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Ideational Influences on Family Change in the United States

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In this chapter we summarize the literature about ideational influences on family formation behaviors in the United States. The U.S. population has been characterized by substantial changes in marriage, divorce, childbearing, cohabitation, and gender roles over the past half century. We begin by describing these changes briefly as background for our summary of research on ideational influences on those changes. Then we review the key streams of social theory motivating research into the influence of ideational factors on changes in family formation processes in the United States. Next we review the powerful measurement resources that have fueled unparalleled research on this topic in the United States, again very briefly. Finally we turn to a topic-by-topic review of the literature on ideational influences on cohabiting, marital, divorce and childbearing behavior. Because the empirical literature on ideational influences on family change in the United States is large, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive review of that literature here. Nevertheless, the summary we provide points toward key insights into ideational influences on family change.

FAMILY CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

The past several centuries have been characterized by both continuity and change in family formation behaviors in the United States

(Thornton, Axinn, & Xie, in press). In the summary provided here we focus on changes between the early 1900s and the beginning of the 21st century. We focus on changes in marriage, divorce, nonmarital cohabitation, and childbearing. Our review begins by summarizing behavioral changes and then moves on to describe changes in attitudes about those same behaviors. Although our primary agenda is descriptions of changes in family formation, we briefly comment on other closely related changes including labor force participation, education, religion, and gender role attitudes.

Changing Family Formation and Related Behaviors

Behavioral changes in family formation in the United States during the 1900s follow a well-known pattern documented in many previous historical studies (Cherlin, 1992; Fitch & Ruggles, 2000; Teachman, Tedrow & Crowder, 2001). In general, rates of marriage and childbearing declined slowly and steadily during the first half of the 1900s, had a sharp rise between 1950 and 1960 directly following World War II, and then returned to decline after 1960. Rates of divorce followed the opposite trend, rising slowly through the first half of the century, bumping up during World War II, dipping after World War II, and then rising again after 1960. Premarital cohabitation was extremely rare until the late 1960s, rising steadily after 1970 and compensating for much of the post-1970 decline in marriage rates. In the paragraphs that follow we describe these well-documented trends in greater detail.

Marriage. Although changes in the age structure of the U.S. population can account for some changes in crude rates of marriage, the U.S. population has also been characterized by important changes in age specific rates of marriage. Changes in age specific rates of marriage reflect both changes in the fraction of the population who never marry and changes in the timing of marriage. However, changes in the fraction who never marry account for relatively little of the long-term decline in age specific rates of marriage in the United States.

Between 1860 and 1920 the percentage of White men and women age 45–54 years who had never married increased steadily (from 5.7 to 12.8 for men and 7.3 to 11.0 for women). From 1920 to 1980 there was a fairly steady decline in the percent who never married, to 5.6 and 4.2 for men and women, respectively. Between 1980 and 2000 there was a slight increase for both men and women, with both around 8% near the end of the millennium (Fitch & Ruggles, 2000). This trend was slightly different for Blacks, who began with percentages comparable to those of Whites

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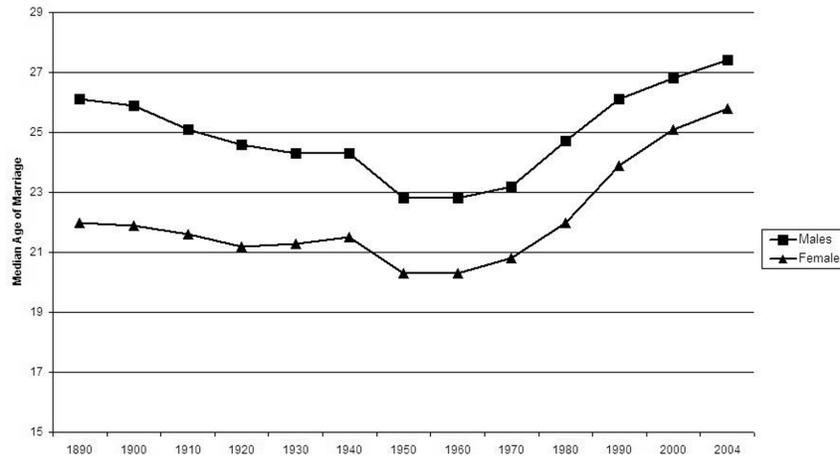


FIGURE 5.1 Estimated median age at first marriage for U.S. males and females 1890–2004.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey: March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2004 and earlier. Internet Release, 2005, Table MS-2.

in the late 1800s, but increased steadily to about 12% never marrying for both men and women by the end of the millennium (Fitch & Ruggles, 2000). Thus the vast majority of Americans will probably eventually marry, and this has only changed slightly over the last 140 years.

Although there have been only moderate changes in the fraction of people who never marry, there has been a much larger change in the timing of marriage. This change is reflected in the median age of marriage (the age when half of the never married population has married once), as shown in Figure 5.1 (U.S. Census, 2005a). Between 1890 and 1940, women's median age of first marriage remained relatively steady, fluctuating between 21.2 and 22 years, whereas men's median age at first marriage for the same time period declined, from 26.1 years, to 24.3 years. Median age at first marriage declined sharply in the decade after 1940 for both sexes, with women falling to age 20.3, and men to 22.8 by 1950. This postwar decline in median age at first marriage leveled off in the 1950s, and by the early 1960s, median age at first marriage began to slowly increase. Beginning in the early 1970s, the median age at marriage climbed significantly for both sexes for two decades, reaching 26.1 years for men and 23.9 years for women by 1990. Median age at first marriage has continued to increase from 1990 to the present, though at a slightly slower rate, reaching 27.4 years for men and 25.8 years for

women by 2004. This dramatic rise in median age at marriage corresponds to an equally dramatic rise in enrollments in college (discussed later), and the two changes are probably linked (Marini, 1978; Thornton, Axinn & Teachman, 1995).

Cohabitation. Nonmarital cohabitation was rare in the United States of the 1950s and rapidly grew more common beginning in the 1960s (Thornton et al., in press). Bumpass and Sweet (1989, p. 619) found that “the proportion of persons who cohabited before first marriage quadrupled from 11% for marriages in 1965–1974 to 44% for marriage in 1980–1984.” The growth of cohabitation slowed, but continued to increase to 56% for marriages in 1990–1994 (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). If union formation is defined as both marriage and cohabitation, the rate of union formation for ages 20–25 has remained fairly constant since 1970 (Cherlin, 1992; Raley, 2000), with the decline in marriage offset by the rise in cohabitation. Contrary to early speculation, enrollment in college reduces rates of premarital cohabitation and once out of school those with more education are less likely to cohabit than those with less education (Thornton et al., 1995).

