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# Family change, child well-being and social inequality

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This paper examines what we know about the role of family change for children's living conditions and inequalities in their life chances. Families in Europe and beyond have become increasingly heterogeneous. From children's perspective, important demographic changes are decreases in family sizes, increases in family instability and single-parent households and increases in the age of the parents. All these changes have the potential to affect children's well-being and future life chances, and the extent to which they do has been a focus of active research. I will, first, provide an overview to these main changes in the Western countries. Second, I will discuss to what extent these changes have been uneven and occurred faster in some (socioeconomic) groups than in others. Third, I look into the evidence on the effects of family structures and dynamics on children's well-being and future life chances. Fourth, I ask whether these effects can strengthen existing socioeconomic inequalities in child well-being and thus act as a pathway for intergenerational reproduction of inequalities. I also briefly discuss a related theme, namely whether family demography can account for differences in child well-being over time and between countries. Last, I summarize the evidence and provide a discussion of their policy implications. Overall, family change has been rapid and in many Western countries uneven, as those family dynamics and forms that have the most potential for detrimental effects have increased the fastest among the weakest socioeconomic groups. Children's well-being can be compromised by experiences of family dissolution and single parenthood. At the same time, children can potentially benefit from smaller family sizes and postponed parenthood. To what extent family demography contributes to existing socioeconomic inequalities, to cross-national and period differences in children's well-being and life chances remains an open question, even though the available evidence suggests that its role is likely to be more limited than expected. The power of policies to ameliorate any negative effects depends on the well-being outcome one is interested in. The playing field is most easily evened in the case of economic well-being, with income transfer policies and policies that support (female) employment being particularly efficient. Existing policies may have weaker effects on non-economic aspects of well-being.

## A. Introduction

Family change of the recent decades has attracted major attention among researchers and the public alike. For some, the main concern is the moral implications of 'family breakdown' and the withdrawal from co-residential and reproductive arrangements that were built around marriage. For others, these changes are a reflection of other major cultural and socioeconomic changes, and yet for others, the main concern is the changing living conditions and inequalities among adults and children (cf. Ellwood and Jencks 2004).

In this paper, I focus on the latter and examine how family change has shaped children's living conditions and life chances, and inequalities in them. The study is structured as follows. First, I describe major patterns of family change in recent decades, especially focusing on what this means from children's point of view. Second, I examine recent research concerning whether these developments have been more rapid among some socioeconomic

groups (separated by education and class, in particular) than in others. Third, I look into what is known about the effects of different family forms and dynamics on children's economic well-being and life chances (and educational attainment in particular). The purpose of these latter two parts is to look at two sides of the inequality-family change nexus: whether socioeconomic differences and inequalities affect family forms and dynamics, and whether these, in turn, affect the well-being and life chances of children. Fourth, I move on to analyzing whether socioeconomic differences in family dynamics and forms can actually explain links between the socioeconomic features of parents and their children, that is, the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage / social (im)mobility. Finally, I sum up and provide a brief discussion on policy alternatives.

The focus of this study is on Europe. However, much of the research on the topic comes from the United States, and thus I draw heavily on American research when appropriate.

## B. Changes in family structures and dynamics

The main aspects of family change—often labeled under the "second demographic transition" (Lesthaeghe 1995; Van de Kaa 2001)—have been well documented (e.g., Sobotka 2008). The general "withdrawal from marriage", with the associated increases in divorce, cohabitation and non-marital childbearing together with declines in and postponement of fertility and marriage are among its most visible features. Despite common trends in most Western countries, cross-national differences remain visible (Sobotka 2008; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008). Nordic countries, for example, led the way to postponed and often foregone marriage, and together with the United States, they have for long had high divorce rates. Other countries, such as Southern European ones, have experienced increases in divorce rates only later and for the most part continue to have more stable marriages than the Nordic ones, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Not only did family change start later in some countries than in others, it has also stabilized in some countries. For example, fertility postponement has slowed down in most of the "lowest-low" fertility countries, leading to recent increases in total fertility rates (Goldstein, Sobotka and Jasilionene 2009). Likewise, family instability has plateaued, and even decreased, at least in some high-divorce countries (Goldstein 1999; Andersson and Kolk 2011). In other words, family change need not follow the same path and continue indefinitely, but varies cross-nationally and begins and slows down at different times.

From children's point of view, major family demographic changes include the decrease in the number of biological siblings, increase in the number of half-siblings, increase in the occurrence of parental separation and single parenthood, and the increase in parental age. Other changes that have captured the attention of academics and non-academics alike include the increase in non-marital childbearing and the access to grandparents. Regarding the former, non-marital childbearing and children's life outside marriage has been a topic of active research and concern in the United States. However, in other countries non-marital childbearing is not as directly linked to socioeconomic disadvantage and single

parenthood (the latter decreasingly so in the US as well) (Andersson and Philipov 2002). Unless one is worried with children's experience of living with unwed parents per se, the growth in the number of children born to unwed parents (e.g., Perelli-Harris 2010) is of less concern. Regarding the latter, increases in life expectancy increase the (at least potential) presence of grand-parents (Uhlenberg 1996), although little is known about factual trends across countries.

