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CHANGES IN NONMARITAL COHABITATION AND THE FAMILY STRUCTURE EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN ACROSS 17 COUNTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

Only three decades ago, many demographers believed that the nuclear family – married adults and their biological children – was the modal family structure toward which all societies would rapidly converge (e.g. Goode, 1970). Indeed, during the two decades following World War II, marriage and childbearing in most Western nations tended to: (1) occur early in adulthood; (2) follow a predictable sequence; and (3) be tightly coupled. That is, young couples first married, and then quickly began having children. Over the past few decades in many Western countries, however, marriage and fertility have been increasingly delayed to later adulthood and decoupled from one another, such that the sequence and timing of partnership formation and childbearing have changed dramatically. As a result, most Western nations have experienced increasing rates of out-of-wedlock and out-of-partnership fertility and nonmarital cohabitation¹ (as well as divorce) (Goldscheider et al., 2001; Haskey, 2001; Hoem & Hoem, 1988; Kiernan, 2001; Martin & Bumpass, 1989; Murphy, 2000; Noack, 2001; Ostner, 2001; Prinz, 1995; Toulemon, 1997). The pace of change has been so swift that in the preface to the second edition of *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*, Cherlin (1992, p. vii) remarks that only ten years after the publication of the first edition a more appropriate title to the book might have been *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, More Cohabitation, and Probably Remarriage*.

It is certain that recent cohorts of children in the United States and many other Western nations are far more likely to be born out of wedlock or experience the separation of their parents than were the children of previous cohorts. These family changes have sparked popular and scholarly concern over the effects of children's presumed increased exposure to single-parent families (Amato & Booth, 1997; Blankenhorn et al., 1990; Haveman & Wolfe, 1994; Popenoe, 1988, 1993, 1996; Uhlenberg & Eggebeen, 1986). However, what remains unclear is the extent to which increases in nonmarital cohabitation between children's biological parents has accounted for (or at least absorbed) the decline in the centrality of marriage as the primary childrearing family structure.

In many Western nations there have been large increases in the prevalence of cohabitation in recent years (Casper & Cohen, 2000; Goldscheider et al., 2001; Smock, 2000), and less dramatic increases in the proportion of childhood spent in cohabiting family structures (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Heuveline, Timberlake & Furstenberg, 2003). This apparent

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¹For the purposes of this article we define “cohabitation” as “a spell of co-residence of at least one month in duration by two unmarried, romantically involved, heterosexual adults.” For some research on the prevalence and trends in the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships, see Black et al. (2000) and Bradley (2001), respectively.

disjuncture is likely due to a combination of at least two factors: first, because cohabiting unions tend to be less stable than marriages (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Bennett et al., 1988; Hall & Zhao, 1995; Heuveline et al., 2003), then even large increases in the *incidence* of cohabitation with children may not have substantially offset the decline in the amount of time children can expect to spend with married parents. Second, and more important for the purposes of this article, much of the increase in the prevalence of cohabitation may have occurred when children are not in the household.

In this article we seek to understand the effects of changes in adult nonmarital cohabitation on the resulting family structure experiences of children. Our primary research question can be stated generally as: to what extent have changes in the incidence and duration of adult cohabitation been translated into changes in children's exposure to cohabiting-parent, married-parent, and other family structures? More specifically, we ask: for women and children, how much have the expected probability of experiencing cohabitation and the expected duration in a cohabiting family structure changed over time? How much of the increase over time in women's expected duration in cohabitation occurred while children were co-resident? Finally, how much has the increasing exposure of children to parental cohabitation offset declines in the amount of time children are expected to spend with married biological parents?

To address these questions, we analyze partnership and fertility data from 17 industrialized nations. We construct single-decrement and increment-decrement period life tables covering, in most cases, the early 1980s to the early 1990s. These tables yield rich cross-national descriptions of expected levels of exposure to cohabitation among women and children. Social scientific research on cohabitation has been limited primarily to the United States, Canada, and a few European nations (Smock, 2000). We extend this line of inquiry to a larger sample of countries, with the goal of advancing our understanding of the extent to which partnership and fertility patterns are converging (or not) across Western nations. Our results provide, to the best of our knowledge, previously unavailable evidence regarding trends in adult cohabitation and children's family structure experiences across a number of Western nations.

Although we do not address questions of the *effects* of cohabitation on child well-being (Manning & Lichter, 1996), the present analysis is a crucial step in tackling such questions, at least at the national level. We believe that the study of these effects has been hindered by imprecise measurement of childhood family structures, for example, lumping married parents and step-parents together by focusing on the marital status of the head of the household, or assuming the same effect on all children in a given family structure regardless of the time spent in such a family. The present analyses therefore represent a necessary step toward improved subsequent analyses of the societal-level effects of family structures on children.