Divorce. Contrary to popular opinion, the increase in divorce in the United States is not a recent phenomenon, but rather a long-term trend that began at least as early as the Civil War. From 1860 until 1915, the crude divorce rate¹ (the number of divorces per 1,000 population) steadily increased from about 0.3 to 1. After 1915 this trend continued, but the fluctuations in the crude divorce rate became more dramatic (NCHS, 1973). As shown in Figure 5.2, three major peaks in this trend occurred between 1900 and 2004 (NCHS, 1973, 2004; U.S. Census, 2005b). The first major change occurred near the beginning of World War I, when rates increased by over 50% in only a few years. However, by 1920 the divorce rate began to decline again, returning to levels that were relatively consistent with the earlier trend. Through the early 1940s the increase in the divorce rate was roughly offset by a long-term decline in the rate of marital dissolution by widowhood, so that the total rate of dissolving marriages through either divorce or widowhood remained relatively stable. The divorce rate suddenly increased again during World War II, up to 3.7 per thousand in 1946, an increase of nearly 75%

¹The crude divorce rate can be affected by changes in population age distribution and marriage timing. Nevertheless, the general pattern seen in the crude divorce rate was very similar to more precise estimates of divorce.

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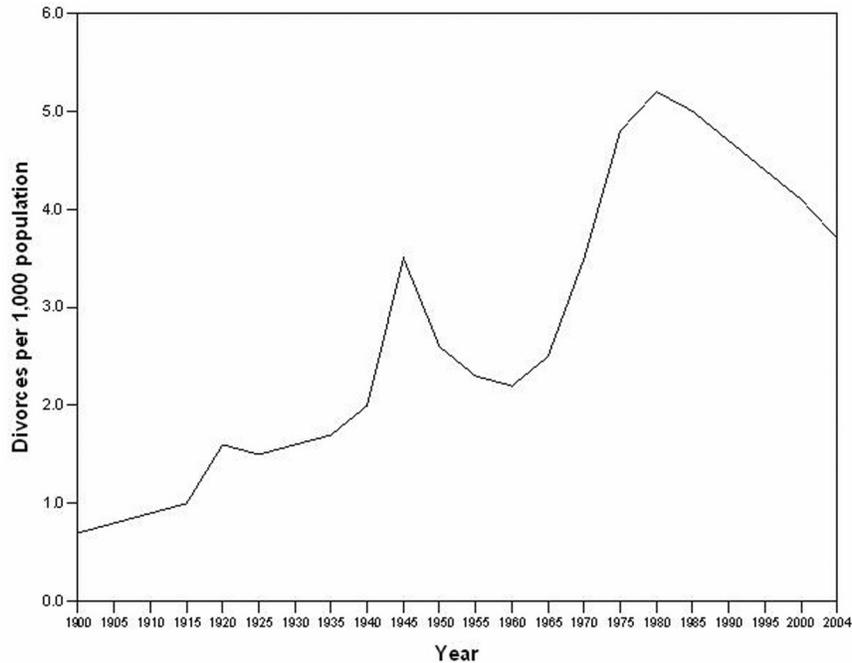


FIGURE 5.2 Crude divorce rate 1900–2004.

Source: 1900–1950, 100 years of marriage and Divorce Statistics 1867–1967. Series 21(24), Table 1: 1950–2002, 2004–2005, U.S. Statistical Abstract: 2002–2004, Natbival statistics, Report, Vol 53(21)

over 5 years. Just as quickly as it increased, the crude divorce rate dropped again, reaching a low of about 2.1 in 1958. This decline in the crude divorce rate was so large that through most of the 1950s the crude divorce rate was much lower than predicted by the initial trend set almost 80 years before. It was during the late 1960s and 1970s, however, that the crude divorce rate had its largest increase, reaching its highest point in the early 1980s at 5.3. Since the mid-1980s there has been a decline the crude divorce rate, so that by early in the 21st century these rates returned to the level of the long-term trend beginning many decades earlier (Cherlin, 1992; Goldstein, 1999). In 2004, the crude divorce rate was at its lowest since the mid 1970s, at 3.7. Based on these rates some scholars have estimated that of those marriages begun over the last several decades, about half are expected to end in divorce (Cherlin, 1992; Teachman et al., 2001).

Childbearing. The overall trend in childbearing since the beginning of the 20th century has been downward, but as shown in Figure 5.3, there has been substantial movement in that trend (NCHS, 1977; U.S. Census, 2005b). From 1917 to 1940 there was an overall decline in fertility, from a total fertility rate² (TFR) of 3.3 to 2.2. Following World War II there was a large increase in childbearing, often called the Baby Boom, which peaked in the late 1950s at a TFR of about 3.7, and was then followed by a quick decline in fertility until the early 1980s (TFR of about 1.8). Childbearing increased slightly after that and has remained a TFR between 2 and 2.1 until the end of the century (Anderton, Barrett, & Bogue, 1997). Although total fertility has declined, marital fertility has declined faster than nonmarital fertility (Teachman et al., 2001). As a result, the proportion of all births that occur outside of marriage has grown substantially over time in the United States. In 1950, only 2% of White women who gave birth experienced a nonmarital birth, but by 2000 this percent had steadily increased to 26%. Black women experienced a similar increase in nonmarital fertility, with 26% of births being nonmarital in 1963, and 62% in 2000 (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993; Bachu & O'Connell, 2001). Nonmarital births are most commonly found at younger ages and at lower levels of education (Bachu & O'Connell, 2001).

Education. These long-term changes in family formation processes have taken place in a context of equally important changes in individual activities outside of the family (Ogburn & Tibbets, 1933; Thornton & Fricke, 1987). One of these changes in nonfamily activities is a long-term increase in participation in formal schooling, and an increase in levels of educational attainment among those who go to school. Prior to the 1960s few people in the United States attended college; however, in the last four decades attendance has increased substantially for both men and women. In 1960, 9.7% of men and 5.8% of women were college graduates or higher, and by 2000 these percentages had increased to 27.8 for men and 23.6 for women. In fact, at the time this chapter was completed, more women were enrolled in college and graduate school than men (U.S. Census, 2005c).

²The total fertility rate (or TFR) is a synthetic cohort-based period rate that controls for the age structure of a population and estimates the average number of children each woman would have over her lifetime if exposed to the age-specific fertility rates of that period.

