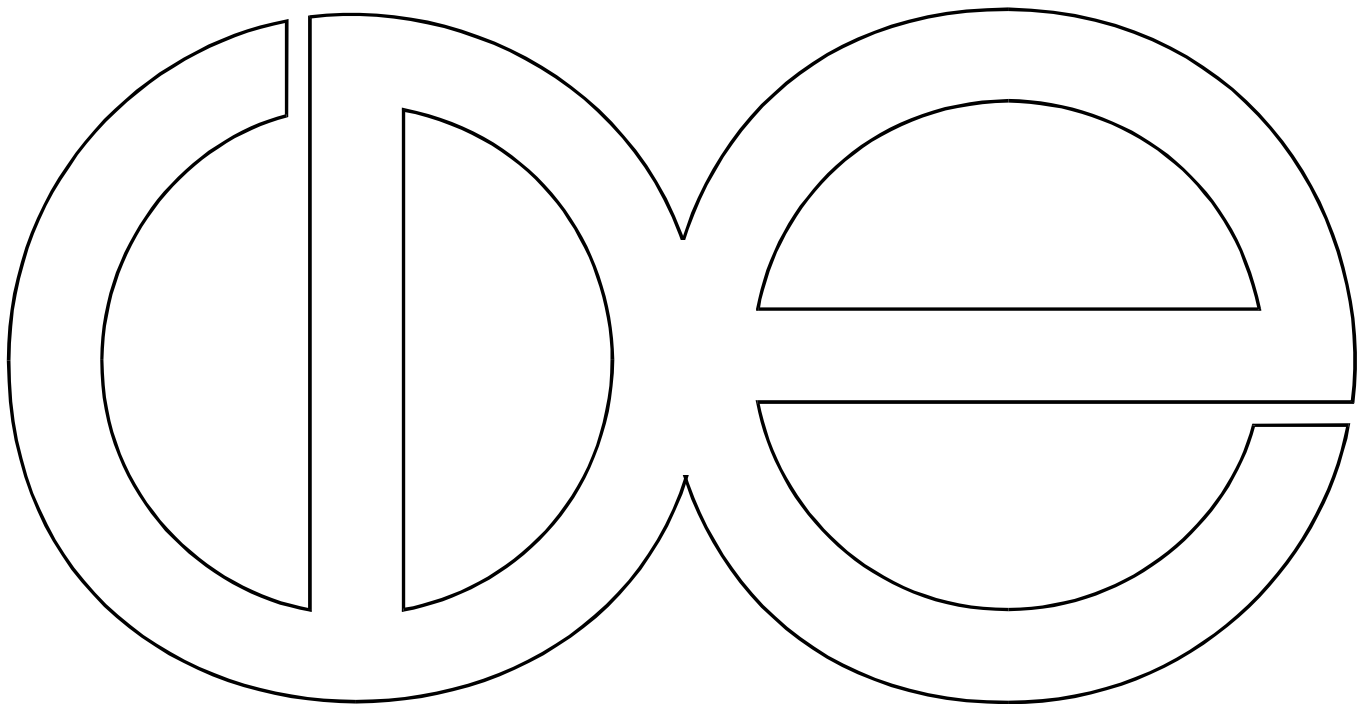


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**Partnerships and Parenthood: A Comparative
View of Cohabitation, Marriage and Childbearing**

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Until the latter part of the 20th century, almost all children in almost all places were born to married couples. Parents needed to be married in order to provide for their children and to enjoy the support of extended family members and communities. As extended family and community supports for childrearing were transferred to states and markets, the necessity of marriage -- or even partnership -- for childbearing and childrearing declined.

Of course, even with state and market resources, having a partner to share the day-in, day-out responsibilities of providing and caring for children is easier than rearing children alone. Two parents can divide tasks in a complementary fashion to produce greater efficiencies in household production, or they can develop parallel competencies that provide a safety net in case one or the other is incapacitated. Two parents can support each other emotionally when a child has difficulties and congratulate each other when a child does well. Two parents increase the number and perhaps the strength of a child's ties to extended family and community. Thus it is no surprise that a stable partnership comes first in Hobcraft and Kiernan's (1995) list of preconditions for the optimal transition to parenthood.

