants as well as other scholars and clinicians to send in short descriptions of some of their recent research findings, practical experiences, clinical observations about emerging family trends and issues, new interventions to help families, and other topics. See also: [Unconventional Wisdom, Issue 1](#), [2](#), and [3](#).

## Unconventional Wisdom: Issue 4

### **Multiracial and Biracial Individuals Are Not All Created Equal: Blacks Continue to be Shut Out**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Southern states decreed that “one drop” of African-American blood made a biracial or multiracial individual black. Even today, multiracial blacks are typically perceived as being black only, underscoring the stigma attached to being African American. But how are new Asian and Latino immigrants with mixed ancestry perceived? My research shows that they are much less constrained by strict racial categories. Racial identification often shifts according to situation, and individuals can choose to identify along ethnic lines, as white, or as American. I argue that like their Irish and Italian immigrant forerunners, the Asian and Latino ethnicities of these multiracial Americans are adopting the symbolic character of European, white ethnicity, indicating that they are closer to whites than to blacks at this time.

We appear to be entering a new era of race relations in which the boundaries of whiteness are beginning to expand to include new nonwhite groups such as Asians and Latinos, with multiracial Asians and Latinos at the head of the queue. However, at the same time, these processes continue to shut out African Americans, illustrating a pattern of “black exceptionalism” and the emergence of a black-nonblack divide.

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### **But Among African American and Latino High School Students, Darker Skin Tone May Mean Higher Grades and Social Acceptance**

A University of Michigan study of high school students found that the darker an African American or Latino student rated his skin tone, the higher his academic performance, academic confidence, and social acceptance. Researchers believed that the darker skin provided the students a greater immunity from accusations of “acting white.”

### **What Helps Minority and Working-Class Students Cope with Prejudice?**

Many studies have shown that negative stereotypes about minority students create a self-fulfilling prophecy: When minority students believe that they are looked down upon and see statistics showing that they are unequal in academic achievement, they tend to disengage from academic effort. Similar dynamics come into play with low-income children.

Well-meaning teachers may try to counter social stereotypes by providing extra praise for minority students. Yet a Columbia University study of 400 fifth graders found that, regardless of socioeconomic class, children who were praised for their intelligence gave up more quickly on difficult tasks than those children who were praised for their effort. The researchers reasoned that those who were praised for their intelligence quickly concluded that they weren't smart enough, while those praised for their effort, concluded that they simply

needed to try harder. Telling children that their brain was "a muscle that needed exercise" was a powerful tool for improving motivation and perseverance.

But pretending that stereotypes do not exist does not work either. A Stanford University study showed that when minority students learn to understand such stereotypes as an unfair advantage for the dominant group rather than a disadvantage for the minority group, they were more likely to remain engaged.

A University of North Carolina study of one hundred twenty-eight eighth-grade African American students found that those who had been prepared for racial discrimination and had been educated toward race pride by their parents had better self-esteem in the face of discrimination than those who hadn't.

### **Education, Income, and Time with Children**

Economists have traditionally expected that men and women who work in challenging professions and earn more money do less child care — perhaps "outsourcing" much of it. And they also expect that women with lower education will spend more time doing child care. But the class difference in time spent with kids is the opposite of what economic theories predict: Contrary to what economists have traditionally predicted, college educated moms spend 5-6 *more* hours a week doing child care than moms who dropped out of high school, even though highly-educated moms are much more likely to have jobs. And college-educated fathers, whose professional jobs tend to demand the longest work hours, spend 3-4 hours more a week doing child care than dads in the low-education group.

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### **Laying a Feminist Myth to Rest:**

#### **Men Don't Start Doing Less Housework if their Wife Increases Her Earnings**

For more than 15 years, family researchers have believed that gender trumps money when it comes to dividing household labor. Several large-scale studies seemed to show that when wives earned more than their husbands, the men actually started doing LESS housework to compensate for the threat to their masculine ego. New studies prove this finding was wrong. Men whose wives earn more DO increase their housework. For the first time we can state unequivocally that men's housework increases year by year as their partner's resources increase.