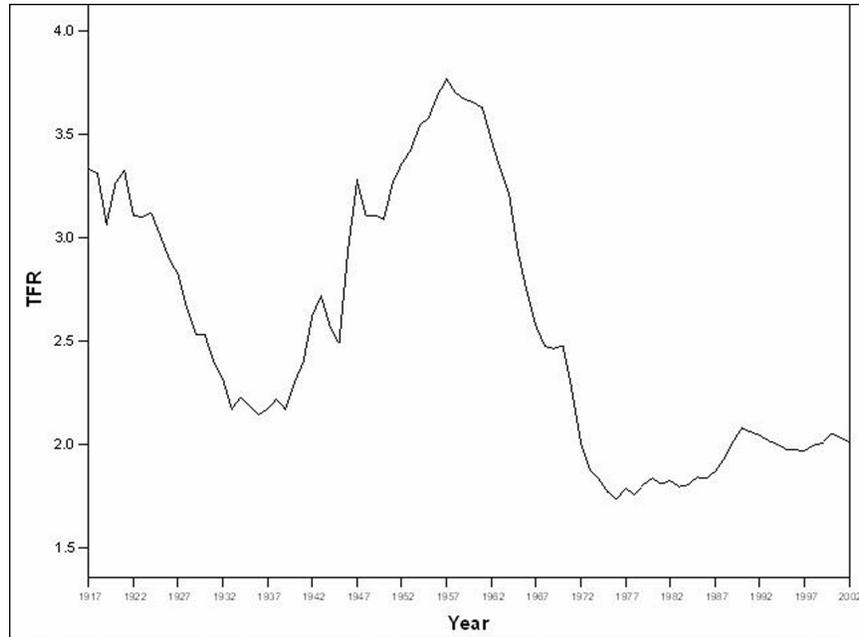


FIGURE 5.3 Total fertility rate, 1917–2002.

Source: 1917–1970, 1977 NCHS Trends in Fertility in the United States, Series 21, Number 28, Table 13; 1970–2002, 2004–2005 Statistical Abstract of the United States, Table Fig 7.5.

Labor Force Participation. The past two centuries have been characterized by a parallel increase of women participating in the paid labor force. Since the 1960s female labor force participation (for people ages 16–64) has increased, particularly among married women. In 1960 the single female labor force participation rate was around 58%; this was substantially higher than the married female rate of 32%. By the end of the century both groups of women had increased labor force participation and married females had closed the gap, with 68% of single women and 62% of married women in the labor force. By comparison, married men's labor force participation rates actually declined, but still remained higher than those for women. Although single men increased slightly over the last four decades, from 70% to 73%, married men declined substantially, from 89% to 78% (Teachman et al., 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Thus these dramatic changes in nonfamily social activities, particularly for women, have paralleled the dramatic changes in family behaviors in the United States.

Religiosity. Religion has a particularly strong connection to ideational change over time. Over this same century of dramatic change in both family formation and nonfamily activities, religiosity in the United States was characterized by both continuity and change. By the late 1990s over 60% of Americans claimed membership in some religious organization, with approximately 45% reporting at least monthly attendance (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). These levels have remained fairly constant over the last several decades (Hout & Greeley, 1987; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999), but women are more likely than men to both be affiliated with any religion and to attend regularly (Miller & Hoffmann, 1995; Sherkat, 1998). Despite this consistency in attendance, perceptions of religious authority over everyday life, the importance of religion in everyday life, and the frequency of prayer have all declined since the 1960s (Glenn, 1987).

Changing Ideas About the Family

These same decades that have been characterized by dramatic macro-level changes in family and nonfamily behaviors have also been characterized by dramatic macro-level ideational changes. These ideational changes feature reduced conformity to a set of behavioral standards, an increased emphasis on individual freedom and personal autonomy, and the emergence of a norm of tolerance (Thornton, 1989). These U.S. changes occurred at the same time as a parallel set of changes in Europe, where a variety of studies have documented the spread of individualistic ideas in general, and more individualistic attitudes toward family behaviors in particular (Lesthaeghe, 2002; Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988). In the United States these macro shifts can be seen in many different domains of life, including the legal system, sexuality, childrearing, and politics. For the legal system, Schneider (1985) documents a trend toward reduced amounts of moral discourse in family law, as well as a transfer of moral responsibility from the society (and courts) to the individual. In part he suggests that this change is a product of U.S. society's increased focus on individualism and freedom. Alwin documents a corresponding trend in childrearing values. From 1924 until the mid 1990s, U.S. society experienced a decreasing parental desire for obedience in children and an increasing preference for children to be tolerant and autonomous (Alwin, 1988, 1996). Similar to Alwin's finding, Bahr, Mitchell, Li, Walker, and Sucher (2004) find that since 1924, children have increased in their desire to have to have a parent who respects their opinions. This suggests increased desires for children's autonomy from both the parent and the child (Bahr et al., 2004). The sexual revolution

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of the 1960s is another example of this increased emphasis on personal freedom. In politics, key social movements such as the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights Movement echoed similar themes.

These macro-level general ideational shifts had strong parallels in macro-level changes in family formation attitudes and beliefs. Unfortunately, systematic documentation of attitudes toward family matters in the general population does not extend as far back in time as our documentation of family behaviors. Most of our empirical evidence about attitude begins in the late 1950s and becomes more detailed by the 1970s. Nevertheless, this evidence does reflect important trends in family formation attitudes, trends that closely parallel the behavioral trends documented earlier in this chapter.

Marriage. First we consider trends over time in views of marrying versus remaining single. Although most measures of these attitudes begin in the late 1970s, one earlier study documents a significant decline in negative attitudes toward remaining single between 1957 and 1976 (Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka 1976). Veroff and colleagues show that 53% of adults were negative toward a person who does not marry in 1957, but that by 1976 only 34% of adults were negative toward those who remained single. Their analyses of closely related attitudes demonstrate a similar trend toward less imperative to marry and more tolerance of remaining single over the period 1957 to 1976 (Veroff et al., 1976).

Beginning in the 1970s, however, we find a great deal of stability in attitudes toward marriage. For example, respondents to the Monitoring the Future³ studies were asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement that "Married people are happier than those who go through life without getting married." The data for women indicate that women's attitudes toward marriage, as measured by this specific item, have remained quite stable from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. In the 1990s, 58.5% of women reported agreeing that married people are happier, and in the mid-1970s 59.5% felt the same way. Men's attitudes toward marriage remained quite stable from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, but there was a slight increase from the 1980s to the 1990s in the percentage who agreed that married people are happier. As we discuss later, this increase in the view that married people may be happier cannot be confirmed from other data sources (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, Table 2).