Marriage provides even more advantages for parenthood. As a contract between two heterosexual partners and the state, marriage offers legal protections for parents and children and

may provide access to public resources. As in the past, marriage is also a social contract between families, and may increase the parents' and children's claims on the resources of their extended kin. As a legal contract, marriage is more difficult to dissolve than other forms of sexual partnerships, producing a more stable environment for childrearing. Stability removes some of the risks associated with an efficient division of labor and increases the gains to shared investments such as the bearing and rearing of children (Willis, 1999; Willis & Haaga, 1996; Pollak, 2000).

In spite of these advantages, nonmarital births have increased dramatically in several wealthy countries. In some countries, cohabitation has become an alternative to marriage as a context in which to bear children; in others, increasing proportions of children are born to mothers who do not live with their child's father. But the patterns are not uniform and do not appear to be converging.

Nonmarital Childbearing in the late 20th Century

Figure 1 shows changes from 1960 through 2000 in the nonmarital birth ratio (percent of births out of marriage) for ten countries selected to show variation in the timing of increases in nonmarital childbearing and its most recent levels.¹ In 1960, the ratio ranged from a low of 1.2 percent in Japan to a high of 25.3 percent in Iceland. Between 1970 and 1975, dramatic increases occurred in Sweden (and Denmark, not shown), followed a decade later by Norway. Other countries followed a more gradual increase. The United States is about in the middle. By

2000, Iceland's percentage had risen to 62.4, and most countries had bypassed the Iceland extreme of 1960. Note, however, that in Japan (and Greece, not shown), nonmarital childbearing remained rare, and in several other countries, below 20 percent.

Figure 1. Nonmarital birth ratios, 1960-2000

Before exploring these variations further, a methodological note is in order. The nonmarital birth ratio is comprised of several different components. It can increase when fewer women are married (with constant birth rates among married and unmarried women, respectively); when married women have fewer children; or when unmarried women have more children. Smith, Morgan, and Koropecj-Cox (1996) decomposed U.S. trends in the nonmarital birth ratio from 1960 to 1992 into changes in these behavioral components as well as changes in the age distribution of women of reproductive age. They found that declines in marriage accounted for most of the increase in the ratio among African-American women. Until 1975, increases for African-Americans could also be attributed to declining marital birth rates, after 1984 to increasing nonmarital rates. Among white women, increases in nonmarital birth rates and declines in marriage contributed to an increasing proportion of nonmarital births. Cooper (1991) shows for the United Kingdom that the 1980-89 increase in the nonmarital birth ratio was due equally to an increasing proportion of unmarried women and an increase in the nonmarital birth rate. In countries with very low nonmarital birth *rates* (e.g., Spain), increases in the nonmarital birth *ratio* have been associated with dramatic declines in marital birth rates (Cantisani & Dalla Zuanna, 1991).

From a behavioral perspective, both nonmarriage and nonmarital birth rates represent a shift of childbearing out of marriage. Postponement or avoidance of marriage without postponement or avoidance of parenthood produces high nonmarital birth ratios even if rates of nonmarital childbearing remain stable or decline. In any case, the correlation between the nonmarital birth ratio and the nonmarital birth rate across the 18 European countries studied by Cantisani and Dalla Zuanna (1999) is .97 for the mid 1990s (original analyses). Thus, it is reasonable to use the relatively plentiful data on nonmarital birth ratios to analyze cross-national differences in nonmarital childbearing.

Cohabitation as a Context for Childbearing

A more important measurement issue for analyses of nonmarital childbearing is the distinction between births to unmarried *couples* and births to unmarried *women* who are not living with the child's father. Because national vital registration systems rarely provide such data, we must rely on sample surveys to estimate the contribution of cohabitation to nonmarital births. Figure 2 presents life-table estimates of the proportion of births to unmarried couples or unpartnered women during the 1990s.² The countries are selected to show variation in the composition of nonmarital births and are ordered by the combined nonmarital birth ratio. In most countries, births to cohabiting couples comprise the majority of nonmarital births. This is true in countries where nonmarital childbearing is relatively rare (e.g., Italy and West Germany) and where it is quite common (e.g., Austria, France and Sweden). In East Germany and in the United States, however, large proportions of births occur to women living without a partner.