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### **Who Invented the Two-Career Marriage?**

Many people believe that the ideal of the two-career marriage was invented by white feminists in the 1960s. But it was black middle-class leaders, not white feminists, who first referred to women and men as "co-breadwinners" and advocated that women make a "threefold commitment" -- to family, career, and social movements. Long before Betty Friedan insisted that meaningful work would not only fulfill women as individuals but also strengthen their marriages, many African-American

women shared the views of Sadie T. Alexander, an influential political leader in Philadelphia, who argued in 1930 that working for wages gave women the “peace and happiness” essential to a good home life.

Although black wives and mothers have often HAD to work outside the home, they have also chosen to do so more often than white wives and mothers, even when married to men who could afford to support them. And studies in the 1950s and 1960s showed that African-American women were more likely than white women to make their decisions about work independently of their husbands. While 90 percent of white women in the 1960s whose husbands disapproved of their working did not work, this was true for less than 60 percent of black wives whose husbands did not want them to work.

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### **Professing Equality Vs. Living Equality**

On average, highly-educated and high-earning women and men express greater desire to share paid and unpaid labor equally than do men and women in less-skilled and lower-paying occupations, who are more likely to endorse specialized gender roles. But the time demands of professional careers often channel educated couples with young children into greater specialization than they say they prefer, with men being exempted from childcare and household work. Meanwhile, less-educated couples are more likely to face economic constraints and work schedule demands, including alternating shifts, that encourage husbands to do more child care and related housework and wives to do more paid work than they initially intended. The result, for some couples, is a mismatch between gender ideals and daily behavior. My work explores the reasons for this gap between “lived” and “spoken” gender egalitarianism among parents of young children.

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### **When Another Minority Becomes a Majority: Public Opinion on Same-Sex Marriage and Families**

In 2003, according to our Constructing the Family Surveys, 59 percent of Americans opposed same-sex marriage, with only 41 percent supporting. By 2006, 55 percent opposed same-sex marriage, and 44 percent approved. But by 2010, a majority of Americans – 52 percent – approved of same-sex marriage, with 48 percent opposing. Similar findings have now been reported by an August 2010 AP-National Constitutional Poll, a CNN poll taken the same month, and a March 2011 poll by ABC News/Washington Post.

In 2003, only 25 percent of Americans accepted same-sex couples without children as a legitimate family form. Twenty-nine percent were willing to count same-sex couples as family if children were involved. But 45 percent insisted that the only legitimate family was two heterosexuals.

By 2010, these percentages had also shifted dramatically. Only 34 percent of Americans refused to accept same-sex couples as families under any circumstances. By contrast, 34 percent counted same-sex couples with children as legitimate families, and another 33 percent included same-sex couples without children in their definition of family. More than

two-thirds of Americans now count same-sex couples with children as family, and a third of Americans believe that same-sex couples without children are as valid a family form as a heterosexual couple without children.

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### **How Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Latinas Negotiate Family Acceptance**

Like their counterparts in other ethnic groups, Latina lesbians, bisexuals, and queers must confront the possibility of rejection by their families of origin. I find that families are more likely to accept their daughter's adoption of an alternative sexuality when they do not resist societal and familial norms for appropriate femininity. Biological families are also more likely to accept LBQ Latinas' interracial/inter-ethnic same-sex relationships when their partners were White Americans as opposed to African American or Black immigrants. These findings point to the complex interactions between what is considered transgressive in terms of sexuality, gender norms, and racial hierarchies.

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### **A Different Kind of Mommy Wars**

There is a growing parenting divide between professional class women, who follow advice books to the letter and increasingly hyper-schedule their infants' and toddler's days with brain enhancement and social stimulation activities designed to pass on their cultural capital, and working-class and immigrant mothers, who are more likely to want to "let babies be babies." What happens when professional women hire working-class women as nannies? Torn between the demands of competitive mothering and an unforgiving workplace, employed professional mothers often attempt to get the working-class and low-income caregivers they employ to carry out the kind of parenting that fits their class and educational expectations. The result is a recurring tension, and sometimes outright clashes, not over class or race per se, but over different mothering ideals.