³Monitoring the Future (MTF) has been conducted by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan every year since 1976, using a nationally representative sample of high school seniors in the United States (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

We also examine responses to a similar statement from the son/daughter sample in the Intergenerational Panel Study.⁴ The percentage of women who agreed that married people are happier has remained relatively stable from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s in this survey as well, but the level of men's agreement with the statement has actually declined slightly. That is, sons in the Intergenerational Panel Study have become a little less positive toward marriage during the same time interval when young men in Monitoring the Future have become a little more positive toward marriage.⁵ Both these differences are statistically significant, although neither difference is substantively large. Overall, we fail to find strong or consistent evidence of specific directional trends in young people's attitudes toward marriage between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001, Table 2).

An exploration of attitudes toward marriage as reflected in other specific measures demonstrates a similar pattern. The percentage of respondents who agree that "there are few good marriages these days" has remained stable in Monitoring the Future data from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s among both men and women (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, Table 2). Likewise, the fraction of young men and women participating in the Monitoring the Future study who said that having a good marriage is extremely important and definitely prefer to have a mate remained high (around 82% for women and 72% for men in 1998) and quite stable from the 1980s into the 1990s (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, Table 2). Thus, there is little evidence of dramatic shifts in attitudes toward marriage between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s (also see Glenn, 1996).

Cohabitation. Values, attitudes, and beliefs about heterosexual non-marital cohabitation have become substantially more accepting in recent decades. The percentage of Monitoring the Future respondents who agree that living together is a good idea increased dramatically throughout the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s for both men and

⁴The Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children (IPS) is a survey of White mothers who gave birth in 1961 in the Detroit Metropolitan area and their children. The mothers were interviewed by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan twice in 1962 and then again in 1963, 1966, 1977, 1980, 1985, and 1993. The children born in 1961 were interviewed in 1980, when they were aged 18, and then again in 1985 and 1993 (Axinn & Thornton, 2000).

⁵Of course, panel data from the Intergenerational Panel Study confound age effects and period effects, whereas the repeated cross-sectional data from the Monitoring the Future studies do not.

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women (an increase from 47 to 62% for men, and from 33 to 51% for women). In fact, there are statistically significant increases in this fraction both from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s and then again from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, Table 5; also, see Schulenberg et al., 1995). Other studies demonstrate the same increase in acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. In both the National Survey of Families and Households⁶ and the son/daughter sample of the Intergenerational Panel Study we see a significant increase in the fraction of women who believe cohabitation is all right and a more modest increase in the fraction of men who believe cohabitation is all right.

Although marriage was once the only social relationship Americans found acceptable for heterosexual co-residence in an intimate relationship, this is changing. Marriage continues to involve sharing of residence for the vast majority of couples. However, today marriage is not the only acceptable route to co-residence for many American couples. This is one dimension in which the meaning of marriage continues to change in the United States.

Divorce. Like attitudes toward marriage, for attitudes toward divorce we also find dramatic shifts across the 1960s and early 1970s, followed by relative stability since the 1970s. Over the 15 years from 1962 to 1977 it appears there was a dramatic increase in tolerance of divorce. Only 51% of the mother sample in the Intergenerational Panel Study disagreed with the statement that “parents should stay together for the sake of the children, even if they do not get along” in 1962, but by 1977 fully 80% disagreed with the same statement (Thornton, 1989). By contrast, the same study shows stability in the fraction of mothers disagreeing with same statement from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Similarly, in the Monitoring the Future studies there are no significant changes over time for either men or women in the percentage of respondents who say that once married, it is very likely they will stay married. Likewise, we find in the NSFH that, for both men and women, the percentage who agree that “marriage is for a lifetime” is almost the same in the mid-1990s as it was in the mid 1980s

⁶The National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) is a nationally representative survey of the noninstitutionalized population aged 18 and over directed by the University of Wisconsin and conducted by the Institute of Survey Research at Temple University. It was first conducted in 1987–1988 with a follow-up approximately 5 years later.

(about 72% for women and 78% for men). Thus, we find stability in attitudes toward divorce from the mid-1970s through the mid-1990s in all three of these studies (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, Table 3).

Childbearing. We examine two ways to think about attitudes and values regarding the intersections between marriage and childbearing in the United States. One is the extent to which people believe that in order to have a child couples should be married. A second is the degree to which people believe that married couples should have children.

Monitoring the Future data indicate that there have been significant declines in the fraction of women who believe “unmarried childbearing is destructive to society” between the mid-1970s (23%) and the mid-1990s (15%). The fraction of men who share this belief also declined over the same period, although this decline was not statistically significant (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, Table 8). Thus the negative stigma individuals attribute to having a child outside of marriage appears to be declining across recent decades (Schulenberg et al., 1995).

These results are very consistent with the findings of Ku et al. (1998) from the National Survey of Young Men and the National Survey of Adolescent Men. In these studies, adolescent males were asked their views about the best resolution to a pregnancy for an unmarried girl. Between 1979 and 1995, the percentages recommending marriage, abortion, and adoption all declined substantially, whereas the percentage suggesting that the mother have the baby and the father help to support it increased dramatically from 19 to 59%. Increased support for unmarried childbearing has also been reported by Pagnini and Rindfuss (1993).

The extent to which parenthood within marriage is viewed as mandatory also changed since the 1960s. In the mother sample from the Intergenerational Panel Study, the fraction of women who agreed that “all married couples who can have children should have children” fell from 85% in 1962 to 43% in 1980 (Thornton, 1989). It also appears this imperative to have children has continued to decline between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, with the son/daughter sample from the Intergenerational Panel Study demonstrating significant declines in agreement with the same item over this later period (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001, Table 8). This indicates that the view that married couples should also be parents is also weakening.

Overall, then, the extent to which marriage and childbearing are viewed as closely linked behaviors has been changing in at least two ways. Americans are becoming less inclined to believe that marriage is the only appropriate social relationship for childbearing, and they are also becoming less inclined to believe that childrearing should be a

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necessary dimension of the marital relationship. Both of these changes constitute important transformations in the meaning of marriage. The meaning of marriage is continuing to evolve, so that the activities of childbearing and childrearing are less often seen as fundamentally tied to marriage.

Other Family Attitudes. Since the early 1960s sex role attitudes have become more egalitarian, plateauing in the late 1990s at very high levels of support for egalitarian relationships and societies (Thornton, Alwin, & Camburn, 1983; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Attitudes toward premarital sex are also characterized by a dramatic increase in tolerance during 1960s and 1970s (Thornton, 1989). Tolerance toward extramarital sex increased in the 1960s and 1970s but has since declined in the last two decades, with 92.9% of women and 89.2% of men saying they view it as always wrong or almost always wrong (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

Overall, these findings point toward two general conclusions. First, family remains a highly valued institution in the United States. Second, tolerance for a diversity of family types and transitions has increased. Thus, the United States is characterized by a high fraction of people who plan on getting married and plan on staying married for life. These represent stable family values and beliefs in the United States over recent decades. On the other hand, the United States is also characterized by dramatic changes in other attitudes over recent decades, including egalitarian gender role attitudes, tolerance of premarital sex and nonmarital cohabitation, and tolerance of childbearing outside of marriage.

