

Families Unequal: Socioeconomic Gradients in Family Patterns across the United States and Europe

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INTRODUCTION

Dramatic changes in marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and fertility behaviors over the past fifty years have been observed across a wide range of industrialized countries, sometimes referred to as the “second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006). Yet, only within the past several decades has there been growing awareness of the extent to which changes in family demography are unfolding unevenly by socioeconomic status. McLanahan (2004) was among the first to identify that differences by socioeconomic status (measured by maternal education) in a range of family behaviors were an important aspect of growing inequality (“diverging destinies”) among children, especially in the United States. Other scholars have increasingly considered differences in various family behaviors by socioeconomic status across other countries (e.g., Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Kalmijn 2013; Perelli-Harris et al. 2010), but the extent to which socioeconomic gradients in family behaviors are broadly observed across Western industrialized countries (and whether such gradients may be positive or negative) is less well understood. In this chapter, I examine whether there are differences by socioeconomic status with respect to a range of family behaviors based on the extant literature in the United States and Europe.

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The striking changes in family behaviors that have been observed since the middle of the twentieth century across Western countries include a delay and decline in marriage, an increase in cohabitation, a notable rise in divorce rates (followed by a decline in some nations), a high prevalence of repartnering, and a large increase in the proportion of births that occurred outside marriage. Also, there is today striking instability and complexity in family life, as adults are likely to spend time living with more than one partner in marital and/or cohabiting unions, and children often experience several changes in the adults who co-reside with them and/or serve as parental figures in their lives. In this context, men's involvement with children has become especially precarious, since women still maintain primary responsibility for child-rearing after union dissolution (Goldscheider 2000). Taken together, these patterns suggest high levels of instability and perhaps complexity in children's family arrangements and experiences over childhood and adolescence (Furstenberg 2014).

Over the same time period that family patterns have changed, we have also observed a striking increase in overall levels of economic inequality across many industrialized countries, including those that are more egalitarian in values and public policy (OECD 2011b). The increase has been especially stark in the United States – whether measured by wage rates, earnings, family income or wealth (Brandolini and Smeeding 2006; Gottschalk and Danziger 2005; Piketty and Saez 2003). After a strong period of economic growth that benefited individuals across all parts of the income distribution from the mid-1940s to the early 1970s, US inequality rose in the 1980s, slowed somewhat in the 1990s during the economic expansion, then continued to rise as we entered the twenty-first century (Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2008; Blank 1997). Recent cross-national comparisons show heterogeneity in the levels of inequality observed across European countries (with Scandinavian countries being somewhat less unequal). Compared to industrialized OECD countries, the United States has very high levels of income inequality; in 2013, on average, the top 10 percent of US incomes were fully 19 times higher than those of the bottom 10 percent of incomes, compared to the OECD average of the top 10 percent being about 10 times higher than the bottom 10 percent (OECD 2015). It is important to note that US *market income* inequality (i.e., before taxes and transfers) is not exceptionally high compared to other European countries (Gini of 0.52, where the range is 0.43 to 0.56 across 19 OECD countries examined in 2010) (Gornick and Milanovic 2015). Rather, the United States does far less

than other countries to redistribute income via social policy; after accounting for taxes and transfers, Gini coefficients across these 19 countries ranged from 0.24 in Norway to 0.37 in the United States: Scandinavian countries (Norway, Denmark, and Finland) had the lowest Ginis (0.24–0.26), Anglo-countries (Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States) had the highest (0.32–0.37), and central/southern/eastern European countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Slovak Republic, Spain, as well as the Republic of Ireland), comprised a group in the middle (0.26–0.33) (Gornick and Milanovic 2015).

Changes in family patterns and economic inequality are not independent, especially in the United States. Indeed, many would argue that the fundamental changes in the economy that have undergirded the overall rise in inequality have also been key drivers of the changes in family patterns. Amidst rapid technological change, deindustrialization, and globalization in labor markets, “good jobs” for those with low-to-moderate education became increasingly scarce (Cherlin 2014). Starting in the 1980s, scholars began to understand that the limited job opportunities for low-skilled men, especially in poor urban areas, were shaping family behaviors among the disadvantaged (Blank 2009); the decline in “marriageable men” (i.e., men who could get and hold a steady job) was seen as a key aspect of decreasing marriage rates, especially in large US cities (Wilson 1987). Over the same period (since the 1970s), women were increasingly entering the labor market. Women’s employment and earnings provided them with greater economic independence (Oppenheimer 1988), which has been an important factor that typically delays entry into marriage (Sweeney 2002; Xie et al. 2003). Once married, the influence of women’s employment and earnings on the likelihood of divorce is less straightforward, and it seems the greater risk of divorce with higher female earnings is only observed for marriages of lower relationship quality (Sayer and Bianchi 2000; Schoen et al. 2002) and for marriages begun in the 1960s and 1970s – but not for marriages begun in the 1990s (Schwartz and Gonalons-Pons 2016).

