Fifty Years of Family Change: From Consensus to Complexity

By FRANK F. FURSTENBERG

Even for me—a student of family change for the past half century—it is difficult to comprehend just how much the American family has changed in the time since I entered graduate school in the early 1960s. In the United States, we have gone from an era where almost everyone acted in lockstep when forming families, to the present day when variation has

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become the hallmark of how Americans form partnerships and have children. Fifty years ago, a vast majority of young adults in the United States was married and had children by their mid-twenties, while today only a small minority of young adults has formed families by their mid-thirties, and close to a fifth will never enter into a lasting partnership or have children (Kennedy and Furstenberg 2013).

True, family formation patterns in the 1960s also represented a sharp departure from the proceeding decades during the Great Depression and Second World War (Cherlin 1981). Nonetheless, whether we cast our vision back to the early decades of the previous century or begin with the anomalous “baby boom era” at midcentury, it is difficult to construct a simple, linear pattern in the timetable for entering adulthood from past to present. Nor can we say that what has been happening to the American family is truly distinctive. The patterns of postponement and variability that characterize contemporary family formation in the United States are also evident in most nations with advanced economies. Though some changes in the United States have been more pronounced than in other Western nations, most countries have followed a similar course of family change. Specifically, virtually all countries with advanced economies have undergone a package of changes that demographers refer to as the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaege and Niedert 2006; Sobotka 2008):

- The long-standing link between the initiation of sex and marriage has broken down. The value placed on virginity at marriage has been seriously depreciated throughout the West and may be changing in parts of the developing world (Furstenberg 2007).
- The institution of marriage, at least as we have known it, has weakened in most nations. Cohabitation before or instead of marriage has become more widespread and more acceptable as an alternative to legal marriage in almost all Western countries and may be occurring in greater frequency in post-industrial nations throughout most of the West and a growing part of Eastern Europe (Kiernan 2002).
- Rates of nonmarital childbearing have risen in all Western nations, albeit at very different levels, leading to higher levels of union instability and single-parent families (Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003).
- Childbearing, especially in marriage, occurs much later, leading in part to fertility declines and the growth of childlessness. Rates of childlessness are growing especially quickly in the economically developed countries of Asia (Frejka et al. 2008; Kohler, Billari, and Ortega 2002; Morgan 2003).
- Social class differences in family formation have widened as inequality has grown in virtually all countries with advanced economies (Smeeding 2005). In particular, the differences between the haves and the have-nots have widened in the timing of first birth and whether it takes place within or outside of marriage.

All of these patterns of change have contributed to growing variability in family formation within nations and probably within regional and cultural
subgroups. Two leading social demographers, Francesco Billari and Aart Liefbroer (2010), have labeled this pattern as “convergence to divergence.”

Accounting for these global changes in the postindustrial family and assessing their consequences on the welfare of children have been topics of much debate and a growing body of scholarship in the United States, Europe, and throughout Anglo-speaking nations. Increasingly, it has become a topic of interest in Asia (Yeung, Alipio, and Furstenberg 2013).

These changes were largely unanticipated 50 years ago. Indeed, the preeminent family scholar of the day at that time, William J. Goode (1963), predicted a general convergence to the conjugal family (based on strong marital bonds and weaker bonds across generations and within lineages). While Goode’s forecasts were right in some respects, he largely missed the mark when it came to what has happened in the United States and indeed throughout much of the West. It is not even clear that his main projections will hold true for Asia or Africa, where the strength of lineage may be declining but the growth of the conjugal family has been uneven (Cherlin 2012; Furstenberg 2013).

In this article, I first touch on the reasons why family change has taken such an unexpected turn, creating more variation and structural complexity than uniformity and simplicity, as Goode’s theory of family change would have predicted. Elsewhere, I have argued that Goode simply did not see what was almost staring him in the face in the 1960s: an impending gender revolution that unsettled the seeming inevitability of the conjugal family. Marriage and marriage-like unions are simply not organized the way they were 50 years ago; the creation of stable unions has proven to be far more challenging than when the system that was rooted in the gender-based division of labor prevailed.