Perhaps most striking about these macro-level ideational trends is their close similarity to the macro-level behavioral trends. Of course, it is a tremendously difficult task to link these macro-level ideational and behavioral trends together to determine the extent to which one set of trends may be causing the other. Instead, a series of studies in the United States has investigated the micro-level relationships between family formation ideas and behaviors with the aim of learning more about the plausible connections between ideational changes and behavioral changes. We quickly review the theoretical and empirical foundations of these studies, then turn to a review of their findings.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF U.S. RESEARCH ON IDEATIONAL INFLUENCES ON FAMILY CHANGE

Four central theoretical models are at the foundation of U.S. micro-level research on ideational influences of family change. They focus on (a) the

link between attitudes and behavior; (b) the reciprocal effects of experiences and attitudes; (c) role conflict as an influence on family-formation decision-making; and (d) the intergenerational transmission of family-formation behavior (Thornton et al., in press).

Attitude-Behavior Links

The most widely used frameworks for linking attitudes and behavior at the micro level are Fishbein and Ajzen's theories of reasoned action and planned behavior. Attitudes, defined as "disposition[s] to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event" (Ajzen, 1988, p. 4), along with social pressures, predict intentions, which predict behavior. Thus, positive attitudes toward a particular behavior make that behavior more likely (Barber & Axinn, 2005; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). For example, individuals with positive attitudes toward children and childbearing are likely to enter parenthood earlier and have more children than their peers who have more negative attitudes toward children and childbearing (Barber & Axinn, 2005).

Following this theoretical model, the spread of more tolerant attitudes toward premarital sex, cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbearing, and divorce would each be expected to increase rates of premarital sex, cohabitation, out-of-wedlock childbearing and divorce at the micro level (Barber, 2001a). Likewise, the spread of less positive attitudes toward marriage or childbearing would be expected to reduce marriage rates and birth rates at the micro level (Barber, 2001a). Thus this model provides a key reason why micro-level evidence of associations between attitudes and subsequent behaviors may help to understand the origins of the macro-level trends.

Reciprocal Effects of Experiences and Attitudes

Although the theory just described focuses on the potential of attitudes to predict behavior at the micro level, there are also strong theoretical reasons to expect links in the opposite direction, with behavior also affecting attitudes (Ajzen, 1988). A key way behaviors influence attitudes is through cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1957). From this perspective, individuals are driven to interpret their past experiences and behaviors in a favorable way. When one's behavior is inconsistent with one's attitudes, the individual is faced with discomfort. Because past behaviors cannot be changed, attitudes toward those behaviors are likely to become more favorable (Festinger, 1957). This hypothesis is consistent with a main proposition of the life course perspective, namely, that

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individuals' preferences, expectations, and choices are influenced by prior experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1977, 1978).

This theoretical perspective on micro-level relationships between ideas and behaviors points toward the potential importance of macro-level behavioral trends in shaping macro-level ideational trends. For example, even those who are initially unaccepting of divorce tend to develop more positive attitudes toward divorce after they themselves experience a divorce (Thornton, 1985). At the macro level this may mean that the spread of divorce behavior may have reshaped ideas about divorce.

Role Conflict

Because individuals' time and resources are limited, at the micro level attitudes toward a wide variety of behaviors are likely to affect family formation. As young people make the transition to adulthood, they must choose among a variety of possible roles. Choosing one role may make the fulfillment of other roles quite difficult (Rindfuss, 1991; Rindfuss, Swicegood & Rosenfeld, 1987), or it might later ease the transition to some roles (Barber & Axinn, 2005). Role conflict theory asserts that individuals will avoid making the transition into roles perceived as conflict- or tension-inducing (Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979; Crimmins, Easterlin & Saito, 1991; Goode, 1960). For example, the role of parenthood calls for spending time with children, whereas the roles of student and worker usually involve spending large amounts of time away from home. Thus, holding positive attitudes toward one of these roles may cause the individual to delay or forgo the other, conflicting, role (Barber & Axinn, 2005). Barber (2001a) explains how role conflict may make attitudes toward various nonfamily activities an important influence on family formation behaviors at the micro level. As a result, positive attitudes toward nonfamily activities that may conflict with family formation, such as education or labor-force participation, may reduce subsequent rates of marriage or childbearing (Barber, 2001a).

This theoretical model points toward another way that micro-level associations may inform our understanding of the connections among macro-level trends. The macro-level increases in educational attainment and labor force participation may be closely related to the spread of positive attitudes toward these nonfamily activities. When such activities conflict with family formation, these positive attitudes toward education and work may reduce rates of marriage or childbearing and may increase rates of divorce. They may also reduce rates of cohabitation less than they reduce rates of marriage if people perceive less role conflict with cohabitation than with marriage (Thornton et al., 1995).

Intergenerational Transmission

Social theory outlines two ways in which parents influence their children's behavior: socialization and social control (Campbell, 1969; Chodorow, 1978; Coleman, 1990; Gecas & Seff, 1990). Socialization is the process through which parents affect how their children want to behave. This is achieved in two ways: First, parents' own preferences for their child shape their child's preferences, attitudes and intentions; and second, children's attitudes and preferences become similar to their parents because they share similar social positions, backgrounds, and experiences with their parents (Barber, 2000; Bengtson, 1975). "Overall, children are socialized to evaluate behaviors similarly to their parents; thus, by behaving in accordance with their own attitudes and preferences, children may be conforming to their parents' wishes as well" (Barber, 2000, p.).

In contrast to socialization, social control is a mechanism through which parents influence their children's behavior, regardless of the child's own attitudes. Parents rely on various punishments or rewards in order to make their children behave according to their wishes. These rewards include parental approval, so that children may act in accordance with their parents' wishes to avoid causing parents embarrassment or pain. These social control methods change a child's behavior independent of the child's own attitudes (Barber, 2000; Smith, 1988).

These micro-level mechanisms linking parents to children may have macro-level consequence linking the family behaviors or attitudes of one generation to the family behaviors and attitudes of the next generation. These cross-generation links may help to propel trends across time, fueling attitudinal and behavioral changes for many years at a time.