Figure 2. Nonunion, cohabiting and nonmarital birth ratios, mid 1990s

Does this mean that high rates of nonmarital childbearing are simply artifacts of our enumeration systems, having little meaning for our understanding of family life and reproduction? Not at all. Cohabitation offers many of the same advantages for parenting and for children as does marriage, but cohabiting unions are less stable than marriages, leaving children at higher risk of living with a single parent (Andersson, 2002; Andersson & Philipov, 2002; Heuveline, Timberlake & Furstenberg, 2003). That risk is lower where cohabitation produces most of the nonmarital births and is likely less selective of troubled relationships. For example, U.S. and East German children experience high risks of living with a single mother early in life because so many of them are born to single mothers and, in the U.S., because of exceptionally high rates of separation and divorce (Andersson & Philipov 2002). Although Sweden has a much higher nonmarital birth ratio, many fewer children live with a single mother before age 6. The difference can be attributed to very low proportions of nonunion births and more moderate separation rates, even for cohabiting parents.

To summarize, even though the connection between marriage and childbearing has loosened considerably in many wealthy countries of the world, marriage remains the most common venue for childbearing. In many countries, more than 90 percent of children are born in marriage. Births to cohabiting couples are increasingly common and account for most of the increase in nonmarital births. The implications of these changes for children's lives depend on the

selectivity of couples into cohabitation or marriage, i.e., on the relative stability of cohabiting and marital unions as well as on the proportion of births to unpartnered women.

Explaining Nonmarital and Nonunion Childbearing

Explanations for cross-national variation in family formation patterns are roughly divided into economic and cultural forces, and most studies focus on one type of explanation or the other. Of course, economics and culture are interdependent. Pollak and Watkins (1993) point out that some cultural ‘stories’ are compatible with rational-actor economic theory, insofar as they accept the distinction between preferences and opportunities. Compatible theories specify culture as a source of variation in preferences and/or as a constraint on opportunities (i.e., the set of choices weighed by rational actors). Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (1988) claim that culture influences preferences and constraints not only directly but also by altering material conditions (e.g., employment policies, welfare regimes) that facilitate or inhibit childbearing.

Willis (Willis, 1999; Willis & Haaga, 1996) argues that nonmarital childbearing arises from the excess supply and relative self-sufficiency of women. ‘Excess supply’ is defined in terms of the number of men who are able to provide economically for the woman and her children. To the extent that cohabitation places fewer demands on men to provide economic support, the theoretical argument can be applied to childbearing in cohabitation rather than marriage. Positive effects of male wages and the male/female wage ratio on marriage (e.g., Mills & Blossfeld, 2003; Moffitt, 2000; Oppenheimer, 2000) are consistent with the theory.³

Effects of employment markets and wages on marriage may, of course, be moderated by state redistribution of income or other resources to women, children or parents. Considerable cross-national variation exists in the extent to which national welfare regimes provide support to parents, especially single parents (e.g., Gornick, Meyers & Ross, 1997; Neyer, 2003). Studies of national policy effects on the number or timing of births produce mixed results (Neyer, 2003). None of this research considers policy effects on nonmarital childbearing.

In the United States, on the other hand, a large body of research exists on the potential effects of means-tested welfare programs on nonmarital fertility. Moffitt (1998) reports that a simple majority of studies find a significant relationship between welfare benefits and nonmarital childbearing or single motherhood. Welfare benefits do not, however, explain the increase in nonmarital childbearing over time and results are sensitive to data and model specification.

The second explanation for wide variation in nonmarital and nonunion childbearing is that citizens in different countries hold different norms or standards for family formation. Several studies have demonstrated an association at the aggregate level between fertility and abstract cultural values such as individualism, secularization, pragmatism or postmaterialism (e.g., Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988; Simons, 1999; Van de Kaa, 2001). Lesthaeghe (1995) showed that Protestant countries had much greater increases in nonmarital births (as a percentage of all births) between 1960 and 1975 than did other countries, net of a country's wealth, female education and female employment. Pagnini and Rindfuss (1993) found parallels between trends in normative beliefs about nonmarital childbearing and the nonmarital birth ratio in the United

States. At the individual level, quite strong effects of values, attitudes or norms and subsequent marriage or childbearing have been demonstrated (e.g., Barber & Axinn, 2004; Barber, Axinn & Thornton, 2002; Moors, 2002; Thomson, 2002). In several European countries, Kiernan (2001) found substantial differences by religious attendance in the probability of having a first child in a first cohabiting union, slightly smaller differences for births before a first union.