DATA, MEASURES, AND METHODS

Data

The data for this article come from the Family and Fertility Surveys (FFS), an international sample survey program focusing on partnership formation and fertility issues in the member countries of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. The list of participants currently includes over 20 European nations, plus Canada, New Zealand, and the U.S. The FFS program coordinated nationally representative surveys carried out by national statistical offices (Macura & Klijzing, 1992). The first countries participating in the program contributed existing family surveys, while countries joining later attempted to fit the model survey instrument into ongoing data collection efforts (e.g. Cycle 5 of the National Survey

of Family Growth in the U.S.). As a result, the years of data collection range from 1988 to 1998, the sampling designs differ, and the questionnaires vary in precise content. The FFS surveys are therefore not perfectly standardized; nevertheless, they constitute a unique source of data on family and fertility trends across countries. More information on the surveys is presented in Kveder (2000), Heuveline et al. (2003), Heuveline and Timberlake (2003), and in Table A1.

We adopt the “female dominant” approach prevalent in demography by using information from female respondents only to estimate adult and child exposure to cohabitation. Because several of the FFS surveys did not include a male sample, we were able to analyze a larger number of countries with this method. In prior research we found that fewer than 5% of childhood years were expected to be spent not with the mother across countries; therefore, the female dominant approach also yields nearly complete information about the family structure experiences of children (Heuveline et al., 2003, p. 59).

Measures

For female respondents to the FFS surveys, we measured transitions into and out of cohabitation, with and without children, from retrospective partnership and fertility histories. For each of up to nine cohabiting relationships, respondents were asked the dates of co-residence (beginning and end), if and how the partnership ended, and the date of marriage, if applicable. In addition, for each of up to 13 live births, respondents reported the date of birth, whether the child was currently in the household, and the date of and reason for departure if he or she was not co-residing at the time of the interview.

We reconstructed children's family structure experiences by combining adult females' partnership and fertility histories. For each natural-born child, we created an early life course record of living arrangements with the mother and her partners. As long as a child was living with his mother, we knew whether she also lived with a partner and, if so, whether the couple was married. Because we are interested in the extent to which cohabitation acts as a substitute for parental marriage, we accounted for children's exposure to and duration in three primary states of interest, which we label: (1) “with married parents”; (2) “parental cohabitation (i.e. with cohabiting biological parents)”; and (3) “not with both parents,” a residual state comprising a variety of family structures, such as with a single mother, in a step-family, and arrangements not involving the mother (see Heuveline et al., 2003, for more analysis).

Methods

Single-decrement Life Tables—Period life tables are a general class of demographic models that describe the expected experiences of a cohort of individuals as they transition over time from one life state to another.² In its classic form, a (single-decrement) mortality life table forecasts the dying out of a birth cohort. However, period life tables can describe transitions to and from other life states, such as from single to cohabiting status. For female respondents to the FFS, we used single-decrement techniques to estimate the expected probability of transitioning from single status into a cohabiting relationship by age 45³ (in most cases). For children, we calculated the observed percentage of births to cohabiting

²In contrast to cohort life tables, which simply record what happens to a cohort as it ages, period life tables estimate what *would* happen to a cohort if it were to experience the age-specific transition probabilities that existed during the period in which the cohort is defined (e.g. children born from January 1, 1991 to December 31, 1993, or women turning age 18 during this interval). Because the future experiences of such cohorts are not observed, but rather estimated with period conditions, demographers refer to them as “synthetic” cohorts (Preston et al., 2001, p. 42).

³“By age 45 (or 36 or 16, etc.)” may be interpreted as “by exact age 45 (or 36, or 16, etc.)” That is, “experiencing cohabitation by age 45” refers to transitions into cohabitation by age 44 and 364 days.

parents during a given period, and for children not born to cohabiting parents, the expected probability of transitioning into a parental cohabitation by age 1.

Increment-decrement Life Tables—Because we wish to understand the extent to which cohabitation has accounted for (or at least absorbed) the decline in children's time spent with married parents, it is crucial to look beyond the mere fact of exposure and analyze the expected duration of children's exposure to cohabiting parents. Although we are primarily interested in children's expected exposure to married parents and parental cohabitations, we had to account for the fact that individuals can transition into and out of cohabitation from several family states (e.g. from or to a single mother-headed household), and that individuals may experience multiple occurrences of these transitions over time. Increment-decrement life table techniques enable this kind of analysis by allowing destination states to be “non-absorbing”; that is, in the increment-decrement framework, multiple transitions to (increments) and from (decrements) origin and destination states are possible (Palloni, 2001, p. 256).⁴

For female respondents to the FFS, we constructed two sets of increment-decrement life tables: one corresponding to all years of early adulthood, and one corresponding to years in which at least one child was co-resident in the household. We derived our estimates of time spent without children in the household from differences between these two sets of life tables. For children we constructed increment-decrement life tables for all birth statuses. These tables provide the number of person-years that cohorts of women or children would be expected to live in different states if they were exposed to the age-specific transition probabilities observed during the period. We transform these person-year estimates into percentages of young adulthood or childhood by dividing the number of person-years by the age interval (e.g. 4 years expected in cohabitation ÷ 16 years of childhood = 25%). We subsequently use the terms “expected duration” and “childhood expectancy,” analogous to life expectancy in standard mortality life tables, to refer to these percentage estimates.