While economic changes and globalization have contributed to rising inequality within (and between) most industrialized countries in recent decades (Firebaugh 2015), we know that the ultimate circumstances of individuals and families also depend on the level and type of policy supports and the degree of “decommodification” (i.e., citizens’ ability to have sufficient income independent of the market) across welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990). Overall, means-tested and targeted benefits are less effective for reducing poverty and inequality as compared to universal social insurance benefits

(Korpi and Palme 1998). As noted above, the Scandinavian countries typically offer more generous welfare policies that provide higher levels of support and allow parents to better balance work and family obligations, as compared to Anglo-countries (especially the United States) which offer minimal support, with central and southern European countries falling somewhere in between (Gornick, Meyers, and Ross 1997). There is extensive research demonstrating that indeed social policies across countries have an important influence on levels of inequality in economic outcomes such as employment, earnings, and income (e.g., Hegewisch and Gornick 2011; Mandel and Semyonov 2005).

At the same time, differences in family patterns may also *contribute* to increasing economic inequality, both within and across generations – at least in the United States (M. Martin 2006; McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Percheski 2008). Within the United States, changes in family structure – especially the rise in divorce and single parenthood – are shown to have increased family income inequality, although there is a range in the estimates about how big a factor these have been (McLanahan and Percheski 2008). Also, increasingly homogamous marriages at both the low and high ends of the income distribution were observed from 1960 to the early 2000s (Schwartz and Mare 2005), and the growing association in spouses' earnings served to significantly increase aggregate-level income inequality in the United States (Schwartz 2010). To my knowledge, there has been less research about how family patterns per se have driven levels of inequality in other countries. The prevalence of single parenthood has been linked with higher inequality across sixteen European countries between 1967 and 2005, holding constant the level of female employment (which is itself associated with *reduced* inequality) (Kollmeyer 2013). An analysis of Denmark shows that greater educational assortative mating has increased inequality, but due to shifting educational distributions by gender (i.e., education increasing for both men and women – but more so for women) rather than partner choice (Breen and Andersen 2012). Certainly, families with greater socioeconomic resources are able to make greater investments (of both time and money) in their children (Kalil 2015; Kalil, Ryan, and Corey 2012; Lareau 2003), and these differential investments may be an important factor in growing inequality, especially across generations (Lundberg, Pollak, and Stearns 2016; Reeves 2017). And as Cooke (see Chapter 11) describes, countries differ greatly in the share of national resources that are invested in families; when countries provide greater baseline support, there is likely less variation by parents' income in how much they invest in children. Nevertheless, differential parental investments have

a long-lasting effect on the development and attainment of the next generation, and inequality therein (Heckman 2007; Yeung, Linver, and Brooks-Gunn 2002).

Thus, overall, it seems reasonable to expect a reciprocal and dynamic relationship between inequality and family patterns: Aggregate-level inequality affects family behaviors and outcomes, and differential family patterns further reify inequality and stratification (McLanahan and Percheski 2008). In the remainder of this chapter, I will (a) provide a brief review of key changes in family patterns that have occurred over the past half-century in the United States and Europe, and then (b) summarize the literature about the extent to which differentials in family patterns by socioeconomic status are observed.

CHANGING FAMILY PATTERNS

Across most Western industrialized countries, a number of changes in family behaviors occurred, beginning in the 1960s. Often referred to as the “second demographic transition,” there has been a similarity in the changes across Western countries that included delayed marriage, a disconnection between marriage and childbearing, a diversity of relationships and living arrangements, and declining fertility to below replacement level (Lesthaeghe 2010). While not uniform across all countries or European regions (see Chapter 4), the basic changes in family behaviors fall into predictable patterns, as described below.

Marriage and Cohabitation. At the core of changes in family life over the past half-century have been shifts in the nature of union formation and marital behavior. Marriage has become less central to the life course, both because individuals are marrying later and a small – but perhaps rising – fraction are not marrying at all (Cherlin 2009). As shown in Figure 1.1, crude marriage rates have significantly declined in most OECD countries over the period from 1970 to 2014.

Across nearly all OECD countries, age at first marriage has increased over the past two decades (see Figure 1.2); women’s mean ages at marriage now range from the mid-twenties in some Eastern European countries to the early thirties in some Scandinavian countries. In the United States, the median age at first marriage has never been higher than since data were first collected in 1890 – age 27.4 for women and 29.5 for men in 2015 (US Census Bureau 2016).

