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## Diversity in Pathways to Parenthood: Patterns, Implications, and Emerging Research Directions

*This review examines and synthesizes recent research on pathways to parenthood. We begin by providing basic information about patterns, differentials, and trends and discussing adoption and new reproductive technologies. We next turn to several areas of inquiry that became particularly prominent in the last decade: the continued “decoupling” of marriage and childbearing, the parental relationship context of nonmarital childbearing, family structure stability, multiple partner fertility, and racial and ethnic variation in childbearing patterns. We then consider the implications of this body of scholarship and identify avenues for future research. Throughout, we highlight racial/ethnic and social class variation in childbearing patterns.*

How a family forms and who forms it are fundamental issues in family research. As attested by a large body of academic work and by ongoing debates in the media, political forums, and popular culture, the answers to these questions matter. Moreover, the study of who becomes a parent, when, why, and in what context adds to our understanding of a range

of topic domains—social change, economic advantage and disadvantage, and demographic trends, among others.

This article focuses on fertility and childbearing patterns, the contexts in which parenthood occurs, and the implications of these patterns. We review research from 1999 through 2009 and synthesize the major contributions of this body of work, focusing largely on studies appearing in peer-reviewed journals from a variety of social science disciplines. Our research began using the *Social Sciences Citation Index*, a database including 1,700 peer-reviewed journals in roughly 50 disciplines. We also performed targeted, hands-on searches of several interdisciplinary journals, including *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Journal of Family Issues*, and *Demography*.

It is essential to keep in mind the familial backdrop of changes that informs recent research on childbearing (Cherlin, 2010). These include the increasing age at marriage, high levels of marital dissolution, the growing prevalence of cohabitation, and rising proportions of births taking place outside of marriage, to name but a few. It is against this backdrop that the research synthesized here should be contextualized. What emerges is a clear, if complex, picture: Although a baby born today is more likely to be born to a mother-father married couple than to any other family type, he or she has many contemporaries who are born to single mothers, same-sex parents, unmarried cohabiting parents, or who live with adoptive parents.

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This review is divided into two main sections. The first section provides an overview of contemporary childbearing patterns, reviewing basic descriptive findings about childbearing trends and patterns, the timing of childbearing, childlessness, adoption, and new reproductive technologies. The second section identifies and discusses several major research questions that form key areas of recent and emerging scholarship about childbearing and the ramifications of the parental context in which childbearing occurs. We conclude by summarizing the implications of the research reviewed and identifying directions for future inquiry.

#### BASIC FACTS ON CHILDBEARING PATTERNS

##### *Trends and Differentials*

In 2007, just over 4.3 million babies were born in the United States, bringing the birthrate to population replacement level for the second time since 1971 (B. E. Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2009). Of all births occurring in 2007, the majority were to married couples—a little more than 60%. In 1970, this figure stood at a substantially higher 89.3%. This change is accounted for in part by the rising share of births to unmarried women or couples, from 10.7% in 1970 to 39.7% in 2006 (B. E. Hamilton et al.; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). In just one year, from 2006 to 2007, the number of children born to unmarried women rose 4% (Ventura, 2009). Also noteworthy is the recent (2006 and 2007) increase in birthrates to teenagers for the first time in nearly two decades (Santelli, Orr, Lindberg, & Diaz, 2009).

Research has demonstrated that married women have higher odds of becoming pregnant than single women or women living with a romantic partner but who are not married (i.e., cohabiting women) and that this pattern holds across race/ethnicity and nativity (e.g., Whites, Blacks, U.S. born Mexican Americans, and foreign-born Mexican Americans; Choi & Seltzer, 2009). Although childbearing within marriage is the dominant pattern, marital fertility has received substantially less attention in the literature than nonmarital fertility over the last decade and longer. Arguably, the research emphasis on nonmarital fertility reflects several factors. These include its growing prominence and that nonmarital births are more prevalent among less economically advantaged men and

women. It is thus a potential public policy issue and, as we discuss later, relevant to concerns about child well-being.

Fertility patterns according to marital status vary widely by race and ethnicity and by social class. For example, in 2007, the percentage of births to unmarried women was 17% among Asian/Pacific Islanders, 28% among White women, 51% among Hispanics, 65% among American Indian/Alaska Natives, and 72% among Blacks (B. E. Hamilton et al., 2009). Although second and higher-order births comprise a substantial proportion of nonmarital childbearing (Wu, Bumpass, & Musick, 2001), patterns by race and ethnicity look much the same when focusing solely on first births.

Using education as a rough proxy for social class or economic advantage, it is also the case that economically disadvantaged people are, on average, more likely to bear children outside of marriage than are the economically advantaged, who are most likely to bear children within marriage. Birth data from 2001 indicate that among women without a high school diploma, 68% of births took place outside of marriage, compared to 53% for women with a high school degree, 32% for women with some college, and just 7% for women with a college degree or more (Mincieli, Manlove, McGarrett, Moore, & Ryan, 2007).

Substantial differences across educational strata become clear in studies that use survey data and multivariate models that take into account sociodemographic variables. One study of the relationship between educational attainment and the likelihood of nonmarital childbearing controlled for an array of sociodemographic characteristics and found that women with a college degree were 95% less likely to have a nonmarital birth than women without a high school degree, and that those with a high school degree were half as likely to give birth outside of marriage than were women who did not complete high school (Musick, 2007).

Several research findings related to these trends and differentials are noteworthy. First, the recent rise in fertility rates is explained largely by increases in nonmarital fertility. For example, the number of births to married women increased by 20,094 between 2006 and 2007 whereas the number of births to unmarried women increased by 73,000 (B. E. Hamilton et al., 2009, see Tables 1 and 7; see Hayford, 2005, regarding the period of stable fertility between 1970 and 1999).