The changes that were about to take place in gender roles within and outside the family were barely evident in the 1960s when family sociologists and economists were still contending that the marked division of labor in the American family contributed to its unique strength (Coser 1974; Parsons 1942). Isolated from strong lineage bonds that dominated in most traditional family systems, the Western model of the family had demonstrated the flexibility to “fit,” to use Goode’s term, or adapt to the demands of an emerging industrial economy. Males, we were told then, embodied the instrumental skills necessary for gaining a livelihood, while females possessed expressive skills necessary for childrearing (Zelditch 1955). Of course, variability still occurred, especially across socioeconomic strata, but those not living in nuclear households with children were seen as more aberrant than they are regarded today (Cherlin 1981).

I offer a brief description of why and how the family shifted from a coherent and dominant model of nuclear families formed early in life to a system that is less prescribed and less uniform. There is no broadly accepted explanation, but most scholars believe that a constellation of changing conditions undermined the model of family formation in place in the middle of the last century. I share this belief, but I also contend that the widening inequality in American society (and postindustrial societies in general) has exacerbated the changes that have occurred, amplifying the consequences for children who grow up in less advantaged circumstances (Carlson and England 2011).
I also consider some of the implications of the changes in how families are formed for perpetuating social inequality. In particular, I focus on the growing complexity of families in which children grow up with both biological and non-biological parents and in kinship systems that are complicated by a succession of multiple partnerships. While this pattern is not unique to the United States, it is far more prevalent in that country than in any other wealthy nation with an advanced economy (Cherlin 2009). In the final section, I speculate on whether kinship complexity may increase in the West and among other nations with post-industrial economies.

Why the Changes Occurred

How did we get from there to here, and why did the changes unfold so rapidly? Whenever demographic patterns change so swiftly, it is safe to assume that many interrelated sources are operating simultaneously and most, if not all, are working in the same direction. When they shift so quickly, there is also reason to suspect that existing patterns may have concealed latent conflicts and contradictions that become actively expressed in the larger culture in which the family system is embedded. The early marriage pattern in the United States—let’s call it marriage, 1950s-style or, even, “traditional marriage”—was riddled with contradictions that were mostly unacknowledged at the time (Bernard 1982; Coontz 1993; Komarovsky 1946; May 1988).

In the 1950s, the median age of marriage fell to just over 20 years for women and to just below 23 years for men, figures substantially lower than in most other nations with developed economies (Carter and Glick 1976). Following the Second World War, courtship among couples was typically brief; in many instances, it was almost nonexistent. Most couples wed after dating for barely more than a year; among couples in their teens, the median length of courtship was especially brief (Burgess and Wallin 1953; Hollingshead 1949; Moss, Apolonio, and Jensen 1971; Pierce 1963). Marriage at this time constituted what might be called the mainspring for the transition to adulthood, swiftly following the completion of education and entrance to the labor force. Young people did not linger in early adulthood as they do today (Modell, Furstenberg, and Herschberg 1976; Furstenberg 2010).

Romantic love was regarded as the reason to marry, and many couples did so impulsively, especially in the aftermath of the Second World War. Strict prohibitions on premarital sex, particularly for women, encouraged couples to “go steady” or become engaged when they “fell in love” in part because sexual strictures were relaxed when couples were committed to marriage. Premarital pregnancies were a common prelude to matrimony, propelling many couples into hasty and often ill-considered unions (Cannon and Long 1971).

In the mid-1960s, when I began my study of teenage parenthood in Baltimore, this marriage pattern was still largely intact. My ringside seat allowed me to observe why early marriage was breaking down among African American teens. Though I did not realize it at the time, the changes that I saw among black teens...
foreshadowed trends in nonmarital childbearing that were to sweep the rest of the population in the 1970s and 1980s.

Almost all the pregnant white teens in my study (about a fifth of the sample) married before their child was born. The few who did not marry gave up their children for adoption. Black pregnant teens faced a different choice, because many of the fathers lacked steady employment and had poor prospects of finding remunerative jobs in the immediate future. Because both the pregnant teens and their mothers were interviewed in the first wave of the study, I was privy to the conversations that were taking place inside families. Mothers were frequently counseling their daughters to postpone marriage until they and the fathers of their children completed their education and found employment. “I told her not to marry him just to give the child a name,” was a phrase that recurred in the interviews. “Wait until he has something more to offer you,” mothers counseled their pregnant daughters. The daughters did not always take their mothers’ advice, but almost all confessed later that they wished that they had (Furstenberg 1976).