Periods of Observation—In order to cover a similar reference period and female age range for all countries, we constructed life tables for many of the countries during a period several years before the FFS interview. For example, the Canadian FFS survey was carried out in 1995 (see Table A1), but in the interests of comparability we analyze a three-year period corresponding to calendar years 1991, 1992, and 1993. Although the period of observation varies somewhat across countries, 15 of the 17 periods include at least one of the first four years in the 1990s (Tables 1 and 2). For simplicity of exposition, we subsequently refer to the observed period rates with the shorthand expression “at early 1990s rates.” In our cross-period analyses, we compare the single-period life table estimates with those from a period ranging from 6 to 12 years earlier, depending on the upper age limit of the FFS sample. With these two sets of period life tables, we estimate annualized rates of change in the expected probability of experiencing cohabitation (Table 3), and the expected duration in cohabitation (Table 4).⁵

⁴See Heuveline and Timberlake (2002) and Heuveline et al. (2003) for details on increment-decrement life table construction using FFS data.

⁵These rates of change follow the formula:

$$r_{t-n,t} = 100 \left(\frac{1}{n} \ln \left[\frac{X_t}{X_{t-n}} \right] \right), \quad (1)$$

here n equals the number of years in the interval, X_t equals the life table estimate for the most recent period, and X_{t-n} equals the life table estimate from the period n years back in time.

For females, we use age 36 in order to estimate trends covering at least eight years, although in Belgium and Hungary data limitations forced us to examine a six-year period of change and to censor the life table at age 32. In preliminary analysis (not shown), we found that single-period expected probabilities of experiencing a first cohabitation change little between ages 36 and 45; thus, we are confident that right-censoring is not a problem for the cross-period analysis. For children, we were able to maintain an upper age limit of 16 in Austria, Canada, Finland, New Zealand, and Poland. Elsewhere, selectivity concerns compelled us to censor the life table at age 14 (Italy, France, Latvia, and Spain), age 12 (Switzerland), age 10 (Czech Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, and the U.S.), or age 8 (Belgium, Germany, and Hungary).⁶

Methodological Challenges—International research always raises questions about data comparability. The information in the FFS surveys (e.g. dates of birth and co-residence) is fairly objective and therefore less sensitive to the different meanings and interpretations that can hamper comparative research on attitudes, for example. However, there are at least three methodological challenges presented by these data.

First, retrospective surveys are subject to recall errors, although dates of birth (of self and own children) and marriage are among the most accurately reported items in such surveys, particularly by women (Poulain et al., 1991). Retrospective data on cohabitation are less reliable, particularly brief cohabitations that occur early in adulthood (Casper & Cohen, 2000; Murphy, 2000). The omission of some early partnerships of older FFS respondents would not bias our single-period estimates because the life table uses information from the youngest respondents to estimate early-adulthood transitions; therefore, these partnerships by construction would have occurred shortly before the FFS interview. However, such omissions would tend to bias estimates of cross-period change (Tables 3 and 4) because the estimation of retrospective life tables required using information from older respondents about partnerships that occurred a number of years before the survey. On the other hand, by the very fact of their brevity, the omission of short partnerships would not contribute much bias to duration measures, in either the single- or cross-period analysis.

Second, because the FFS surveys were designed to measure marital rather than parental status, female respondents were not directly asked about the identity of the biological fathers of their children. We applied the decision rules described in detail in Heuveline et al. (2003) to distinguish between children living with a biological mother and father and children living with a mother and a male who is not biologically related to the child. Briefly, if a child was born while his or her mother was in a cohabiting partnership (married or not), we assumed that the partner fathered the child. For children born outside of a partnership, we used the timing of the birth and the next union formation to distinguish between a parental union and another partnership. If the next partnership was formed within six months of the birth or if the mother married within a year of the birth, we coded this partner or spouse as the child's father.⁷ Any rule based on timing will create some false assignments; however, Heuveline et al. (2003, n. 4) report that the numerical impact of these false assignments is

⁶By “selectivity concerns,” we are referring to the fact that the children in older life tables were on average born to younger mothers than the children in more recent life tables. Because mothers under age 25 are more at risk for out-of-wedlock childbearing (Morgan & Rindfuss, 1999) and partnership separation, we had to censor certain countries' life tables to ensure that not all of the children in them were born to mothers younger than age 25.

⁷This procedure could not be carried out in Canada because all “month” variables (e.g. of partnership beginning, marriage, partnership end, children's births) were coded to the same month within respondent. Thus, the first transition a child could experience after birth (for example, the marriage of his cohabiting (at birth) biological parents) could by construction only occur one full year after birth. As a result, our timing rules could not code this first transition as one into parental cohabitation. This will exert downward bias in our estimates of Canadian children's exposure to parental cohabitation; however, given that the average expected probability of exposure to parental cohabitation after birth is less than 1% in the other 16 countries we analyze in this article, the magnitude of the bias in Canada is likely to be small.

likely to be low because the vast majority of children in these FFS surveys were born within a partnership.