Second, taking into account factors such as education and socioeconomic background generally diminishes but does not fully account for the lower odds of nonmarital childbearing among White women compared to Hispanic and Black women (e.g., Musick, 2007; South, 1999). This suggests that there may be differences in cultural values when it comes to nonmarital childbearing, an issue we revisit in more detail.

Third, nontrivial proportions of unmarried or cohabiting women, or both, report that they planned to become pregnant. Overall, nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, defined as a woman's report of whether the pregnancy was mistimed or unwanted (Finer & Henshaw, 2006). Planned pregnancies and births are most common among married women, least common among single women, with cohabiting women/couples falling in between. About 39% of unmarried, noncohabiting women classify their pregnancies as planned, compared to 54% of cohabiting women and 79% of married women (Musick, 2002).

A central motivation for research on planned versus unplanned pregnancies is that there appear to be negative associations between an unplanned birth and both mothers' and children's well-being. Indicators of well-being include mothers' mental health, mother-child relationships, self-esteem when children become young adults, children's health and development, and parents' emotional investments in children (e.g., Barber, Axinn, & Thornton, 1999; Gibson, Koenig, & Hindin, 2008; Hummer, Hack, & Raley, 2004). Barber and East (2009) found that an unplanned birth negatively impacts the child's siblings, too, even if the siblings were "planned."

### *The Timing of Childbearing*

An interest among family researchers, particularly family demographers, is delayed or postponed childbearing. The terms "delayed" and "postponed" are to some extent normative ones, but they also have roots in biology because of greater rates of subfecundity and infertility as women age.

Women's average age at first birth rose from 21.4 in 1970 to almost 25 in 2000 (Matthews & Hamilton, 2002), and various nationally representative data sources are clear that there has been an increase in the prevalence of giving

birth after age 30. One study reported that the percentage of all births to women over age 30 increased from 31.7% in the 1990–1994 period to 36.4% between 1997 and 2001 (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008).

First, consider changes in the birthrate among 30–34-year-old women between 1990 and 2005, with the birthrate defined as the number of births per 1,000 women in a particular age range. It increased from 82 to 97 for Whites, from 98 to 107 for Hispanics, and from 106 to 115 for Asians. There was no increase for Black or Native American women, whose birthrates for both years hovered in the 60s. Moving to women aged 35 to 39 years, birthrates increased from 31.5 to 45.6 for Whites, from 28.1 to 34.3 for Blacks, from 49.6 to 61.8 for Asians, and from 45.3 to 54.2 for Hispanics. Native American women had birthrates of about 27 for both 1990 and 2005 (B. E. Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2007; B. E. Hamilton, Sutton, & Ventura, 2003). These numbers indicate that, overall, we are witnessing an increase in births to women at later ages, and this trend includes most racial and ethnic groups.

The increase in delayed childbearing has also been linked to social class, and, in most studies, social class is operationalized by women's educational attainment. The proportion of college-educated women who were childless at age 30 rose from .40 to .56 between the late 1970s and early 1990s; there was an increase as well for women without a college degree, from .19 to .26 (Martin, 2000). A key point, however, is that, in relative terms, the increase has been about the same for women of all educational levels (Martin), although those with college degrees are overrepresented in this category. In recent years there has been an increase in both first and second child birthrates after age 30. This upward swing, too, has been concentrated among highly educated women. Although most women, in absolute numbers, who delay childbearing until after age 30 do not have college degrees, their college-educated counterparts are more likely to have a birth after age 30 (Martin).

There are at least three reasons for the increased attention to delayed childbearing, beyond general demographic interest in shifts in the timing of childbearing. First, it reflects marked societal changes, as women have increasingly entered the labor market and, among the well educated, are establishing

careers rather jobs. Of course, this coincides with the increasing age at marriage as well. Many women and men are waiting to be established economically before beginning family formation, and doing so typically requires not only extended education but several years of continuous commitment to employment. Ellwood and Jencks (2001), examining the 1960 to 2000 time period, showed that the increase in single parenthood has been concentrated in the middle and lower thirds of the educational distribution. These groups have been delaying marriage, but not necessarily parenthood. The top third of the distribution has been delaying both marriage and parenthood until older ages (see also Martin, 2004; Sassler & Cunningham, 2008).

Second, attention to delayed childbearing is accounted for in part by the fact that it attracts popular as well as academic interest. At heart is the question: When is fertility postponed fertility foregone? This has been explored extensively in popular media. Books such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett's (2002) *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* spawned curiosity, and sometimes anxiety, about whether childbearing delayed is actually childbearing foregone. The answer to this question is complex, but it appears that delayed childbearing does lead to some degree of forgone childbearing and that there is gender asymmetry in this linkage. A study based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth showed that among women born between 1957 and 1961, those who were unmarried, childless, and still in school in 1982 were most likely to end up having fewer children than intended (as reported in 1982) by the year 2000 (Quesnel-Vallée & Morgan, 2003). Further, the probability of having fewer children than intended was 33% higher for women enrolled in college than for men enrolled in college, arguably highlighting some gender asymmetry in "having it all."

Third, whereas nonmarital childbearing used to be viewed as the province of teenagers, it is now the case that the majority of nonmarital births—60%—are occurring to women ages 20–29. Only 23% of nonmarital births in 2007 were to women under 20 years old, compared to 50% in 1970 (Ventura, 2009). Arguably, this shift, alongside the rising average age at childbirth and declining birthrates for teenagers, at least until very recently, has led researchers to focus more on birth timing at older ages.

### Childlessness

Childlessness, perhaps the most extreme form of childbearing "forgone," has increased over time. In 2000, nearly 20% of women were childless at ages 40–44, an age range often used by demographers to proxy ultimate fertility. This proportion has roughly doubled since 1976. Although some women in this age group will go on to have children, by these ages, women are nearing the end of their childbearing years.