Similar family dialogues may well have occurred in previous eras because patterns of premarital pregnancy, especially among black teens, had existed throughout the first part of the twentieth century. American couples, it seemed, often were prodded into marriage by impending parenthood. However, the situation for low-educated males was changing dramatically in the 1960s, as well-paying, low-skill jobs began to leave American shores, owing to the European recovery and the beginnings of the globalization of capital. So at the macro level, the economy in the United States was changing in ways that had a particular and pronounced effect on the population that I was observing. The “logic” of early marriage was beginning not to make sense to the most disadvantaged women and their families. As more and more African Americans began to eschew early marriage, rates of nonmarital childbearing in this population soared. Had I began my study 15 or 20 years later, the same discussions would have been occurring among the families of the white teenagers. By then, the trade-off for pregnant women between a precipitous marriage and having a child outside of marriage had changed for the vast majority of American women, and the stigma of nonmarital childbearing had all but disappeared.

Early entry into marriage and parenthood became problematic for more advantaged (and better-educated) women for a different set of reasons. Even before the publication of Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (1963), feminist scholars such as Mira Komarovsky (1946) and Jessie Bernard (1942) had detected a set of cultural contradictions in well-educated families. Well-educated parents began sending daughters to college in growing numbers; at the same time, women were electing to go directly from school into a married life that centered exclusively on domestic activities. Feminism, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, became part of the volatile mix of conditions that propelled educated women into the workforce even when economic conditions did not require them to work. (Incidentally, it is interesting to note that a similar sort of cultural dialogue is taking place in parts of East Asia at the time of this writing.) Rising standards of household consumption probably contributed to the growth of all women in the labor force regardless of their educational attainment.
In the accounts of the time, many women in the middle class claimed that they remained in or reentered the labor force to help afford the purchase of a home, household appliances, televisions, and automobiles, or to support their children's college education. The stagnant wages of male earners and rising expectations for what it took to secure a place in the middle class encouraged many women to remain in the labor force even after they had children and even for some of those who might have otherwise preferred not to continue working had males' incomes been rising more rapidly (Hoffman 1961; Rubin 1976).

The availability of widespread family planning services and, especially, the advent of oral contraceptives, grew from the late 1960s onward, allowing women to exercise greater control over the timing of their births (Furstenberg 2007). This permitted married women to control their fertility, making labor force participation more feasible for women. And for the first time, unmarried women could initiate sex without the fear of getting pregnant. In 1973, the Supreme Court affirmed the right to legal abortion, giving women another strategy for managing ill-timed and unwanted pregnancies. No doubt, the growing practice of family planning facilitated and extended the work lives of women who increasingly were being counted on as supplementary wage earners or household heads whose ranks were rapidly increasing.

Rising divorce rates beginning in the mid-1960s probably also figured into the mix of conditions that encouraged women to enter and remain in the labor force. Of course, a growing number of single mothers needed to work to support themselves and their children. But increasingly, women began to hedge their bets, much as African American women had long done, by becoming more economically self-sufficient. Thus, increasing rates of marital dissolution probably had both direct and indirect effects on increasing rates of women, with all levels of education, in the labor force.

This combination of economic, technological, social, and cultural changes all contributed to the weakening of the strict gender-based division of labor that had prevailed throughout the Baby Boom era. Although demographic and historical scholars have not completely sorted out all of the precise paths of influence, it seems likely that different segments of the population were susceptible to varying combinations of these altered conditions. What we do know is that from the late 1960s to the present day, in a broadly linear fashion women entered the labor force in growing proportions, marriage age began to rise, women began to feel more empowered and even compelled to pursue careers and full-time employment, use of contraceptives steadily increased, and the fertility of married couples declined accordingly.

The Emergence of a Two-Tier Family System in the United States

We now know that the changes that have occurred over the past 50 years affected family formation and family stability differently for the disadvantaged
and advantaged: marriage, as we knew it, became unattainable or at least more problematic in the bottom half (and perhaps two-thirds) of the population. When marriages do occur among poor, near-poor, and middle-income couples, they display as much or even more instability as in the past. Conversely, marriages among the affluent and college educated have actually become more stable over the past several decades (Goldstein and Kenney 2001). While marital instability has long been more common among the less advantaged, the gap in marriage practices between the top and bottom has grown over the past 50 years. As a result, the United States has moved toward a two-tier family system in which practices in establishing and maintaining families among the affluent and the disadvantaged have become more dissimilar.

