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Fertility of Single and Cohabiting Women

Historically, fertility outside formal marriage has been referred to variously as bastardy, illegitimacy, or out-of-wedlock childbearing, with such terms typically

connoting the inferior status of children born in such circumstances. More recently, the use of these terms has declined, in part because they presume an answer to the question of whether 'inferior status' is a necessary consequence of being born to an unmarried woman or whether some of this disadvantage might stem from other causes. Instead, terms such as nonmarital fertility or childbearing by single or cohabiting women, which carry more neutral connotations, have seen increasing usage.

1. Measurement

Measuring nonmarital fertility requires knowledge of at least two demographic statuses—fertility and marriage—and ideally a third—whether a birth occurs within a cohabiting union. By and large, identifying births as occurring within or outside formal marriage is a straightforward matter given sufficiently detailed data. However, it is useful to identify potential inconsistencies across alternative definitions of nonmarital fertility; for example, 'the fertility of single or cohabiting women' vs. 'childbearing to unwed parents.' Consider a birth conceived within a marital union in which the father dies before the child is born. Viewed one way, the child was conceived to married parents; viewed another way, the mother was single at birth by virtue of the death of her spouse. Similar issues arise for legitimated births or births to separated parents. In the latter case, because the birth occurs prior to the dissolution of a formal marital union, one might view it as a marital birth. However, the child may have been conceived by the woman and a man other than her husband, either before or after marital separation; thus, another definition might classify such a birth as nonmarital. Furthermore, note that the period between separation and divorce can be lengthy, with the timing of a formal divorce decree often a response to various factors, including the outcome (e.g., childbearing) under study. Consequently, some researchers have adopted an operational definition that shifts emphasis from formal to *de facto* marital status, thus including as nonmarital those births that occur between separation—marking the informal but behavioral dissolution of a union—and divorce—marking the formal dissolution of a union.

Additional measurement issues arise when attempting to distinguish between nonmarital births to cohabiting women and to women in neither a marital nor cohabiting union. It is sometimes difficult to determine when or whether a cohabiting union has begun, a problem similar to that posed by common law marriage in historical studies. These issues have led some to argue that cohabitation might be better conceptualized not as a discrete status but rather in terms of a continuum capturing the extent to which a couple might be said to have formed a union. Nevertheless, estimates from alternative data sources are typically in substantial agreement, providing evidence, albeit of an

indirect nature, suggesting that female respondents can report accurately on their union status at birth, even retrospectively.

As a general accounting principle, one might suppose that the number of births to males and females should, in the aggregate, be identical as when data are available from official birth registers. Still, this principle need not hold under some definitions of nonmarital fertility (e.g., when both parents are married, but not to each other) given the types of data typically available to the analyst. Moreover, comparisons of survey and registration data often reveal that marriage and fertility data supplied by male respondents are markedly inferior in quality to those from female respondents. One consequence has been that nearly all research on nonmarital fertility to date has focused on the nonmarital fertility of women. Although such an emphasis is often sensible, in that childrearing responsibilities continue to fall most heavily on women, it has nevertheless produced an asymmetry in research findings, with little being known about the men who have fathered children outside marriage.

2. *Demographic Trends*

Nonmarital fertility has increased substantially in both Europe and the USA. Official statistics for the USA suggest that, as of 1998, roughly one in three births (32.8 percent) were to unmarried women, a level about three times higher than that in 1970, at which time one in ten births (10.7 percent) were to unmarried women. These levels are mirrored in much of Europe. More than every third birth occurs outside marriage in France, the UK, Finland, and the former East Germany, and roughly every second birth is nonmarital in the Scandinavian countries of Iceland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (Kiernan 2001).

In the USA, nonmarital first births have been and continue to be prevalent among teenage women; however, the composition of nonmarital births (counting all parities) increasingly consists of those at higher birth orders to nonteenage women. As of the early 1990s, second and higher-order nonmarital births accounted for 48 percent of births to unmarried white women and fully 60 percent of births to unmarried black women. Nonmarital fertility in the USA has also increased substantially among women over age 19. In 1970, one-half of all nonmarital births were to teenage women, but by the early 1990s, nonmarital births to women aged 20 and older accounted for more than two-thirds of all nonmarital births. These period trends have been accompanied by marked declines in the likelihood of marriage following a nonmarital first birth, with some attributing this decline in marriage to changes in men's economic circumstances and others to period change in both men's and women's economic circumstances.

