

Cohabitation and the Uneven Retreat from Marriage in the U.S., 1950-2010

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April 3, 2015

Why the retreat from marriage?

Because for many people, marriage has become less attractive relative to the alternatives:

1. Living alone
2. Cohabitation

The sources of the gains to marriage have changed.

Sources of gains to marriage - 1

Traditional economic rationale for commitment:
provides security to the vulnerable spouse who
specialized in home production and failed to
accumulate market human capital

Gender specialization and division of labor in the
household has weakened.

Market substitutes for home produced commodities

Economies of scale available with cohabitation

Sex as a motive for marriage has weakened

Sources of gains to marriage - 2

Relative and absolute importance of investment in children as a source of returns to marriage have increased over the last 60 years.

This change has affected the number of marriages.

It has also affected

who marries and

who marries whom (assortative marriage)

Cohabitation and Nonmarital Births

To a first approximation, everyone cohabits.

But not everyone has children while cohabiting.

Nonmarital births as a proportion of all births by mother's education, 2010

(Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics. VitalStats. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/vitalstats.htm>. [November 12, 2012].

	White, Non-Hispanic	Black	Hispanic, All
High School or Less	53.6		
Some College	31.0		
College graduate or more	5.9		

Nonmarital births as a proportion of all births by mother's education, 2010

(Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics. VitalStats. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/vitalstats.htm>. [November 12, 2012].

	White, Non-Hispanic	Black	Hispanic, All
High School or Less		83.5	
Some College		68.7	
College graduate or more		32.0	

Nonmarital births as a proportion of all births by mother's education, 2010

(Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics. VitalStats. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/vitalstats.htm>. [November 12, 2012].

	White, Non-Hispanic	Black	Hispanic, All
High School or Less			59.6
Some College			45.3
College graduate or more			17.4

Nonmarital births as a proportion of all births by mother's education, 2010

(Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Center for Health Statistics. VitalStats. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/vitalstats.htm>. [November 12, 2012].

	White, Non-Hispanic	Black	Hispanic, All
High School or Less	53.6	83.5	59.6
Some College	31.0	68.7	45.3
College graduate or more	5.9	32.0	17.4

Preview of our argument: Marriage and Commitment

Marriage is about long-term commitment; not just about living together

Couples (some couples) want commitment because it facilitates rearing children who are successful by middle class standards (e.g., children who graduate from college)

- We do not claim that this accounts for all marriages.
- It is consistent with marriage as a commitment device
- It is consistent with positive assortative marriage
- It is consistent with the education gradient in marriage, in nonmarital fertility, in time spent with children, in childrearing practices, and in outcomes for children.

Implications of our argument

Large literature on “family structure” (e.g., traditional nuclear family; single parent family) and outcomes for children.

Children from traditional nuclear families have better educational and labor market outcomes than children from other family structures.

Our argument implies that much of the association between marriage and good outcomes for children is selection.

Is any of it causal? I'll come back to this.

Post-war trends in marriage, divorce, and fertility - 1

- Cohabitation: rising rates as marriage is delayed or foregone
- Retreat from marriage: delay, decrease in proportion ever married
- Divorce: increased marital instability through 1970s, then decline
- Increase in assortative marriage by education (Mare, 1991; Schwartz and Mare, 2005)
- Many cohabiting couples have children

Post-war trends in marriage and fertility - 2

Fertility (Bailey, Guldi and Hershbein, 2014)

increased control of fertility: the pill and abortion
decline in fertility; emergence of two-child norm
postponement of fertility; timing of fertility
rising nonmarital fertility

Race and ethnicity: non-Hispanic whites, blacks, Hispanics

Education: college grads; some college; highschool or less

Education gradient within each race/ethnicity group

- in marriage and nonmarital fertility,
- in time spent with children,
- in childrearing practices, and
- in outcomes for children

Implications of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage

Implications for models of the marriage market

Standard economic theory of marriage recognizes only two alternatives: marriage and living alone.

Recognizing cohabitation as an additional alternative to marriage requires substantial changes in the economic theory of marriage.

Implications for understanding the association between marriage and outcomes for children

Sources of gain from marriage (and, hence, motives for marriage) have changed.

Investing in children has become more important as source of gains to and motives for marriage.

Everyone cohabits. But for each racial and ethnic group, college graduates are much less likely than others to have have children in cohabiting unions.