Finally, for each child, information was provided on only one departure from the maternal household, if one occurred before the interview. Thus, we had to assume that children continuously co-resided with their mother from birth until either the time of the survey or the date reported as the end of co-residence. Because returns to the maternal household were not reported either, we further assumed that children who were not co-resident at the time of the survey remained out of the maternal household until age 16. It makes some intuitive sense that violations of these assumptions would introduce bias into our estimates of expected duration in a maternal household; however, under stable conditions the expected sum of the two biases is zero.⁸

FINDINGS

Single-Period Analysis

Probability of Experiencing Cohabitation—We first examine the expected probability of experiencing cohabitation for synthetic cohorts of women and children. The countries in Table 1 are sorted by the percentage of women expected to experience at least one cohabitation by age 45 (except where noted). At early 1990s rates, a majority of women can expect to form at least one cohabitation in eight countries (France, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, Canada, and Germany), ranging from 83.6% in France to 53.5% in Germany. The United States follows with just under 50%. Five other countries – Latvia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Belgium, and Hungary – show percentages between one-quarter and one-half of a cohort of women. In Spain, Italy, and Poland, cohabitation is a fairly rare occurrence, with fewer than 15% of a cohort of 18 year-old women expected to experience cohabitation.⁹

In general, the expected probability that children will experience parental cohabitation reflects the probability for women (the correlation between column 1 and 4 is 0.65). Children's expected probabilities of experiencing parental cohabitation range from nearly half of a birth cohort in Sweden (48.0%) to fewer than 3% in Poland. There appears to be have been a fair amount of convergence over time in children's expected probability of experiencing parental cohabitation, with 9 of the 17 countries exhibiting probabilities ranging from 10 to 20% of a birth cohort (New Zealand, Austria, Canada, Slovenia, U.S., Finland, Germany, Latvia, and Czech Republic). Fewer than 10% of a birth cohort of children in Belgium, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and Poland can expect to experience parental cohabitation during childhood.

⁸Heuveline et al. (2003, n. 3) provide empirical evidence to support this claim. More formally, suppose a child lives with her mother from birth to age a , then departs the maternal household until age b , at which point she returns, where $\text{birth} < a < b < 16$. Let A = the interval from birth to age a , B = the interval from age a to b , and C = the interval from age b to 16. If the FFS survey is administered during A , then there is no bias in our estimate of time spent in a maternal household. If it is administered during B , then our estimate is downwardly biased by C . If it is administered during C , then our estimate is upwardly biased by B . Thus, under stable conditions,

$$\text{Bias} = E(A[0] + B[-C] + C[B]) = 0 + E(B[-C]) + E(C[B]) = 0.$$

⁹In other research (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2003) we use the overall incidence of cohabitation as a key indicator of the “role” cohabitation plays across countries. Briefly, we argue that although cross-national differences in individual characteristics largely explain variation in the prevalence of particular sequences of partnership formation, marriage, childbearing, and childrearing, national-level differences also depend on the cultural norms and institutional supports that families encounter in each society. We argue that these country-specific effects can be detected in measures of central tendency on indicators such as the incidence of, duration of exposure to, and route of exit from cohabitation for adults and children.

Column 5 of Table 1 demonstrates that nonmarital cohabitation is much more prevalent as a pre-childbearing (or post-childrearing) family form than as a family structure to which children are exposed. The ratio of the percentage of women expected to experience cohabitation by age 45 to the percentage of children expected to experience a parental cohabitation (column 7) exceeds 2.0 in all countries except Sweden and Poland, and approaches or exceeds 3.0 in 12 of the 17 countries. The most extreme case is Switzerland, where about 60% of women are expected to experience cohabitation, while only 5% of children are expected to experience a parental cohabitation. Thus, women in Switzerland are about 12 times more likely to experience cohabitation than children are to experience a parental cohabitation, at early 1990s rates. These results – high adult prevalence and low child exposure – are consistent with previous research on the Swiss family system (Charton & Wanner, 2001).

Expected Duration in Cohabitation—The countries in Table 2 are sorted by the total percentage of early adulthood (ages 18–45 in most countries) women were expected to spend in a cohabitation (column 3), again at early 1990s rates. Although Sweden ranked behind France, Finland, and New Zealand in terms of the expected probability of female cohabitation (Table 1), Sweden stands out in Table 2 with nearly a third of the time between age 18 and 42 expected to be spent in cohabitation (about 7.8 years). French women can expect to spend about a quarter of their early adulthoods in cohabitation (6.7 years from age 18 to 45), while women in New Zealand, Austria, and Finland are expected to spend about one-fifth of early adulthood in cohabitation. Eight other countries show expected durations of 9–18%, while in Hungary, Spain, Italy, and Poland, women's expected duration in cohabitation is less than 7% of early adulthood.

Column 5 of Table 2 presents children's expected durations from birth to age 16 in parental cohabitation. Column 5 shows that only in France are children expected to spend more than 10% of childhood in parental cohabitation. Five more countries exhibit childhood expectancies of 6–9% (about 1.0–1.4 child-years). Column 4 shows that in most countries, children's overwhelming experience is with married parents, at least at early 1990s rates. Exceptions include Latvia, the U.S., New Zealand, Canada, Austria, and Germany, where children can expect to spend over a quarter of childhood not with both parents. Prior research has found that the majority of this time not with both parents is spent with a single mother, rather than in other two-parent family structures (Heuveline et al., 2003, p. 59).