Nonmarital fertility in the USA continues to exhibit striking differentials by race and ethnicity. In 1998,

slightly more than one in four white births (26.3 percent) were nonmarital, while nearly seven in ten black births (69.0 percent) were nonmarital. These differences also extend to births in cohabiting unions. Births to cohabiting white women rose sharply in the last two decades of the twentieth century, accounting for virtually all of the observed increases in white nonmarital fertility (Bumpass and Lu 2000). By contrast, births to cohabiting black women accounted for a far smaller proportion of nonmarital black births. Fewer than one out of five of recent nonmarital births occurred to cohabiting black women and, over time, births within cohabiting unions have constituted a declining fraction of nonmarital births to black women (Wu et al. 2001).

Nonmarital fertility in the USA and Europe differs in several important respects. The overlap between teenage and nonmarital fertility, characteristic of the USA, is largely absent in the European context. In addition, births within cohabiting unions constitute a far larger fraction of European than of US nonmarital births. Fewer than half of US nonmarital births are to parents cohabiting at the time of the birth (Wu et al. 2001), whereas the overwhelming proportion of nonmarital births in Europe are to cohabiting couples (Kiernan 2001). As a result, recent cohorts of US children are likely to spend more years, on average, growing up without a father present in the child's household than are their European counterparts.

One might expect that the decoupling of both sexual activity and childbearing from marriage and the accompanying erosion of norms proscribing nonmarital fertility would imply that nonmarital fertility has increasingly diffused beyond poor and disadvantaged populations to the non-poor and more highly educated segments of society. The available empirical evidence is in fact quite mixed on this point. On the one hand, the prevalence of cohabiting births in Europe, particularly Scandinavia, has been interpreted by some as consistent with this view. On the other hand, the expected diffusion is difficult to detect in the USA and Great Britain, where nonmarital fertility continues to occur predominantly among those with the least education and where there is accumulating evidence of diverging trends in the sociodemographic characteristics of married and unmarried mothers (see, e.g., Wu et al. 2001, Haveman et al. 2001).

3. *Functionalist, Historical, and Policy Literatures*

The distinction between social and biological parenthood implicit in the discussion of measurement of nonmarital fertility was an explicit emphasis of early functionalist authors in anthropology and sociology. A classic statement is Malinowski's:

The most important moral and legal rule concerning the physiological state of kinship is that no child should be

brought into the world without a man—and one man at that—assuming the role of sociological father, that is guardian and protector, the male link between the child and the rest of the community. I think that this generalization amounts to a universal sociological law, and as such I have called it ... *The Principle of Legitimacy*. (Malinowski 1930, pp. 137–8)

Accumulating empirical evidence of violations of this principle led Goode (1960) to argue that it was more likely to be followed or enforced when fathers were high in status, as when a father possessed substantial income or assets, or when his stake in the child was high.

By contrast, historians have typically regarded nonmarital fertility as a rough empirical proxy for premarital or illicit sexual activity, although many historians have also emphasized the ebbs and flows in both the incidence of ‘bastardy’ in different historical periods and the tenuous connection between levels of nonmarital fertility and the intensity of social or moral disapproval. Moreover, while public and moral authorities often reacted to nonmarital childbearing as concrete evidence of fornication and adultery, real concern appears to have often centered on the financial burdens posed to the community by children born out of wedlock. Wells (1979), in particular, concludes that local authorities in colonial America were by and large ‘unwilling to punish children for the sins of their parents,’ noting, for example, that ‘both William Franklin, the last royal governor of New Jersey, and Alexander Hamilton were able to achieve political eminence ... despite the fact that their parents were not legally married.’

The question of whether the sins of parents should be visited on children remains highly relevant to contemporary policy debates. A continuing policy dilemma is that social and economic resources directed to children born outside marriage also in effect provide assistance to parents—it is often difficult to target social policies and provisions in ways that benefit children but not parents. This concern has been less evident among policy-makers in Europe, with many European nations having had a longer and more generous tradition of social welfare provisions. It has, however, played a central role in US policy debates, where concern that welfare programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) may have had the unintended consequence of increasing nonmarital births was a key factor in the dismantling of these programs in favor of those intended to discourage nonmarital childbearing.