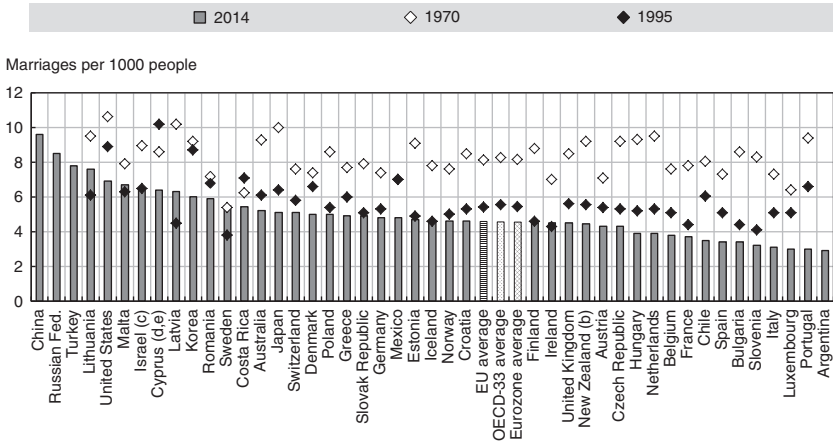


FIGURE 1.1 Crude marriage rates across OECD countries, 1970–2014
Source: OECD Family Database (OECD 2017).

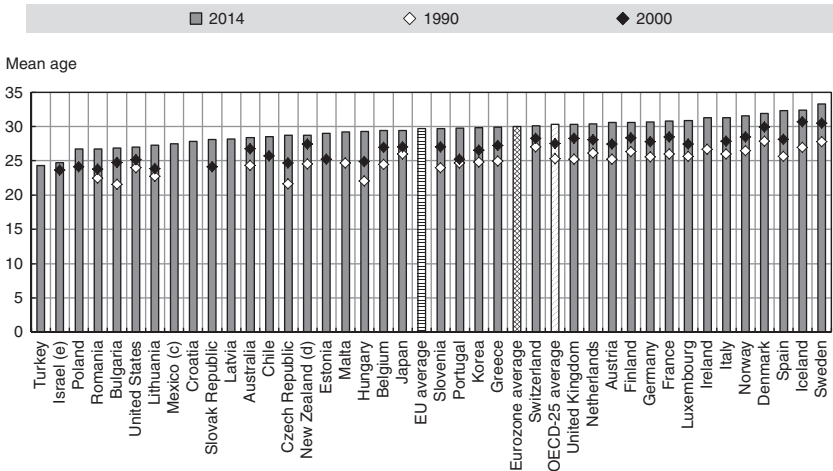


FIGURE 1.2 Women’s mean age at first marriage across OECD countries, 1990–2014
Source: OECD Family Database (OECD 2017).

Also, cohabitation has increased such that today over 60 percent of US women have ever cohabited (Manning 2013), and the fraction is even higher in most European countries. Cohabitation has essentially replaced marriage as a first union for the majority of young adults, as, at least in the United States, individuals have been entering a first union at about the same average age over the past twenty years (Manning, Brown, and Payne 2014). The diverse meanings

and experiences of cohabitation are an important factor in both the United States and Europe, as cohabitation may be a precursor to – or a substitute for – legal marriage for different groups or at different stages of the life course for the same individuals (Heuveline and Timberlake 2004; Hiekel, Liefbroer, and Poortman 2014; Perelli-Harris et al. 2014; Seltzer 2004). A growing proportion of first births now occur within cohabiting unions across European countries (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012) and the United States (Curtain, Ventura, and Martinez 2014). Further, many cohabiting households include children who are born to couples while living together or that one or the other partner has from a prior relationship (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Thomson 2014).

Divorce. Divorce has been rising across most European countries over recent decades, and there is notable heterogeneity in the patterns, causes, and consequences (Amato and James 2010). Divorce in the United States has historically been much higher than in other Western countries, and the best estimates suggesting that about half of all first marriages will end in divorce in the United States (Amato 2010). Figure 1.3 shows crude divorce rates across OECD countries for 1970–2014, ranging from the lowest European levels today in the Republic of Ireland and Italy to the highest in Lithuania, Denmark, and the Russian Federation. In many countries, divorce rates rose between 1970 and 1995 and then declined between 1995 and 2014. Across European countries, divorce tends to be higher in the West and North versus lower in the East and South.

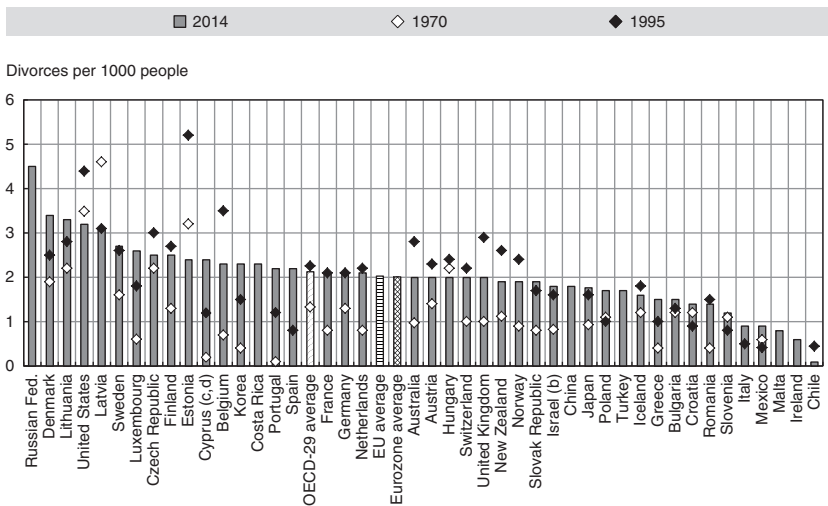


FIGURE 1.3 Crude divorce rates across OECD countries, 1970–2014
 Source: OECD Family Database (OECD 2017).