The correlation between columns 3 and 5 is 0.78, again suggesting that children live with cohabiting parents to a similar extent as this partnership form is culturally sanctioned for adults. However, as in Table 1, column 7 in Table 2 shows that women in all countries except Poland are expected to spend a much longer relative duration in cohabitation than are children – in all countries except Spain, Italy, and Poland, the female to child ratio in column 8 approaches or exceeds 2.0. Switzerland again stands out, with a ratio of nearly 16. Furthermore, as demonstrated in columns 1 and 2 of Table 2 and in Fig. 1, in most countries the percentage of early adulthood spent cohabiting without children exceeds the percentage spent with children. These findings suggest that the role of parental cohabitation in replacing parental marriage as a childrearing institution may be overstated in current popular and scholarly thought. They further lead us to hypothesize that much of the increase in adult cohabitation over time has occurred when children are not in the household. In the next section we examine this hypothesis by analyzing patterns of change across countries.

Cross-Period Analysis

Change in the Probability of Experiencing Cohabitation—We now shift focus from single-period, cross-national comparisons to within-country trends over time. The

countries in Table 3 are sorted by the annualized rate of change (see footnote 5) from time $t - n$ to t in females' expected probability of experiencing a cohabitation by age 36 (except where noted). The findings in Table 3 indicate that the expected probability of forming a cohabitation was increasing in most countries in the years prior to the FFS interviews, in some places quite rapidly. Nine countries experienced increases of about 5% per year or greater, including remarkably swift changes in Czech Republic (13.1% per year) and Hungary (10% per year). Rapid increases were seen in many low-prevalence countries, including Hungary, Belgium, Spain, and Italy; however, even Germany, Finland, the U.S., and France experienced fairly robust annualized rates of change. Four of the highest-prevalence countries from Table 1 – New Zealand, Austria, Sweden, and Switzerland – were experiencing much slower or even negative growth, suggesting that by the early 1990s, these countries had reached a plateau in terms of the contribution of nonmarital cohabitation to family formation.

Column 2 of Table 3 shows uniformly positive annualized rates of change in children's probability of experiencing a parental cohabitation. As with adult change, high rates of change were observed in countries that had fairly low single-period probabilities of childhood exposure, including Czech Republic, Belgium, Hungary, Italy, and Spain. In addition, however, France and Canada experienced some of the highest rates of change, suggesting that the popularity of rearing children within cohabitation has grown rapidly in these countries. Annualized rates of change of between 3 and 7% per year were also observed in Austria, New Zealand, Latvia, Slovenia, and Finland. Growth was lowest in Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland, suggesting more stability in these countries family formation regimes. In Sweden, this indicates stability in a system in which both adult and child exposure to cohabitation is high, while in Switzerland, the previously-noted pattern of high adult and low child exposure appears to remain in place.

The ratios in column 3 indicate that children's exposure to parental cohabitation is increasing faster than overall exposure to cohabitation for women. Only four countries (Latvia, Germany, Finland, and Slovenia) had ratios greater than 1 (plus Switzerland, where adult growth was negative). This finding is largely due to the fact that children's exposure to parental cohabitation is still much rarer than females' exposure (Table 1); thus, identical absolute increases (or even smaller absolute increases for children) would yield greater annualized rates of change for children.

Change in Expected Duration in Cohabitation—In Table 4 we assess the magnitude and direction of changes in women and children's expected duration in cohabitation. The countries in Table 4 are sorted by change in females' total expected duration in cohabitation (column 3). As in Table 3, the figures are in annualized rates of change in expected duration in cohabitation from age 18 to 36 for women, except where noted, and from birth to the upper age limit for children. At the time of the interview, increases of about 5% per year or more were occurring in all countries except the United States, Switzerland, Germany and Sweden. In Sweden, which had the highest female incidence of exposure to cohabitation and longest expected duration as of the early 1990s, expected duration in cohabitation for females was declining slightly at the time of the survey. In 7 of the 17 countries, increases without children were greater than increases with, with the reverse being true in the other 10. The total increase in expected duration in cohabitation was dominated by increases without children in Latvia and Slovenia, suggesting that nonmarital cohabitation was becoming more socially acceptable in these countries at the time of the FFS interview, provided that children were not in the household. In France, Spain, Hungary, New Zealand, Canada, and Belgium, increases in female cohabitation with children were occurring much faster than without, suggesting that cohabitation was increasingly being used and accepted as a childrearing family form.

Table 4 also presents data on changes in the share of childhood spent in different family structures over time. In all countries except the U.S., childhood expectancy with married parents was declining slowly in the years before the FFS survey, and in all countries except the U.S. and Germany, childhood expectancy with cohabiting parents increased. Increases in childhood expectancy with cohabiting parents were largest in Czech Republic (28.6% per year), Spain (20.7%), Poland (16.1%), and Belgium (12.6%). These were countries with among the lowest childhood expectancies in cohabitation (see Table 2, column 5); thus, small absolute increases over this low baseline resulted in large annualized rates of change. The countries with higher childhood expectancies in Table 2 were still experiencing fairly rapid growth at the time of the FFS surveys, including 7.1% per year in Canada, 6.6% per year in France, 5.9% per year in Austria, 5.2% per year in Slovenia, and 5.1% per year in New Zealand. Sweden, which had the highest childhood expectancy at the time of the survey, was experiencing almost no growth in children's expected duration in parental cohabitation.

