Family Patterns and Social Inequalities among Children in the United States, 1940-2012: A Re-Assessment

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Widening social divide in fragile family structures

% of 8-9 yr olds with no father in household, by race,
United States, 1940-2012

Widening social disparities in family patterns in the US?

• Moynihan (1965) *The Negro Family*
  – Growth in mother-headed families in black population
  – Due to discrimination and poor job situation of black men – undermines their role as husbands & fathers
  – Gives rise to the black ‘matriarchal family’

• Wilson (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged*
  – Family disorganisation as matter of social class rather than race
  – Increasingly common among all urban poor & marginalised, black & white
  – Driven by segregation and labour market differentiation in American cities
  – The cycle of inequality:
    • Socio-economic inequality → differentiation in family behaviour → disadvantage among lower class children → reproduction of socio-economic inequality


• A pessimistic picture
The other side of the story: narrowing social divide in children’s family size – the ‘sibsize revolution’

% of 8-9 yr olds with sibsize 5+, by race, United States, 1940-2012

Preston, ‘Women’s & children’s family size’, 1976
Blake, ‘Family size & achievement’, 1989

Note: Sibsize is measured by linking 8-9 yr olds to their mothers’ reported number of children ever born (Census up to 1990, Current Population Survey after 1990).
The two sides of the story together: counter-trends in family structure and sibsize
Topics

• Background: How did the sibsize revolution come to be overlooked?
  – Fertility differentials a major focus pre-WWII
  – Dropped in 1960s – why?
  – Technical issue: women’s v children’s family size (cohort fertility v sibsize)

• Further details on sibsize revolution

• Questions/implications for further research
  – Re-examine the fertility transition from a children’s perspective
  – What are the effects on children
  – Relevance for other countries
Fertility differentials in late 19th/early 20th century

T.H.C. Stevenson’s ‘fan’ graph: widening social class gaps in married women’s completed family size, England & Wales, marital cohorts 1850s to 1890s

Completed fertility as % of national mean

Marriage cohorts -- women

- I. Upper & middle
- II. Lower middle
- III. Skilled manual
- IV. Semi-skilled
- V. Unskilled
- VII. Miners
- VIII. Agric. Workers

Source: T.H.C. Stevenson (1920) ‘The fertility of various social classes in England and Wales from the middle of the nineteenth century to 1911’ Journal of the Royal Statistical Society 83, 3: 401-444
Eugenics & population quality

• **Social Darwinism**: fertility differentials → ‘survival of the unfittest’

• ‘Race suicide’, ‘population degeneration’: in shrinking population, lower orders & ethnic minorities outbreed (white) middle & professional classes

• **Social eugenics/reform eugenics** – ‘family policy’:
  – Incentivise higher fertility among the middle & professional classes
  – Birth control programmes for the poor (incl. abortion? sterilisation?)

• Gunnar & Alva Myrdal *Crisis in The Population Question* (1934)

• W. Beveridge ‘Eugenic aspects of children’s allowances’ Galton Lecture, Eugenics Society, Feb 1943

- Commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York
- Major influence on post-war racial liberalism in United States
- Strand on the ‘Negro family’:
  - Poor fertility control as cause of black immiseration
  - Large families, illegitimacy
  - Solution: public family planning programme for black women (abortion? sterilisation?)
Post-war baby-boom

- Population decline turns into population growth
- Lower classes ‘catch up’ with middle/upper class birth control behaviour: the social divide in fertility behaviour greatly reduces (disappears?)
  - Kiser et al. (1968), Glass (1976)
- Research on social divide in fertility/family formation turns to other topics:
  - Maternal age at childbearing (esp. re teenage births)
  - Non-marital births
Why has children’s family size (sibsize) been overlooked?

• Demographic research focuses on women’s family size (mean completed cohort fertility)
• Preston (1976): highlighted and mathematically defined difference between mean family size of cohort of women ($\bar{X}$) and mean family size (sibsize) of their children ($\bar{C}$), where $V_X$ is coefficient of variation in women’s family size:

$$\bar{C} = \bar{X} (1 + V_X^2)$$

• $\bar{C}$ always exceeds $\bar{X}$ except where $V_X$ is 0, that is, where all women have the same number of children & none are childless

Illustration

• 10 women x 2 children each: 20 children in total
  \[
  \bar{X} = 2 \quad \frac{20}{10} = 2 \\
  \bar{C} = 2 \quad \frac{(20 \times 2)}{20} = 2
  \]