Together these four theoretical mechanisms—attitudinal influences, reciprocal effects of experiences on attitudes, role conflict, and intergenerational influences—represent the main theoretical foundation for micro-level research on the relationships between family attitudes and behaviors in the United States. These theories have shaped the key research designs, measurements, and analyses of ideational influences on family behaviors at the micro level in the United States. As we discuss later, although relatively simple, together they have generated complex and comprehensive studies that provide some of the most thorough documentation of micro-level family attitude-behavior relationships anywhere in the world.

LONGITUDINAL DATA RESOURCES FOR STUDYING ATTITUDE-BEHAVIOR LINKS

At the micro level it is difficult to use cross-sectional studies that measure attitudes and behavior at the same point in time to advance our understanding of the relationships between family attitudes and family behaviors. This is because at the same time attitude may affect subsequent behavior, it is also likely that behaviors help to shape subsequent attitudes. As a result, the observation of an empirical correlation between family attitudes and behavior in cross-sectional data is just as likely to reflect the influence of behavior on attitudes as it is to reflect the influence of attitudes on behavior. This problem is exacerbated when cross-sectional measures of behavior actually ask about behaviors that must have occurred *before* the day of the measurement, such as experiences with cohabitation, marriage, divorce, childbearing, or childrearing. Measures of attitudes from such studies reflect respondents' attitudes on the day of the study, and study participants' past experiences are more likely to be causes of those attitudes than consequences of those attitudes.

More convincing evidence of attitudinal or ideational influences on behavior is made possible by longitudinal measurement that features measures of attitudes at one point in time and a *subsequent* record of behavior. Such longitudinal studies of family attitudes and family behaviors are relatively rare worldwide. One reason the United States has been fertile ground for the study of the relationship between family attitudes and family behaviors is that this country has multiple longitudinal studies documenting family attitudes and family behaviors from the same individuals over time. Together these studies constitute an important resource for the investigation of attitude-behavior links. Among the many examples, the National Study of Families and Households, the Intergenerational Panel Study of Mothers and Children, the National Study of Children, the Monitoring the Future studies, and the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth each appear frequently in the research literature on these topics.

Many of these longitudinal studies include multiple measures of the same attitudes over time from the same individuals, making them particularly useful for documenting the effects of family behaviors on changes in family attitudes over time. For example, they show that marriage behavior affects attitudes toward marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Clarkberg, 2002; Marchena & Waite, 2002), divorce behavior affects attitudes toward divorce (Thornton, 1985), and cohabitation behavior affects

attitudes toward cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Clarkberg, 2002). Even more interesting, behaviors in one family domain affect attitudes in other family domains. So, childbearing behavior affects gender role attitudes and attitudes toward marriage (Marchena & Waite, 2002; Morgan & Waite, 1987; Thomson, 2002), cohabiting behavior affects attitudes toward marriage, divorce, childbearing, money, and external social ties (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Axinn & Thornton 1992; Clarkberg, 2002; Marchena & Waite, 2002), and living alone or with unrelated housemates affects attitudes toward sex roles, marriage, and childbearing (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Cunningham, Beutel, Barber, & Thornton, 2005; Waite, Goldscheider, & Witsberger, 1986).

Thus these U.S. longitudinal studies provide a great deal of evidence that family behaviors shape changes in family attitudes over time—evidence that strengthens our conviction that cross-sectional measures of attitudes and behaviors can teach us relatively little about the effects of attitudes on subsequent family behaviors. In the pages that remain, therefore, we restrict our summary of findings from U.S. research to longitudinal studies that use measures of attitudes at one point in time to predict subsequent measures of family behavior.

MICRO-LEVEL FINDINGS

Marriage

Various attitudes held prior to marriage influence individuals' marriage behavior, and some of the first attitudes studied concerned education and work. Bayer (1969) conducted one of the first longitudinal studies of ideational effects on family by using a nationally representative sample of 39,000 high school seniors interviewed in 1960 and 1965. Bayer found that the educational and marital expectations of high school students predict later marriage behavior, even after controlling for parent socioeconomic status (SES) and school aptitude. Another study utilized the National Longitudinal Survey of Work Experience of Young Women, a nationally representative survey of women ages 14–24 in 1968, who were reinterviewed nearly every year until 1975. When asked “What kind of work would you like to be doing when you are 35 years old?” those previously unmarried women who answered “housewife” (or something similar) were significantly more likely to marry over the following 2-year interval (Cherlin, 1980). Although this effect is fairly constant for Whites between the ages of 18 and 23, it only appears to operate for slightly older Blacks—ages 22–23 (see also Waite & Spitze, 1981, for similar results).

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In addition to educational and occupational ideals, family attitudes affect marital outcomes. Using the 1980 and 1985 waves of the IPS (who were age 18 in 1980), one study finds that sons who report more agreement with the statement “divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can’t seem to work out their problems” in 1980 have much lower rates of marriage between 1980 and 1985 (Axinn & Thornton, 1992). The authors also find that even after controlling for their mothers’ attitudes, children who report that they would be more bothered if they did not get married have significantly higher rates of marriage over the 5-year period. Using the same data, other studies focus on the link between attitudes about the division of household labor and marriage timing. One study finds that attitudes supporting egalitarian roles for women and men in families are related to delayed entry into marriage (Cunningham et al., 2005). Another study focuses on the contingent nature of this relationship—young women who expect only to complete high school and agree that “wives should remain in the home” have higher marriage rates (Barber & Axinn, 1998a), but young women who expect to complete 4 years of college and agree that “wives should remain in the home” have lower marriage rates (Barber & Axinn, 1998a).

Along with people’s own attitudes, the attitudes of people around them also have an effect on their later marital behavior. For example, Marini (1978) uses a 15-year follow-up of students in 10 Illinois high schools originally surveyed in 1957 to examine the effect of friends on marital behavior. Along with finding that students who plan to attend college marry at later ages than those who do not plan to attend college, she also finds that people with *friends* who plan to attend college marry at later ages than those whose friends do not plan on attending college. The effect of friends’ school plans remains even after controlling for the person’s own desires to attend school. Interestingly, this effect is much larger for women than for men.

Along with friends, parents have a particularly strong influence on young adults’ marital behavior. Due to its unique design, the IPS has provided a significant amount of data on effects of parental values and attitudes on children’s later family formation patterns. Using the 1980 attitudes of the mothers and children to predict the child’s marriage behavior until 1985 (when all the children were 23) allows for a powerful test of the effect of both parents’ and children’s attitudes on behavior. Studies using the IPS data have shown that young people’s mothers’ attitudes and values affect their marriage patterns, even after controlling for their own attitudes. For example, the children of mothers with more favorable attitudes toward cohabitation (e.g., those mothers who agreed that “its all right for a couple to live together without planning to get

married”) had lower marriage rates over the subsequent 5 years—an effect even stronger than the child’s own attitudes toward cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1993). In addition, the older the mother’s ideal age of marriage for her child, the longer the child delays marriage—especially for mothers with higher financial resources; however, as the child ages, this effect of mothers’ ideal age weakens (Axinn & Thornton, 1992a).