Decreasing fertility rates have often meant that children have fewer (biological) siblings. This is the clearest in the case of developing countries going through the Demographic Transition, in which declines in mortality rates are followed by a fall in fertility rates. As a result, children have fewer siblings (even though the chances of each of them surviving might be improved) and families become smaller (Lam and Marteleto 2008). Although the fertility declines in the "Second Demographic Transition" are less dramatic, the (in many countries) decreasing number of children ever born of women means fewer siblings for their children. Due to increasing union instability, this trend is likely to be more pronounced for the number of biological siblings children have. The same increases in family instability together with re-partnering (e.g., Prskawetz et al. 2003; Holland and Thomson 2011) also mean that more children will have half-siblings.

Children's experiences of single parenthood due to parental separation vary greatly between Western countries and they have generally increased over time. By the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, there were major cross-national differences in children's likelihood of experiencing single motherhood at some point during their childhoods (Andersson and Philipov 2002). Similar differences were still visible at the turn of the millennium (Härkönen 2012). Countries also differ markedly in what share of single parenthood is accounted for by births to single women compared to union dissolution (Heuveline, Timberlake and Furstenberg 2003) with the former being much more common in the United States and United Kingdom than elsewhere in Europe (with the partial exception of Germany and Austria). Regarding trends over time, it comes as no surprise that children born in later cohorts are more likely to have experienced parental separation and single parenthood during their childhoods. For example, in Sweden, which long has been the European forerunner in family changes associated with the Second Demographic Transition, between 15 and 20 percent of children experienced parental separation by age 15 in the late 1960s, whereas that share increased to approximately 35 percent by the turn of the millennium (Thomson and Eriksson 2010). The share of Swedish children born out of union has, however, remained stable at just above 5 percent. Interestingly enough, the share of children experiencing parental separation by age 15 has modestly declined after its peak, again suggesting that period of rapid increase in family instability might be coming to a close, at least in some countries. Worth noting, also, is that mortality declines have meant that fewer children have experienced single parenthood due to parental death (Bygren, Gähler and Nermo 2004).

Women have been having their first children at increasingly older ages (e.g., Sobotka 2008). From children's point of view, a natural implication of this is an increase in age of the parents. This, of course, only applies directly to first-born children as the age of the

parents at the birth of the later-born children depends additionally on the spacing of births (how soon after their first child parents have their second one, and so forth), and, of course, whether parents continue to have second children or more in the first place. Since women have been bearing fewer children in the more recent cohorts, there are fewer children born who have older parents than would otherwise be the case. However, fertility postponement has tended to dominate this counteracting effect (Martin 2004), and therefore children born in the more recent cohorts tend to have older parents.

### C. Has the change been uneven?

One of the findings of recent research on family change is the uneven occurrence of family change across socioeconomic groups. In particular, studies from several countries have found that family instability and single parenthood have increased the fastest among women with the lowest levels of education (for the United States: Ellwood and Jencks 2004; McLanahan 2004; Martin 2006; Europe: Härkönen and Dronkers 2006; Härkönen 2012). The reasons behind these developments are not fully understood. Regarding the shift in the educational gradient of divorce, Härkönen and Dronkers (2006) drew on the "Goode hypothesis" which states that when divorce is difficult (due to social, legal, and economic barriers), divorcing requires resources that are more common among the highly educated. When divorcing becomes easier, those lower in the socioeconomic ladder (who are often also those with higher marital strain) find divorce more accessible and can end up with higher divorce rates due to higher stress in their partnerships. Their results were broadly in line with this hypothesis (see also Blossfeld et al. 1995; De Graaf and Kalmijn 2006; Bernardi and Martínez-Pastor 2011). Other explanations have drawn on the interaction between cultural, economic and social policy factors that may contribute to union dissolution and single parenthood being more common in some educational groups than in others (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; McLanahan 2004). In particular, several American studies have increasingly stressed the importance of stable economic prospects as a prequisite for stable (married) family life in modern societies, and maintained that the lack of them partly explains the withdrawal of low educated women from stable families (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; McLanahan 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2005;

Rates of single parenthood are due to childbearing by single mothers, separation, and repartnering. Overall, childbearing by single mothers has been more important in the United States than in most European countries (Heuveline, Timberlake and Furstenberg 2003), as discussed above. These are also differences between educational groups. Childbearing by single mothers has been more common among the least educated in all countries (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010). Furthermore, the educational differentials in fertility to single mothers have increased in some countries, although the trend is not uniform. In addition, the growing instability of families with the least socioeconomic resources adds to the occurrence of single parenthood among children with less educated parents.

