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1988-2012

U.S. Attitudes Towards Nonmarital Childbearing from 1988-2012

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Abstract

Nonmarital childbearing in the United States has been increasing since the 1980s. Because nonmarital childbirths appear to be related to poor child developmental outcomes, researchers have investigated factors that are related to the increase in nonmarital fertility over time and proposed ways to reduce it. One of the major explanations for the spike in nonmarital fertility is a cultural shift of views towards marriage among US adults, yet little research has examined trends in American people's attitudes towards nonmarital fertility since the 1980s. Using the 1988, 1994, 2002, and 2012 General Social Survey (GSS) (N = 5,190), I examine trends in US adults' attitudes towards nonmarital fertility over time as well as variation in such attitudes by major demographic characteristics, including gender, race, age, education, and marital status. I examine three hypotheses: 1) attitudes towards nonmarital fertility became more permissive from 1988 to 2012; 2) women, Blacks, younger adults, the lower educated, and non-married individuals are more permissive than men, Whites, older adults, adults with higher education, and married individuals; and 3) even after controlling for shifts in demographic compositions, the change towards more permissive attitudes concerning nonmarital fertility from 1988 to 2012 remains significant. All hypotheses are supported.

Since the 1980s, there has been a dramatic increase in rates of nonmarital childbearing well into the 2010s (Ventura, 2009), though some data indicate that this trend may be slightly decreasing (Curtin, Ventura, & Martinez, 2014). Specifically, the share of nonmarital births—i.e., births to cohabiting or single women—increased from 21 percent in the early 1980s to 43 percent in the early 2010s (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015). High rates of nonmarital childbearing have led to numerous concerns due to consistent research findings of the association of nonmarital childbirths with poorer economic, health, and mental health outcomes for both the mothers and their children (Driscoll, Hearn, Evans, Moore, Sugland, & Call, 1999; Hollander, 1996; Terry-Humen, Manlove, & Moore, 2001). Researchers and policy makers have debated ways of potentially decreasing childbearing outside of marriage (Nock, 2005; Solomon-Fears, 2008; Ooms, 1995). To inform this debate, social scientists have investigated explanations for the increase in births before marriage, which essentially reflect the decrease in marriage rates. Various explanations have been offered, including: demographic changes among the U.S. population (Solomon-Fears, 2008), women's increasing economic independence (Becker, 1981), increased government benefits for single mothers (Moffitt, 2002), the decline in marriageable men (Solomon-Fears, 2008; Wilson, 1987; Wilson & Neckerman, 1986), and cultural shifts in views of marriage among American adults (including a decrease in social stigma attached to nonmarital childbearing), particularly among minorities (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993; Clarkberg, 1999; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Although a lack of economic opportunities appears to be related to lack of marriage and thus childbearing outside of marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Wilson, 1987), the decline in social stigma attached to cohabitation and childrearing without marriage also appears to play an important role in the increase in nonmarital childbearing (Cherlin, 2004; Edin & Read, 2005).

Much research has shown that U.S. adults' views or attitudes towards marriage, family, and women's roles dramatically shifted in the latter half of the 20th century, in part due to the feminist and sexual revolutions as well as the increases in women's labor force participation in the 1970s (Thornton, 1989; 1995; Thornton & Yong-DeMarco, 2001). In general, Americans have become more accepting diverse forms of families, such as working mothers, divorce, and remarriage. Social stigma associated non-traditional families, such as cohabitation and single-mother families, have been declining (Cherlin, 2004). Yet, changes in attitudes towards nonmarital fertility are under-investigated. Because attitudes may be linked to behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1980; 2010) and have been proposed to influence nonmarital childbearing specifically (Solomon-Fears, 2008), it is important to investigate whether and how U.S. adults' attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing have changed since the 1980s when the rate of nonmarital childbearing increased rapidly.

Using data from the 1988, 1994, 2002, and 2012 General Social Survey (GSS), this study examines the following three questions. First, it investigates changes in U.S. adults' attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing across the two and a half decades. Given the findings of research on reasons for the decline in marriage rate (e.g., Edin & Read, 2005), it is hypothesized that attitudes towards nonmarital childbirth will have become more permissive over time. Second, I examine how attitudes towards nonmarital childbirth vary by social group, focusing on gender, race, age, education, and marital status; I hypothesize that women, Blacks, younger adults, adults with lower education, and non-married individuals will be more permissive towards nonmarital childbirth than men, Whites, older adults, adults with higher education, and the married. Thirds, I examine whether changes in attitudes towards nonmarital status from the late 1980s to the early 2010s remains after controlling for change in demographic compositions

of these social groups among U.S. adults during this period; I hypothesize that time will remain significant, even when changes in these demographic composition changes are accounted for.