Both economic and cultural explanations implicate gender as an over-arching explanation for change and variation in childbearing patterns. McDonald (2000a) distinguishes between gender equity in individual-oriented institutions such as the labor markets and political systems of industrialized countries and family-oriented institutions (i.e., the household). He claims that fertility will be extraordinarily low when gender equity is high in individual-oriented institutions, but low in family-oriented institutions. Cross-national variation in fertility levels has been related to gender equality in the home, as well as in the public sphere (Chesnais 1996, 1998; McDonald 2000b). Within countries, policies designed to increase gender equity at home appear to increase childbearing (Duvander & Andersson, 2003; Oláh 2001).

Cherlin (2000) argues that gender inequity at home has become a stumbling block for marriage. Women are seeking partners who will not only contribute to the household economy but also do a fair share of household work. In order to find such partners, Cherlin claims, women must cohabit; income potential can be observed through a potential mate's education, occupation, employment, but household contributions can be assessed only through direct experience.

Of course, failure to find the dual-shift man could lead women to choose childlessness or nonmarital childbearing. Even the purely economic definition of male supply (Willis, 1999) begs the question – why would women choose to take on more responsibilities, economically and in the household, by having children without a partner or in a relatively unstable union? An implicit premise seems to be that women are more interested in motherhood than are men in fatherhood.

Jensen (2001) agrees, claiming that when children become primarily an emotional good, they are more valuable to women than to men. As a result, fertility is higher where “women can have and provide for children without being married. ... where this is not possible, men are the main obstacle for having children” (p. 1). Cherlin (2000) also asserts that women care more about ‘emotional connections, altruism, & raising children’ (p.133), which limits their use of bargaining to obtain greater equity in the household (England & Farkas, 1986). Evidence for the stronger interest of women in children is mixed (Jensen 2001; Jones and Brayfield, 1997).

Perhaps gender ideologies and institutions make the costs of dual-shift parenthood higher for men than for women. Male-dominant gender ideologies have lost considerable power to restrict women’s employment; but they continue to penalize men for doing ‘women’s work’ (Brines 1994). If men and women value parenthood equally, but men pay higher costs for taking on a full share of parental and household responsibilities, the net benefit of children to women would be greater.

Cross-National Patterns in Nonmarital Childbearing,
Economics, Culture & Gender

My goal in this section is to identify cross-national variation in economic, cultural and gender indicators that should, according to theories discussed above, parallel variation in nonmarital childbearing. Nonmarital childbearing is represented by the percentage of nonmarital births in 1995 and in some cases by estimates for the 1990s of the percentage of births to cohabiting couples or unpartnered women. Indicators of economic and cultural contexts are drawn from the same general period. I use all countries for which data are available on the selected indicator of nonmarital childbearing and indicators of economic, cultural or gender forces.

The analysis has two serious limitations. It ignores the complexity of variations in timing of union formation and births that can mislead us about the changing propensity of a particular population to have children in marriage or not. And it ignores the possibility that changing family behaviors lead to changes in economic conditions and/or cultural beliefs. But it's a start on the complex task of understanding the circumstances under which nonmarital and nonunion childbearing occur.

Economics

Figure 3 plots the nonmarital birth ratio in parallel with the percent of women economically active and women's wages as a percent of men's (United Nations 2002). Employment

opportunities for women provide the required self-sufficiency for unpartnered motherhood, and the female/male wage ratio is an indicator of women's excess supply, being inversely related to the supply of economically suitable fathers.

Figure 3. Nonmarital births and women's economic position

Across the 26 countries for which data are available, both indicators are positively associated with nonmarital births ($r=.71, .57$, respectively). Both associations are driven by the percentage of births to cohabiting couples (across a subset of 17 countries with appropriate data) rather than by the percentage of births to unpartnered women (analyses not shown). That is, employment and relatively high wages enable women to take the risk of having children in cohabitation and subsequently becoming single mothers, but do not appear to support childbearing without a partner.

Figure 4 repeats the exercise for indicators of state support for parents: maternal leave benefits, measured as the proportion of a full year's salary (United Nations 2002) and a scale of support for employment of mothers with children under age 6 (Gornick et al., 1997). Both types of support may facilitate childbearing for all women, but they should be particularly important for unpartnered women or women in unstable (cohabiting) relationships. Although weak positive associations emerge, the number of countries is quite small ($n=13$). Analyses of the even smaller set of countries with estimates of nonunion and cohabiting births produced a stronger positive association with cohabiting births but a negative association with births to unpartnered women

(not shown). These estimates may be particularly sensitive to outliers such as Sweden and the United States.