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### **Non-Standard Work Hours Can Increase Marital Conflict for Low-Wage Workers**

The poor and working classes are more likely to work non-standard work hours such as rotating shifts, night shifts, and over-time with little notice. While this may cause the father to increase his involvement with the house and children, it often creates more tension at home because couples have far less time together as a couple or family, carry more anxiety about arranging childcare, time off, and coordinating day-to-day details of family life. In addition, non-standard schedules can result in ongoing fatigue due to irregular sleep schedules which may lead to reduced family participation. While there may be benefits to parents who voluntarily choose non-standard schedules to balance family and work obligations, schedules for low-wage workers are more often determined by employers. The stress that is created for these families often leads to an increase in marital conflict and divorce proneness.

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### **Gay Fathers**

There are at least 60,000 gay male couples raising children in the US. It is much more difficult for gay men to start a family than for lesbians, and among the most common ways are public domestic adoption through the foster-care system, private domestic adoption, international adoption, and surrogacy, which can cost upwards of \$100,000. All of these options place huge financial and/or bureaucratic pressures on prospective parents, but my interviews with about 90 fathers reveal that many gay men have a very strong set of motivations to start a family. They see having children as absolutely necessary if they are to count as a “family” in the many cultural, economic, and political arenas where that is important. In addition, they often see parenthood as providing them with a moral foundation very different from popular images of gay men as self-indulgent and consumption-oriented.

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### **Multiracial Identity: It's Not Just a Question of Physical Appearance**

Not everyone with the same racial background or appearance racially identifies in the same way. Comparing biracial siblings who have the same parents, we found that variations in skin tone and other aspects of physical appearance are not as important as racial ancestry and cultural context in explaining how these siblings' identities develop. Multiracial siblings who are part-Black are very likely to identify as Black, regardless of how light-skinned they are. Multiracial Asian siblings from India, the Pacific Islands, and the Middle East show greater variability in the racial identities they develop. Racial identity seems much more flexible for some groups and much more rigid for others, regardless of phenotypical characteristics.

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### **Multiracial Children in Single-Mother Families**

Although racially mixed children are often thought of as living “between two worlds,” many live in “one-world” -- that is, with a single-mother. Using recent data from the American Community Survey, we find that while 20 percent of American children aged 0-17 live in one-parent homes, this is true of almost 30 percent of racially mixed children. Yet despite their disproportionately larger presence in mother-only families, multiracial children are not more vulnerable to poverty than monoracial children of color. In general, we find a moderating effects of racial mixture on the odds of poverty. For example, White-Black children have significantly lower odds of poverty compared to monoracial Black children and Hispanic children with non-Hispanic mothers similarly have lower odds of poverty than monoracial Hispanic children. Interestingly, Asian children with non-Asian mothers are less likely to be poor than monoracial Asians *and* monoracial Whites.



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### **Meaning of Family Differs by Class**

Family often means something very different to low wage workers than it does to affluent professionals. For affluent professionals like the physicians we have been studying, family primarily means spouses and children. For low-wage nursing assistants, by contrast, family means extended kin -- the mothers, grandparents, aunts and cousins, sisters and brothers on whom they must rely for much assistance and to whom they give much unpaid care. This attention to extended family ties stems less from different values than from their working conditions and low wages. While doctors work long hours, they not only earn about eight times what nursing assistants make, they also have considerable control over their hours. Unsocial hours, multiple jobs, and unpredictable shifts make it difficult for low-wage workers to survive without extended kin. Whereas physicians can hire non-relatives to do the family work they cannot cover, the nurses' aides must mobilize their own networks of mutual aid.

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### **Who Gets the Daddy Bonus?**

When men have children they start earning more—it's the "daddy bonus." The size of the bonus? About 11 percent of average earnings across a wide variety of educational, racial and ethnic characteristics. Is it because the men who are better earners are also more likely to become dads? Researchers say no. Is it because new dads work more—and therefore earn more? They do work more, but that isn't the source of the bonus. Having a wife seems to make a difference; unmarried dads don't earn more. And white dads and middle class dads are greater beneficiaries of the daddy bonus than other groups.

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### **How Far Have Women and Minorities Come?**

In 1970, race and gender outweighed education and skill in determining wages. Black college graduates, male or female, and white female college graduates all earned less than the average white male high school graduate. Today, education outweighs race and gender. In most major metropolitan areas, women in their 20s out-earn their male counterparts. And African-American college graduates have attained some of the most lofty positions in America – Secretary of State, President – as well as breaking into formerly closed ranks of business.