Prior Research on U. S. Attitudes Towards Marriage & Family Issues

While numerous studies have examined trends in behavior of nonmarital childbearing (Curtin, Ventura, & Martinez, 2014; Driscoll, Hearn, Evans, Moore, Sugland, & Call, 1999; Hollander, 1996; Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015; Ooms, 1995; Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993; Perelli-Harris et al., 2009; Solomon-Fears, 2008; Terry-Humen, Manlove, & Moore, 2001; Ventura, 2009; Ventura & Bachrach, 2000), trends in attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing have been less developed. In the mid-1990s, Ooms (1995) found that “The vast majority of Americans still consider unmarried childbearing to be an unwelcome event under many circumstances” (p. 204), and while this more conservative view is still very common, permissive attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing have become more common over time (Daugherty & Copen, 2016; Pagnini, & Rindfuss, 1993; Thornton, 1989; 1995; Thornton & Yong-DeMarco, 2001). Using data from an international survey of attitudes towards marriage and family in Western countries (Austria, West Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the U.S.) from 1988-2002, Gubernskaya (2010) summarizes this trend succinctly: “Despite the persistent cross-national and socio-demographic differences in support for marriage and children at any given time point, the general trend towards greater nontraditionalism can be seen in different countries and for all socio-demographic groups” (p. 194). U.S. studies that examined why cohabiters do not marry have found that one reason is that cohabiters, especially those with lower socioeconomic status, do not perceive any stigma to having children while remaining single (Edin, 2000). However, trends pertaining to the acceptance of nonmarital childbearing among American adults since the mid-1980s have not been investigated using a national sample.

Research on attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing has also consistently pointed to different demographic groups holding significantly different opinions towards nonmarital fertility (Solomon-Fears, 2008); Solomon-Fears (2008) identifies that a potential cause of the more liberal attitudes towards nonmarital fertility in America may be due to more permissive demographic groups composing a greater percentage of American society. When considering attitudinal shifts in nonmarital fertility, then, it is important to consider trends within demographics both for their own sake as well as how overall attitudes may have changed due to changes in the demographic composition of America. In the following sections, I first discuss variations in attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing by demographic characteristics focusing on gender, race, education, age, and marital status. Then, I discuss how demographic make-ups of these characteristics (except for gender) have changed from the mid-1980s to the early 2010s, which suggest the necessity of taking into account such changes in demographic compositions when estimating changes in U.S. adults' attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing.

Demographic Variation in Attitudes Towards Nonmarital Childbearing

Gender. Many studies have found gender to be significant, with women having more permissive attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing than men (Carter, 1993; Daugherty & Copen, 2016; Gubernskaya, 2010; Trent & South, 1992), though some studies have not found gender to be statistically significant (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993). Women are proposed to be more permissive towards nonmarital fertility due to their generally “less traditional perspectives” (Trent & South, 1992, p. 428) towards marriage and family, as well as finding marriage as less desirable (Gubernskaya, 2010).

Race. Race has been more consistently found to be significant, with Blacks holding more permissive attitudes than Whites (Carter, 1993; Moor & Stief, 1991; Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993),

though not all research agrees with this trend (Trent & South, 1992). It has been argued that due to higher nonmarital birthrates among Blacks than among Whites or other racial groups (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015), there has been an increased acceptance of this trend; alternatively, it has been proposed that marriage has become increasingly separated from childbearing among Black communities, which may also increase permissiveness (Carter, 1993; Trent & South, 1992).

Education. Perhaps reflecting the higher rate of nonmarital childbearing among those with lower levels of education (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015), lower education levels have been found to be correlated to more permissive attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing (Barber & Axinn, 2005; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gubernskaya, 2010). Higher levels of education have been known to increase exposure to liberal attitudes towards nontraditional gender roles and nontraditional families as well as influencing attitudinal changes (Gubernskaya, 2010; Trent & South, 1992), and are thusly proposed to be correlated with permissive attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing.

Age. Being younger has also been found to be correlated with more permissive attitudes (Carter, 1993; Daugherty & Copen, 2016; Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993; Trent & South, 1992). Younger age groups are proposed to be more permissive due to their generally less conservative attitudes than the elderly, which would include attitudes towards family issues (Trent & South, 1992).