Figure 4. Nonmarital births and maternal support policies

Willis and others have argued that women's self-sufficiency and excess supply is particularly pronounced at lower levels of income (Moffitt, 2000; Willis, 1999; Willis & Haaga, 1996). As a result, we might expect the level of inequality to be associated with nonmarital childbearing, particularly childbearing without a partner. Figure 5 plots two indicators of inequality, the ratio of income above the 90th percentile to that below the 10th percentile, and the Gini Coefficient (Smeeding, 2002). Because no clear pattern was found for nonmarital childbearing, I plot here the proportion of births to cohabiting couples and to women living alone. Toward the right side of the figure, in countries where nonmarital births exceed a minimal threshold, a clear parallel can be observed between nonunion births and inequality. The association between inequality and nonunion births is consistent with research showing that the income penalty for single mothers after taxes and transfers was highest in the United States and United Kingdom where rates of nonunion births are relatively high, much lower in countries such as Sweden and Italy where nonunion births are rare (Rake & Daly, 2002). While these results support economists' theoretical account of nonunion births, they could also arise from the contributions of single mothers' extreme poverty to overall levels of inequality.

Figure 5. Nonunion, cohabiting births and income inequality

Culture

Turning to the cultural explanation, I consider variation in norms specific to nonmarital childbearing in relation to a country's level of nonmarital childbearing. The International Social Survey Program (Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung, 1997) presented respondents with two statements: *People who want children ought to get married; One parent can bring up a child as well as two parents*. Response options ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). I use data for respondents under age 40 in order to capture the peer group for individuals in their childbearing years. Mean responses vary across countries, but are centered very closely around the midpoint, *neither agree nor disagree*.

Figure 6 shows that, even in countries with extremely low levels of nonmarital childbearing, respondents under 40 expressed considerable tolerance for having children outside of marriage or raising children as a single parent. With the exception of the extreme cases of Japan and Sweden, no clear relationship exists between either of these normative responses and the proportion of births that occur out of marriage. What this overall pattern masks, however, is a positive association ($r=.60$) between nonunion births and acceptance of one-parent families and a negative association ($r=-.51$) between cohabiting births and norms for marital childbearing (not shown).

Figure 6. Nonmarital births and family norms

The Eurobarometer Surveys (Reif & Melich, 1997) included an intriguing question about marriage, cohabitation and singlehood as contexts for raising children. Respondents were asked whether they considered each of the following *to be a family: a married couple with child(ren), an unmarried couple with child(ren), a single parent with child(ren)*, along with other household configurations. In every country, almost all respondents considered a married couple with children to be a family. Figure 7 shows the percentage of respondents under 40 who defined cohabiting or single parents as living in a family. Although the pattern is not completely parallel, countries with high levels of nonmarital childbearing also have high proportions of respondents who define a cohabiting couple with children as a family ($r=.84$, $n=16$). The pattern arises for the most part from the proportion of cohabiting rather than nonunion births (data not shown). Stark contrasts are seen between the extremes of Greece and Sweden. The definition of single parents as families is also associated with nonmarital childbearing ($r=.65$); oddly, however, respondents in Austria and East Germany – where unpartnered motherhood is quite common – were relatively much less likely to include single parents and children in their definition of ‘family’.

Figure 7. Nonmarital births and definition of family

Not included in this analysis is the country with the lowest level of nonmarital childbearing, Japan. Data from the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2000) showed that Japanese respondents of childbearing age were only slightly less likely to agree that *A child needs a home with both mother and father* than were their counterparts in Sweden (not shown).

These results taken together are more consistent with normative adaptation to specific forms of family behavior – cohabitation versus nonunion childbearing – than with a general normative permissiveness as the source of behavioral variation. It is furthermore quite surprising that normative constraints are not strong in countries such as Japan, Italy and Spain where extremely low levels of nonmarital childbearing are found. Tolerance for a variety of family forms resulting from nonmarital and nonunion births appears to be quite widespread.

Gender

To identify potential relationships between gender equity in the home and nonmarital childbearing, I begin with one classic and one new question about norms for a couple's division of labor, both from the 1994 ISSP (Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung, 1997).