At the top tier of well-educated and affluent Americans, couples typically do not enter marriage until late in the third or early in the fourth decades of life. They usually do so only after an extended period of cohabitation where the relationship is tested before they enter marriage and before having children. As I have written elsewhere, marriage is increasingly regarded as less of a pledge to commitment than a celebration of commitment that has already been demonstrated.

In the second tier of family formation, couples generally begin forming unions earlier than their well-educated counterparts; the formation of their relationships occurs almost as swiftly as it did 50 years ago (Manning, Brown, and Payne 2013). They usually begin cohabitating either shortly before or just after conception. The pregnancy and inception of the partnership is often viewed as a prelude to an eventual marriage, but their hopes are usually unrealized. Most of these unions do not survive the test of time; indeed, they frequently end before children even enter school. Typically, the cohabiting relationship dissolves before a marriage occurs; they are in effect “stillborn” marriages that never see the light of day.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on just why the family system of poor Americans has diverged so sharply from that of their better-off counterparts. Scholars have multiple explanations, ranging from shifts in cultural values to structural accounts that are rooted in changes in the economic conditions among men and women (see, for example, the debate generated by Charles Murray’s book Coming Apart [2012]). In my view, the debate over cultural and structural explanations that rages in professional and popular venues is crudely constructed. Individuals and the family systems that they build must adapt to changing circumstances as I suggested in the introduction of this article. Doing so often involves altering time-honored practices that no longer work or have become unattainable. Both these behavioral adaptations and the accounts that people provide to explain their behavior are likely to change over time more or less simultaneously. Cultural change usually accompanies—sometimes proceeding and sometimes lagging—changes in economic circumstances (see Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). This adaptive process usually feeds itself as cultural norms adapt to current structural realities and vice versa. This is surely part of the reason why cohabitation in the United States became so prevalent over such a short span of time and quickly is becoming an alternative to formal marriage among couples with limited means and prospects.
Inequality and the Growth of the Two-Tier Family

The larger backdrop under which the two-tier family has emerged is the growth of economic inequality that began in the final third of the last century and continues today. Though much of this growth has been driven by the rapid increase at the very top of the income distribution, it has also been fed by the economic stagnation of incomes in the bottom two-thirds of the income distribution. In part, the relatively slow pace of growth in the proportion of young adults who graduate from college (compared to more rapid increases in other rich nations) suggests that college graduation may have become more difficult for young people from low- and moderate-income families. During the past several decades, the United States has lost its position as the nation with the highest proportion of college graduates and now ranks thirteenth, slightly below the OECD average (OECD 2012).

Though the matter is far from settled empirically, I suspect that income inequality, when combined with the slower growth of the college population, is contributing to the divergence of family patterns. Specifically, it seems likely that, apart from other sources of family change mentioned earlier in this article, the growth in inequality has made the family system that was in place 50 years ago far more difficult to sustain for lower-income and less well-educated couples: in other words, they are compelled to settle for cohabitation because they believe that a successful marriage is out of their reach (Edin and Kefalas 2005).

In growing numbers, young couples without means have begun to find entrance to marriage daunting as they contend with the challenge of finding stable and well-paying jobs in an era when remunerative jobs have all but disappeared for couples with a high school education or less (Lichter, Turner, and Sassler 2010). This in turn has led young adults to question the wisdom of entering matrimony before they are “settled.” In a recent article that examined the process of settling into permanent relationships, young couples told of the difficulties of becoming committed when they were still trying to complete their schooling and enter a job with some future prospects (Kefalas et al. 2011). The problem for many couples in the bottom and even the middle third of the socioeconomic distribution is that they may never enjoy the level of economic security that their counterparts expected or had 50 years ago.

