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Illegitimacy

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Illegitimacy

Abstract

Until the 1960s, it was widely assumed that marriage was a universal or nearly universal institution for licensing parenthood. Marriage assigned paternity rights to the fathers (and their families) and guaranteed social recognition and economic support to mothers and their offspring. According to Malinowski (1930), who first articulated "the principle of legitimacy," and to Davis (1939, 1949), who extended Malinowski's theory into sociology, marriage provides the added benefit to children of connecting them to a wider network of adults who have a stake in their long-term development.

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SHELDON STRYKER

ILLEGAL ALIENS/UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS See International Migration.

ILLEGITIMACY Until the 1960s, it was widely assumed that marriage was a universal or nearly universal institution for licensing parenthood. Marriage assigned paternity rights to fathers (and their families) and guaranteed social recognition and economic support to mothers and their offspring. According to Malinowski (1930), who first articulated "the principle of legitimacy," and to Davis (1939, 1949), who extended Malinowski's theory into sociology, marriage provides the added benefit to children of connecting them to a wider network of adults who have a stake in their long-term development.

This functional explanation for the universality of marriage as a mechanism for legitimating parenthood became a source of intense debate in anthropology and sociology during the 1960s. Evidence accumulated from cross-cultural investigations showed considerable variation in marriage forms and differing levels of commitment to the norm of legitimacy (Bell and Vogel 1968; Blake 1961; Goode 1961; Coser 1964). More recently, historical evidence indicates that the institution of marriage was not firmly in place in parts of Western Europe until the end of the Middle Ages (Laslett 1972; Gillis 1985).

The accumulation of contradictory data led Goode (1960, 1971) to modify Malinowski's theory to take account of high rates of informal unions and nonmarital childbearing in many New World nations and among dispossessed cultural minorities. Goode (1971) argued that the norm of legitimacy was likely to be enforced only when fathers possessed wealth and property or when their potential economic investment in child rearing was high. Therefore, he predicted that when "giving a name" to children offers few material, social, or cultural benefits, the norms upholding marriage will become attenuated.

So vast have been the changes in the perceived benefits of marriage since the 1960s in the United

States and most Western nations that even Goode's modification of Malinowski's theory of legitimacy now seems to be in doubt (Davis 1985; Popenoe 1988; Cherlin and Furstenberg 1988). Indeed, the term *illegitimacy* has fallen into disfavor precisely *because* it implies inferior status to children born out of wedlock. The nuclear unit (biological parents and their offspring)—once regarded as the cornerstone of our kinship system—remains the modal family form, but it no longer represents the exclusive cultural ideal, as was the case in the mid-1960s. The incentives for marriage in the event of premarital pregnancy have declined, and the sanctions against remaining single have diminished (Cherlin 1988; Bane and Jarrogowsky 1988; Thornton 1989).

TRENDS IN NONMARITAL CHILDBEARING

Premarital pregnancy has never been rare in the United States or in most Western European nations (Vinovskis 1988; Smith 1978; Goode 1961). Apparently the tolerance for pregnancy before marriage has varied over time and varies geographically at any given time. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, premarital pregnancy almost always led to hasty marriages rather than out-of-wedlock births—even for very young women (Vincent 1961; O'Connell and Moore 1981). Rates of nonmarital childbearing were actually higher in the middle of the nineteenth century in England, Wales, and probably the United States (Clague and Ventura 1968) than a century later. In 1940, illegitimacy was uncommon in the United States, at least among whites. Nonmarital births were estimated at about 3.6 per 1,000 unmarried white women, while the comparable rate for nonwhites was 35.6. For all age groups, and among whites and nonwhites alike, a spectacular rise occurred over the next two decades (Clague and Ventura 1968; Cutright 1972).

In the 1960s and 1970s, nonmarital childbearing rates continued to increase for younger women, albeit at a slower pace, while for women in their late twenties and thirties rates temporarily declined. Then, in the late 1970s, nonmarital

childbearing rose again for all age groups and among both whites and African-Americans. Current levels in the United States are unprecedented. Moreover, since rates of marriage and marital childbearing have fallen precipitously since the 1960s, the ratio of total births to single women has shot up (National Center for Health Statistics 1990, Tables 1-31–1-33). More than a quarter of all births (25.7 percent) in 1988 occurred out of wedlock, more than five times the proportion in 1955 (4.5 percent) and nearly twice that in 1975 (14.3 percent). The declining connection between marriage and parenthood is evident among all age groups but is especially pronounced among women in their teens and early twenties. Nearly two-thirds of births to teens and close to one-third of all births to women ages twenty to twenty-four occurred out of wedlock. Virtually all younger blacks who had children in 1988 (over 90 percent) were unmarried, while half of white teens and a quarter of women twenty to twenty-four were single.