Respondents were presented with the following two statements: *A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family*; and *Both the man and the woman should contribute to the household income*. Responses were scored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Figure 8 presents the mean response for respondents under 40, along with the nonmarital birth ratio, again all in the mid 1990s. At relatively high levels of nonmarital childbearing, we see a *negative* association between support of the single breadwinner model and nonmarital births, i.e., a *positive* association with marital childbearing. This result is inconsistent with the argument that women have children out of marriage where gender norms are most rigid. Rejection of the

traditional division of labor is stronger where nonmarital births, particularly births to cohabiters, are especially high. No association was found between nonmarital childbearing and beliefs that both women and men should contribute to the household income. It is in fact rather astonishing that respondents in many of the most ideologically traditional countries agreed with this statement.

Figure 8. Nonmarital births and gender role norms

The 1998 Eurobarometer Survey provides data on norms for the allocation of childrearing. Respondents were presented with a list of childrearing tasks: *playing sport with the children, bringing the children to activities, changing the baby's nappies, dressing the children or choosing their clothes, taking the children to the doctor, helping the children with their schoolwork and going to parents' meetings, reading to the children, buying toys for the children, punishing the children, putting the children to bed, answering important questions raised by the child*. They were asked to indicate whether they thought each task *should be carried out mainly by the father, mainly by the mother or by both*. I constructed a scale from mean responses (1=father, 2=both, 3=mother) for all eleven tasks and for the four tasks involving physical care of children (nappies, clothing, doctor, bed). In every country, mean scores for both scales were at or just above the score for 'both'; not even a weak association can be discerned between normative childrearing tasks and nonmarital births (Figure 9). Among the smaller number of countries for which estimates of nonunion births were available, a positive association was discerned. Childrearing tasks were delegated more to mothers where high proportions of births

were to unpartnered women (data not shown), supporting the hypothesized positive relationship between gender inequity and nonunion births.

Figure 9. Nonmarital births and childrearing norms

Finally, Figure 10 speaks to the question of fathering: Does men's willingness or ability to share childrearing foster marital births? The two indicators are a score representing policy support for father's involvement in childrearing and the percentage of child caregivers (14+ hours per week) who are men (Smith 2001). With notable exceptions, and only at the higher levels of nonmarital childbearing, a positive association appears. Most of the association can be attributed to the higher rates of cohabiting births in countries with higher gender equity scores (data not shown). As with gender ideology, more gender-equitable institutions appear to be associated with *more* rather than less childbearing outside of marriage. This pattern presumably arises from greater gender equity in cohabiting than in marital unions.

Figure 10. Nonmarital births and father involvement

Discussion and Conclusions

Cross-national variation in nonmarital childbearing, in and out of cohabiting unions, is quite remarkable – from Japan where virtually all children are born in marriage to Iceland where well over half are not. The composition of nonmarital births is also quite different, from the Nordic

countries where births out of unions are rare and cohabitation is almost as common a context for childbearing as marriage, to the exceptional United States, United Kingdom and East Germany where the percentage of births to single women is astonishingly high.

The very broad-brush analyses presented above produced some support for economic explanations of nonmarital childbearing. Where nonmarital childbearing – especially childbearing in cohabitation – is relatively common, women’s employment and relative wages appear to be associated with the proportion of nonmarital births. On the other hand, nonmarital childbearing was only weakly associated with state support for maternal employment or specific provisions for maternal leave, both of which could be equally important for marital childbearing. The fact that nonunion births are more common in countries with high income inequality and, in particular, where the income gap between single mothers and other parents is larger, is consistent with economic arguments about the lack of suitable fathers at low ends of the income scale. Whether inequality is driven by or produces higher levels of nonunion childbearing is not clear.

Patterns of association between normative beliefs and nonmarital childbearing suggest an adaptation of norms to behavior rather than the other way around (Lesthaeghe and Moors 2002). For example, high levels of nonunion childbearing were associated with beliefs that one parent is as good as two, while high levels of childbearing in cohabitation were associated with rejection of marriage as a prerequisite for childbearing and with including cohabiting couples with children in definitions of ‘family’. A cultural explanation requires a more general pattern of

association in which both forms of nonmarital childbearing would be associated with norms for unconventional family behavior.

Perhaps another kind of cultural norm underlies low fertility in some settings, high nonmarital fertility in others, i.e., standards for the quality of family life. Presser (2001) invokes an increasing sense of entitlement to leisure time as the source of lowest-low fertility, and class differences in the sense of entitlement as the source of differences in women's willingness to have children alone or in unstable unions. Barber (2001; Barber & Axinn, 2004) showed that preferences for luxury spending decreased the risk of nonmarital (but not marital) childbearing in the United States. Dalla Zuanna (2001) argues that Italian familism leads to delayed home-leaving and the acquisition of very high consumption standards based on the parents' level of living. Raymo and Ono (2003) explore a variant of this hypothesis for Japan where high proportions of young adults live with their parents. They found later marriage for women experiencing the highest "comforts of home" – having independent incomes but not contributing time or money as a condition of living with parents.