As in Table 3, rates of change in childhood expectancy with cohabiting parents generally exceeded rates of change in adult expected duration in cohabitation (column 7). However, this is again largely due to the fact that single-period childhood expectancy with cohabiting parents was quite low in most countries (Table 2). It is important to note that although the annualized rates of change for childhood expectancy with cohabiting parents appear impressive compared to rates of decline in time with married parents (columns 5 and 4, respectively), increases in time spent with cohabiting parents were not sufficient to completely absorb the decline in time spent with married parents. Note that in all countries except Slovenia and Hungary, childhood expectancy not with both parents was increasing at the time of the FFS survey. This indicates that even substantial increases in expected duration in parental cohabitation were not sufficient to prevent children from spending an increasing share of childhood without one or both biological parents. In most countries, this has meant increasing exposure to single-parent households (Heuveline et al., 2003).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the countries we analyzed display substantial variation both in the cross-section and over time, three basic conclusions emerge. First, at early 1990s rates, in most countries the expected probability of women experiencing a cohabitation during early adulthood was substantially larger than the probability of children experiencing a parental cohabitation (Table 1, column 5). Likewise, the relative expected duration in cohabitation was longer for women than for children (Table 2, column 7). Moreover, Fig. 1 shows that in most countries, women's expected duration in cohabitation without children exceeds that with children. These findings indicate that cohabitation for many women continues to be a non-childrearing living arrangement.

Second, the probability of women experiencing a cohabitation was increasingly fairly rapidly in most countries (column 1 of Table 3). For children, we found that the probability of experiencing a first cohabitation with biological parents was increasing even faster in most countries (column 3). Third, we found that in most countries, females' expected duration in cohabitation with children was increasing faster than expected duration without children (columns 1 and 2 of Table 4), although there was substantial cross-national variation in these rates of growth. Latvia and Slovenia appeared to be countries in the early stages of transition to a more prominent role of cohabitation in childrearing. In these countries, the rate of growth in expected duration in cohabitation without children was much larger than that with children. In contrast, France was perhaps the most notable example of a country in which childrearing within cohabitation was growing much faster than childless cohabitation.

Change in children's expected duration with cohabiting parents also displayed great variation, with dramatic annualized rates of positive growth experienced in countries where children have historically spent very little time with cohabiting parents (e.g. Spain, Hungary, and Belgium). Countries with higher single-period childhood expectancies in parental cohabitation (Austria, Canada, France, New Zealand, and Slovenia) also experienced fairly robust annualized rates of change in expected duration with cohabiting parents, with the notable exception of Sweden. Sweden experienced little change in either adulthood or childhood expectancy in cohabitation. This may be because the role of cohabitation in family formation has to some extent reached an equilibrium in Sweden, with those couples who wish to pursue this family formation strategy given sufficient cultural and institutional supports to do so. As Kiernan (2001, p. 3) argues, Sweden may have reached a stage in which cohabitation is "indistinguishable from marriage."

We suspect that cross-national variation in trends in cohabitation is due in large part to differential rates of the relaxation of cultural norms against unmarried adults: (1) living together without children; (2) bearing children together; and (3) raising children together. Our argument proceeds as follows: In the two decades following World War II, the duration between the age of consent and marriage was short and dominated by single (i.e. non-cohabiting) status in Western societies. In addition, the predominant family formation sequence was singlehood, marriage, and childbearing, with marriage and childbearing tightly coupled, that is, first birth occurring soon after marriage. Whereas cohabitation until at least 1970 was almost exclusively reserved for the poor and the divorced (Kiernan, 2001, p. 2), in recent decades, many Western societies have increasingly sanctioned the formation of a pre-marital cohabiting partnership for a heterogeneous group of young adults.

However, as marriage and especially fertility have been postponed to later adulthood, young couples now face a longer period of time in limbo between the age of partnership formation and first birth. Thus, additional delays in marriage and fertility haven't dramatically affected the *incidence* of cohabitation formation for young women (except in low-prevalence countries such as Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy and Spain); that is, the expected probability of ever experiencing a cohabitation hasn't been much affected by whether the duration from age 18 to marriage or first birth is 5 years or 10 years. However, because the amount of time spent without children is now much longer, expected *duration* in cohabitation has increased more appreciably for women. In addition, although *childrearing* within marriage is still the overwhelming norm in Western societies (even in Sweden – compare columns 4 and 5 of Table 2), the precise sequence of marriage and *childbearing* is becoming more flexible. Thus, children have become much more likely to experience parental cohabitation. Relative to a low baseline, they are experiencing a relatively longer share of childhood in cohabitation; however, in absolute terms the change has not been substantial in most countries (Heuveline et al., 2003, p. 61).

We conclude by attempting to provide an answer to the question posed in the title of this article: how much have changes in adult nonmarital cohabitation affected the family structure experiences of children? Our answer is: some, but probably not as much as is commonly believed. That is, despite some rapid changes from roughly the mid-1980s to early 1990s, adult females were, as of the early 1990s, still much more likely than children to experience cohabitation. Furthermore, women's expected duration in cohabitation without children was substantially higher than that with children, and in only one country (France) could children expect to spend more than 10% of childhood with cohabiting parents. Finally, despite rapid increases in children's expected duration in parental cohabitation, childhood expectancy not with both biological parents was also on the rise. On the other hand, we observed quite rapid rates of change for children in a number of countries; thus, it is conceivable that after another ten years of change (from the early 1990s to the early 2000s),

children's family structure experiences might be considerably influenced by changes in the social acceptability of nonmarital cohabitation.