Moreover, variation in childlessness suggests that women with high levels of human capital are least likely to bear children. For example, in 1998, roughly 29% of 40–44-year-old women with bachelor's degrees were without children compared to about 14% for those with high school degrees or less. Similar differentials occur when women are stratified by occupation; among those with professional and managerial occupations, over 26% were childless in 1998 compared to 17% for women in other occupations (Bachu & O'Connell, 2001). Other evidence indicates that women with highly compensated and time-intensive careers (corporate executives, for example) have much higher rates of childlessness, in some subgroups nearing 50% (Crittenden, 2001).

Childlessness, it should be underscored, is not necessarily involuntary. Abma and Martinez (2006) showed that a considerable percentage of women who are childless at ages 40–44 are *voluntarily* childless: 44% in 2002. The category "voluntarily childless" includes women who expect no children and who have either been sterilized for contraceptive purposes or are fecund. For the rest, 40% are involuntarily childless and 16% consider themselves temporarily childless. The latter group expects one or more births in the future. The patterns among slightly younger women (ages 35–39) show much higher levels of temporary childlessness (43%) but still a substantial proportion of women who are voluntarily childless (41%). Notably, women who are voluntarily childless have the highest incomes, the highest percent in managerial and professional occupations, and most extensive past work experience in comparison to the temporarily and involuntarily childless. This general pattern holds for both White and Black women; a recent study found that childlessness among Black and White women has similar correlates such as prioritization of career goals

and preferences to forgo childbearing until married (Lundquist, Budig, & Curtis, 2009).

These differentials are consistent with other research and with conceptual frameworks stressing the life course perspective as well as the notion that engaging in an activity may entail opportunity costs for other activities (e.g., foregone wages, satisfaction). That is, heavily investing in education and career building in young adulthood may lead to trajectories that may, over time, reduce the desire or eventually the ability, or both, to have children for some women. In addition, childrearing and career investment both require time and energy and thus may compete; combining them, particularly among highly educated women with careers requiring high investments of time, can prove to be quite difficult (Blair-Loy, 2003).

#### *Roads Less Traveled: Adoption and New Reproductive Technologies*

Nationally representative data indicate that, in 2002, just 1.1% of all 18–44-year-old women reported having adopted a child, making adoption a relatively uncommon phenomenon. The percentage is higher for men as a whole (2.3%) and especially for ever-married men (3.8%). This gender difference is largely due to the adoption of the biological children of men's partners or spouses: Roughly 9% of remarried men, for example, have adopted a child (Jones, 2008).

Adoption as a path to parenthood is more common among some population subgroups. Among women age 40–44 who have no biological children and who reported having used infertility services, more than one fourth (26%) have adopted a child. Further, roughly 10% of childless women who have ever used infertility services were currently taking steps to adopt.

Additionally, because of the small number of domestic infants available for adoption (only 1% of all children born in the United States between 1996 and 2002 were relinquished for adoption), some individuals and couples pursue international adoption (Jones, 2008). The number of international adoptions to the United States was roughly 17,400 in 2008 (U.S. Department of State, 2009). Correspondingly, recent research explored the experiences and implications of transracially adopted multicultural children being raised by White

families (L. Hamilton, Cheng, & Powell, 2007; Samuels, 2009).

Assessing the potential use and impact of new reproductive technologies begins with an understanding of impaired fertility and infertility. Approximately 12% of all 15- to 44-year-old women have what is termed “impaired fecundity” (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005). As defined in the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the standard national resource for information on fertility and reproduction, this includes women who (a) report that it is physically impossible for them or their husbands/partners to have a baby (excluding those who have been sterilized), (b) that it is physically difficult or dangerous to carry a baby to term, or (3) had been continuously married or cohabiting for 3 years, not used birth control, and not become pregnant. In the 35- to 39- and 40- to 44-year-old age groups the percentages were, not surprisingly, substantially higher at 22% and 37%, respectively. Infertility is measured only for married couples, with couples classified as infertile if they have not been using contraception for 12 months or more and not become pregnant. The 2002 NSFG indicated that approximately 23% and 27% of childless, married women ages 35–39 and 40–44 were infertile. Including all age groups, 7.4% of married women were infertile in 2002 (Chandra et al.).

The number of people who report having used assisted reproductive technologies is small. According to the 2002 NSFG, 19% of women ages 40–44 have used any infertility service, with only 0.7% having used assisted reproductive technologies. Percentages are lower for other age groups (Chandra et al., 2005). Nonetheless, new reproductive technologies have made biological parenthood a possibility for individuals who were once told they were unlikely ever to conceive, including older women, former chemotherapy patients, and same-sex partners.

New reproductive technologies may potentially impact shifts to later childbearing by offsetting impaired fecundity or infertility (Morgan & Taylor, 2006). A recent study on the effectiveness of in vitro fertilization (IVF), following over 6,000 patients at a large IVF center in Massachusetts, reported two estimates of effectiveness, one optimistic and one conservative. The two are based on different assumptions about the potential “success” rate of patients not returning for treatment (i.e., left before completing

six cycles and did not become pregnant). After six cycles, the optimistic and pessimistic estimates of having a live birth are 72% and 51%, respectively. The percentages decline substantially with age, however, such that the analogous estimates for women 40 and older are 42% and 23% whereas those for women younger than 35 are 86% and 65% (Malizia, Hacker, & Penzias, 2009).

Given that IVF treatments can cost as much as \$15,000 per cycle and health insurance covers this treatment in only a few states, such procedures are financially out of reach for most of the population (Martin, 2004). IVF treatments are also time-consuming and involve multiple injections of drugs (Beckman & Harvey, 2005). Taken together with the results of the IVF study, the ultimate impact of new reproductive technologies is likely to remain limited for some time, depending on future technological and social developments.