Studies of low-income parents in the United States also suggest that marriage is viewed as a luxury while cohabitation or 'visiting' relationships provide the budget alternative. Both mothers and fathers reported that they must achieve a strong financial as well as emotional basis for marriage (Furstenberg, 1996; Gibson, Edin & McLanahan, 2003; Reed, 2003). Many respondents appeared to have unrealistic expectations about the quality and stability of any marital relationship.

Gender-equitable institutions and ideologies appear to support childbearing in cohabitation rather than in marriage, as hypothesized. Among countries with relatively high levels of nonmarital childbearing, father-friendly policies and men's participation in childcare were *higher* for countries with higher proportions of nonmarital births, most of which occurred in cohabitation. Similar patterns were observed for rejection of the single breadwinner model. These patterns could, of course, arise from the more common practice of gender equity in cohabiting than in marital unions. Supporting the gender equity hypothesis is the positive association between rigid views of maternal responsibility for childrearing and nonunion births.

Part of the problem in finding evidence for economic, cultural or gender sources of nonmarital childbearing – particularly with regard to childbearing in cohabitation – may be differential selectivity of couples into cohabitation (with consequent differences in union stability) and differences across countries in legal and economic protections for dependent children and partners in cohabiting unions. Heuveline and Timberlake (2003) attempt to classify the institutional location of cohabitation on the basis of its incidence, duration, stability and relation to childbearing in several low-fertility countries. They conclude that cohabitation is linked to marriage in all countries with moderate or high nonmarital birth ratios – except where the proportion of births to single women is also high (New Zealand, United States). Cohabitation is defined as equivalent to marriage in Sweden, an alternative to marriage in Canada and France, and a stage in the marriage process in Austria, Finland, Latvia and Slovenia.⁴ An implication of their analysis is that in countries with high proportions of births to single women, we should try to explain marital versus nonmarital childbearing; where births to single women are rare, the

new demographic behavior to be explained is the proportion of births to couples who are cohabiting versus married.

Another reason for the lack of strong country-level associations with economic, cultural or gender indicators is that unplanned pregnancies occur. A considerable proportion of births to single or cohabiting women are not planned (e.g., Kravdal, 1997; Musick, 2002; Toulemon 1995). This means that views of sexuality, contraception and abortion and access to the latter mediate and may interact with effects of preferences and opportunities on the risk of a nonmarital or nonunion birth. On the other hand, the set of decisions that do or do not result in a nonmarital or nonunion birth can also be viewed as simply the means to a goal that is economically or culturally driven (Willis & Haaga, 1996).

The fact that connections between economic or cultural supports for nonmarital childbearing were stronger among countries with relatively high levels of nonmarital childbearing suggests that different mechanisms produce the initiation of nonconforming family formation behavior than produce its spread throughout the population. Although births out of marriage have always occurred, small numbers of such births do not challenge and can even strengthen economic and cultural sanctions against them (Laslett, Oosterveen & Smith, 1980). When a substantial minority of births occur outside marriage, however, institutions and ideologies may be modified to accommodate them.

Finally, the level of analysis presented here may not be adequate for examining economic, cultural or gender explanations for nonmarital and nonunion childbearing. Economic, cultural and gender conditions vary considerably within as well as across countries. Even when a policy is the same for all citizens, its effects will depend on individual situations and characteristics. As mentioned above, economists predict greater economic gains to shared earnings for couples with more education (Moffitt, 2000; Oppenheimer, 2000) so that nonmarital and nonunion childbearing occur predominantly among the less well educated (Elwood & Jencks, 2001; Willis, 1999; Willis & Haaga, 1996). Welfare regimes also differ in the extent of their income redistribution and the degree to which policy supports for parents are means tested. As a result, market or policy effects may be discerned only for selected sub-groups (Gauthier & Hatzius, 1997). Kennedy (2003) finds, for example, that educational concentration of nonmarital births is greater in settings with less generous supports for parenthood (Italy, Spain) than in other, more family-friendly settings (East Germany, Norway).