Cohabitation and even childbearing within cohabiting unions seem like sensible steps, a hedge against the uncertainties of a poor labor market. Like the young mothers in the Baltimore study, a growing number of women are reluctant to enter marriage with men who offer them little or no economic security. Better, they reason, to wait until their partners have a more secure foothold in the economy. Though this more provisional form of a union may make sense to those with limited means and uncertain prospects, a large body of evidence suggests that cohabiting unions in the United States are a highly unstable family form, far more so than marriages, especially when pregnancy and childbearing precedes coresidence. Thus, the problem is not so much entering these partnerships but making them stable and enduring unions, as seems to occur more commonly in parts of Northern Europe.
The churning of relationships that occurs among cohabiting couples, especially among young parents with children, might be predicted for several different reasons. First, lower-income and less-educated couples are far more likely to have an unintended birth because they are less adept at practicing contraception and have less access to abortion in the event that they become pregnant (Guzzo and Payne 2012). Arguably, they are less motivated to avoid a birth, too, if only because they have less to lose if an early birth occurs. Elsewhere, I have argued that the political culture in the United States provides less support for pregnancy prevention than in many European nations (Furstenberg 2007). Whatever the explanations, many lower-income couples are more likely than their better-off counterparts to enter partnerships facing impending parenthood. Second, the relationships are less likely to survive because of the very reasons that lead couples to cohabit rather than to marry. The absence of resources is probably a good part of the explanation for the transience of these fledgling families. Lower-income couples are under constant economic pressure, a source of guilt and resentment that not infrequently leads to conflict and recrimination. Often, these recriminations take the form of “gender mistrust.” Women complain that men are not ready to stop running around and settle down; men, in turn, complain that their partners expect too much from them. These complaints have long occurred, but the cultural force that marriage once held no longer keeps people in officially sanctioned unions, and people who are not in officially sanctioned unions have great difficulty compelling each other to stay together when they are not getting along.

As far back as 20 years ago, I learned from interviewing young couples in Baltimore that relatively few appear to possess the interpersonal skills necessary to establish a harmonious, gratifying, and sustainable union, especially under conditions of high stress. At the same time, it also seems that emotional expectations for a relationship—what constitutes a good partnership—have been rising. Working mothers feel entitled to emotional support and practical assistance from their partners, and men (especially when they lack steady employment) often feel inadequate in the face of these demands. Many of the women whom I interviewed complained that the men who fathered their children were not only unreliable as partners but were also unreliable as parents. When asked why she did not marry the father of her child, one woman explained to me, “I already have two children. I don’t need a third,” referring to the child’s father (Furstenberg 1995).

Communication, problem-solving skills, the development of trust—especially when these attributes are not cultivated in childhood—are in short supply in families where parental education is low, work is unstable, and life is continually stressful. These interpersonal skills can be acquired in later life through education, work, and experience in relationships, but lower-income couples do not easily develop them, especially when they enter relationships early in life and especially with offspring on the way. Data from a number of sources, most notably from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, reveal that nonmarital unions with children are quite volatile; the presence of a child does not seem to stabilize the partnership. Five years after the birth of their children, about half of the women who were cohabiting but not married at the time that their child was born were no longer living with the father of their child (Kiernan et al. 2011).
This pattern of family formation, often centered on an early and unplanned birth in couples that are unprepared to assume the responsibilities of parenthood, stands in stark contrast to the practice of couples possessing a college degree or more. Similar to those with less education, first unions often start out as a cohabiting relationship. While cohabiting unions do not invariably evolve into marriages among the well-educated, they almost always do when childbearing is initiated. Marriage is a transition, signaling that the couple is ready to have a family. They have acquired, in the words of some, “the marriage mentality” (Kefalas et al. 2011). In other words, they are ready and able to settle into family life because they have deemed that they are emotionally well suited to each other and have sufficient resources to support a family even if they have not decided that they want children immediately or, for that matter, ever. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that when marriages occur, their prospects of surviving are greater than they were 50 years ago (Goldstein and Kenney 2001).

Multiple-Partner Fertility and the Growth of Complex Families

A number of circumstances contribute to the volatility of cohabiting unions among less-well-educated and lower-income couples that are hastily constructed around the birth of a child. A pattern of family flux that used to be associated almost exclusively with teenage childbearing has now become more common among women in their early and mid-twenties (Manlove et al. 2008). It is no longer primarily confined to African Americans but now occurs among lower-income whites and Hispanics in growing proportions. Families in lower-income circumstances are often formed before the partners are really ready to take on the responsibilities of parenthood in part because many “truly disadvantaged” (Wilson 1987) couples suspect that they may never reach a point when they become “truly secure.”

When I examined the family formation patterns of the women in Baltimore, I discovered that both men and women who had children from an early relationship often moved on quickly to have an additional child in a new partnership (which typically occurred soon after the earlier relationship dissolved). Whether they did so deliberately, they appeared to regard another pregnancy and child as a means of securing this new union, hoping that parenthood a second (or third) time would generate a sense of commitment to the new family (Furstenberg and Berkowitz King 1998; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan 1987).