It is important to note that a number of same-sex couples are pursuing adoption and alternative reproductive strategies, spurring scholarly conversation about the ramifications these new families have on deeply held social and cultural ideas about kinship (e.g., Dunne, 2000). Systematic, nationally representative data are difficult to come by to substantiate levels and trends. Even large-scale surveys, which contain information gathered from thousands of people representative of the U.S. population, do not contain sufficient numbers of sexual minorities for separate study and typically do not ask about sexual orientation; the overall lack of quality data on sexual minorities is problematic (Gates & Sell, 2006). Nonetheless, data from the 2000 U.S. Census indicate that more than 39% of same-sex couples ages 22–55 were raising children (Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein, 2005), with lesbian couples somewhat more likely than gay couples to be doing so. Whereas some of these children were from prior (heterosexual) relationships, others may be adopted children or children born via new reproductive technologies (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003).

#### MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS ON CHILDBEARING PATTERNS

This section synthesizes central areas of recent research relevant to changing childbearing patterns. We identify several areas of scholarship that have garnered significant attention in

the past decade. Although it is the case that most children are born to married couples, the increasing share born to single and cohabiting couples constitutes the bulk of recent childbearing research. Below we discuss four strands of research: the continued decoupling of marriage from childbearing, the parental relationship context of nonmarital childbearing and its implications for family structure stability, multiple partner fertility, and racial and ethnic variation in childbearing patterns and their ramifications.

A few words about theory: Many studies discussed below are primarily motivated by the need to describe and understand the essentials of emerging family patterns. That family patterns are changing rapidly, constituting a “moving target” (Seltzer, 2004; Smock, Casper, & Wyse, 2008), underscores the need for tracking the basics. In addition, because of recent policy and programmatic efforts in the area of what is termed “marriage promotion,” many studies are motivated to provide basic information relevant to such efforts.

Thus, some studies are explicitly and solely descriptive, although others draw on theories or conceptual frameworks to guide or make sense of the models to be estimated (in quantitative studies) and the interpretation of results. The pool of particular theoretical or conceptual frameworks utilized is large and dependent on topic domain. Life course frameworks are quite common, particularly when researchers are utilizing rich longitudinal data, placing emphasis on the timing and sequencing of events over the life course. Others, especially studies attempting to explain patterns or differentials in nonmarital childbearing and union formation, tend to be influenced by frameworks that highlight an economic or resource dimension (e.g., earnings, education, economic status and trajectories, time), an ideational dimension (e.g., attitudes, norms, culture, religiosity, schemas), or both (see Morgan et al., 2008, chap. 3). Studies using ideational factors to understand a range of family behaviors include but are not limited to those linking attitudes and behavior, the role of religious denomination or religiosity, or the use of concepts such as “norms” or “culture” (Barber, 2001; Harding, 2007; Hayford & Morgan, 2008; Pearce, 2002; Thornton, 2001; Waller, 1999; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007).

The focus on economics has a long history in family studies, such as Becker's (1981) notion that the “gains” to marriage stem from gender

ideology, with women investing in home production and men specializing in the labor market (see also Parsons, 1949). Women's movement into employment, the decline in earnings among less educated men over the past few decades, and concomitant changes in attitudes toward gender diminish such gains; some scholars attribute the "retreat" from marriage to these forces. Also influential is Wilson's (1987) notion of marriage markets, in which the numbers of "marriageable men" (i.e., men having steady incomes) are not plentiful relative to the numbers of women of the same race and similar age group. This lack of marriageable men is particularly acute in disadvantaged minority communities, where high rates of incarceration and unemployment compromise men's opportunities to marry (Harknett & McLanahan, 2004).

#### *The Continued Decoupling of Childbearing and Marriage*

An emerging literature, facilitated to some extent by the collection and analysis of qualitative data, attempts to unpack and further understand the meanings of marriage broadly and, for the purposes of this article, as it relates to parenthood. Once childbearing occurred overwhelmingly within marriage, but now it is increasingly decoupled from marriage for large segments of the population (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993). Why? This question has engaged numerous family researchers.

A qualitative study on unmarried parents provides some clues. This study suggested that three perceived obstacles to marriage are most salient to unmarried couples with children. These are concerns about financial stability, relationship quality, and fear of divorce, with financial concerns clearly the most frequently mentioned issue (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). The centrality of economic circumstances for marriage is consistent with other qualitative research on low-income mothers and on working and lower-middle-class cohabiting couples (Cherlin, 2004; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005). Although it might appear at first glance that getting married should not be more expensive than living together, couples tend to have a number of specific concerns. They feel they should be able to afford the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle (e.g., the ability to purchase a home) and a reasonable wedding (rather than going downtown to the courthouse),

achieve financial stability, be debt free, and demonstrate fiscal responsibility (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan; Smock et al.).

Research using survey data yields similar findings, but the qualitative studies are more nuanced in unpacking the meaning of money and economic resources. In this way, they elaborate on the clear message from the quantitative literature that the well educated or those with reasonably high earnings, or both, are more likely to marry, to move more rapidly from cohabitation to marriage, and to remain married (e.g., Oppenheimer, 2003; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004; Sassler & Schoen, 1999; Smock & Manning, 2007; Sweeney, 2002; Xie, Raymo, Goyette, & Thornton, 2003).

This is not to say that marriage is all about money. A study using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWB), a national study following a sample of children born to unmarried parents between 1998 and 2000, along with a comparison group of children born to married parents, finds that cultural and interpersonal factors have some effects on unmarried parents' chances of marriage (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). These factors include pro-marriage attitudes, the emotional quality of the relationship, church attendance, and women's trust of men. Attitudes favorable toward marriage, women's religiosity, and feeling supported by one's partner enhance the chances of marriage, whereas women's gender mistrust (e.g., beliefs that men take advantage of women in dating relationships and that men cannot be trusted to be faithful) decreases it.

