South Africa, like other developing countries, suffers from incomplete vital statistics registration system. As a result, censuses and surveys become primary sources of demographic information. Before South Africa's first nationally elected government in 1994, censuses and surveys were rarely used to collect marital information at the national level. In addition, surveys were also not conducted regularly (e.g., annually). Lack of such useful sources of demographic information led to biased demographic estimates.

In South Africa, regular collection of demographic information at the national level began with the inception of the annual October Household Surveys (OHS) program in 1993. The OHS is an omnibus survey conducted by Statistics South Africa—to help measure the country's development progress. The OHS collects information on individual characteristics, fertility, employment, migration, mortality, and household characteristics.

Questions on marital status in the OHS and the census permit an estimation of marital patterns at national and sub-national levels. For example, Udjo (2001) using the 1996 census data demonstrates that South African females have about the highest mean age (32.2 years) at marriage in the world. Udjo also found that the gender difference in the mean age at marriage is small in South Africa. These findings contradict the generalization that women in sub-Saharan Africa marry very early and do so to much older men (United Nations (UN) 1988, 2000; Aryee 1997; Caldwell 2000).

Despite the regular collection of demographic data in South Africa since the mid 1990s, little has been done in studying marital patterns at national level. Instead, most demographic research has focused on fertility, mortality and, to a lesser extent, migration. The dearth of marriage-related research is doubtless ascribed to the tendency among demographers to use marital status as a determinant of other demographic outcomes such as fertility and, to a lesser extent, mortality. Examples of studies positing marital status as determinant of fertility include: 1] Bongaarts and Jones (1982), 2] Pebley and Rutenburg (1986), and 3] Udjo (2001). An example of a study associating marriage to mortality was done by Goldman in 1993. The inclination to study marital behavior in relation to other phenomenon has diminished the importance of nuptiality as an independent area of research. As a consequence, some interesting marital patterns are not explored such as the finding by Udjo (2001) that late marriage is not a phenomenon peculiar to developed countries.

Against this background, we attempt to describe the patterns of marital behavior in South Africa from 1995 to 1999 using the OHS data. First, we examine changes in the composition of the marriageable population (15 years+). Second, and specific to the married, we present an overview of marriage in terms of its type, timing, and prevalence. Third, we examine the association between the two using multinomial logistic regression analysis with reports of current marital status as our dependant variable, controlling for other covariates. It is worth mentioning from the outset that our model specification does not imply causality. We are interested in the association between SES and marital status. Furthermore, we acknowledge that the direction of causality can go either way. The analysis is disaggregated by sex and race (African/Black, Coloured, Indian/Asian and White).

Data

Data come from the OHSs (1995–99) which were based on the stratified cluster sampling method. In three rounds of the OHS program (i.e., 1995, 1997 and 1999) 30,000 households were drawn from 3,000 randomly selected enumeration areas (EAs). In 1998 information was collected from 20,000 households drawn from 2,000 randomly selected EAs while in 1996 only 16,000 households were sampled from 1,600 EAs. Hence, in all the surveys 10 households were selected for interview in each EA. The 1996 population census (final database of EAs) was used as the sampling frame for OHSs 1997–99. The 1995 and 1996 OHSs were based on the 1991 population census list of EAs. Although the latter were based on the 1991 population census, at a later stage they were also weighted to the 1996 census. For the association between marital status and SES, we use data from 1999 because we do not expect huge variation in the association between the two variables over the period 1995–99.

In all the surveys, marital information was gathered by asking the respondents (or their proxies) of their current marital status: 1] never married, 2] married – civil, 3] married – customary/traditional, 4] living together with partner, 5] widower/widow, and 6] divorced/separated. Among the married, extra information on age at which they got married for the first time is available from the OHSs 1997 and 1998.

Data Limitation

The OHS data do not provide comprehensive information about marital behavior in South Africa. For instance, with regard to timing of marriage, the data are limited to analysis of *first* marriage, thus denying researchers an opportunity to study remarriage patterns in South Africa. With regard to types of marital unions the data do not permit an estimation of the prevalence of polygny—a remarkable phenomenon to study.

Methodology

We employ the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) which is the most commonly used measure of the mean age at which people marry for the first time (UN 1988, 1990; Smith 1980; McCarthy 1982; Xenos and Gultiano 1992; Pebley and Rutenburg 1986) and measure prevalence of marriage by the percentage of men and women ever married at age 50. We use simple frequency tables to examine the prevalence of unions and marriages. A measure of the SES index of the family is created by a method called principal components analysis (PCA) which is a statistical technique for extracting from a set of variables those few orthogonal combinations that capture the common information most successfully (Filmer and Pritchett 2001). These variables are a set of household assets (e.g., presence of a telephone, radio, car, etc) that were gathered from a responsible household member. We use marital status, age, race, sex, education, and province as the main variables of interest.