The trends documented here pertain to what demographers, following van de Kaa (1987), commonly refer to as the “second demographic transition.” While nonmarital cohabitation, out-of-wedlock fertility, and divorce appear to be on the increase in all countries, the pace of the change has varied across countries, as have the consequences for children's experience of family structures. The second demographic transition can likely be traced to some common macro-level factors affecting all Western countries, but these results also suggest the presence of idiosyncratic national factors that affect the pace of changes in adult family behavior and the way they translate in changes for children. Comparative studies of these macro-level factors that mediate the effect of family changes on children's experiences are as important as studies of the individual-level predictors of family behavior. Although a wealth of individual survey data have benefited the latter program of research, comparative databases on national characteristics that may affect family decisions have not been developed as rapidly and should now be prioritized.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1 presents survey dates, female respondent upper age limits, and female and child sample sizes for the 17 FFS surveys analyzed in this article.

Table A1

FFS Survey Dates, Respondent Upper Age Limits, and Sample Sizes.

Country	Survey Dates		Female Age Range		<i>n</i>	
	From	To	Survey	Period of Analysis	Females	Children
Austria	12/95	4/96	20–55	18–45	4,535	7,039
Belgium ^a	12/91	12/92	20–42	20–37	3,231	3,771
Canada	1/95	12/95	15–55	15–45	4,050	5,452
Czech Republic	11/97	12/97	15–45	15–40	1,730	2,363
Finland	8/89	1/90	22–53	20–45	4,140	6,220
France	1/94	5/94	20–51	18–45	2,936	4,525
Germany	7/92	7/92	20–40	20–36	5,990	5,923
Hungary	12/92	12/93	18–42	18–37	3,590	4,933
Italy	11/95	1/96	20–50	18–43	4,794	5,495
Latvia	9/95	10/95	18–50	17–45	2,688	3,902
New Zealand	9/95	11/95	20–60	18–45	2,901	5,847

Country	Survey Dates		Female Age Range		n	
	From	To	Survey	Period of Analysis	Females	Children
Poland	12/91	12/91	18–50	18–45	4,210	7,016
Slovenia	11/94	11/95	15–46	15–41	2,788	4,005
Spain	11/94	11/95	18–50	18–45	4,021	5,065
Sweden	10/92	5/93	22–45	20–38	3,272	4,686
Switzerland	10/94	6/95	20–50	18–43	3,876	5,440
United States	1/95	10/95	15–45	15–40	10,711	14,824

^aThe Belgium survey only covers the Flanders region.

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Fig. 1.

Expected Duration in Cohabitation for Females, by Presence of Children. *Note:* See Table 2 for period of analysis. Age 38 in Belgium and Hungary, 40 in Germany, and 42 in Czech Republic, Sweden and the U.S. *Source:* Data from the Family and Fertility Surveys.

Table 1 Expected Probability of Experiencing Cohabitation for Females and Children.^a

Country	Period	Females By Age 44 ^b (1)	Children			Female: Child Ratio(5) = (1)/(4)
			At Birth (2)	From Birth to Age 1 (3)	Total by Age 1 (4)	
France	89–91	83.6	23.8	2.1	25.9	3.23
Finland	84–86	76.2	12.5	0.6	13.1	5.82
New Zealand	90–92	72.9	18.2	1.9	20.1	3.63
Sweden	87–89	66.8	47.4	0.6	48.0	1.39
Switzerland	89–91	59.9	4.3	0.7	5.0	11.92
Austria	90–92	58.8	17.3	0.7	18.0	3.27
Canada	91–93	55.7	17.4	0.0	17.4	3.21
Germany	89–91	53.5	11.6	1.1	12.7	4.21
United States	91–93	49.7	11.3	3.3	14.6	3.41
Latvia	91–93	47.5	10.6	1.8	12.4	3.83
Slovenia	91–93	43.8	14.6	1.3	15.9	2.76
Czech Republic	93–95	31.2	9.5	0.9	10.4	2.99
Belgium	88–90	28.0	4.0	0.5	4.5	6.29
Hungary	89–91	24.0	6.8	0.4	7.1	3.38
Spain	91–93	14.9	5.3	0.1	5.5	2.72
Italy	90–92	9.6	4.1	0.6	4.7	2.04
Poland	88–90	4.4	2.5	0.1	2.6	1.71

Note: Table sorted in descending order by column 1.^aData from the Family and Fertility Surveys.^bSee Table A1 for upper age limits.