Marital Status. Finally, marital status has also been found to be a key predictor of attitudes towards nonmarital childbirth, with married individuals holding less permissive attitudes (Carter, 1993; Gubernskaya, 2010; Trent & South, 1992). Being married is proposed to be correlated with less permissive attitudes because being married would impact perceptions of

how desirable marriage and traditional family structures are, thus reducing liberal attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing (Trent & South, 1992).

Changes in Demographic Composition

While the gender composition of the United States has remained overall consistent over time, there have been many notable shifts in demographic compositions in the U. S. over the past century, including race/ethnicity, education, age, and marital status.

Race. The racial composition in America has undergone major shifts in the past decades, between domestic racial changes and immigration, causing the United States to be more racially diverse than ever before. While 84% of the population was White in 1965, by 2015, Whites only comprised 62% of the population, with minorities such as African Americans and Asians, but most prominently Hispanics, driving the change in racial composition (Pew Research Center, 2015a).

Education. The United States has become more educated over time. The proportion of the population that has less than a high school education has vastly decreased, whereas there has been a surge in completion of high school or some college as well as the completion of Bachelor's degrees or higher (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017).

Age. American society has been aging. Worldwide, the relative quantity of younger individuals (under 15) has only roughly doubled from 1950 to 2010, the relative quantity of adults 15 to 64 has nearly quadrupled, and the relative quantity of adults 65 and older had nearly tripled (Pew Research Center, 2014a); in the United States, there has been a similar surge in 15-64-year-olds and 65+ year-olds, but only a modest doubling of 0-14-year-olds (United Nations, 2017).

Marital Status. Marital status and marital demographic compositions have also undergone major shifts. Not only are more people than ever not getting married at all, with a shift of only 9% of adults over the age of 25 not being married in 1960 compared to approximately 20% in 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2014b), but marriages are not as permanent as before, nor are they seen as the only option. Cohabitation, single parenthood, and blended families are all becoming more common, with nuclear, first-time married two parent households decreasing from 73% of families in 1960 to 46% in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2015b).

Summary of Hypotheses

On the basis of the prior discussions, this analysis examines the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing will have become more permissive among American adults from 1988 to 2012.

Hypothesis 2. Women, Blacks, adults with lesser education, younger adults, and nonmarried adults will hold more permissive attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing than men, Whites, adults with high educations, older adults, and married adults.

Hypothesis 3. After accounting for changes in demographic composition of the United States, the change in attitudes becoming more permissive over time will remain.

Methods

Data

Data is used from the GSS, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The GSS's respondents stem from adults (ages 18 and up) from the mainland United States, not including adults who were abroad, institutionalized, or deployed in the military. The analysis uses data from the 1988, 1994, 2002, and 2012 surveys, as these were the only years in which the focus question was asked (NORC, 2015a; 2015b).

For the present analysis, all cases that had a missing value in at least one variable in the analysis were deleted, which resulted the initial sample of 9,212 respondents to be reduced to a total analytic sample of 5,190 cases (for 1988, $N=1,376$; for 1994, $N=1,400$; for 2002, $N=1,144$; for 2012, $N=1,270$). To adjust the sample to be nationally representative, all analyses were weighted using the weight variable provided by the NORC.

Methods

Attitudes towards nonmarital childbirth were measured by the question asking respondents whether they would agree or disagree with the statement, “Those who want children ought to get married.” 1 = “strongly disagree,” 2 = “disagree,” 3 = “neither agree nor disagree” 4 = “agree,” and 5 = “strongly agree.” The higher values indicate less tolerant attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing.

Year was measured as survey year, including 1988, 1994, 2002, and 2012. For the demographics, *gender* was a dichotomous variable where women were assigned 1 and men were assigned 0. *Race* was measured as three dummy variables of White, Black, and Other race; the “Hispanic” category was not added to the GSS until 2000, and thusly was not utilized in this analysis. *Education* was measured as four dummy variables of less than high school, high school, some college, and college plus. *Age* was sorted into three dummy variables of 18-29, 30-49, and 50+. *Marital status* was measured as four dummy variables of currently married, widowed, divorced/separated, and never married.