But race and gender still matter. It is women who typically interrupt or adjust their work for family needs, experiencing a motherhood penalty that ensures their lifetime earnings will be much less than men of the same class or education. Racial disparities in neighborhoods and schools still exclude many African-American children from the

educational preparation necessary to succeed in college. And when we compare black and white families with the same yearly income, the black families typically have only one-twelfth the wealth (home values, inheritance, savings) as their white counterparts, making them much more vulnerable in recessions such as this.

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### **The Myth of the Macho Mexican-American Dad**

Although popular culture tends to describe Mexican immigrant men as macho and uninvolved in family life they actually spend as much time interacting with their children as Anglo fathers (or more acculturated Latino fathers). Compared to Anglo-American fathers, Mexican-born fathers are just as involved with their children, and they interact in routine parenting activities like supervising children and taking them shopping as well as in traditional masculine activities like coaching soccer or playing games with them. And Mexican American fathers' high levels of involvement have positive outcomes for children: More father involvement predicts better performance at school, higher self-esteem, and better social skills.

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### **Understanding the Black-White School Achievement Gap**

Over the last 40 years we have made significant progress in narrowing the well-documented black and white school achievement gap. But on average, African-American children continue to enter preschool approximately one year behind their same-aged Caucasian peers in early vocabulary and pre-literacy skills. One factor contributing to this early language gap is differences in the amount and type of oral language that toddlers are exposed in the home as a function of income. Middle-income Caucasian children hear three times more words per hour than their low-income same-aged peers and are exposed to significantly more nouns, adjectives, and adverbs over the first three years of life.

Surprisingly, researchers have recently discovered that a similar pattern exists with the amount and type of nonverbal or gestural communication infants receive in the home. My research documents differences among racial and income groups in early gestural communication and language development, raising the issue of how socio-cultural factors such as parenting practices and cultural learning styles may contribute to the maintenance of the black-white achievement gap.

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### **Black Men Misdiagnosed with Schizophrenia Five Times More Frequently Than Other Groups**

Prior to the 1960s, American medical and popular discourses frequently assumed that schizophrenia was a white illness suffered by docile housewives or ethereal men of genius.



However, starting in the 1960s, at the same moment in time when civil-rights protests rose to the fore of American consciousness, many medical and popular representations shifted from depicting a disease of white docility to one of “Negro” hostility, and from a disease that was nurtured to one that was feared. Despite increased efforts for cultural competency training, schizophrenia is incorrectly diagnosed five times more often for black men than for other groups. Multicultural training is important, but it often does little to address how assumptions about race are structurally embedded into health care delivery systems.

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### **Dealing With Discrimination: What Personality Traits Help or Hurt Black Men?**

Racial discrimination remains a common experience for African Americans in the U.S. However, we know little about how this stressor interferes with functioning within African American families. My research on the associations between racial discrimination and family relationships provides initial evidence that African American men’s experiences of discrimination interact with features of their personality traits in an important way: Men who were more emotionally expressive experienced greater warmth, cooperation, and satisfaction with family members in the face of more frequent discrimination. However, men who were more oriented towards instrumental problem-solving and less toward emotional expressiveness had more family conflict and marital problems in the face of discrimination. These findings suggest that having more emotionally expressive traits may be a protective factor for the family relationships among African American men.

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### **The Real Face of "Out of Wedlock" Childbearing**

Many people hear about rising rates of “out of wedlock” childbearing or “nonmarital childbearing” and imagine ever more single woman bearing and rearing children by herself. The reality is that the proportion of births to unmarried but cohabiting couples has been trending upward. Even among non-cohabiting women with unwed births, about two thirds report that they are romantically involved with the baby's father, although not living with him.

In general, the fertility rate for cohabiting women is substantially higher than that of single women. But there is considerable racial, ethnic, and educational variation in the proportion of nonmarital births to cohabiting couples. Among non-Hispanic White and Hispanic women, 61% and 65% of nonmarital births occur while cohabiting, compared to a much lower 30% among Black women. Although highly educated women are far less likely to have a nonmarital birth than less educated women, when they do, they are more likely to do so in the context of a cohabiting relationship.