Not surprisingly, not all parental effects are as uniform. For example, mothers who report agreeing with the statement “married people are usually happier than those who go through life without getting married” have sons (but not daughters) with higher rates of marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1992b). Another study finds that the higher a mother’s fertility preferences are for her son (i.e., the number children the son should have), the more likely he is to form any union (marriage or cohabitation) (Barber & Axinn, 1998b). On the other hand, the higher the mother’s fertility preferences are for her daughter, the more likely the daughter is to marry (compared to cohabiting) (Barber & Axinn, 1998b). It is also interesting to note that for both of these findings the mother’s fertility preferences for her children exert a stronger effect than the child’s own fertility preferences (Barber & Axinn, 1998b).

Cohabitation

Cohabitation, although often studied in comparison to marriage, has its own small body of research concerning ideational effects. One study, using the 1986 wave of the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, reports that high school seniors who place higher importance in “finding the right person to marry and having a happy family life” have lower rates of cohabitation (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995). Similarly, they find high school seniors with more favorable attitudes toward “living close to parents and relatives” have lower rates of first union and cohabitation.⁷ More specifically for men, placing more importance on “being able find steady work” and “having leisure time to enjoy my own interests” decreases the rate of cohabitation after high school. Also, female high school seniors who report higher importance of “being successful in my line of work” and “being able to find

⁷In a study using the High School and Beyond data, a similar question was asked and those young people who reported that it was not important to live close to family were more likely to live away from home (not including getting married or going to school). A similar result was found for people with more egalitarian gender role attitudes (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1993).

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steady work” have lower rates of first union during the first few years after high school, whereas finding more importance in “having lots of money” in high school leads to higher rates of cohabitation. Finally, for both males and females, more egalitarian sex role attitudes in high school increase the rate of cohabitation for several years after high school (Clarkberg et al., 1995; Cunningham et al., 2005).

Returning to the IPS data, mothers who agree that “married people are usually happier than those who go through life without getting married” and who report they would be more bothered if “your child did not get married” have daughters with significantly lower chances of cohabiting, even after controlling for the daughters’ own attitudes (Axinn & Thornton, 1992b). On the other hand, daughters who agree that “divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can’t seem to work out their problems” have significantly higher risk of cohabiting over the same 5-year interval, even after controlling for their mother’s attitude toward divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992b). In a different paper the same authors report that more tolerant attitudes toward cohabitation (e.g., disagreeing that “a young couple should not live together unless they are married”) are associated with higher rates of cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1993). It is also interesting to note that although mothers’ attitudes do not have an effect on sons’ cohabitation rates, the cohabitation rates of daughters are much higher for mothers with positive attitudes toward cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 1993). Another study finds that net of early adulthood experiences with education, work, cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing, young adults who expect “that work will be a source of life satisfaction” have higher rates of cohabitation (Barber, Axinn, & Thornton, 2002). Rates are also higher for young adults who have more tolerant attitudes toward premarital sex and those who have mothers with more tolerant attitudes toward premarital sex (Barber et al., 2002).

Divorce

Although all studies of ideational effects on family formation are difficult and require extensive longitudinal data, the study of divorce is particularly difficult. Although the vast majority of people will marry, of those who do marry about half will divorce (Cherlin, 1992). Also, unlike the other family formation processes, divorce occurs over a much longer period of time, requiring a much longer longitudinal study. Despite the difficulties of divorce studies, some findings have emerged. For example, using the IPS data, Thornton et al. (1983) report that women’s 1962 sex

role attitudes (measured using four questions) do not appear to have an effect on the probability of divorce over the subsequent 18 years. Thornton (1985) also uses the IPS data to find that holding more tolerant attitudes toward divorce in 1962 (i.e., disagreeing with “When there are children in the family, parents should stay together even if they don’t get along” and agreeing with “divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can’t seem to work out their marriage problems”) appear to have little effect on the later chance of divorce over the next 15 years. Bumpass (2002) finds that individuals with conservative family attitudes—measured by an index combining attitudes toward unmarried teens having sex, cohabitation, premarital childbearing, the acceptability of divorce, and marital independence—have marital separation rates that are only about 50% the rates of those with with least conservative attitudes. The same study finds that those with fundamentalist religious affiliations and those who attend church weekly have lower marital disruption rates, and that couples who perceive their relationship to be of high quality have lower marital disruption rates as well (Bumpass, 2002). Considering these results and the current state of data on divorce, future studies will be needed to provide evidence of ideational effects on divorce behavior comparable to the other family events discussed in this section.

Childbearing

Empirical evidence has repeatedly provided support for attitude–behavior links in the area of childbearing. These relationships between attitudes and behavior come in many forms, including childbearing attitudes affecting childbearing behavior, attitudes toward other behaviors affecting childbearing behavior, one’s own attitudes affecting subsequent behavior, and others’ attitudes affecting one’s behavior. We begin with attitudes related to childbearing influencing childbearing behavior.

Not surprisingly, women’s family size preferences are strongly related to their subsequent number of births. Using the Intergenerational Panel Study (IPS), Coombs (1974) tests her fertility preference “I-scale” as a predictor of subsequent fertility. Respondents were asked to report the number of children they would have “if you could start life over again, knowing that things would turn out just the way they have for you and your husband.” They were then asked to report second- and third-best numbers of children. The resulting choices were mapped onto a scale of fertility preferences. Coombs found a consistent, positive relationship between location on the fertility preference scale and number of subsequent births, which was not fully explained by fertility *expectations* (Coombs, 1974).

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In an analysis of the effect of fertility *intentions* on fertility behavior, Schoen, Astone, Nathanson, Kim, and Murray (1999) also found strong effects of attitudes on childbearing. Using panel data on a sample of non-Hispanic White women from the NSFH (1987–1988 and 1992–1994), Schoen and colleagues model respondents' intentions to have a(nother) child, as well as the strength of those intentions, and the relative strength of spouses' intentions on the subsequent birth of a child. They found a strong association between childbearing intentions and the strength of those intentions, and the probability of having a birth. The most certain fertility intentions ("very sure, yes" and "very sure, no") had the strongest effects on subsequent childbearing. Measures of spouses' fertility intentions also had consistent positive effects on the probability of a birth (Schoen et al., 1999).