Much interest in terms of socioeconomic differences in fertility behavior has been on the educational differences in the number of children women have (e.g. Skirbekk 2008). Generally, women with less socioeconomic resources have had more children. In some countries, however, there are no major educational differences in the number of children born, but rather in the timing of births (Andersson et al. 2008).

The postponement of births by the highly educated has been generally observed and has partly to do with the longer time these women spend in education, which is often seen as incompatible with family formation. Children born to highly educated women thus often have fewer siblings, and older parents. Regarding half-siblings, the negative gradient of divorce prevalent nowadays in many Western countries, together with no differences in step-family formation and fertility, lead to expect that children born to less educated mothers are more likely to have step-children as well.

## D. Family structures, family dynamics and child well-being

What effects do these family demographic changes have on children's well-being and life chances? Numerous studies have analyzed these questions and focused on different indicators of child well-being and life chances, such as economic well-being and poverty, educational achievement and attainment, psychological well-being, and family demographic behaviors in adulthood. As a summary, one could say that different family demographic changes have different effects on child outcomes. Furthermore, the estimation of each of these effects is plagued by serious methodological challenges due to the non-random assignment of families to these states. For example, parents can to a high extent choose to have more or less children, to have them earlier or later, and to separate or stay together, often due to reasons that cannot be observed and statistically controlled by the researcher. These same unobservable factors (such as personality traits and the quality of the parents' relationship) can additionally affect children's well-being. Therefore, causality is very difficult to claim.

Maybe the most research interest has been devoted to studying the effects on parental separation (for reviews, Amato 2000; James and Amato 2010; Garriga and Härkönen 2009). Overall, children of divorced or separated parents experience heightened economic strain and tend to perform worse in terms educational success and attainment and different aspects of well-being than those whose parents have remained together. Here again, causality is difficult to prove and it is not completely clear to what extent these effects are due to the divorce/separation as such, or due to some other factors that are correlated both with the parents' separation and children's outcomes. However, many indications do suggest that at least part of the difference between children with separated parents and those whose parents did not separate are due to the separation itself (Ibid; McLanahan and Percheski 2008). These effects tend to be stronger in the short run, even though they often do not completely disappear even in the longer run. One can also maintain that the effects are rather heterogeneous: for some children (especially for those from highly confliction or

otherwise badly performing families), parental separation may have positive effects; other children do not experience any (at least long-term) negative outcomes; yet others may adapt very badly to their parents' divorce. Although much needs to be learned from which factors actually account for this heterogeneity in effects, socioeconomic safety and the behavior of parents and other significant adults during and after the divorce process does predict children's adjustment.

Other researchers have analyzed the effects of family size on children's living conditions and futures. Again, children from larger families tend to experience more economic strain and perform worse in school, among other outcomes (e.g., Steelman et al. 2002), which supports common beliefs of higher economic constraints in such families and more competition between siblings in them. However, many scholars maintain that growing up in a large family does not in itself lead to compromised life chances. Instead, some research suggests that the observed associations are partly due to birth order: first-born children generally perform better than their later-born siblings, and there are more later-born children in larger families (Black et al. 2005; Härkönen 2012b). Having more siblings thus would not affect the life chances of children with the same birth order (second children, for example).

Finally, parental age can have important effects on children's well-being (e.g. Martin 2004). A lot of research has focused on the effects of teenage parenthood on parents' and children's outcomes alike. In general, the children of teenage parents tend to fare worse in terms of academic and various other outcomes, although, here again it has been difficult to determine how much of these differences are due to the parents' age as such or to other factors. Some studies have analyzed this question using a broader distribution of parents' ages and analyzed outcomes such as educational attainment and health (Mare and Tzeng 1991; Powell et al. 2003; Myrskylä and Fenelon 2012; Silventoinen et al. 2012; Härkönen and Buis 2012). Although fertility postponement may have negative health repercussions for mothers and children alike, the results generally show that either these do not materialize to affect the living conditions and life chances of children, or they are overrun by the positive effects of increasing age, such as maturity and economic stability. Overall, the effect of parental age on children's outcomes appears to be positive, calling into question concerns of postponed parenthood.

## E. Can demography explain changes, cross-national differences and social inequalities in child well-being?

The last two sections showed how family behaviors and family change have not been evenly distributed across socioeconomic groups, and how family demographic behaviors can matter for children's well-being and life chances. Together, these two effects suggest that family demography may play –a potentially increasingly important– role in the intergenerational reproduction of socioeconomic inequality. Furthermore, due to the cross-national differences in family structures and behaviors, and the family change over time, family

demography may potentially explain some of the differences in child well-being across countries and over time.

