

Concluding Reflections

What Does Less Marriage Have to Do with More Family Inequality?

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This volume has explored the nature, causes, and consequences of family inequality in the Americas and Europe. Family inequality, measured both in economic terms and in family structure, can be found in many countries across these three regions, but it is most pronounced in the United States and Latin America (Boertien, Bernardi, and Härkönen, Chapter 7; Carlson, Chapter 1; Esteve and Florez-Paredes, Chapter 2). That is, although gaps in family income between more and less affluent families exist in all countries, they are especially large in the United States and Latin America (Carbone and Cahn, Chapter 13; Esteve and Florez-Paredes, Chapter 2). Likewise, single parenthood and family instability are now more common among those without a college education throughout most of the Americas and Europe, but inequalities in these particular dimensions of family structure seem to be especially prevalent in the United States and Latin America (Carlson, Chapter 1; Esteve and Florez-Paredes, Chapter 2; Perelli-Harris, Chapter 4). Overall, then, less-educated men, women, and their children in these three regions are more likely to be “doubly disadvantaged” – having fewer socioeconomic resources and less family stability, compared to their better-educated fellow citizens (McLanahan 2004; Perelli-Harris 2018) – and this pattern of double disadvantage is most common in the United States and Latin America.

Although this volume chronicles an array of economic, policy, and cultural factors that help to account for this dual pattern of economic and family inequality, it does not focus much on the role, if any, that the retreat from marriage unfolding across much of the globe since the 1960s (Goode 1993; Wilcox and DeRose 2017) has itself played in fueling both family economic inequality and family structure inequality between more- and less-educated Americans and Europeans. The major exception is Eberstadt’s chapter (See

Chapter 5), which touches on the ways the decline of marriage among less-educated Americans may help explain the growing divergence in labor force participation among men with and without college degrees in the United States (Lerman and Wilcox 2014). Otherwise, not much attention is paid to the role that the decline of marriage may have played in fueling or locking in patterns of economic and family structure inequality.

Nevertheless, the retreat from marriage that has been unfolding in the Americas and Europe over much of the last half-century may well be an important contributor to growing inequality in family structure between more- and less-educated North Americans and Europeans – and high levels of family inequality between Latin Americans. That is because when marriage is less likely to anchor the adult life course, and less likely to ground and guide the bearing and rearing of children, family instability and single parenthood seem to follow in its retreating wake (Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg 2003). DeRose and colleagues (2017), for instance, find that in the United States and Europe, children born to cohabitating couples are, on average, about 90 percent more likely to see their parents split by age 12 compared to children born to married couples. Moreover, as cohabitation becomes more common and marriage becomes less common in countries across the globe, family instability generally increases (DeRose et al. 2017). In other words, less marriage seems to equal more family instability and single parenthood for children.

Why is this? Marriage is characterized by a distinctive set of norms, customs, and often legal rights and responsibilities that appear to make it more stable than cohabitation (Nock 1998). For instance, unlike cohabitation and dating, entry into marriage is marked by a collective ritual that signals to self, partner, friends, and family that a new state in life has been entered into. Above all, marriage is generally seen to signify greater commitment than the relational alternatives: It functions as a commitment device (Lundberg, Pollak, and Stearns 2016). Indeed, Perelli-Harris (see Chapter 4) notes that her focus groups with men and women across nine European countries indicate that “participants in all countries generally saw cohabitation as a less committed union than marriage.” This, then, is probably why in countries as different as France, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States, children born to married parents enjoy markedly more stability than children born to cohabiting parents (DeRose et al. 2017).

In turn, the rise of cohabitation and the retreat from marriage seems to have affected the less-educated more than the college-educated in many American and European nations, at least as it relates to family instability and single parenthood. The number of families headed by single parents has increased

and is markedly higher among those without college degrees in countries as different as Mexico, Sweden, and the United States (Carlson, Chapter 1; Esteve and Florez-Paredes, Chapter 2; Kennedy and Thomson 2010; Wilcox 2010). Although the negative relationship between education and family instability/single parenthood is not universal throughout Europe and the Americas, it does seem to be increasingly the norm (Carlson, Chapter 1; Perelli-Harris, Chapter 4).

Why is family structure increasingly patterned along educational lines? This development is true partly for economic reasons – for instance, less-educated men face higher levels of job instability, which affects both their marriageability and the stability of their families (Carbone and Cahn, Chapter 13; Perelli-Harris, Chapter 4; Wilcox, 2010). However, cultural reasons also seem to matter: The ethos of freedom and choice related to questions of sex, parenthood, and relationships valorized amidst the “second demographic transition,” and the deinstitutionalization of marriage this ethos has fueled, can be more difficult for the less educated to navigate when it comes to childbearing, marriage, and the establishment of stable families (Cherlin 2004; Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006; Sassler and Miller 2017). Future research will have to explore how much, and to what extent, the declining cultural, legal, and economic power of marriage has contributed to growing family structure inequality in much of the Americas and Europe.

Likewise, more needs to be learned about how the retreat from marriage, along with the increasingly stratified character of family structure, has affected economic inequality between families in Europe and Latin America. In the United States, growing family structure inequality appears to have played an important role in increases in family income inequality from the 1970s to the 2000s. The scholarship suggests that between about one fifth (Western, Bloome, and Percheski 2008) and four tenths (S. P. Martin 2006) of the growth in family income inequality over this period can be connected to the growing proportion of single-parent families among less-educated Americans. Because less-educated Americans have experienced much higher levels of family instability and single parenthood than their college-educated peers since the 1970s, their median family incomes are markedly lower than they would otherwise be, especially compared to their college-educated peers who are now much more likely to benefit from two incomes (Lerman and Wilcox 2014). By contrast, if they enjoyed levels of family stability as high as their college-educated fellow citizens, family income inequality in the United States would be smaller.

It is less clear, however, if and how increases in family structure inequality have influenced economic inequality in Europe and Latin America.

In Europe, it is possible that increasing family structure inequality may *not* have led to greater family economic inequality, at least when it comes to family income, because welfare state spending has increased commensurate with the growth in single-parent families (Huber and Stephens 2014). In Latin America, family income inequality has declined in recent years, largely because less-educated workers, including women, are working more and earning more, and welfare state spending has grown (Azevedo, Inchauste, and Sanfelice 2013; Lustig, Lopez-Calva, and Ortiz-Juarez 2013). However, given increases in women's labor force participation among less-educated women, it is possible family income inequality in Latin America would have been reduced even more than it was were it not for the fact that more and more Latin American mothers are single, especially the less-educated (Esteve and Florez-Paredes, Chapter 2). More research is needed to determine if growing family instability in Europe and Latin America has led to greater inequality in family economic well-being between the more and less-educated. Such research needs also to extend beyond income to include considerations of how changes in family structure may influence patterns of inequality in family assets between the highly educated and the less educated.

This volume shows that families across the Americas and Europe are more fragile. This is in part because marriage is less likely to anchor the adult life course, and to ground and guide the bearing and rearing of children in countries across these three continents. What is more, in many countries in the Americas and Europe, family life is particularly fragile among the less educated. This has led to family structure inequality in many countries – from Sweden to the United States – such that highly educated men and women continue to enjoy strong and stable families whereas their less-educated fellow citizens do not. However, it is not clear that growing inequality in family structure uniformly leads to growing family economic inequality in income and assets in these three continents. More research is needed to determine if public policies can and do minimize the economic fallout of growing family structure inequality on economic inequality in Europe and the Americas. In other words, it is not clear if less marriage always need equal more family economic inequality in nations across these three continents.