In previous analyses, Thompson and colleagues also demonstrate the importance of spouses' fertility desires and intentions for subsequent fertility. Using the Princeton Fertility Survey, a three-wave panel study of couple fertility in major metropolitan areas, Thompson and colleagues (Thompson, McDonald, & Bumpass, 1990) examined the effects of spouses' desires for a third child on the rate of third births. They found that, relative to couples who both wanted to stop childbearing at two children, couples in which either spouse desired a third child were more likely to have a third birth. Furthermore, when *both* spouses desired a third birth, the birth rate was double that of couples who disagreed about the desire for a third birth. Wives' and husbands' family size desires showed equal effects on subsequent birth rates (Thompson et al., 1990). In a later study using the NSFH, Thompson (1997) conducted a similar analysis on spouses' childbearing desires, but also considered measures of each spouse's childbearing *intentions*. Thompson found that, as in the earlier analysis, couples where both spouses want no more children have substantially lower probabilities of a birth than couples where both spouses want another child. Birth probabilities of couples whose fertility desires are in disagreement fall in between these two groups, but are more similar to couples who want no more children. Results were similar for childbearing intentions—couples where both spouses strongly intended to have another child had the highest rates of subsequent births, followed by couples with less certain intentions toward another birth. Couples who disagreed (one partner intended, one did not intend) were much less likely to experience a birth, but more likely than couples who both did not intend another birth (Thompson, 1997).

Other related attitudes are also important predictors of childbearing behavior. Using the IPS, Barber (2001b) finds that for married women, enjoyment of activities with children (caring for, playing with and talking to little children), preference for larger families, and the belief that children do *not* cause worry and strain all lead to earlier first birth timing.

In addition to attitudes toward children and childbearing, attitudes toward many other areas of life have significant influence on childbearing behavior. Using IPS data, Thornton and colleagues find that women's less egalitarian sex-role attitudes, measured by eight questions on the roles of men and women in the family and work force, subsequently led to less participation in the work force, less educational accumulation, earlier entry into parenthood, and increased family size (Thornton et al., 1983; Cunningham et al., 2005). Using the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), Thomson finds that women's attitudes toward conjugal familism (an index combining multiple attitudes toward childbearing, marriage, and divorce) and men's attitudes toward extended familism (an index combining attitudes toward parents' and children's obligations to one another) lead to earlier entry into parenthood. Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), Plotnick (1992) found that more egalitarian sex-role attitudes led to higher adolescent premarital pregnancy rates. In contrast, positive attitudes and expectations for education, and favorable attitudes toward school are linked to lower premarital pregnancy rates (Barber, 2001a; Plotnick, 1992). Similarly, positive attitudes toward consumption of luxury goods lead to lower premarital first birth rates, and delay marital childbearing (Barber, 2001a; Crimmins et al., 1991).

Parents' attitudes toward childbearing and competing behaviors also have significant effects on their children's childbearing behavior. Using IPS data, Axinn, Clarkberg, and Thornton (1994) find that mothers' preferences for their children's completed family size have strong positive effects on their children's family size preferences. Additionally, using the same data, Barber (2000) finds that both sons and daughters whose mothers prefer lower levels of education, early marriage, large families, and stay-at-home motherhood become parents earlier than their peers. In both studies, mothers' preferences for their children's childbearing have stronger effects on that behavior than the children's own preferences for themselves (Axinn et al., 1994; Barber, 2000).

CONCLUSION

So, what does this long list of micro-level results mean? Using individual-level longitudinal panel data that maintains appropriate temporal ordering

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between measures of ideas and measures of behavior, researchers in the United States have accumulated a large volume of evidence that variations in ideas are closely associated with subsequent variations in marital, cohabiting, divorce, and childbearing behavior. These include ideas about marriage, cohabitation, divorce, and childbearing along with ideas about premarital sex, appropriate gender roles, education, work, and consumption. They include individual's own ideas about behavior, and the ideas of important others, such as their parents. There is also evidence that behavior shapes subsequent ideas, but even considering the important reciprocal relationship, there is still a great deal of evidence that ideas are associated with variation in these family formation behaviors.

Of course, even with longitudinal measurement, because of the observational nature of research on ideational influences on family behavior, empirically there is ample room to doubt that these associations represent causal effects of ideas on family behaviors (Moffitt, 2005). But social psychological theory, role conflict theory, and intergenerational theory each provide strong reasons to expect that at least part of the observed association represents a causal influence of variations in ideas on family behaviors. This reasoning is consistent with the repeated large, robust associations found in the empirical literature, even in well-specified multivariate models that include the most likely potential prior factors. Attitudinal variation is often found to have quite large effects of family formation behaviors—as large as 100–200% differences across the observed range of attitudinal variations. In general, U.S. research demonstrates that these ideational effects are independent of factors such as education, work experience, or income that are often believed to explain variations in behavior. There is no proof here, but the evidence is certainly mounting.

What does this mean in the context of the macro-level behavioral shifts and accompanying macro-level attitudinal trends outlined at the beginning of this chapter? Longitudinal studies from the United States demonstrate important micro-level consequences of behaviors for ideational changes over time. Some of the relationship among these trends likely reflects the influence of changing behaviors on changes in beliefs. However, the micro-level evidence of important effects of ideas on subsequent behavior is also consistent with the conclusion that some of the association among these trends is the product of ideational influences on family change.

Ideational shifts in the United States are best documented beginning in the early 1960s. That decade saw the spread of family ideas favoring individual freedoms and a norm of tolerance, a change that may have stabilized, but has not reversed. Not only did that change probably fuel

changes in family behaviors, it may also have strengthened the association between ideas and family behaviors. As societal-level values become more varied and a broader range of family behaviors is considered acceptable, individuals are likely to be increasingly free to act on their own attitudes and preferences in making behavioral decisions (Barber, Pearce, et al., 2002; Bellah et al., 1985; Bumpass, 1990; Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988; Preston, 1987; Thornton, 1989; Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). This change increases the likelihood ideas will act as an important force in shaping family behavior. The evidence reviewed earlier shows that attitudes and values have strong intergenerational consequences, affecting the behavior of both individuals and their children. As a result, recent changes over time in attitudes and values documented here are likely to continue to shape family behaviors for some time to come. Thus we leave this summary of U.S. research on the ideational influences on family behaviors with the strong conviction that consequences of ideational change and variation deserve to be one of the very highest priorities in research on the family, both in the United States and elsewhere around the world.

AUTHOR NOTE

Authorship of this chapter is given in alphabetical order.

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