Based on the PCA approach, we divide individuals by the level of SES, a measure derived from household assets through PCA. Multinomial logistic regression models are estimated to examine the likelihood of reports of being in any of the marital status groups at the time of the 1999 survey. This multinomial analysis assesses the odds of being married, living together, widowed, and divorced-separated. We make all the comparisons with the never married group.

Results

Preliminary results show earlier age at first marriage among Whites and Indians compared to Africans and Coloureds. The age difference between spouses at marriage is highest among Africans and lowest among Indians and Coloureds. On average, a lower proportion (38%) of the marriageable population reported being married compared to those who reported that they had never married (48%), during the period 1995–99. Fifty-three percent of males reported as "never married" compared with 45% of females. The prevalence of cohabitation is around 5% whereas for widowhood it is 6%. Divorce/separation has the lowest prevalence at 3%. On average, the proportion of people reporting divorce/separation has increased over time. Correspondingly, there has been a decline in the proportion of people getting married over the years. These results in general suggest that the institution of marriage is eroding and this finding is consistent with the results from developed countries such as the United States.

When we look at the baseline association between marital status and SES, the results show that in 1999 individuals in the highest quintile were less likely to report that they are married whereas the likelihood of reporting cohabitation increases with the level of SES. For example, while individuals in the highest SES group are 51% less likely to report that they are married compared to those in the lowest quintile (reference group), they are also more likely (odds ratio (OR) = 2.72) to report cohabitation, *p=0.001.* As we move from the lowest to the highest quintiles, the odds of reporting widowhood and divorce decrease. After adjusting for race, sex, education, and province, the association between SES and marital status is still robust and in the same direction as the baseline model. Compared to Africans/Blacks, Coloureds are about 30% more likely to be married whereas the odds of being married for Indians/Asians and Whites more than triple at 3.45 and 4.50 respectively. Cohabitation chances between Coloureds and Whites are almost equal (OR = 1.54 and 1.53 respectively). Widowhood is high among Whites (OR = 5.09) followed by Indians (OR = 2.47) and Coloureds (OR = 1.28). The direction of the odds for reporting divorce/separation by racial group is consistent and significant as is the case with widowhood. The ORs of divorce/separation for Coloureds are 1.28 whereas for Indians and Whites they are 2.56 and 3.03 respectively. Compared to males, the odds among females of reporting being married increase by 11%, of cohabitation increase by 9% whereas for widowhood and divorce/separation the odds increase by are 5.32 and 2.00 respectively.

Individuals with at least primary education are less likely to marry, cohabit, be widowed, or divorced-separated compared to those with no education. For example, the odds of being married for those with primary and secondary education are 0.30 and 0.14 respectively. The data also show differences in the likelihood of reports of any of the marital statuses considered by province of residence. In Free State and Limpopo provinces, people are more likely to report being married (ORs = 1.29 and 1.14 respectively) whereas in Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Kwazulu-Natal, North West and Mpumalanga the odds of reporting being married are low. In Northern Cape and Gauteng, people are more likely to cohabit (OR = 1.32 and 1.18 respectively) than in Eastern Cape (OR = 0.24) Kwazulu-Natal (OR = 0.69), North West (OR = 0.73), and Limpopo province (OR = 0.30). Widowhood is high in Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, and Limpopo provinces. Reports of divorce/separation are highest in Free State (OR = 1.91) followed by Gauteng at 1.36 whereas lowest reports of divorce/separation are found in Northern Cape and Kwazulu-Natal.

Conclusions

Marriage is one of the demographic behaviors that can change over time as a response to a number of factors at the individual or aggregate level. Its definition also varies from one society to another. The changing definition creates problems for researchers in their analyses when they are comparing findings from different countries over time. Even within one country, the definition of marriage may change from one group of people to the other. In the end, studying marriage has proved to be taxing.

Notwithstanding the challenges of studying marriage, we set out in this study to examine the patterns of marital behavior in South Africa between 1995 and 1999 using the OHS data. The availability of time series data on marital status in one country permits us to pursue this goal. Specifically, our objectives are to present an overview of marriage in terms of types, timing, and prevalence. In addition, we are interested in the relationship between SES and marital status using the most recent data available. We feel that a lot of changes have been going on in South African between 1995 and 1999 both in terms of socioeconomic development and individual behavior. Marital behavior possibly will be influenced by some of these driving forces. We hope that our research will contribute to the existing literature on nuptiality in South Africa.

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