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### **Academic Success: The Immigrant Paradox**

Many youths from immigrant families outperform their peers in school despite higher-than-average rates of social and economic disadvantages. This is especially true for children of African and Asian descent. In addition, despite poorer socioeconomic circumstances and the stress associated with acculturation and migration, foreign-born children who immigrate to the U.S. typically have lower morbidity and mortality risks than U.S. children born to immigrant parents.

### **Are Rabbis Pushing Families Away From Judaism?**

According to the 2010 report by the Jewish Federations of North America, intermarriage has been increasing since 1970. While many rabbis think they are protecting Jewish heritage by encouraging in-marriage and by not performing mixed marriages, my own survey of more than 100 parents of Jewish intermarried kids demonstrates that many couples often won't talk to their rabbis at all because they know he/she will not perform the ceremony. Two factors point to the problem with the rabbinical stance: First, the North American Jewish Data Bank found that membership in a synagogue is an important factor in Jewish observance among the intermarried and second, younger Jews see Judaism as an individual choice, not necessarily a family choice. As a result of these factors, rabbis may be pushing more people away from their religion. Pushing families away from the synagogue at important life cycle events reduces the importance of the synagogue in the lives of these families.

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### **Myths About Aggression in Children**

Most psychological perspectives hold that children who are ranked as cooperative by their teachers and friends would be low on ratings for aggressive behavior. However, my research of youths from preschool through college found that children who are positively rated by their peers and teachers are actually more likely to use threats, aggression, and teasing of their peers. And rather than experiencing ostracism as a result of this aggressive behavior, they are sought out, are socially prominent, and enjoy positive esteem from their peers. I have referred to these children as "bistrategic controllers" (and "Machiavellian") to underscore how they use both pro-social and coercive behaviors to effectively achieve their aims. This research shows that aggression can be associated with social intelligence and well-being, and therefore should not be considered as the opposite end of a single dimension with prosociality at the other.

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### **Are Parents in the U.S. More at Risk for Estrangement From Their Adult Children?**

A recent study found that parents in the U. S. were more than twice as likely to have disharmonious and detached relationships with their adult children compared to parents in Spain, England, Germany, Norway, and Israel. While there are several explanations for this, my experience as a clinician working with estranged parents has shown me that the

individualistic nature of the U.S. culture which emphasizes self-development, autonomy, and personal expression is often at odds with other aspects of family life that require self-restraint, sacrifice for others, and the tolerance of conflict and difference. In my clinical practice I have found that parents are helped to repair a strained relationship by putting their communication into a more individualistic framework, which means respecting the “boundaries,” of their adult children, not inducing guilt, and avoiding direct criticism of them, their partners, or their choice of partners.

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### **How Divorce Hurts Women’s Health: It’s Not the Loss of the Man, but the Loss of Medical Insurance**

In 2006 we published an article showing that divorced women had more health problems 10 years after divorce, compared to the continuously married. The report was picked up by the popular press, and the *Chicago Sun-Times* ran a headline, “Stand by your man, or get sick!” But our follow-up studies have now confirmed that the greater health problems found in divorced women 10 years after divorce are connected to the loss of access to adequate insurance rather than the loss of a husband. Divorced women are much more likely to lack insurance or to have inadequate insurance, and those without adequate insurance are much less likely to schedule routine checkups and more likely to postpone doctor/dentist procedures. These health issues reflect a problem with the U.S. practice of making the medical care of many Americans contingent on their being married to someone whose jobs provides insurance.

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### **Doing Time = Doing Gender**

A big puzzle in the past few years has been over the rise in employment for women vs. the decline in employment for men. Psychology and family relations are some of the causes that people discuss. But research also points to the roles of race and economics: an analysis of Bureau of Justice Statistics data that indicates that incarceration in America reduces our male employment rate by about 1.6 percent. Each year the United States produces about 700,000 “ex-offenders”--and they are disproportionately African American. These ex-offenders have a much harder time on the job market. American's imprisonment--higher than anywhere else in the developed world -- is a neglected piece of the story about men, women, and jobs.

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