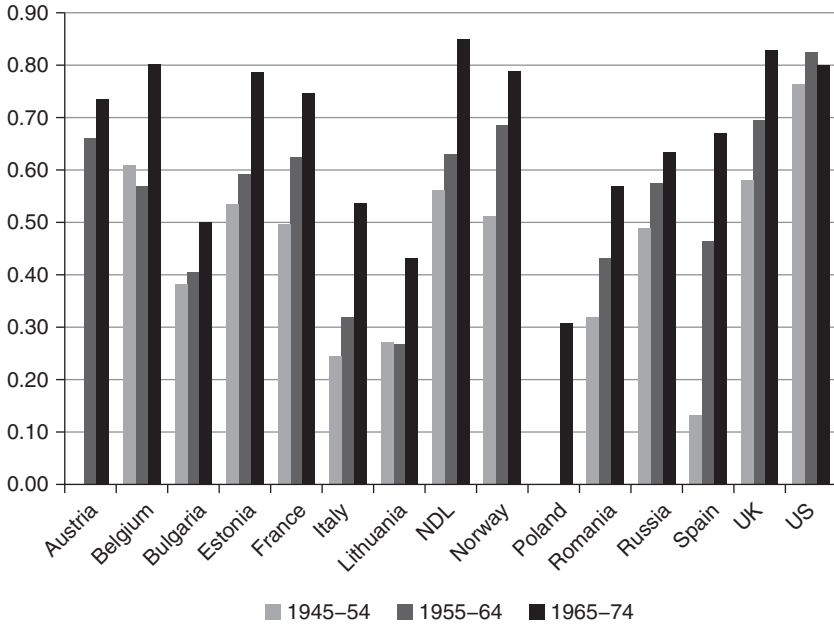


FIGURE 1.4 Cumulative proportions of women repartnering ten years after union dissolution by cohort

Repartnering. As many unions now dissolve, it is increasingly likely that individuals will have more than one partner over their life course, either by marriage and/or cohabitation. Repartnering provides a new opportunity to share economic resources, give/receive emotional support, and experience companionship and sexual intimacy, and thus may offset some of the negative consequences of divorce (Amato 2010). Yet, when children are involved, repartnered relationships may be more complicated or less “institutionalized” than first partnerships (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). Across Europe and the United States, there has been a notable rise in repartnering since the 1970s, although there is substantial cross-country variation (Gałęzewska 2016). Figure 1.4 (from Gałęzewska 2016) shows the cumulative proportion of women who repartner within ten years of union dissolution, across three birth cohorts. There has been a dramatic rise in repartnering over time, as, in most countries, women born 1965–1974 are much more likely to repartner than women born 1945–1954 or 1955–1964; the exception here being the United States, where repartnering was already high in the earliest cohort. For the most recent cohort, the majority of women will repartner within ten years after union dissolution across twelve of the fifteen countries examined

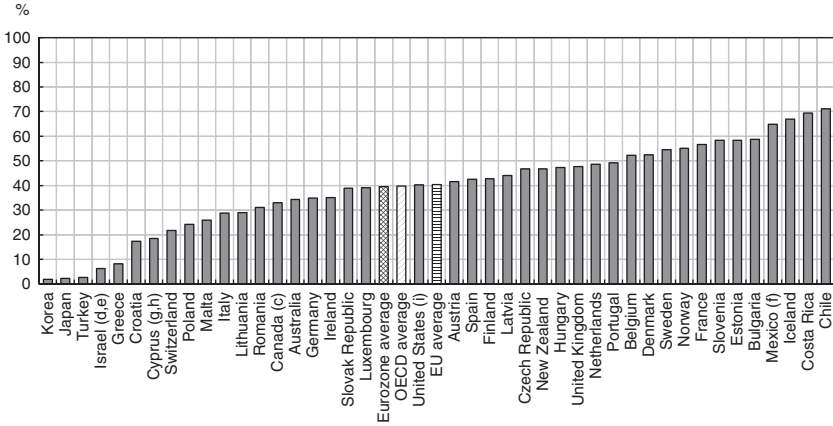


FIGURE 1.5 Proportion of births outside marriage across OECD countries, 1970–2014
 Source: OECD Family Database (OECD 2017).

(the exceptions being Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Poland), and most of those unions will be cohabitations; at the same time, it is important to note that selection processes may affect the high rate of repartnering for the recent cohort, as these women were quite young at union dissolution and may differ from women who entered unions at older ages and/or had longer-lasting unions (Gałęzewska 2016).