First, I present means for attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing and demographic characteristics for the total sample and by year. To test the first hypothesis (that attitudes will have become more permissive over time), t-tests were used. To test the second and third hypotheses (that attitudes will vary by demographics and that variation over time will remain

significant when demographic shifts are accounted for), I conducted ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. I also examined ordered logistic regression models. However, because the patterns of findings were very similar, only results of OLS regression models are presented.

Results

Means for U.S. adults' attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing for the total (pooled) sample and by year are presented in Table 1. Attitudes towards nonmarital fertility became significantly more permissive from the late 1980s to the early 2010s; the first hypothesis is supported. The mean response decreased from 3.90 (with 5 being least permissive and 1 being most permissive towards nonmarital fertility) in 1988 to 3.57 in 2012 (Table 1). However, it should be noted that this mean value still leans towards being non-permissive in all sample years.

Table 1 also suggests that demographic compositions among U.S. adults shifted from 1988 to 2012 as expected. The percentage of "Other race" increased from 4 percent in 1988 to 11 percent in 2012, which may reflect the increases in Hispanic and Asian immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2015a). There has also been an increase in the proportion of those with some college education or a complete college education or more, as well as an associated decrease in those with less than a high school education or a high school degree; these changes in educational attainments have also been shown by U.S. Census data (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). There has been an increase in older adults (50+) and a decrease in young adults (18-29), reflecting the trend that U.S. society is aging (United Nations, 2017). Finally, there is a decrease in the proportion of married individuals and a subsequent increase in the proportion of individuals who have never been married, consistent with data reported by Pew Research Center (2014b; 2015b). The changes in demographic composition in the GSS data reflects U.S. Census, United Nations, and Pew Research Center data on demographic trends for the United States and

general world (Pew Research Center, 2014a; 2014b; 2015a; 2015b; United Nations, 2017; U. S. Census Bureau, 2017).

[Table 1 around here]

Turning to multivariable analyses, as shown in Table 2, there were variations in attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing by demographics, as expected. Women were significantly more permissive towards nonmarital fertility than men ($p < .001$). Nonwhites were significantly more permissive in comparison to whites ($p < .001$). Those with less than a high school education and some college education were significantly more permissive than those with a college education or more ($p < .05$), though there was no significant relationship comparing the college educated or more with those who have a high school degree. Americans aged 18-29 were more permissive than 30-49-year-olds, and those aged 50 or older were less permissive than 30-49-year-olds ($p < .001$). Finally, compared to married individuals, the widowed were significantly more permissive ($p < .05$), and the divorced/separated and those who have never been married held significantly less permissive attitudes ($p < .001$). Hypothesis 2 was supported.

After accounting for changes in demographic composition and trends, the significance of time to attitudes towards nonmarital fertility are still significant. Comparisons between 1988 and 1994 and 2002 were significant at a $p < .01$ level, and 1988 compared to 2012 had a significant increase in permissiveness at the $p < .001$ level in the ordinary least squares regression (Table 2); these results were consistent with an ordinal logistic model (not shown; data available upon request) as well. The third hypothesis that attitudes have become more permissive over time is supported.

[Table 2 around here]

Discussion

Although researchers tend to agree that a decrease in social stigma associated with nonmarital childbearing may be a reason for the increase in nonmarital childbearing, surprisingly little research has examined trends in U.S. adults' attitudes towards this topic. Using data from the GSS, this paper examined changes from 1988 to 2012.

All hypotheses were supported. The findings of this analysis support that attitudes towards nonmarital fertility have become more permissive over time. The results also support that variation in attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing by key demographic groups. Women are more likely than men to be permissive towards nonmarital childbearing. Nonwhites are more likely than Whites to hold permissive attitudes towards it. Those without high school diploma, who are more likely to be the poor, are more likely than those with a college degree to hold permissive attitudes towards nonmarital childbearing. Interestingly, whereas those with high school diploma show no difference from those with a college degree in their attitudes, those with some college education are more likely to be tolerant. This is consistent with more rapid increases in nonmarital childbearing rates for those with some college education than for those with high school diploma (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015). Younger adults are more likely than older adults to be more permissive towards nonmarital childbearing. Finally, married individuals are less likely to be permissive towards nonmarital childbearing than adults who have never married or are currently divorced/separated; however, widowed adults were found to be slightly *less* permissive than married adults towards nonmarital childbearing. This finding, while interesting, should be taken with a grain of salt, there were few cases (total $N=476$, which led to some cell counts as low as 4) with widowed individuals. After accounting for changes in demographic composition in the United States, there was still a significant overall increase in permissiveness towards nonmarital fertility over time.