The specific issue of whether more generous AFDC benefits have produced increases in nonmarital births in the USA has spawned an extensive research literature. The available evidence, constructed largely from cross-sectional US data (see Moffitt (1998) for a review), finds support for such an association, with most researchers finding that this association is small in magnitude. However, a persistent puzzle generated by these cross-sectional findings is that they appear

inconsistent with period trends in nonmarital births and welfare generosity, with nonmarital births increasing and the inflation-adjusted value of AFDC and other benefits falling between 1975 and 1995. One possibility is that there is in fact no real inconsistency between the time-series and cross-sectional evidence, in that falling AFDC benefits may have acted to reduce nonmarital births, but that other factors may have operated in the opposite direction to increase nonmarital births. Surprisingly little work has been done with respect to this issue, save for Moffitt (2001), who presents evidence in support of this possibility.

4. *Socioeconomic Determinants*

A consistent finding in the US literature (see, e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur 1994) is that the risk of a nonmarital first birth is associated with family structure, with the standard finding being that these risks are higher for women who resided in a single-mother family at some point during adolescence. This empirical association appears remarkably robust, for example, to adjustments for unmeasured factors shared by siblings or the tendency for women with nonmarital first births to have initiated sexual activity slightly earlier than other women.

A difficulty with many of these studies is their reliance on a ‘snapshot’ of family structure, typically measured at age 14 or 16, which makes problematic the interpretation of what exactly it is about family structure that may account for the higher observed risk of a nonmarital first birth. Somewhat surprisingly, evidence to date suggests no support for widespread expectations concerning the intergenerational transmission of nonmarital childbearing—that being born outside marriage raises the risk that a young woman will herself bear a child outside marriage (Wu and Martinson 1993, Wu 1996, Haveman et al. 2001). Instead, what appears to be transmitted across generations is the propensity to bear a child at an early age (Haveman et al. 2001). Another consistent finding is that low income and low educational attainments of parents appear substantially associated with premarital first birth risks (Haveman and Wolfe 1994, McLanahan and Sandefur 1994, Wu 1996, Ermisch 2001). Three studies (Wu and Martinson 1993, Haveman and Wolfe 1994, Wu 1996) found that turbulent family environments, in the form of repeated changes in family structure, are associated with higher risks of a premarital first birth.

5. *Consequences for Women and Children*

Nonmarital childbearing is commonly thought to carry adverse consequences, both for the women bearing the child and for the children born into such families. An early view capturing this sentiment (Campbell 1968) held that:

The girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90 percent of her life's script written for her. She will drop out of school; even if someone else in her family helps to take care of her baby, she will probably not be able to find a steady job that pays enough to provide for herself and her child; she may feel impelled to marry someone she might not otherwise have chosen. Her life choices are few, and most of them are bad.

Although this view remains highly influential in many respects, the research community has increasingly regarded it with some skepticism. For example, Furstenberg et al. (1987) reported substantial variability in the life-course outcomes for women who began childbearing while in their teenage years, many of whom had births while unmarried. These findings have caused many to question whether a woman's life script is in fact '90 percent written' as a consequence of teenage (and nonmarital) childbearing. Wu et al. (2001), using nationally representative US data, have documented similar variability for women with nonmarital births, suggesting that the results of Furstenberg et al. may also hold for more recent cohorts of women. Another basis for skepticism is the realization by researchers that previous studies may have overstated the magnitude of the negative effects of teenage childbearing. Indeed, a considerable controversy has arisen over whether teenage childbearing might be held to have any causal relationship to the later social and economic disadvantages observed for teenage mothers (Geronimus and Korenman 1993, Hoffman et al. 1993a, 1993b).