Nonmarital childbearing was initially defined as a problem among teenagers and black women (Furstenberg 1991). But these recent trends strongly suggest that the disintegration of the norm of legitimacy has spread to all segments of the population. First the link between marriage and sexual initiation dissolved, and now the link between marriage and parenthood has become weak. Whether this trend is temporary or a more permanent feature of the Western family system is not known. But public opinion data suggest that a high proportion of the population finds single parenthood acceptable. A Roper study (Virginia Slims American Women's Opinion Poll 1985) revealed that 49 percent of women agreed that "There was no reason why single women should not have children and raise them if they want to."

Citing similar attitudinal evidence from the National Survey of Families and Households in 1987–1988, Bumpass (1990) concludes that there has been an "erosion of norms" proscribing nonmarital childbearing. He concludes that this behavior is not so much motivated by the desire to have children out of wedlock as it is by the reduced commitment to marriage and the limited

sanctions forbidding nonmarital childbearing. Bumpass argues that much of the nonmarital childbearing is unplanned and ill-timed.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF NONMARITAL CHILDBEARING

Although extensive research exists on the economic, social, and psychological sequelae of single parenthood for adults and children, relatively little of this research distinguishes between the consequences of marital disruption and nonmarriage (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986; Furstenberg 1989; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). A substantial literature exists on the consequences of nonmarital childbearing, but it is almost entirely restricted to teenage childbearers (Hofferth and Hayes 1987; Chilman 1983; Moore, Simms, and Betsey 1986; Miller and Moore 1990). It is difficult, then, to sort out the separate effects of premature parenthood, marital disruption, and out-of-wedlock childbearing on parents and their offspring.

Nonmarital childbearing most certainly places mothers and their children at risk of long-term economic disadvantage (McLanahan and Booth 1989). Out-of-wedlock childbearing increases the odds of going on welfare and of long-term welfare dependency (Duncan and Hoffman 1990). The link between nonmarital childbearing and poverty can probably be traced to two separate sources. The first is "selective recruitment," that is, women who bear children out of wedlock have poor economic prospects before they become pregnant, and their willingness to bear a child out of wedlock may also reflect the bleak future prospects of many unmarried pregnant women, especially younger women (Hayes 1987; Hogan and Kitagawa 1985; Geronimus 1987; Furstenberg 1990). But it is also likely that out-of-wedlock childbearing—particularly when it occurs early in life—directly contributes to economic vulnerability because it reduces educational attainment and limits a young woman's prospects of entering a stable union (Hofferth and Hayes 1987; Trussell 1988; Furstenberg 1991).

If nonmarital childbearing increases the risk of

lengthy periods of poverty for women and their children, it is also likely that it restricts the opportunities for intra- and intergenerational mobility of families formed as single-parent units. Growing up in poverty restricts access to health, high-quality schools, and community resources that may promote success in later life (Ellwood 1988; Wilson 1987). Apart from the risks associated with poverty, some studies have shown that growing up in a single-parent family may put children at greater risk because they receive less parental supervision and support (McLanahan and Booth 1989; Dornbush 1989). As yet, however, researchers have not carefully distinguished between the separate sources of disadvantage that may be tied to nonmarital childbearing: economic disadvantage (that could restrict social opportunities or increase social isolation) and psychological disadvantage (that could foster poor parenting practices or limit family support).

Even though nonmarital childbearing may put children at risk of long-term disadvantage, it is also possible that over time the advantages conferred by marriage may be decreasing in those segments of the population that experience extremely high rates of marital disruption (Bumpass 1990). Moreover, the social and legal stigmata once associated with nonmarital childbearing have all but disappeared in the United States and many other Western nations (Glendon 1989). Over time, then, the hazards associated with nonmarital childbearing (compared with ill-timed marital childbearing) for women and their children could be declining (Dechter and Furstenberg 1990).