More generally, Cherlin (2004) argued that the symbolic importance of marriage has increased over time, now representing achievement and signifying prestige. In essence, whereas economic struggle during the early years of marriage was a normative assumption in an earlier era, nowadays there is widespread perception that marriage should occur after financial goals have already been reached.

The ethnographic work of Edin and Kefalas (2005) on why low-income women have children outside of marriage rather than wait until marriage has deepened our understanding of worldviews that do not involve having children within marriage. First, valuing marriage or aspiring to marriage, as nearly all people do as shown by numerous surveys, does not a marriage make. Low-income mothers very much value marriage but believe that marriage

should be free from economic difficulties, and, further, given the possibility of divorce, it is worth putting off marriage until the right time. In addition, Edin and Kefalas argued, the disadvantaged ascribe more value to children than do the middle class and deem childlessness a terrible tragedy. Third, they have less to lose (e.g., forgone earnings) by having children early and place children first in terms of making meaning of their lives. Fourth, good mothering is not seen as something that requires tremendous resources; it basically involves “being there,” a conception of parenting that differs from that of the middle class (Lareau, 2003).

The upshot is that low-income women generally view marriage as something to which to aspire, whereas parenthood is attainable regardless of financial stability or marital status (see also Schoen & Tufis, 2003). Even among more affluent, childless cohabitators, a significant minority does not subscribe to the view that having a child constitutes a sufficient reason to marry (Sassler & Cunningham, 2008).

Most broadly, we argue that not only has the stigma against nonmarital childbearing decreased over time, but the upsurge in cohabitation offers a marriage-like relationship with many of the same advantages of marriage (e.g., companionship, shared expenses, sexual access, childbearing, and childrearing). With cohabitation available as an increasingly normative option, the impetus for marriage decreases.

#### *The Parental Context of Nonmarital Childbearing and Implications for Family Structure Stability*

Many people hear the words “out of wedlock childbearing” or “nonmarital childbearing” and imagine a single woman bearing and rearing a child by herself. The couple context of nonmarital birth is entirely absent from this picture, as are other kinds of living arrangements. Recent research has changed this picture and has also begun to examine the implications of the type of families children are born into for the stability of their early life course.

*The relationship context of nonmarital births.* Of all births, almost 20% are to unmarried couples who are living together, so-called cohabiting couples (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Mincieli et al., 2007). There also appears to be an upward trend in the proportion of births to cohabiting

couples. Between 1997 and 2001, slightly over half of all *nonmarital* births were to cohabiting couples and the remainder to women who were not cohabiting. Between 1990 and 1994, in contrast, roughly 29% of all nonmarital births were to cohabiting couples (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Mincieli et al.). Further, the share of births to cohabiting women increased substantially between the early 1990s and 1997–2001, whereas the share to single mothers living without a partner remained steady (Kennedy & Bumpass). It is also essential to note that, although cohabiting couples account for only about half of all nonmarital births, their fertility rate is substantially higher than single women, closer to that of married women (Raley, 2001; Wildsmith & Raley, 2006). These observations hold because of differences in the denominator: Rates use the number of women in a particular union status as the denominator whereas the proportion of births is derived from using the number of all births as the denominator.

Data from the FFCWB indicate that among unmarried mothers who were not cohabiting at the time of the child’s birth, about 35% were living alone and 65% with other adults. Moreover, in the noncohabiting group, about two thirds reported that they were romantically involved with the baby’s father, although not living with him (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Even among those who were cohabiting, a substantial minority (30%) were living with other adults as well (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002b).

The finding that a not inconsiderable share of cohabiting couples live with other adults is consistent with qualitative research, suggesting it should not be assumed that all cohabiting couples set up independent households, especially among the less economically advantaged. One study on cohabiting, working-class young adults found that living with other adults is a relatively common pattern (Manning & Smock, 2005). Another, based on a subsample of the FFCWB, reported that 62% of cohabiting couples lived with other family members when they first moved in together (Reed, 2006).

Racial/ethnic and educational variation is also seen in the proportion of nonmarital births that are, in fact, to cohabiting couples. Among non-Hispanic White and Hispanic women, 61% and 65% of nonmarital births are occurring while cohabiting, compared to a much lower 30% among Black women. Although highly educated women are far less likely to have a nonmarital



birth overall than less educated women, when they do, they are more likely to do so in the context of a cohabiting relationship. Among women without a high school degree who have a nonmarital birth, about 44% are living with the biological father; this is substantially less than the 60% of women with at least some college (Mincieli et al., 2007). It should be noted that these births are not all occurring among the young and never married; roughly 20% of births after marital separation or divorce are occurring in cohabiting unions (Brown, 2000).

*Stability in parents' relationships.* Family scholars have not only been documenting the couple context in which children are born but also focusing on the stability of such contexts. A primary reason for this research emphasis is child well-being.

Beginning in the 1980s, when nationally representative, longitudinal data sources became available, studies emerged examining the implications of divorce for children's well-being (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). This body of work has been important in establishing that family structure instability, by and large, has negative effects on child well-being (Cherlin, 1999; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007). More generally, studies have documented that children who experienced family structure instability are, overall, more likely to experience a number of problems. Although some children may do just fine, family structure instability tends to decrease child well-being. The kinds of child outcomes assessed are numerous: verbal development, academic achievement, behavioral problems, financial stability during adulthood, delinquency, and many others, depending on the availability of measures in the data being used. For example, Wu and Thomson (2001) found that, among Whites, family instability accelerates premarital initiation of sexuality controlling for an array of other factors. Important, too, is that single mothers and cohabiting couples tend to have lower incomes than married couples; we have already described how social class and race/ethnicity are correlated with pathways to parenthood with the less advantaged being more likely to have births outside of marriage. Income is important in ensuring child well-being, with low income and poverty associated with a host of disadvantages for children. Children's poverty rates are high in cohabiting and single-mother households, substantially

higher than in married-couple families (Brown & Manning, 2006).