This effort frequently failed. If anything, having children with their new partners only reduced their prospects of forming a stable second union. Multiple-partner fertility brings a series of new challenges to couples that are often ill-suited to manage them by dint of their limited resources and interpersonal skills. Of course, multiple-partner fertility does also happen among college-educated couples (usually after divorce and remarriage), but its impact may not be as consequential for the children involved when serial childbearing partnerships
occur to couples who have more resources and better skills to manage the complex families created by childbearing with two or more partners (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, and Scott 2009; Dorius 2012). In any event, multiple-partner fertility occurs far less frequently among the well-educated (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Evenhouse and Reilly 2010; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007; Qian, Lichter, and Mellott 2005).

An important but largely still unanswered question is how multiple-partner fertility affects children (Meyer and Cancian 2012; Tach 2012). The research challenge is sorting out the selection of couples with very different demographic and psychological attributes from the social process generated when couples encounter the challenges of supporting and raising children across different households. If couples with low resources and poor interpersonal skills are prone to forming families involving multiple-partner fertility and those with ample resources and high interpersonal skills are forming families that do not involve this, it is very difficult to tell whether their children are affected by distinctive family structures or merely by an array of prior conditions that produce these different family structures. Researchers must take great care to sort out this methodological problem before they reach the conclusion that complexity resulting from a family system created by multiple-partner fertility really has adverse consequences for children over and above what would occur by virtue of their parents’ social standing, available social support provided by kin and friends, interpersonal skills, psychological, and cognitive capacities.

Family Complexity and Its Consequences for Children

There is little evidence from anthropological studies that household complexity per se creates greater problems for children’s development and welfare, though cross-cultural studies show that characteristic strains exist in families created by plural marriages or joint families. As far as I know, there is no evidence that children growing up in complex households in family systems across the globe experience more problems in later life; indeed, there are reasons to expect just the opposite if multiple caregivers (parents, grandparents, uncles, and aunts) provide attention and care to children in the household. The greater number of parent figures, one might hypothesize, the greater the investment in children so long as the attention and care is stable and coordinated. There are institutionalized patterns of authority, control, and caring in joint families and in households with plural marriages where these forms are common (Altman and Ginat 1996; Hill and König 1970; LeVine and New 2008). Moreover, complex family systems generally are associated with the presence of greater, not fewer, resources, in stark contrast to the pattern of multiple-partner fertility that especially characterizes the family formation patterns of lower-income Americans.

In fact, very little is known about how such families function: whether and how biological parents and stepparents or social parents (parents formed by cohabitation) collaborate, how they relate to biological and nonbiological children, and
the practices of extended kin in family systems created by multiple-partner fertility. However, there is a great deal of research on the complex family systems created by divorce and remarriage—a more familiar form of a complex family system (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Ryan, Kalil, and Ziol-Guest 2008; Sweeney 2010). Family scholars have discovered that family systems resulting from marriage/divorce/remarriage can and often do create distinctive problems for couples and their children (Smock and Greenland 2010). There are a number of reasons why this is so, apart from the selection issues mentioned earlier:

1. There is more competition for fewer resources in these families. Parents (mostly fathers) must allocate money, time, and emotional support to biological children with whom they may not be living and stepchildren who may be part of their current household but with whom they have tenuous relationships. Given the limited supply of these resources, the average investment in children is likely to be lower than it is in a comparable nuclear family if only because of the greater number of obligations that must be managed across different households (Thomson and McLanahan 2012).

2. Organizing time and establishing regular routines across households is difficult to achieve, especially among parents who may harbor misgivings or jealousy toward previous partners. Coordination of parenting responsibilities is complicated to work out when ex-partners feel aggrieved and supplanted. It requires communication, restraint, and strategic skills that often exceed what is required in managing a two-biological parent household or even one formed by a single parent and her parent(s).

3. Divorce and remarriage frequently disrupt intergenerational exchange. Grandparents may not see their biological grandchildren (especially if they reside with the other parent). They may be reluctant to treat their stepgrandchildren as they would the offspring produced by their own children. This can produce tensions across the generations, as parents may resent the lack of involvement by their own kin.

4. Systems external to the family, such as schools, health care providers, and social services, may find it more difficult to access appropriate parents when problems or needs arise. Stepparents frequently complain that they are left out of the loop and may feel compelled to withdraw when nonresidential biological parents step into problem situations.