Although a large empirical literature has examined outcomes for children who resided at some point with a single parent, this literature rarely distinguishes between whether such families were formed through divorce or nonmarital fertility. Thus, surprisingly little is known concerning outcomes for children born to unmarried mothers, aside from the fact that these children are substantially more likely to grow up in poverty. As noted above, several studies have found no empirical evidence in support of the transmission of nonmarital childbearing across generations. Korenman et al. (2001) found that the higher prevalence of unintended births among unmarried mothers relative to married mothers appears to account for little of the observed differential in parenting behaviors, infant health, or child development between marital and nonmarital births. Haveman et al. (2001) have found that children born to unmarried mothers are significantly less likely to complete high school than children born to married parents.

Even less is known about the consequences of being born to cohabiting parents. Empirical studies of Great Britain and the USA (Ermisch 2001, Wu et al. 2001) have found that children born within a cohabiting union are more than twice as likely to experience the loss of a parent—most typically the father—through the dissolution of their parent's cohabiting or marital union as children born within marital unions, but this

instability appears far less true in the continental European context (Kiernan 2001). As a result, it is difficult to know whether outcomes for children born within a cohabiting union would more closely resemble those of children born to single mothers or married parents. It is also worth emphasizing that what is observed—the presence or absence of a marital or cohabiting union—is but a crude proxy for the economic, social, and emotional commitments of the parents to the child, commitments which may, in turn, vary substantially over time.

6. Conceptual and Theoretical Challenges

Unlike empirical research, theoretical work to date has taken seriously the 'two-sex' nature of nonmarital fertility—for example, how nonmarital fertility might respond to both men's and women's characteristics. Notable examples include Wilson's (1987) argument concerning a dearth of 'marriageable' males in the US black community and Willis' economic models of nonmarital fertility (Willis and Haaga 1996, Willis 1999), in which different distributions in the relative wages of men and women may produce behavioral equilibria in which men move from a pattern of high to low paternal investment in the children they father. Neal (2000) has proposed a model in which the prevalence of nonmarital fertility can vary substantially if the choice set for women is expanded to consist not only of giving birth within or outside marriage, as assumed by both Wilson and Willis, but also of the option of foregoing a birth entirely.

The study of nonmarital fertility poses other unusual challenges for both theoretical and empirical researchers. One is that nonmarital fertility lies at the intersection of several joint (and potentially endogenous) processes by which families are formed—childbearing, marriage, and, increasingly, the formation of cohabiting unions. Many researchers have only begun to grapple with the additional analytic issues that arise when including cohabitation in their behavioral and statistical models. A second challenge concerns the likely life-course dynamics underlying nonmarital fertility. Advancing knowledge is complicated by the fact that many key aspects relevant to this process are typically unobserved by the researcher, including the timing of initial (and ensuing frequency) of sexual activity and how the resolution of a nonmarital pregnancy is weighed by the woman and by other relevant actors. A final challenge is that recent trends in nonmarital fertility may well reflect an evolving response by individuals to fundamental changes in the long-term contract represented by marriage, a contract that has itself changed in response to other social forces, including the nearly universal levels of sexual activity prior to marriage, the increasingly widespread diffusion of cohabitation, changes in the nature and levels of labor force participation of men and women,

and continuing high levels of divorce and union instability.

See also: Families and Households, Behavioral Demography of; Family Theory and the Realities of Childbearing Behavior; Fertility Control: Overview; Fertility: Institutional and Political Approaches; Fertility: Proximate Determinants; Sexual Behavior: Sociological Perspective; Teen Sexuality; Teenage Fertility

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Fertility: Political and Political–Economic Perspectives

Since the rise of modern demography in the early twentieth century, fertility has largely been the province of demographic research. In the 1980s other fields—in particular anthropology, but also gender studies, social history, and cultural studies—began to take an active interest in childbearing as sociocultural and political–economic process. Concerned less with the numbers of children born than with the macro- and microlevel dynamics surrounding the reproduction of families, societies, and polities, these perspectives have flourished along the borders between sociocultural anthropology, population studies, gender studies, and cultural studies of science and technology. This article traces the development of three of the most vigorous streams of such research: the culture and political economy of fertility, the politics of reproduction, and Foucauldian perspectives on ‘population.’ Although these fields of research are multidisciplinary, because anthropologists have been at the forefront of these intellectual developments, and because of limitations of space and knowledge, this

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