

## **Partners and parity: fertility in higher-order unions in Belgium and the US**

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### **Research focus.**

Our study investigates childbearing behavior in first and higher order unions focusing on recent experience in Belgium. Building on prior research we examine the impact of step-children on subsequent parity transitions both in unions (cohabitations and re/marriages) and outside them. Within the constraints of available data, we provide cross-national comparisons with the United States. Thematically we extend prior studies of the fertility within step-families by contrasting the objective living conditions of children born into different union types and varying sibling histories.

### **Rationale.**

With the continuing evolution of family dynamics in Western societies, cohabitation, divorce and remarriage have become common experiences. The relative proportion of the individual life course spend in second and higher order unions has increased accordingly. Decisions about childbearing and parenthood occur in a more complex framework. In the first instance these shifts would appear to put downward pressure on aggregate fertility level since gaps between unions may decrease exposure to risk and discontinuities in union histories may occasion reevaluation of fertility plans and delay childbearing. Uncertainty about the longevity of one's current union may play some role.

Moreover children from prior relationships may have their own impact on childbearing in new unions, a possibility that is occurring with increasing frequency in the United States and across Europe. In the last fifteen years a score or more studies investigating this relationship have appeared in literature. Results have been mixed with some reports of negative effects of step- children on subsequent fertility with others findings little substantive impact at all. Yet in other contexts, step-children have been conceptualized as a prenatal force within a new union, leading to the intriguing study title, "Union Instability as an Engine of Fertility?" These disparate patterns of "effects" should not be considered surprising given the complex meanings of children and parenthood in the contemporary society. The diverse theoretical referents found in discussions of these patterns include "opportunity costs", symbolic commitment, social capital and even evolutionary advantage

Despite a core concern with fertility in higher order unions and its relationship to prior childbearing, the research literature in this domain reveals many different stands of

emphasis involving variation in statistical models, time frame, geographic coverage and the structural complexity of family forms under consideration. (Due to space considerations we cite only a couple of illustrative studies.) For example, in work such as that represented by Stewart's (2002) important study based on U, the substantive focus is as much devoted to birth intentions as actual behavior. Where actual behavior is modeled her emphasis tends to fall rather narrowly on differential hazard rates associated with the step-children. The results are informative but they tend to be a step or so removed from a general concern with the particular implications of step-children and multiple unions for completed family size and period fertility levels. By contrast the study of Prskawetz and his colleagues of step-family formation in 19 European countries is concerned less with the hazards (intensities) of births in first and higher order unions and more with the how the pathways or transitions leading to step-family formation (exposure) vary across the European continent. This approach allows for a clearer vision of how important childbearing in higher order unions may be but obviously sacrifices detailed consideration of the particular cultural and institutional contexts shaping those pathways. We intend to borrow the strengths of both approaches in our analyses.

Our investigation will focus in the first instance on Belgium. For several reasons, this low country makes an excellent case for further study. Divorce rates are comparatively high rivaling those in the United States and cohabitation quite common. Thus the potential salience of fertility in higher order unions for the overall reproductive regime in Belgium is quite high. The total fertility rate in recent years has been in the around 1.6, moderate levels relative to European standards and not at great deal different from period measures for the non-Hispanic white population in the United States. Moreover, Belgium also occupies some of the middle ground in terms of how the welfare state has responded in the realm of family policy. In sum, we think that there are sufficient similarities and differences in the American and Belgium contexts to warrant a systematic comparative study.

### **Data and Methods:**

Our Belgian analysis will in the first instance rely on the Panel Study of Belgian Households (PSBH). The PSBH began in 1992 and 10 subsequent surveys of the of the original panel were fielded through 2002. In initial sampling frame was designed to yield reliable information for the three major cultural/administration division of the country with approximately 1,000 households from Brussels and 2,000 households each from Flanders and Wallon. About 8,000 individuals from nearly four and half thousand families began participation in 1992. Retention rates proved to be typical of longitudinal studies in the West, and a refreshment panel was added during the 7<sup>th</sup> wave of the study. Our preliminary analysis shows that there are sufficient numbers of births and higher order unions in the PSBH study to support the analyses that will make up the core of our study.

For the purposes of comparison with U.S. data we will use the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). In a number of respects this panel survey provides comparable coverage of childbearing and union histories. It has been used in several

important studies of the childbearing in higher order unions (e.g. Stewart, 2002 and Thompson, 1997) and perhaps hundreds of other studies documenting family dynamics and change in the American population. Strengths and weaknesses of the data have been well articulated, and a third wave of data allows for an updating of analyses reported in the aforementioned reports. It is worth noting in this regard that a great deal of the literature on this topic is becoming dated as the behavior under review falls in the decades of the 1980's and 1990's. The second wave of the NFHS was conducted in 1992-1994. (As noted by Stewart many of the study participants were too young too have contributed union spells while in there thirties.)

We will estimate hazard models of the risk of childbearing in both countries specifying the models as closely as possible for both countries. Several approaches have been used in prior research. One can start the exposure period at the beginning of a new union or the last birth with in the current union and treat union specific parity as an independent variable. For purposes of comparison we will estimated the effect of prior children (and whether they were the children of the male or female) along with other theoretically motivated covariates. However this approach tends to obscure transitions between specific parities and to ignore childbearing behavior during non-union spells. In so far as our case base will support the analysis we intend to estimate parity specific models that incorporate union and non-union statuses. This hazard modeling with be contextualized where possible with descriptive analyses concerning the family trajectories that may lead to childbearing (or not) in higher order unions. Unfortunately there is no recent counterpart to the European Family and Fertility Surveys, but we will drawn upon Census and other relevant Belgian data to construct the country-specific setting for step-family formation.

The final dimension to our investigation will consider how the broader family context into which births occur may vary according to the union order and prior fertility history of the women/couple. We can see for example with the PSBH data what the characteristics of the home and neighborhood and the financial living standards of the household beyond just income are at each wave of the study. We can also see something about the way in which parents are interacting with these children. To some extent the research focusing on childbearing in higher order unions has been motivated by the idea that children with step siblings may be experiencing various deprivations that are the consequence of the complexity of their families. The later portion of our work will give us a preliminary view of the extent to which this is the case.