Table 2

Expected Duration in Cohabitation for Females and Children.^a

Country	Period	Females (% of Age 18–14) ^b			Children (% of Birth to Age 16) ^c			Female: Child Ratio (7) = (3)/(5)
		With Children (1)	With Children (2)	Total (3)	With Married Parents (4)	With Cohabiting Parents (5)	Not With Both Parents (6)	
Sweden	87–89	15.5	17.1	32.5	70.3	8.0	21.6	4.04
France	89–91	12.0	13.7	25.7	69.0	11.7	19.3	2.20
New Zealand	90–92	10.3	11.0	21.3	61.3	6.9	31.8	3.07
Austria	90–92	8.7	11.2	19.9	65.9	6.3	27.8	3.14
Finland	84–86	5.6	13.1	18.6	83.4	3.7	13.0	5.04
Canada	91–93	11.0	6.6	17.5	61.6	8.7	29.7	2.02
Germany	89–91	4.0	11.5	15.5	68.6	4.2	27.2	3.65
Slovenia	91–93	7.6	5.6	13.2	83.5	6.1	10.4	2.17
Latvia	91–93	7.7	4.3	11.9	60.3	3.0	36.6	3.92
Switzerland	89–91	1.3	10.5	11.8	89.2	0.8	10.1	15.68
Czech Republic	93–95	5.4	5.5	10.8	75.4	3.0	21.6	3.64
Belgium	88–90	1.8	7.7	9.5	89.3	2.4	8.3	3.94
United States	91–93	5.1	4.1	9.2	62.5	2.6	34.8	3.50
Hungary	89–91	2.7	4.1	6.8	84.9	3.1	12.0	2.23
Spain	91–93	2.0	2.3	4.3	90.3	2.6	7.1	1.64
Italy	90–92	1.6	2.0	3.6	92.9	2.2	4.9	1.66
Poland	88–90	1.5	0.3	1.7	84.4	2.8	12.8	0.63

Note: Table sorted in descending order by column 3.

^a Data from the Family and Fertility Surveys.^b Age 38 in Belgium and Hungary, 40 in Germany, and 42 in the Czech Republic, Sweden and the U.S.^c Age 14 in Belgium and Hungary.

Table 3

Annualized Rates of Change in the Expected Probability of Experiencing Cohabitation for Females and Children.^a

Country	Time Interval ^b (Years)	Annualized Rate of Change (in % Per Year)		Female: Child Ratio (3) = (1)/(2)
		Females By Age 44 ^c (1)	Children by Age 1 (2)	
Czech Republic	8	13.1	15.0	0.87
Hungary	6	10.0	12.9	0.78
Belgium	6	8.0	11.4	0.70
Latvia	8	7.3	4.9	1.49
Germany	8	6.9	2.1	3.26
Spain	8	6.6	12.6	0.52
Italy	8	5.6	12.6	0.45
Canada	12	4.6	12.2	0.38
Finland	10	4.6	3.2	1.41
Slovenia	8	4.4	3.7	1.21
United States	8	3.8	5.0	0.76
France	8	3.5	11.6	0.30
Poland	10	2.6	7.2	0.37
New Zealand	12	2.4	5.0	0.48
Austria	12	2.2	7.1	0.31
Sweden	8	2.1	2.5	0.83
Switzerland	8	-0.5	1.4	-0.35

Note: Table sorted in descending order by column 1.

^a Data from the Family and Fertility Surveys.

^b Refers to the beginning of a three-year interval prior to the beginning of the three-year interval noted in Table 1.

^c Age 32 in Belgium, Germany, and Hungary, and age 34 in Czech Republic, Sweden, and the U.S.

Table 4

Annualized Rates of Change in Expected Duration in Cohabitation for Females and Children^a.

Country	Time Interval ^b (Years)	Upper Age Limit		Females (in % of Age 18 to Upper Age Limit Per Year)		Children (in % of Birth to Upper Age Limit Per Year)			Female: Child Ratio (7) = (3)/(5)
		Females	Children	With Children (1)	Without Children (2)	Total (3)	With Married Parents (4)	With Cohabiting Parents (5)	Not With Both (6)
Czech Republic	8	34	10	13.4	15.0	14.1	-1.7	28.6	7.2
Poland	10	36	16	14.1	9.9	13.2	-0.5	16.1	2.0
Latvia	8	36	14	9.5	15.6	11.7	-2.3	5.1	5.0
Finland	10	36	16	6.9	7.9	7.7	-0.2	0.6	0.9
Slovenia	8	36	10	5.4	10.4	7.4	-0.1	5.2	-2.9
France	8	36	14	10.2	3.4	5.9	-0.8	6.6	1.2
Spain	8	36	14	12.8	2.4	5.7	-0.4	20.7	1.4
Hungary	6	32	8	9.0	1.9	5.6	-0.4	15.0	-1.4
New Zealand	12	36	16	9.3	3.0	5.5	-1.6	5.1	3.0
Canada	12	36	16	9.0	1.9	4.9	-2.7	7.1	8.4
Austria	12	36	16	5.1	4.4	4.7	-0.9	5.9	1.4
Belgium	6	32	8	10.5	3.6	4.7	-0.4	12.6	3.6
Italy	8	36	14	6.2	3.4	4.5	-0.3	6.4	5.0
United States	8	34	10	3.6	1.4	2.4	0.1	-0.2	-0.3
Switzerland	8	36	12	-1.7	2.2	1.8	-0.4	4.8	2.8
Germany	8	32	8	-0.4	1.3	0.8	-0.4	-2.6	2.2
Sweden	8	34	10	-1.6	0.3	-0.5	-0.2	0.2	0.6
									-2.23

Notes: Table sorted in descending order by column 3. See Table 3 for intervals and child upper age limits.

^aData from the Family and Fertility Surveys.^bRefers to the beginning of a three-year interval prior to the beginning of the three-year interval noted in Table 1.