Given the continued growth in the percentage of children born in marriages, recent studies are concerned with both documenting and understanding the risks of family structure instability for these children, compared to those born to married couples. One strand of such research compares the stability of parental relationships for children born to cohabiting versus married parents, typically finding that the former are more vulnerable to the dissolution of their parents' relationship (Graefe & Lichter, 1999; Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004; Wu & Musick, 2008). For example, about 15% of children born to cohabiting mothers experience the end of their parents' union by age 1, half by age 5, and two thirds by age 10. For children born to married couples, instability is much less, with only 4% and 15% experiencing their parents' separation by ages 1 and 5, respectively, and roughly 28% by age 10 (Manning, Smock, & Majumdar, 2004).

In addition, rates of instability are higher for Black children than for White and Hispanic children in both circumstances. Two fifths of Hispanic and White children born into cohabiting families have experienced their parents' separation by age 5 years, compared to three fifths for Black children (Manning et al., 2004). Among children born to married couples, 14% of Hispanic, 16% of White, and 25% of Black children have experienced the dissolution of their parents' marriages.

In multivariate models, findings regarding relative stability differ somewhat across studies, depending on the data source used, the choice of independent variables, and the like. But the take-home point is that studies are typically unable to account for the higher levels of instability for children born to cohabiting unions, with perhaps two exceptions. Osborne et al. (2007) found that, for White children, parental education and other factors account for the higher risk of instability for those born to cohabiting parents compared to married parents but that this is not the case for Mexican American or Black children.

Wu and Musick (2008) added an interesting twist. They found that *for couples who marry*, the ordering of cohabitation, marriage, and child-birth does not affect the stability of their unions. In other words, couples who end up marrying have relationships that are similar in terms of stability whether they had their child while

cohabiting or after becoming married. Their results suggest that, for some cohabiting couples, marriage and childbirth are jointly planned; that is, the decision to marry is not separate from the decision to have children. Future research on this issue, particularly through studies using a variety of data sets, might allow us to draw more definitive conclusions about relationship stability, improving our knowledge of the mechanisms that account for varying levels of instability across different parental relationship types, and for understanding racial/ethnic variation.

Scholars have also been documenting relationship trajectories for women who have a nonmarital birth but are not cohabiting (e.g., “single” women). Even controlling for educational attainment, the odds that White and Black women with a nonmarital birth marry rather than cohabit are 30% less than for their childless counterparts; for Hispanic women the odds are 56% less (Qian, Lichter, & Mellott, 2005; see also Graefe & Lichter, 2002).

A related issue is the extent to which children conceived or born outside of marriage are likely to experience their parents’ marriage. Data from the FFCWB study showed that, at the time of their child’s birth, the majority of couples with a nonmarital birth—84% of Blacks, 81% of White, 94% of Mexican Americans, 94% of other Hispanics—were romantically involved, either cohabiting or having a romantic relationship but living apart (Harknett & McLanahan, 2004). The vast majority also had high hopes that they would marry their partner.

Yet by the 1-year follow-up, only 15% of cohabiting mothers had married the baby’s father and a substantially higher one quarter had broken up. A mere 5% of those who were romantically involved but not living together at the baseline interview had married (Carlson et al., 2004). Whereas about one third began living together, almost half of the noncohabiting, romantically involved couples had broken up.

Moreover, research based on other data sources shows that, over recent decades, single and cohabiting women who become pregnant are decreasingly likely to marry and increasingly likely to remain single or cohabiting (Raley, 2001; see also Reed, 2006). That is, a premarital conception no longer catalyzes a “shotgun” marriage (i.e., “legitimation”) or a shotgun cohabitation for that matter. Among single, noncohabiting women who became pregnant during the 1990–1994 period, 11% married

prior to childbirth, 9% began cohabiting, and 81% remained single. Ten years prior, about 20% married prior to childbirth, 6% began cohabiting, and 74% remained single (Raley). What these numbers also illustrate is that, although not common, women in the most recent years examined are also as likely to begin cohabiting as to marry (9% and 11%, respectively). More generally, studies have demonstrated that women who have a nonmarital birth have reduced odds of marriage (Graefe & Lichter, 2002).

Researchers have also grappled with the issue of whether marriage is likely to solve the economic problems faced by many unmarried mothers. The answer appears to be “probably not” (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002a).

To illustrate, women’s chances of entering a union with a well-educated partner are reduced by nonmarital childbearing, consistent with the general inverse relationship between social class and nonmarital childbearing (Qian et al., 2005; see also Harknett & Kuperberg, 2009). The flip side is that men with few economic resources are more likely than other men to marry unwed mothers (Lichter & Graefe, 2007). One study finds that among women who had a nonmarital birth and eventually married, 25% married a high school dropout, 15% a nonemployed man, and 62% someone earning less than \$30,000 per year (Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003). Also, at least one third of unwed mothers who married were subsequently divorced (by the time of the survey); in fact, those who went on to marry and divorce ended up economically worse off than those who never married.

### *Multiple Partner Fertility*

A new phrase has been coined in the past few years: “multipartnered” or “multiple partner” fertility. This refers to having biological children with more than one partner. The phenomenon itself, however, is not new. Research has, for some time, examined the linkages between, for example, having children from a prior marriage and the chances of remarriage, having a premarital birth and the subsequent chances of marriage, and the complexities faced by “blended” families (e.g., stepfamilies).

In the more distant past, however, when divorce rates were low, most people lived their (shorter) lives with one partner and generally had children with only one partner. Times have changed, as people live longer, nonmarital

childbearing is increasing in frequency and losing its stigma, divorce rates are high, and cohabiting relationships remain more short lived than marriages. Thus, multiple partner fertility, particularly that taking place outside of marriage, appears to be on the rise (Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007; Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe, 2008).