Nonmarital childbearing has become a major component of fertility in many wealthy countries. The difference between “lowest low” fertility and close-to-replacement fertility depends to a great extent on the level of nonmarital childbearing (Coleman, 1999; Morgan & Hagewen, 2004). Furthermore, the implications of nonmarital childbearing – and whether it occurs out of unions or in cohabiting unions – for children’s and parents’ lives are enormous. For both reasons, connections between partnership and parenthood must remain at the forefront of fertility research.

End Notes

1. The former East and West Germany are treated as two separate countries, given their political and economic separation during most of the period of observation. Estimates for most countries are reported by national statistical offices via the Council of Europe (2000) and/or Demoscope (<http://demoscope.ru/weekly/app/app4013.php>). Estimates were produced for the United States by the National Center on Health Statistics (www.cdc.gov/nchs/) and for Japan by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2003). Data for Canada (see later figures) were found in Preston (1987) and updated by Statistics Canada (personal communication, 2003).
2. Estimates for most of the countries are derived by Andersson (2002) from the Fertility and Family Surveys. He used six-year periods prior to each survey as the basis for life tables. Data for the United Kingdom are based on birth registrations in 1989 (Cooper, 1991). Heuveline, Timberlake and Furstenberg (2003) provided life-table estimates for Canada, New Zealand and Switzerland used in subsequent figures. They used the three-year period before the survey for surveys conducted in the early 1990s, the period three to six years before the survey for surveys conducted after 1993. Because of the different methods and timing of observation of births, the sum of estimated births to cohabiters and to unpartnered women does not match exactly the nonmarital birth ratio reported by national statistical agencies.

3. Positive effects of female wages on marriage (Sweeney, 2002) are not necessarily incompatible with the theory because the male/female wage ratio may be higher among those with the highest wages (Moffitt, 2000).

4. Because Heuveline and colleagues (2003) combine data for the two formerly separate parts of Germany, they cannot detect differences in the meaning of cohabitation related to very different patterns of nonmarital childbearing.

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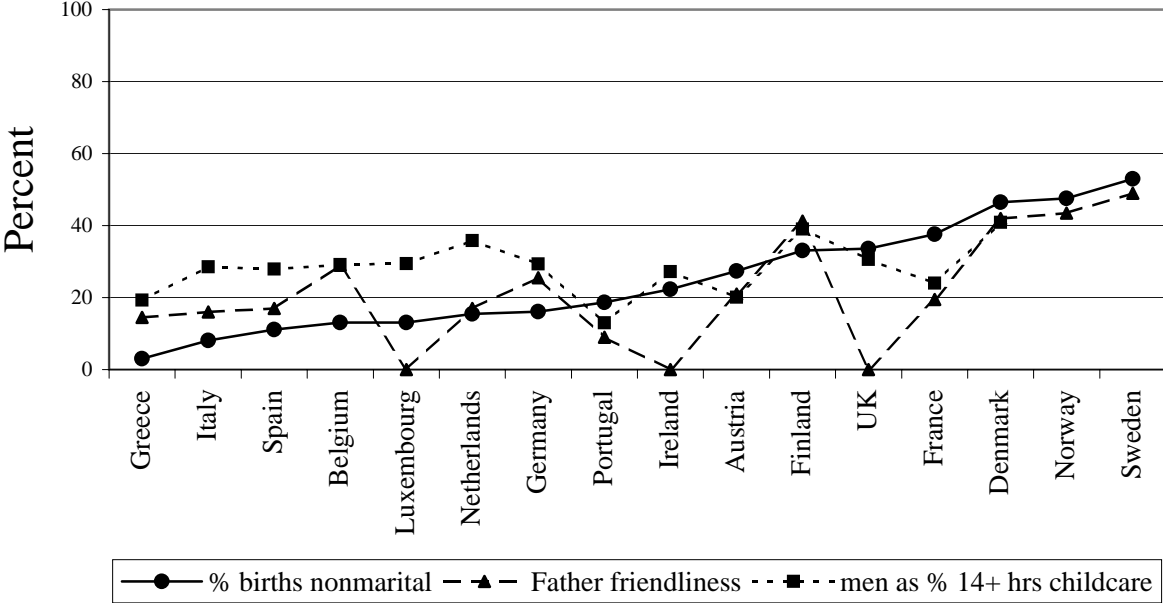
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Figure 10. Nonmarital births and father involvement



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