Nonmarital Childbearing. Along with the changes in marriage patterns has been a sharp increase in childbearing outside marriage across most Western industrialized countries. In the United States, 40 percent of births are today outside legal marriage (Hamilton, Martin, and Osterman 2016). As shown in Figure 1.5, the OECD-27 average for 2014 was also 40 percent, but this belies notable variation across countries – from only 7 percent in Greece to more than 50 percent in Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Iceland, Norway, Slovenia, and Sweden.

While “traditional” family formation typically followed a linear course – first dating, then marriage, and then childbearing – the rise in nonmarital childbearing (along with concomitant changes in union formation) has yielded a range of complex and diverse family arrangements. This is especially true for disadvantaged individuals in the United States and the United Kingdom, who are likely to have children outside marriage in relationships that are likely to break up (Kiernan et al. 2011; Mincy and Pouncy 1999). In Europe, nonmarital childbearing occurs more often within cohabitation,

and cohabitation is often not differentiated from legal marriage in policy or research, especially in countries where cohabitation is quite common.

Much of the recent increase in nonmarital childbearing can be attributed to births to cohabiting couples, especially in European countries (Thomson 2014). The majority of nonmarital births between 2000 and 2004 occurred to cohabiting couples in France and Norway, and 30–40 percent in Austria, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). In the United States, 18 percent of all children were born to cohabiting mothers between 1997 and 2001 (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008), and the most recent US data indicate that fully 58 percent of nonmarital births between 2006 and 2010 occurred to cohabiting couples (Curtain, Ventura, and Martinez 2014). At the same time, being born to cohabiting parents does not mean that children necessarily enter into a stable union, as many such unions are highly unstable – even more so in the United States than in other nations (Kiernan 1999; Osborne and McLanahan 2007). Growing evidence clearly shows that children born to married parents have much more stable families than children born to cohabiting parents across European countries as well (DeRose et al. 2017; Sánchez Gassen and Perelli-Harris 2015; Henz and Thomson 2005; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006). Recent research using data from the Generations and Gender Surveys and other comparable sources across Europe and the United States suggests that children born to cohabiting parents are far more likely to see their parents separate by age 15 (ranging from 13 percent in Georgia to fully 73 percent in the United States), compared to those born to married parents (ranging from 8 percent in Georgia to 34 percent in the United States and 36 percent in the Russian Federation) (Andersson, Thomson, and Duntava 2016). In other words, even in more egalitarian countries, marriage in the context of childbearing is associated with greater union stability (perhaps due to the selection of those who choose to have children within legal marriage versus cohabitation).

Multipartnered Fertility. Amidst high levels of union dissolution and nonmarital childbearing, a large fraction of adults today have (or will have) biological children by more than one partner, sometimes referred to as “multipartnered fertility.” All things being equal, overall fertility rates are shown to be higher in countries where policies allow women to better balance work and family commitments (Castles 2003; Duvander, Lappegård, and Andersson 2010; Rindfuss et al. 2010), but multipartnered fertility will also be higher in contexts of high union dissolution (Thomson 2014). Recent studies focused on the United States have identified that a sizeable fraction of individuals across various demographic groups have children by more than one partner

(Guzzo and Dorius 2016), including low-income teenage mothers (Furstenberg and King 1999), national samples of adult men (Guzzo 2014; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007b), adolescent and early adult women (Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007a), unwed parents in large US cities (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006), and mothers receiving welfare (Meyer, Cancian, and Cook 2005).

This phenomenon is not unique to the United States, and a growing literature has explored multipartnered fertility across European contexts, especially with respect to its prevalence and predictors. In a study comparing two Anglo-countries and two Nordic countries, Thomson et al. (2014) found that the fraction of all mothers who have children with two or more fathers was 12 percent in Australia, 16 percent in Norway, 13 percent in Sweden and 23 percent in the United States; the higher prevalence in Australia and the United States is likely due to the greater proportion of births that occur to lone mothers in these two countries (Thomson 2014; Thomson et al. 2014). Other studies have shown that childbearing across partnerships, or “stepfamily child-bearing” (Thomson 2014), is not uncommon in Sweden (Holland and Thomson 2011; Vikat, Thomson, and Hoem 1999) and Norway (Lappegård and Rønsen 2013).

Family Instability for Children. Taken together, at the intersection of patterns of union formation and dissolution with fertility behavior, are the family experiences of children. Within the United States, a growing literature has examined the prevalence and consequences of family instability for children. While much of the early literature focused on being in particular family types – first, intact versus nonintact families, then various longitudinal categories of family structure during childhood (e.g., Astone and McLanahan 1991; Cherlin 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994) – more recent studies have identified family transitions or instability (i.e., changes in family type) as an important factor predicting children’s well-being. This literature consistently shows that greater family instability is associated with disadvantageous outcomes for children across a range of academic and behavioral domains (Davis et al. 2009; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Osborne and McLanahan 2007).