These findings support Solomon-Fears' (2008) proposal that some of the increase in permissive attitudes towards nonmarital fertility can be accounted for by looking to demographic transitions. Similarly, findings that racial minorities and the less educated are more likely to be permissive of nonmarital childbearing may suggest support for the argument that cultural shifts in views of marriage among racial/ethnic minorities and the poor have influenced the shift (Bulcroft & Bulcroft, 1993; Clarkberg, 1999; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005) is tentatively supported. However, it is possible that behavior precedes attitudes: racial/ethnic minorities and the less education may be more tolerant towards nonmarital childbearing because it is already common in their communities. Either way, this study shows that there has been an overall shift in attitudes over time towards nonmarital fertility, with increased permissiveness across all demographic groups. Changes in demographic composition do not account for all of the increased permissiveness towards nonmarital fertility, nor do changes in just minority/lower income demographics. Even among advantaged groups, there has been a shift in attitudes towards increased permissiveness; these hypotheses do not account for this additional overall trend.

Further research is needed to investigate other potential theories for the causes in this shift that do not focus explicitly on changes within only minority groups and demographic variation, as these changes do not account for the overall trend towards increased permissiveness over time. Culturally, the United States as a collective has moved towards increased permissiveness, though nonmarital childbearing is still generally viewed unfavorably. Further research grounded in qualitative measures of what leads to attitude formation—as well as attitude transitions—pertaining to nonmarital fertility may be useful going forward.

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Table 1. Means (SD) for Variables in the Analysis (N = 5,190)

	Total Sample	By Year			
		1988	1994	2002	2012
People should marry to have children	3.76 (1.15)	3.90 (1.10)	3.81* (1.11)	3.75*** ^c (1.28)	3.57*** ^{cf} (1.07)
Gender					
Female	0.56	0.55	0.57	0.57	0.53
Race					
White	0.81	0.84	0.84***	0.81 ^a	0.75*** ^{cf}
Black	0.12	0.12	0.11***	0.12	0.15*** ^b
Other	0.07	0.04	0.05	0.06*** ^c	0.11*** ^{cf}
Education					
< High School	0.19	0.26	0.18***	0.14*** ^b	0.15***
High School	0.30	0.32	0.31	0.30	0.27*** ^a
Some College	0.27	0.23	0.26*	0.32*** ^b	0.28*** ^e
College Plus	0.24	0.19	0.24***	0.24**	0.29*** ^{be}
Age					
18-29	0.23	0.27	0.22	0.24 ^b	0.22**
30-49	0.42	0.39	0.39	0.42	0.39 ^c
50+	0.35	0.33	0.39	0.34	0.39*** ^{be}
Marital Status					
Married	0.57	0.60	0.60	0.56* ^a	0.52*** ^{cd}
Widowed	0.06	0.07	0.06**	0.05* ^a	0.05**
Divorced/Separated	0.13	0.11	0.13	0.15**	0.14*** ^{cd}
Never Married	0.24	0.21	0.20	0.24 ^a	0.29*** ^{ce}
Year					
1988	0.26	-	-	-	-
1994	0.27	-	-	-	-
2002	0.22	-	-	-	-
2012	0.25	-	-	-	-
<i>N</i>	5,190	1,376	1,400	1,144	1,270

Differences between means from 1988 are significant at: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Differences between means from 1994 are significant at: ^a $p < .05$; ^b $p < .01$; ^c $p < .001$.

Differences between means from 2002 are significant at: ^d $p < .05$; ^e $p < .01$; ^f $p < .001$.

Note. Means were weighted.

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regression Models
 Predicting U.S. Adults' Attitudes Toward Nonmarital
 Childbearing ($N = 5,190$)

	<i>b</i>	SE
Gender		
Female	-.192***	.030
Race		
White	----	----
Black	-.365***	.046
Other	-.358***	.061
Education		
< High School	-.111*	.047
High School	-.073	.041
Some College	-.093*	.042
College Plus	----	----
Age		
18-29	-.208***	.045
30-49	----	----
50+	.416***	.036
Marital Status		
Married	----	----
Widowed	.161*	.068
Divorced/Separated	-.269***	.046
Never Married	-.251***	.044
Year		
1988	----	----
1994	-.108**	.041
2002	-.126**	.043
2012	-.313***	.043
Intercept	4.125***	.04
R^2		.121***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$