Most of this newer body of literature is concerned with documenting the prevalence and correlates of multiple partner fertility, although oftentimes using multivariate models, particularly among unmarried couples. In two fifths of the couples in the FFCWB sample, one or both partners have children from another relationship (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006). Multiple partner fertility is more prevalent among unmarried parents than married parents, varies by race and ethnicity (with Blacks having higher rates of multiple partner fertility), is higher if the father has been incarcerated, and is higher if parents had their first child when young. In short, multiple partner fertility is highest among the least advantaged in our society.

Studies using other data sources not limited to new unmarried parents, such as the 2002 NSFG, draw similar conclusions. Focusing on men, Guzzo and Furstenberg (2007) found that among those age 35–44, 16% had children with two or more women. Rates of multiple partner fertility, however, were much higher among the poor, with “poor” indicated by having an income of 150% above the poverty line or less. Among poor 35- to 44-year-old men, nearly 37% of Black, 20% Hispanic, and 27% of White men reported multiple partner fertility (see also Manlove et al., 2008). These levels are all the more striking given that men who are incarcerated are not in the sampling frame, men older than their mid-40s are not included, men tend to underreport fertility (Rendall, Clarke, Peters, Ranjit, & Verropolou, 1999), and the most disadvantaged men may live part-time in several households and thus be undercounted (Goffman, 2009).

What is the significance of this emergent area of research? Broadly, it underscores the increased complexity of kin relations that multiple partner fertility induces for children and parents and raises questions about stress and conflict stemming from this complexity. One strand of research asks whether multiple partner fertility diminishes paternal resources to “old” biological children (Furstenberg, 1995)

or whether new partners assume the role of biological parents in terms of investments of time and resources. Longitudinal research based on two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (1987–1988 and 1992–1994) suggested that when a father has new children, particularly new biological children, in his household, his social involvement with and economic investments in his nonresident biological children decrease (Manning & Smock, 1999, 2000).

Research using more recent data drew similar conclusions, although some studies have argued that high quality coparenting enhances nonresident father involvement (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; see also R. M. Ryan, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2008; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Edin, Tach, and Mincy (2009) found that fathers in new partnerships were less involved with their nonresident biological children over time, despite the great importance they placed on being a father. Limits on time and resources, however, constrained the extent to which they could stay involved.

In addition, a qualitative study indicated that fathers’ involvement with children from earlier unions is often the source of relationship problems among cohabiting parents (Reed, 2006); that is, continuing contact with the other parent can provoke sexual mistrust and jealousy. This may very well inhibit continuing father involvement.

Whether new, nonbiological fathers step in and basically “replace” biological fathers is an area needing more research. From what we know to date, the answer may well be “yes.” The pattern noted above—of diminishing investment in nonresident children when fathers form new families—is consistent with this conclusion.

More direct evidence comes from studies that have found that many men claim “father” status with the nonbiological children with whom they live (Edin et al., 2009; Marsiglio, 2004). As Edin et al. concluded from their study of low-income fathers, “Except for periods in men’s life course when they are struggling with addiction, an examination of the 165 cases reveals a portrait of almost continuous intensive fatherhood” (p. 170) when we use an inclusive definition of fatherhood that incorporates social fathering. It is also important to note that “social fatherhood” appears beneficial for young children, being positively correlated with a number of indicators of child well-being (Bzostek, 2008).

One further significant aspect of multiple-partner fertility research is that it underscores the point that family relationships often extend beyond a single household. Calls for more data collection and research predicated on the assumption that family and family-like relationships and exchanges span beyond households are well founded (Morgan et al., 2008).

### *Racial and Ethnic Variation in Childbearing Patterns*

As demonstrated throughout this review, there are typically racial and ethnic differences in childbearing patterns noted by researchers. These are fairly straightforward to document. Understanding them is another matter, and understanding has been and remains very much on the minds of family scholars.

So, what do we know? We have four answers, partial at best, to this question. First, racial and ethnic differences in childbearing patterns are found in most studies and generally cannot be fully explained away, even with the inclusion of a wide array of variables (e.g., attitudinal, economic, sociodemographic).

Second, most of these differentials, at least among Hispanics, Blacks, and non-Hispanic Whites—groups that have been studied more than others because of data constraints—are in the direction of more disadvantage, broadly speaking, for Blacks and Hispanics. For example, as we have discussed, Whites are least likely to have a nonmarital birth. Partly as a result, the trajectories of Black and Hispanic children involve more family instability than those for White children and, among those born to unmarried mothers, a lower chance of experiencing their mothers' marriage by age 12 (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004).

Third, social class, including income as well as wealth, is of course terribly important in any explanation of racial and ethnic variation. This is because of the correlation between economic advantage and being White in this country; non-Hispanic Whites enjoy, on average, the highest incomes and lowest levels of poverty across family structures (Proctor & Dalaker, 2002). Although researchers do their best to include available measures to proxy social class in the majority of studies examining childbearing, parental trajectories, and family structure

stability, racial and ethnic variation may be reduced but does not disappear.

Fourth, some variation of the concept of culture—perceived meanings, values, worldviews, and the like—is typically deployed to explain subgroup differences that remain unexplained, although how *culture* is defined differs across studies (e.g., Osborne et al., 2007; Wildsmith & Raley, 2006). Although these arguments are usually plausible, they are generally post hoc explanations rather than testable predictions. Raley and Sweeney (2009) offered a series of useful recommendations that may help to shed light on racial and ethnic differences in a number of family domains. Highlighting the importance of subjective influences, their recommendations included investigating the multiple dimensions of marriage versus other couple relationships across subgroups, attending to the influence of “third parties” (e.g., relatives, friends, and employers), and taking account not only of social class but of the institutional contexts that bind these parties.