All of these issues arise in a more acute form in the family systems of unmarried couples who have children in successive partnerships:

1. Bonds between cohabiting couples are often weaker than they are for married couples; this suggests that parenting issues surrounding authority and control in the family could readily occur. For example, social parents might be inclined to defer to biological parents even when the latter are unin-
volved in childrearing. Or, conversely, they might find themselves competing with biological parents living apart from their children. They may expect their partner’s ex to help support his or her children and resent the financial burdens imposed if he or she does not. The unclear boundaries of parental responsibilities may create conflicts that undermine the relations in both new and former partnerships.

2. Children may receive even less investment from social parents than they do from stepparents. To my knowledge, we simply do not know how surrogate parents relate to their children. When and under what circumstances do they “adopt” their surrogate children, treating them as if they were their own? There is still not a sufficient body of evidence to answer this question. The anecdotal evidence is not particularly reassuring; from most accounts, children do not easily assimilate new parents into the household.

3. Extended kin may withhold support that they would otherwise provide in the event of a marriage. For example, the parents of the surrogate partner may not claim or enact the grandparent role as readily as they would if the couple enters marriage. Once again, it would be useful to know much more than we currently do about how grandparent relations evolve over time and the involvement of extended kin.

4. The ambiguities of cohabitation may make the interface with bureaucratic systems even more difficult than they are when remarriage occurs. States and localities differ in the degree to which they have institutionalized cohabiting partnerships. It may be possible to examine questions regarding the interface between families and bureaucracies by comparing the impact of state practices on families of different structures.

5. Finally, we know relatively little about the ties that develop between full and half siblings in childhood and beyond. Indeed, I know of no research that follows families formed by cohabitation for a long enough time to get a good fix on how kinship obligations are carried over into the adult years.

Possibly, as legal and social conventions will eventually respond to the new realities of provisional families, relationships across households and the obligations they entail may become more institutionalized. In the meantime, they constitute both a less stable and less well-established form of the family. Many developmental researchers, not to mention social critics, think that the complexities of multiple-partner fertility contribute to poorer prospects for children’s success in later life, beyond what can be attributed to the adverse selection of parents forming second-tier families (Brown 2010; Sassler 2010). But at this stage, our speculations outrun the data required to test them.

Inequality in American society has widened over the past four decades and is probably both a precursor and a product of the two-tier family system. In the top tier, we see growing evidence that parents expect to provide more resources for and interaction with their children and have actually increased their investments in their offspring, especially in spending on childcare and higher education. Moreover, they are in a better position to do so, as marital homogamy among the
highly educated has increased over time (Schwartz and Mare 2005), helping two-earner professional families enter the top of the income distribution. At the bottom and in the middle of the distribution, evidence suggests that families are also spending more per capita on their children than they did several decades ago, but the gap between what is required of contemporary parents and what they have to spend has grown (Kornrich and Furstenberg 2013). At the bottom of the income ladder, the costs of childrearing have been partially offset through government programs aimed at assisting poor families and children, but the economic position of middle-income families has stagnated over the past several decades even as costs of raising children have mounted.

Inequality and the Two-Tier Family System in Comparative Perspective

As I noted in the beginning of this article, the changes in the family system that have occurred in the United States, notably the weakening of marriage and the growth of nonmarital childbearing, are widespread throughout Europe and other Anglo-speaking nations. However, it is not as clear whether the two-tier family system that has emerged in this country is as evident elsewhere. This is a critical question because its helps to elucidate the reasons why family change may take different forms in varying contexts. It is entirely possible that the features of the Second Demographic Transition may play out quite differently depending on local conditions that moderate the impact of family change such as culture and public policy, the strength of religious institutions, and the quality and openness of the educational-employment system for young adults coming from families with moderate means.

In particular, I would expect to find far lower rates of multiple-partner fertility in Europe and other Anglo-speaking nations for several different (but perhaps related) reasons:

First, the volatility of relationships in this country occurs in part because young adults, especially those who are more economically disadvantaged, are far less adept at practicing contraception and preventing unwanted conceptions than their counterparts in Canada, Australia, and most of Europe. Unintended pregnancies and births are far more common in the United States than in Europe or the other Anglo-speaking nations (Mosher and Jones 2010). So Americans, especially those who are educationally and economically disadvantaged, enter relationships earlier, and these unions are more frequently accompanied by parenthood. These partnerships are especially vulnerable to dissolution.