• 5 women x 1 child, 5 women x 3 children: 20 children in total
  \[
  \bar{X} = 2 \quad \frac{(5 \times 1) + (5 \times 3)}{10} = 2 \\
  \bar{C} = 2.5 \quad \frac{(5 \times 1) + (15 \times 3)}{20} = \frac{50}{20} = 2.5 \\
  50\% \text{ of women have 3 children; } 75\% \text{ of children are in families of 3 children}
  \]

• Add 5 childless women: 15 women, 20 children
  \[
  \bar{X} = 1.33 \quad \frac{20}{15} = 1.333 \quad 33.3\% \text{ of women have 3 children} \\
  \bar{C} = 2.5
  \]

• If the 5 childless women have 1 child each: 15 women, 25 children
  \[
  \bar{X} = 1.67 \quad \frac{25}{15} = 1.667 \\
  \bar{C} = 2.2 \quad \frac{(10 \times 1) + (15 \times 3)}{25} = \frac{55}{25} = 2.2
  \]

Conclusion: *movements over time in women’s mean cohort fertility, or comparisons between groups of women at one point in time, on their own tell us little about corresponding differences in children’s sibsize. Must also take account of variance in women’s cohort fertility.*
The fertility transition from women’s and children’s perspective

Family size among women aged 45-49* and among their children, by race, 1900-2012

* Data for 2000 are based on women aged 40-44. Family size among children (sibsize) is derived based on the method described by Preston (1976).
Women aged 45-49*: % childless and % with large families (7+ children) by race, 1940-2012

* Data for 2000 are based on women aged 40-44.
Black women and their children in 1960: distribution by family size

**Number of children: Black women aged 45-49, 1960**

- Mean: all women 2.64
- Mean: women excl. childless 3.84

**Sibsize: Children of black women aged 45-49, 1960**

- Mean: 6.53
Percent of 8-9 yr olds with large (7+) and small (1-2) sibsize by race, 1940-2012
Sibsize of 8-9 year-olds by educational level of mothers, 1940-2012
Key points

• Among American children, widening social divide (and overall increase) in lone parenthood since 1960s counter-balanced by narrowing social divide (and overall decrease) in sibsize
  – a change in the form of family vulnerability among lower status children rather than an increase in family vulnerability over past half-century

• No research as yet on the comparative impact of these two trends -- but overall effect likely to be less negative for children than current focus on changing family structure implies

• Methodological caveats:
  – Need to focus on trends in total sibsize, not co-resident sibsize: the larger the sibsize, the less likely that all siblings will be co-resident
  – Need to base analysis on samples of children, not of adults or families: (alternative: use samples of parents/families weighted by number of children)
Women's birth cohorts, 1920-196, England & Wales

Women's and children's mean completed family size

Women's birth cohort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Women aged 45 (cohort fertility)</th>
<th>Children of women aged 45 (sibsize)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>2.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>2.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>2.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>2.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.02</td>
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<td>1960</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>1.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women's and children's mean completed family size

Women aged 45 (cohort fertility) vs. Children of women aged 45 (sibsize)

Source: Derived from ONS, *Childbearing among women born in different years, England and Wales*, 2014 Release (Table 3)
Other countries

% of women & children with large (4+) families
(women’s birth cohort c. 1960)

Differentials in children’s sibsize in middle childhood by maternal education, US, UK, Denmark & Ireland

Mean sibsize

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Third level</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete second level</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>2.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete second level</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effect of mother’s partnership status on children’s sibsize in middle childhood, US, UK, Denmark & Ireland

OLS regression coefficients (dummy variables: reference category = mother married to child’s natural father)*

- **US**
  - Cohabiting: -0.06
  - Step-family: -0.2
  - Divorced/separated: -0.14
  - Never-married: -0.48

- **UK**
  - Cohabiting: -0.2
  - Step-family: -0.18
  - Divorced/separated: -0.18
  - Never-married: -0.64

- **Denmark**
  - Cohabiting: -0.16
  - Step-family: -0.09
  - Divorced/separated: -0.23
  - Never-married: -0.5

- **Ireland**
  - Cohabiting: -0.93
  - Step-family: -1.1
  - Divorced/separated: -0.4
  - Never-married: -1.4

* Controlling for effects of maternal education and age

Sources & data: as previous slide
Some overall conclusions

• More attention to sibsize needed in research on children’s family contexts
• ... paying close attention to key methodological issues (focus on total sibsize, based on samples of children)
• ... and to interactions with other family patterns (esp. family structure)
• Trends over time positive for children, reduced social inequalities between children? Is the US experience typical?
• But inequalities still not eliminated in all countries (?)