These recommendations are well informed and have the potential to further our understanding of group variation. Many of them will require pilot studies to refine the measurement of constructs to be included in existing surveys; others will benefit from ethnographic and other qualitative work that provides comprehensive, although not necessarily parsimonious, accounts of meaning making of different groups in the context of varied structures. Other important directions for future research on racial and ethnic variation include increased attention to nativity and immigrants, a focus increasingly prominent in family studies (Glick, 2010; Glick, Ruf, White, & Goldscheider, 2006; Osborne et al., 2007; Parrado & Morgan, 2008), as well as attention to Native Americans and specific subgroups of Asians and Hispanics (Smock et al., 2008). The latter is a special challenge for quantitative research because most surveys do not have a sufficient sample size to sustain analyses of fertility processes and behaviors for small population subgroups.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Over the past decade, social scientists have established that so-called alternative family forms have increased in frequency and produced new or bolstered nascent pathways to parenthood. Studies of fertility behavior, relationship

trajectories, and family forms reveal the extent to which social change (e.g., technology, social norms) has made parenthood an available option for some women and men who, not long ago, would have had to forgo childbearing or child-rearing, or both, because of, for example, impaired fecundity or being unmarried. Social change has now also made childlessness an option for people who choose to form families without children; recall that 44% of childless 40- to 44-year-old women are voluntarily so (Abma & Martinez, 2006). Just as there is no single pathway to parenthood, there is no single, hegemonic family form; a variety of family forms are accepted and practiced widely today.

Our review synthesized several areas of knowledge on parenthood. We first summarized recent data on basic childbearing patterns, highlighting variation by social class, largely proxied by education, and race and ethnicity. We also identified several areas of research that emerged in our analysis as most prominent in the literature over the past decade. These include (a) attempts to understand the rise in nonmarital childbearing, (b) the relationship trajectories of parents having children outside of marriage compared to those having them within marriage, (c) multiple partner fertility (e.g., the implications of having children with more than one partner), and (d) the large and burgeoning literature on racial and ethnic variation in numerous childbearing-related behaviors. Thus, our coverage was broad and our pace swift at times. Nearly all of these topics, in fact, could constitute a separate review, necessitating omission of many relevant studies.

We began the article by noting the number of children born in 2006. But the aggregate number obscures the multiple paths to and contexts of parenthood and the implications of such variation. One of the most important implications involves family structure instability and its impact on child well-being. It is clear that children who are most disadvantaged are, on average, more likely to be born into contexts in which they can expect to experience family instability (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). A father leaves, a boyfriend moves in, a boyfriend moves out, and then, perhaps, the mother remarries: These changes are typically negatively associated with child well-being. This is not true in all cases, but social science research has established this connection generally. We expect that future research will continue to

engage these themes and suggest that studies also take on the question of “when is instability good for children?” Although this question has received less explicit attention, one can imagine that a stable cohabiting relationship between a mother and a very committed “step” father can enhance child well-being.

A second implication of the body of work we analyzed is that moving beyond the household is vital for understanding families and the interconnections between family structure, relationship trajectories, and child and adult well-being. Families are dynamic and may include people that are household members at one point in time but who later leave the household; families may also include part-time residents such as stepsiblings or “quasi” stepsiblings (e.g., biological children of a cohabiting partner). Given such fluidity, families are decreasingly bound by households, and family ties may well remain between members of different households when a parental coresidential relationship dissolves. This point is vital substantively and must inform the development of new data collection on families.

Third, researchers will continue to examine the impact on children of being born to and raised by single parents or by parents who are cohabiting compared to those who are married, but we believe there will be increasing calls for data that will allow for more attention to children raised in same-sex or adoptive families (see Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001, for a study that included an explicit focus on adopted children). We would add that an important direction for future research is to place more emphasis on longer term impacts. Longitudinal surveys such as the Add Health will be useful for assessing in considerable depth the association between parents’ relationship histories and their children’s own childbearing and union formation decisions, at least for a particular cohort who are now adults (e.g., S. Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, & Manlove, 2009). Further, when today’s infants and young children are grown, it is possible that the family forms currently considered nontraditional will have lost that label and be even more widely accepted, socially and legally. Thus, if other existing surveys following more recent birth cohorts of children (i.e., young or adolescents now) can be extended through young adulthood, such data would help researchers illuminate social change.

Fourth, a significant development in family studies is attention to perceptions and how people interpret their situations. This line of inquiry focuses on the worldviews of people themselves, often using ethnographic and other qualitative approaches. Qualitative studies such as those we have cited here have helped us to understand that, although marriage is an aspiration for most people, those on the economic edge are likely to see themselves as “unready” to marry, with marriage signifying having already achieved a middle-class lifestyle (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005; Smock et al., 2005). Additional qualitative work can deepen our comprehension of the ways that men and women, as well as adolescents and children, perceive and experience family forms.

We would make two closing observations. The first concerns the title of our review. “Diversity” in pathways to parenthood does not mean equal, just as “separate” is not equal. What is missing in the word “diversity” is acknowledgment of inequality. The life chances of people taking different paths to parenthood are already stratified by social class, race, and ethnicity, and these contours of inequality are likely to be passed down to their children as well. In other words, diversity in life “choices” is no guarantor of equality. In almost every indicator and area of research discussed here, social class and racial/ethnic differences exist, making it nearly impossible to overlook the clear patterning of advantage and disadvantage. To put it most simply, those who are economically privileged typically have more stable family lives. Although many scholars argue about selection versus causation and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, it is important to emphasize that preexisting inequality indeed leaves an imprint—often a deep one—on family processes and behaviors.

Our second observation is about family change. Taken together, the research reviewed here indicates how and often why family forms, childbearing, and paths to parenthood in the United States have been transformed in the recent past and are likely to continue to be. At the same time, to say that families are in flux is not news (Smock, 2004). Generations of social critics as well as social scientists have noted—sometimes with alarm—the changing nature of families. What is new is that today’s family scholars have multiple sources of rich data and useful methodological tools with which

to try to understand such changes and their implications.

#### NOTE

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