NONMARITAL CHILDBEARING AND PUBLIC POLICY

Growing rates of nonmarital childbearing in the United States and many Western nations suggest the possibility that the pattern of childbearing before marriage or between marriages may be spreading upward into the middle class. In Scandinavia, where marriage has declined most dramatically, it is difficult to discern whether formal matrimony is being replaced by a *de facto* system of informal marriage (Hoem and Hoem 1988). If

this were to happen, the impact on the kinship system or the circumstances of children might not be as dramatic as some have speculated. But if the institution of marriage is in serious decline, then we may be in the midst of a major transformation in the Western family.

The weakening of marriage has created confusion and dispute over parenting rights and responsibilities. A growing body of evidence indicates that most nonresidential biological fathers, especially those who never marry, typically become disengaged from their children (Furstenberg and Nord 1985; Setzer, Schaeffer, and Charng 1989; Teachman 1990). Most are unwilling or unable to pay regular child support, and relatively few have constant relationships with their children. Instead, the costs of child rearing have been largely assumed by mothers and their families, aided by public assistance. A minority of fathers do manage to fulfill economic and social obligations, and some argue that many others would do so if they had the means and social support for continuing a relationship with their children (Smollar and Ooms 1987). Some researchers observe that the role of biological fathers is often assumed by surrogates, who may come to assume some or most paternal responsibilities (Mott 1990). In short, it is possible that social parenthood is becoming more important than biological parenthood.

Nevertheless, the uncertain relationship between biological fathers and their children has created a demand for public policies to shore up the family system. Widespread disagreement exists over specific policies for readdressing current problems. Advocates who accept the current reality of high levels of nonmarriage and marital instability propose more generous economic allowances and extensive social support to women and their children to offset the limited economic role of men in disadvantaged families (Ellwood 1988). Critics of this approach contend that such policies may further erode the marriage system (Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale 1988). Yet few realistic measures have been advanced for strengthening the institution of marriage (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991).

One policy—enforcement of child support—has attracted broad public support. A series of legislative initiatives culminating in the Family Support Act of 1988 has increased the role of federal and state governments in collecting child support from absent parents (typically fathers) and standardizing levels of child support. Some states, notably Wisconsin and New York, have designed but not yet implemented measures for creating a child support assurance system that will guarantee payments to single mothers and their children. It is too early to tell whether these sweeping measures will succeed in strengthening the economic contributions of fathers who live apart from their children. And, if it does, will greater economic support by absent parents reinforce social and psychological bonds to their children (Furstenberg 1989; Garfinkel and McLanahan 1991).

As for the future of marriage, few, if any, sociologists and demographers are predicting a return to the status quo or a restoration of the norm of legitimacy. Short of a strong ideological swing favoring marriage and condemning non-marital sexual activity and childbearing, it is difficult to foresee a sharp reversal in present trends (Blankenhorn, Bayme, and Elshtain 1990). Predicting the future, however, has never been a strong point of demographic and sociological research.

(SEE ALSO: *Deviance; Law and Society; Legitimacy*)

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FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, JR.

IMPERIALISM AND COLONIALISM

Imperialism is among the most overused and contested terms in our political vocabulary, so much so that Hancock was led to brand it "a word for the illiterates of social science" (1950, p. 17). Viewed more hopefully, the study of imperialism seems dogged by two conceptual problems: the centrality of politics versus that of economics, and the awkward relationship between *imperialism* and *empire*.

Imperialism was first used in the 1830s to recall Napoleonic ambitions. It gained its classic meaning around the turn of the century as a description of the feverish colonial expansion of Britain, France, Germany, Russia, the United States, and Italy. But the term is seldom confined to formal colonial expansion; in particular, the continuing dependence of much of the third world on Western states and multinational corporations is often understood as neocolonialism or neoimperialism (Nkrumah 1966; Magdoff 1969).

Attempts to distill these diverse usages generally define imperialism as the construction and maintenance of relationships of domination between political communities. Such relations are often seen as explicitly political, either in the narrow sense of direct administrative control or more broadly as formal or informal control over state policy. Economic conceptions of imperialism sometimes develop an analogue to these notions, where relations of economic control or exploitation replace political domination.

This usage should be distinguished from the equation of imperialism with particular modes of production or types of economic systems. Lenin's statement that "imperialism is the monopoly stage

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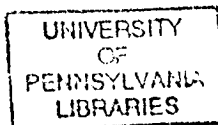
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