There is a growing literature about the prevalence of family instability experienced in other industrialized countries, including several cross-national, comparative studies. Using data from the UN’s Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS), Andersson (2004) and Heuveline, Timberlake, and Furstenberg (2003) found that the United States is an outlier with respect to family instability, with fully half of US children experiencing their parents’

union dissolution by age 15; at the other end of the spectrum, only about one in ten of children in Italy will see their parents' union dissolve by age 15, while most other countries in Western and Eastern Europe fall somewhere in between – with about one quarter to one third of children experiencing the dissolution of their parents' union by age 15. The United States has a higher fraction of children born to single (i.e., not cohabiting or married) mothers than other countries; however, across nearly all countries, including the United States, children are more likely to live with a single parent as a result of parental separation than being born to an unpartnered mother.

Swedish register data (i.e., data about the entire population of Sweden) offer a particularly rich source of information about parents' union histories (and hence children's family structure), including cohabitation, which is often not accurately or regularly measured in surveys. Thomson and colleagues have several papers exploring family (in)stability in Sweden, finding that one quarter to one third of Swedish children have experienced their parents' union dissolution by age 15, depending on whether survey data or register data are used (Kennedy and Thomson 2010; Thomson and Eriksson 2013).

Research suggests that children who live apart from their biological fathers do not fare as well on a range of outcomes as children who grow up with both biological parents, especially within stable married families (Amato and Anthony 2014; McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013). The research evidence is especially strong in the United States, although parents' union dissolution has been linked with various adverse outcomes across European and Anglo-countries as well (see Chapter 6; Härkönen, Bernardi, and Boertien 2017; McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013). There is mixed evidence about whether there is an educational gradient in the effects of single parenthood on children's outcomes; recent reviews of the literature (see Chapter 6; Bernardi et al. 2013) note that some studies show single parenthood to be more detrimental for children of higher educated parents, while other studies show single parenthood to have greater negative consequences for children of lower education.

Children in single-mother families are often deprived of two types of resources from their fathers: Economic (money) and relational (time) (Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994; Thomson and McLanahan 2012). The economic circumstances can be most easily quantified: Single-parent families with children have a significantly higher poverty rate (43 percent in 2015) than two-parent families with children (10 percent in 2015) (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2010), and an extensive US literature shows that living in poverty has adverse effects on child

development and well-being as well as adult socioeconomic attainment (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Duncan, Ziol-Guest, and Kalil 2010; Duncan et al. 2012; Hair et al. 2015). Yet, it is important to recognize the effects of family structure on economic well-being are not necessarily (or entirely) causal, though there is evidence of some causal effect of marriage on family income (Sawhill and Thomas 2005; Waite and Gallagher 2000). Also, at the aggregate level, geographic regions with a higher proportion of intact families are shown to experience greater economic growth (Lerman et al. 2017) and higher intergenerational mobility (Chetty et al. 2014a). Children in single-parent families also receive less parental attention and emotional support from their fathers: Nonresident fathers see their children less often than resident fathers, and lack of interaction decreases the likelihood that a father and child will develop a close relationship (Carlson 2006; Seltzer 1991).

Overall, dramatic changes in family behaviors have occurred over the past half-century, resulting in new and more diverse patterns of family experiences for adults and for the children with whose life courses they overlap. While there is some variation in breadth and scope, these patterns are generally observed across Western industrialized countries. In the next section, I turn to the extent to which these family patterns appear to systematically differ by socioeconomic status.

FAMILY CHANGE AND INEQUALITY

Although the “second demographic transition” – with the incumbent changes in marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and fertility – has been recognized as occurring across a wide range of industrialized countries (Lesthaeghe 1995, 2010), only within the past fifteen years has there been clear recognition of the extent to which changes in family demography are unfolding unevenly across the income distribution. McLanahan’s 2004 presidential address at the Population Association of America noted that differences in family behaviors (including divorce, single parenthood, maternal employment, and fathers’ involvement with children) by socioeconomic status (measured by mothers’ education) were an important aspect of growing inequality among children, or what she called “diverging destinies” (McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Jacobsen 2015). Although the bulk of her evidence was focused on the United States, she included international comparisons for maternal age, maternal employment, and single motherhood by mothers’ education for six European countries, using data from the Luxembourg Income Study; in all cases, she found notable gaps by education in the prevalence of each.

Subsequent studies have provided additional evidence about the extent to which family demographic patterns diverge by socioeconomic status (and whether this divergence may be increasing).