This is not a consequence of shot-gun marriages. The children of college graduates are conceived after marriage.

Mothers' Education and Children's Educational Outcomes

		Women	
		College Grad	
White: Mom Coll Grad		.45	
Mom Not Cl Grad		.22	

Mothers' Education and Children's Educational Outcomes

	Men	
	College Grad	
White: Mom Coll Grad	.42	
Mom Not Cl Grad	.18	

Mothers' Education and Children's Educational Outcomes

		Women	
		College Grad	
Black: Mom Coll Grad		.37	
Mom Not Grad		.18	

Mothers' Education and Children's Educational Outcomes

	Men		
	College Grad		
Black: Mom Coll Grad	.30		
Mom Not Grad	.11		

Mothers' Education and Children's Educational Outcomes

		Women	
		College Grad	
Hispanic: Mom Col Grad		.37	
Mom Not Grad		.18	

Mothers' Education and Children's Educational Outcomes

	Men		
	College Grad		
Hispanic: Mom Col Grad	.18		
Mom Not Grad	.14		

Transition to Sociology

“Diverging Destinies”

- Sara McLanahan, "Diverging Destinies: How Children Fare Under the Second Demographic Transition," (2004)
 - children born to most-educated mothers are gaining resources (parental time and money), while children of least-educated mothers are losing resources
 - due to trends in single parenthood, divorce, and maternal employment
- Compared with Europe, inequality in the U.S. is high and increasing, intergenerational mobility is low and decreasing.

(Generational Income Mobility in North America and Europe, ed. Corak, 2011; Persistence, Privilege, and Parenting, eds. Smeeding, Erikson, Jantti, 2011)

“Unequal Childhoods”

Class differences in parenting practices

Annette Lareau (2003, 2008): *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*

“Class-specific cultural orientations to child rearing”

- Middle class parents engaged in “concerted cultivation” of children—heavily involved in schooling, development – “helicopter parents”

- Working class and poor parents:

“accomplishment of natural growth”—children need to be cared for and protected, but will develop spontaneously.

Gaps among children start early

Large differences in the number of words children have heard and in children's vocabularies when they enter kindergarten -- Hart and Risley (1995).

Fernald, Marchman and Weisleder (2013) found "significant differences in both vocabulary learning and language processing...." at 18 months "...with a 6-month gap emerging between higher- and lower-SES toddlers by 24 months."

Heckman (2007) finds that gaps we see among children in middle school were there when the children first entered school.

Time with children

- In the US and other developed countries, despite fewer children, the amount of time parents spend with children has increased since the mid 1960s. (Bianchi, 2000; Sayer, Bianchi, Robinson, 2004)
- Despite the higher opportunity cost of their time, parents with more education spend a lot more time with children than parents with less education: “...mothers with a college education or greater spend roughly 4.5 hours more per week in child care than mothers with a high school degree or less.” -- Guryan, Hurst, and Kearney (2008)
- Ramey and Ramey, “Rug Rats” (2009) (next slide)

“Rug Rats”

Ramey and Ramey: increased investment in children driven by competition to get into college. (Selective colleges/ elite colleges.)

What do they mean by “college educated” on previous slide? They mean those with a college degree.

Time, Money, and Parents' Education

Time – Is time with children investment or consumption? (For parents? For children)

Money – Is expenditure on children consumption or investment? (For parents? For children?)

Time vs money vs parents' education

What is the investment technology?

How much is household “environment” (e.g., books in the home)

Conclusion - 1

Marriage is a commitment device, not just about living together

Some women and some men want commitment because it facilitates rearing children who are successful by middle class standards (e.g., children who graduate from college)

- We do not claim that this accounts for all marriages.
- We do claim that it is consistent with marriage as a commitment device
- It is consistent with positive assortative marriage
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Conclusion - 2

Implications for the theory of marriage: Recognizing cohabitation as alternative to marriage as a multiple person living arrangement changes theory of marriage.

Scope for a causal role of marriage as a determinant of outcomes for children. recognizing marriage as a commitment mechanism suggests that marriage keeps some couples together that would separate if they were cohabiting. So children experience fewer family structure and living arrangement transitions.

Conclusion - 3

Hence, some portion of the association between marriage and outcomes for children is not just selection but is causal.

But our argument implies that the association between marriage and good outcomes for children is primarily due to selection.