Second, commitment to existing partnerships may be weaker in this country than elsewhere. Or to put it differently, Americans may tolerate or prefer more discretion in changing partners. This could reflect a long-standing cultural difference, as Andrew Cherlin (2009) has argued, in explanation of why union instability is particular high in the United States. Cherlin argues that religion has played a unique role, but other factors surely contribute as well, such as higher rates of
geographical mobility, which conceivably undermine the power of families to influence both marriage and divorce decisions. Moreover, there are significantly higher levels of poverty and economic disadvantage in the United States. The higher proportion of people living less well may contribute to the greater volatility in relationships that occur in the bottom socioeconomic strata.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive and may well combine to produce a family system in which multiple-partner fertility may be common in the United States but relatively infrequent elsewhere. Over the past several years, there has been a small stream of studies on the incidence and consequences of multiple-partner fertility in Europe, using a variety of data sources. In this volume, Elizabeth Thomson reviews some of her own research and cites others, showing that, compared to the United States, the rate of multiple-partner fertility is far lower in Sweden and in some other nations for which longitudinal data on fertility and partnerships were available (see also Thomson et al., forthcoming).

The evidence that Thomson and her collaborators have assembled along with other scattered reports indicate that multiple-partner fertility may be growing outside of the United States but from a far lower baseline. The incidence of childbearing across partnerships among mothers with two or more children is substantially higher in the United States than in the Nordic countries of Norway and Sweden (33 vs. 20 and 16 percent, respectively) and almost 40 percent higher than in Australia (33 vs. 24 percent). The differences are largely accounted for by higher levels of earlier and presumably unplanned births of younger unmarried women in the United States. Thomson suggests that multiple-partner fertility may be more prevalent in some Eastern European nations, which have very high rates of union instability.

Both union stability and the absence of early childbearing appear to depress the incidence of multiple-partner fertility. No doubt, more effective contraceptive use outside of the United States also explains the relatively low levels of childbearing across multiple partnerships in Europe and other Anglo-speaking countries. Still, it is very likely that childbearing across partnerships may be growing with the decline of union stability that is occurring as marital unions are replaced by cohabitating unions throughout much of the Western world.

Conclusion

This article explained how a set of conditions in the United States has given rise to a changing family system that has become more distinctively different across socioeconomic strata. Longer delays into adult transitions have had different consequences for young adults from well-educated families than from families with low education and limited resources. Among the affluent, the family system has become more stable over time, while just the opposite has occurred for young adults from more disadvantaged circumstances.

In large measure, the timing and conditions of first births (the age of the parents and the level of resources that they possess) create divergent pathways for
family formation. When births are delayed until first unions have been tested by cohabitation (often leading to marriage), the likelihood that parents will have children by two or more partners greatly decreases. If first births are unplanned and occur before the partners have much experience living together if any at all, the union is much less likely to survive, and one or both partners will often proceed to have a child with another father or mother.

Currently, the United States has conspicuously higher levels of multiple-partner fertility than the rates reported among other nations with advanced economies. There are several reasons accounting for this demographic difference: higher levels of poverty, early formation of partnerships among men and women who are not ready to have children, greater fluidity of relationships, and lower levels of contraceptive practices. The product of these conditions is higher rates of unintended births that often destabilize fledgling partnerships. The United States also has a higher level of single women bearing children outside of a stable relationship. The good news is that over the past decade and a half, early childbearing has dropped precipitously; the less good news is that women in their early twenties (married and unmarried) still have much higher rates of unintended births than occur in Europe, Canada, and the other Anglo-speaking countries. Thus, multiple-partner fertility is likely to continue to be higher in the United States than elsewhere, though we may see some convergence of the incidence of parenting across partnerships in the next several decades.

The research on the consequences of more complex families for children is still inconclusive. There are many theoretical reasons why children may fare less well when their parents have obligations to children from other partners. We know that parents who have children with more than one partner are also different in many sociodemographic and psychological ways from those whose parenting is confined to a single union. Without effectively ruling out selection, it is very difficult to conclude that complexity per se undermines good parenting, couple collaboration, and successful child development. For the time being, it makes good sense not to rush to a judgment on the questions of whether or how family complexity compromises child well-being.

References