Marriage. Extensive evidence has shown that the retreat from marriage is much more pronounced among the less-educated in the United States. Those with a college education are much more likely to marry compared to those with less (Cherlin 2009; Goldstein and Kenney 2001; White and Rogers 2000). An educational gradient in marriage is less consistently observed across European countries, although whether, and in what direction, a gradient is observed may depend on the degree of gender segregation within countries (Kalmijn 2007, 2013). Analyzing union formation across Canada, Italy, Sweden, and the United States in the early/mid-1990s, Goldscheider, Turcotte, and Kopp (2001) found that the educational gradient for marriage was steepest in the United States, where those with a college education were more likely – and those with below high school were less likely – to marry than those with a high school degree. There was no discernible gradient in Canada or Sweden, and in Italy, those with both lower education and with higher education were more likely to marry than those with a high school education. Using data from the European Social Survey from 2002 to 2010 for twenty-five countries, Kalmijn (2013) found that for women, higher education is negatively related to marriage when gender roles are highly segregated but is positively related to marriage in gender-egalitarian countries; in other words, highly educated women are more likely to marry when societal expectations about marriage include continued involvement in the paid labor market. For men, there is a positive gradient overall, but it is weaker in traditional countries and more strongly positive in egalitarian societies. At the same time, higher education is associated with a delay in marriage in a recent study across fifteen Western countries (Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2016).

Divorce. There is mixed evidence about how education is related to divorce, with some countries showing a positive gradient, others a negative gradient, and some no detectable gradient. In the United States, a notable negative educational effect on divorce has emerged since the 1970s, as those with a college degree are much less likely to divorce than their less-educated counterparts (S. P. Martin 2006; Raley and Bumpass 2003; White and Rogers 2000). Using data on first marriages in seventeen countries from the Fertility and Family Surveys with event-history techniques, Härkönen and Dronkers (2006) found that higher education is associated with a higher risk of

divorce in France, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Spain and with a lower risk of divorce in Austria, Lithuania, and the United States; there is no educational gradient in divorce observed in Estonia, Finland, West Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Sweden, and Switzerland – and for some models in Flanders and Norway. They attributed their disparate findings to the social and economic costs of divorce, which vary over time and across countries. They also found that the gradient is more positive in countries with more generous welfare policies, which they suggested means that social benefits may promote marital stability among the socioeconomically disadvantaged. Kalmijn (2013) also considered divorce in his paper on the educational gradient in marriage across twenty-five European countries; he found that overall, men – but not women – with a higher education were less likely to get divorced (conditional on marriage). However, the association differed by gender attitudes within countries – a higher education was associated with a lower likelihood of divorce in gender-egalitarian societies, but with a higher likelihood of divorce in more gender-traditional countries. In a meta-analysis of fifty-three studies of education and divorce across Europe, Matysiak, Styrk, and Vignoli (2014) found a generally positive socioeconomic gradient in divorce – but with variation across countries – and they note that the relationship between education and divorce has weakened over time as divorce has become more common and as women have increasingly entered the labor force.

In a recent paper that conjointly considers union formation and dissolution patterns as linked to socioeconomic status, Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos (2016) used data across fifteen countries with latent-class analysis to examine partnership trajectories. They found that education is consistently associated with a delay in marriage, but there is less consistent evidence for an education gradient in stable cohabitation or union dissolution. In other words, a higher education is associated with marrying later but not with cohabiting or the likelihood of breaking up. Overall, they find that country context is more important (and increasingly so) than individual-level education in predicting partnership patterns, with country context reflecting the unique combination of social, cultural, political, and economic factors within particular nations.

Repartnering. Repartnering only occurs once unions have been entered and exited, and we know that there are numerous factors that affect the likelihood of such, including both social and economic characteristics (Lyngstad and Jalovaara 2010; Xie et al. 2003). While repartnering has increased across most Western countries, following rising union dissolution rates, there does not appear to be a consistent socioeconomic

gradient. In the United States, where repartnering rates are highest, greater education (especially college) is associated with a higher likelihood of remarriage – but with a lower likelihood of cohabiting with a new partner (McNamee and Raley 2011). In the Netherlands, education is associated with a greater likelihood of repartnering (either marriage or cohabitation) for men but not for women (de Graaf and Kalmijn 2003; Poortman 2007). One recent study in Flanders that considered the characteristics of new partners found that higher educated men are more likely to repartner with a childless partner (versus no union) but not with a partner who has a child (Vanassche et al. 2015); this study also found no effects of education on repartnering for women.

Nonmarital Childbearing. We know that nonmarital childbearing in the United States is strongly associated with socioeconomic disadvantage (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; McLanahan 2011). Childbearing within cohabitation is shown to follow a clear socioeconomic gradient within eight European countries, although the gap by education has not necessarily increased over time (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010); these authors find that conceptual expectations from second demographic transition theory cannot account for the gradient across countries and over time. Instead, the negative socioeconomic gradient appeared to emerge from both economic and social changes; in particular, changes in the labor market brought both greater economic uncertainty and higher employment among women, and at the same time, social values and norms were changing that increased the acceptability of certain family behaviors. Kennedy and Thomson (2010) also considered births to single and cohabiting women in Sweden, and they found a small and persistent gap by education in the fraction of births to single (unpartnered) women; of births to women with less than secondary education (tertiary education), 5 percent (2 percent) were to single mothers in the 1970s and 6 percent (3 percent) in the 1990s. While births to cohabiting women rose for all women, the relative gap by education remained similar over this time period: For women with less than secondary education (tertiary education), the fraction of births to cohabiting women rose from 45 percent (30 percent) in the 1970s to 59 percent (38 percent) in the 1990s – thus the ratio of high-to-low education was similar (at 1.5–1.6) at both time points.