These possibilities have been considered in the family demographic and social stratification research. For example, a core question in Sara McLanahan's (McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Percheski 2008) "diverging destinies" thesis was that family demography may become an increasingly important pathway in socioeconomic reproduction across generations in the United States, but also elsewhere. In the same manner, some studies have asked whether family structures can explain differences in child poverty between countries and across time (Chen and Corak 2008; Iceland 2003). Both of these arguments are theoretically feasible; if some family demographic structures and dynamics have adverse effects on children's outcomes, and if parents with lower socioeconomic position are more likely to experience these potentially harmful conditions, family demography may be an important explanation to the correlation between the socioeconomic statuses of parents and children. A similar line of argument holds for cross-national or period differences in child well-being.

However, the relatively limited number of existing empirical studies that have directly assessed the extent to which family structures and family demography can explain existing child well-being differences between socioeconomic groups, countries, or periods have questioned whether it plays a strong role (Chen and Corak 2008; Heuveline and Weinshenker 2008; Härkönen 2012). Generally, income redistribution policies and labor market attachment appear more important. This does not mean that family structure cannot be important for child well-being. Quite the contrary, poverty rates, for example, in single parent households can be remarkably high, and even more so in single parent households headed by a mother with low education. What the above findings mean is that it is likely that the socioeconomic background differences in child well-being and life chances would not be much different without the uneven distribution of divorce, single parenthood, and other family demographic behaviors across socioeconomic groups. However, it is possible that the role of family structure on inequality in children's outcomes depends on the particular societies and time periods that are analyzed (cf. Iceland 2003), and more research is needed to draw stronger conclusions on this issue.

## F. Conclusions and discussion

Family life courses have changed rather remarkably over the last decades and these have the potential to affect children's lives and inequalities between children, especially as these changes have been more rapid in some socioeconomic groups than in others. What we know from previous research is, firstly, that changes associated with the "second demographic transition" –such as increases in family instability and single parenthood and postponement and reduction of fertility– begun earlier in some countries (notably, Northern Europe and the United States) than in others (Southern Europe especially). There are also increasing signs that at least some of these changes are experienced differently in different

socioeconomic groups, with divorce, for example, increasing more rapidly among the less educated so that union instability is becoming strongly associated with low education in many countries. We also know that many family demographic behaviors (such as parental divorce and age at parenthood) are at least associated with –if not causally affected by– various child outcomes, such as educational attainment and physical and mental health. Together, these findings suggest that family change can have had an important effect on developments in child well-being and in reinforcing existing inequalities in children's living conditions and life chances. However, the existing evidence suggests that although possible, these effects might be weaker than anticipated.

What about policy? As usual, policy responses should focus on the issue of most concern to the public, researchers, and policy-makers. Policy interventions intended to lessen inequalities and effects caused by family change are likely to be most effective when they target economic outcomes, such as child poverty. A long line of research has shown that single parent household and large family poverty rates vary cross-nationally, and are strongly affected by income redistribution and policies that support mothers' employment (Vleminckx and Smeeding 2001; Brady and Burroway 2012). These policies can thus have a major role in leveling the playing field between children in different family types.

However, it may be more difficult to decrease potential effects of family demographic behaviors on longer-term effects (such as education) and non-economic aspects of well-being. The most studied family demographic patterns, such as single parenthood and parental divorce, are associated with poorer child outcomes practically in all (Western) countries where they have been studied (Garriga and Härkönen 2009; James and Amato 2010). Although some studies suggest that extensive and family-friendly policies may alleviate the impacts of single parenthood (e.g., Pong et al. 2003), it is more difficult to detect consistent patterns between parental divorce and many well-being indicators across countries, and even more so to establish what lies behind any cross-national patterns (Garriga and Härkönen 2009). It seems that although "traditional" social policies that aim at equalizing economic inequalities may have long-term effects by reducing children's poverty risks, which then may have independent effects on child outcomes, policies that aim to decrease the gaps in well-being between children growing up in different family forms may need to "think outside the box" and additionally concentrate on non-economic forms of support.

Can policies address the socioeconomically uneven development in family dynamics and forms? Parental leave policies and educational policies are known to affect the timing of fertility (Andersson and Neyer 2008). However, if postponement of parenthood—which is associated with positive child outcomes—is the policy aim, this may conflict with other population policy goals which instead tend to stress the opposite. It is potentially possible to address the uneven trends in family dynamics, such as divorce and union formation, by labor market and social policies that improve the economic position and stability of those with the least resources. This is suggested by research stressing the negative effects of economic instability on family formation and stability, and some findings suggesting that the educational differences in divorce are less in countries with more encompassing social welfare systems (Härkönen and Dronkers 2006).

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