Multipartnered Fertility. In the United States, we know that multipartnered fertility is much more common among socioeconomically disadvantaged men and women (Cancian, Meyer, and Cook 2011; Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Guzzo and Dorius 2016). Thomson et al. (2014) find a similar pattern in their

study of Australia, Norway, Sweden, and the United States: There is a negative educational gradient, as higher education is associated with a lower chance of having a subsequent birth to a different father. In their detailed analyses of Norwegian register data, Lappegård and Rønsen (2013) paint a more complicated picture, finding that multipartnered fertility is related to both socioeconomic disadvantage and advantage. The former can be attributable to the fact that the risk of union dissolution is higher among those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, while the latter is due to the fact that, conditional on having broken up, the chance of repartnering is higher among the socioeconomically advantaged. Indeed, union instability during the childbearing years can serve as an “engine of fertility,” because parity progression occurs more quickly in new partnerships (Thomson et al. 2012).

Family Instability for Children. While there has been less research focused on socioeconomic gradients in family instability for children in European contexts, several recent papers have provided important new insights. In work in progress by Carlson et al. (2014) analyzing fifteen industrialized countries, the authors find that between birth and age 15, US children spend on average five years living with a single (unpartnered) mother, compared to one to three years in all other countries (Russia being the second highest at three years). Further, there is a notable educational gradient in family instability; across all countries examined, children spend a higher number of years living with both parents if the mother has a higher education, but the gap in family stability by maternal education is greatest in the United States.

Kennedy and Thomson (2010), using data from the Swedish Level of Living Survey, found some evidence of a growing gap in family instability by parental education in Sweden from the 1970s to the 1990s, although the magnitude of the gradient was far less than that observed in the United States. Given the strong association noted earlier between growing up with two biological parents and healthy child development (McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013), this may have broader implications for inequality. Yet, one recent paper focused on Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States found that while indeed growing up in a nonintact family was associated with lower socioeconomic attainment, this did not explain aggregate-level differences in inequality across countries (Bernardi and Boertien 2017a); this was in part because the effects of nonintact families are actually more negative for those with higher socioeconomic status, even though the likelihood of experiencing a nonintact family is much more common for those with lower socioeconomic

status. A recent working paper by Musick and Michelmore (2016) suggests that the higher proportion of unions that break up in the United States and the greater socioeconomic gradient in such compared to European countries is due to the higher prevalence of – and correlation among – behaviors linked to union instability (such as early childbearing and multipartnered fertility – which are also linked with unplanned pregnancies); this, in turn, points to greater inequality in what children get from parents in the United States compared to Western Europe.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter summarizes what we know about recent patterns of family change and socioeconomic inequality therein across the United States and Europe. This is an important topic because family circumstances and transitions can influence individual well-being, happiness, identity, and relationships – and also play an important role in promoting or sustaining economic well-being. To the extent that family behaviors diverge by socioeconomic status within countries, this can reflect a broader pattern of accumulating advantage or disadvantage (depending on the direction of the gradient), with long-term ramifications for individuals and society; differences in outcomes for a given generation may then perpetuate growing inequality for the next generation.

Overall, in contrast to the United States, where there are consistent socioeconomic gradients in family behaviors – with more educated individuals experiencing more “traditional” and stable family patterns – there is much greater variability in Europe. Observed variation in family patterns by socioeconomic status (SES) seems to depend on numerous factors in particular places, including gender role attitudes and other cultural attributes, as well as social policies that facilitate balancing work and family and that reduce income inequality. At the same time, there is some evidence that family instability may be rising, especially for children from the least-educated families.

Also, it is important to consider how the timing of family changes may be related to the educational gradient. Conceptual arguments about the “second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe 1995, 2010) suggested that the highly educated would be in the vanguard of ushering in new family patterns; thus, there would initially be a positive educational gradient in “modern” family behaviors (such as delayed marriage and childbearing, and rising cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and divorce), but that this gradient would dissipate as the new ideas spread to lower socioeconomic strata. Here too,

a consistent pattern cannot be observed across contexts, or particular behaviors, and more research over time (that allows comparisons by education across cohorts) is warranted.

Ultimately, it seems impossible to draw strong general conclusions about patterns of inequality in family behaviors – and the relationship to broader economic inequality – across Europe and the United States writ large. Instead, it appears that individual countries experience quite distinct patterns. As Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos observed in their recent study of partnership patterns (2016, p. 275), “macro-level country context explains more of the variance in predicted probabilities than individual-level education.” Thus, we are reminded of the importance of historical, cultural, social, and economic processes within particular geographic contexts and communities as key factors that influence human behavior and outcomes.