Single Parenthood and the Double Standard

FRANCES GOLDSCHEIDER
Brown University

GAYLE KAUFMAN
Davidson College

In the 1950s, when unmarried men and women became parents, the double standard stigmatized women more than men. With the rise in egalitarianism and approval of sex outside of marriage, however, attitudes may have changed so that people view unmarried parenthood by men and women similarly or even stigmatize men. This paper contributes to studies of single parenthood by examining acceptance of unmarried parenthood for men versus women. Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households (1992–1994), we show that there is somewhat greater acceptance of single mothers than single fathers, and women are more accepting than men of single mothers. There is some indication that there may be greater approval over time, given that younger individuals and those who experienced family disruption as children are more accepting of single parenthood. However, there is great variation in attitudes by race, religious participation, and region.

Keywords: attitudes, gender, single fathers, single mothers

Among the tremendous growth in single parent families, the number of single father families is growing even faster than single mother families. In 2000, single father families comprised one in six single parent families compared to one in ten in 1970 (Fields & Casper, 2001). While most single parent families are the result of divorce or separation, a significant proportion of these families are the result of nonmarital childbearing. Indeed, 43% of single mothers and 34% of single fathers have never been married (Fields & Casper, 2001).

Although a majority of people disapproved of unmarried mothers as recently as the late 1980s (Trent & South, 1992), there is clearly greater support for nonmarital

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Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Frances Goldscheider, Department of Sociology, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. Electronic mail: Frances_Goldscheider@brown.edu.

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childbearing than in the past (Barich & Bielby, 1996; Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993). People are less likely to think that nonmarital childbearing is damaging to the social order (Axinn & Thornton, 2000) and more likely to think that it is “doing one’s own thing” (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Teenage boys choose single motherhood as the best option for unmarried pregnant girls above marrying the father, having an abortion, or adoption (Ku, Sonenstein, Lindberg, & Bradner, 1998). Axinn and Thornton (2000) expect that, as nonmarital births increase, attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing will continue to become more positive.

There is no research that examines attitudes toward unmarried parenthood separately for men and women, nor is there research that looks at attitudes toward unmarried fatherhood. It is important to study attitudes toward unmarried fatherhood as well as unmarried motherhood given the increase in these families and the continued existence of gendered expectations. For example, single fathers may be seen as incompetent if they are living with their children, or irresponsible if they are not, producing a more negative image of single fathers than single mothers. On the other hand, men who do well raising children on their own may be given more credit than women simply because initial expectations are low. There is still debate over the characterization of fatherhood versus motherhood in our society. Coltrane (1996) suggests that “the line between fathering and mothering is beginning to blur” (p. 5) as men take on more responsibilities that have traditionally been associated with mothers. Indeed, the evidence suggests that “men can mother” (Risman, 1998). Most single fathers are quite comfortable with their ability to provide child care (Greif, 1985), and studies of single fathers show that they are quite similar to single mothers in their interactions with children (Hall, Walker, & Acock, 1995; Risman, 1998). However, nonresident fathers (whether divorced or never married) are routinely characterized as “deadbeats” or “bad dads” (Furstenberg, 1988) who rarely visit and more rarely pay, although careful studies show that divorced men, at least, pay regularly and frequently overcome barriers erected by their former wives to maintain their relationships with their children (Braver & O’Connell, 1998), a finding that may fuel the fatherhood movement (Horn, Blankenhorn, & Pearlstein, 1999).

This paper examines the determinants of attitudes toward unmarried fatherhood in comparison with unmarried motherhood. Using data from the 1992–1994 wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), we are able to compare the attitudes of men and women toward single mothers and fathers. In our analysis, we also focus on whether the data suggest future increases in approval, as Axinn and Thornton (2000) suggest. We examine the effects of age, education, and childhood family structure as indicators of future change in attitudes and control as well for the major axes of heterogeneity likely to affect such attitudes toward men and women having children outside marriage: race/ethnicity, religion, region, and marital/parental status.

BACKGROUND

Although premarital sex and nonmarital births were not uncommon during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the connection between marriage and childrearing has recently weakened dramatically. In addition, gender roles have continued to
change, moving from a strict division of labor enacted in separate spheres in nineteenth-century middle-class families to a situation in which women and men’s roles became more entangled (Coontz, 1992). By the 1980s, men’s relationship to family responsibilities had become more focused on involved fathering (LaRossa, 1988), although there has remained some sense of ambiguity in conceptualizing fatherhood (Griswold, 1993). Nevertheless, men born as late as the mid-1950s mostly continued to see marriage and fatherhood, along with job and house, as a package deal (Townsend, 2002) to be achieved together. Indeed, Townsend found that the men in his study did not typically consider single parenthood as a possibility but rather felt that “paternity depends on the cooperation of women” (p. 82). In this view, men would only become single fathers as a result of maternal abandonment or death.

Hence, when women become unmarried parents, it is more likely to be the result of their choices than it is for men. Women are far more likely than men to make the decision to divorce (Sweeney, 1997). Unmarried women, but not men, can decide whether to carry a pregnancy to term, making the decision about whether to become mothers, themselves, and also whether their partners should become fathers (Marsiglio, 1998). Single women who choose to become single mothers are normally those who feel that they are emotionally and financially secure (Bock, 2000), and they often experience support from their friends and families (Mannis, 1999). Single men who want children have few options outside of marriage. Nevertheless, some single men would like more power in the decision-making process of their pregnant sex partners (Marsiglio, 1998) or, at least, the right given to women to escape the consequences of an unwanted pregnancy (Goldscheider, 2000).

Does the fact that women can choose to be unmarried parents in a way that most men cannot translate into greater approval of single motherhood than single fatherhood? We think so, and we expect that both men and women will be more approving of single mothers than single fathers. It seems likely that many assume that a woman who bears a child out of wedlock has chosen to assume the full responsibilities of parenthood rather than abort, whereas the men who become unmarried parents are assumed to be imprudent at best and irresponsible at worst. Studies support this difference, as women are less likely than men to emphasize traditional family values linking marriage and parenthood (Amato, 1988; Thornton, 1985) while men, in contrast, prefer marriage to remaining single (Thornton & Freedman, 1982). Specifically, young women are somewhat more likely than young men to view unmarried childbearing in a positive light (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). While this general pattern would suggest that women will be more approving of single mothers than men, it seems likely that men will also be more approving of single fathers than women. Men’s movements that focus on fathers’ rights argue that men should have the right to be single fathers (Messner, 2000), and some argue that fathers are necessary because they are more likely than mothers to teach their children skills such as competitiveness (Popenoe, 1996). Therefore, men may increasingly focus on their rights and abilities as fathers.

Research on attitudes toward unmarried parenthood that differentiates between the situations of men and women is sparse. The major studies of the determinants of and changes in family-related attitudes are forced by data limitations to analyze attitudes toward these family roles for all unmarried parents (rather than for unmarried
mothers and unmarried fathers separately), although they distinguish between the views of men and women (e.g., Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). These studies also normally include unmarried parenthood as one of the attitudes studied, and they find fairly similar patterns as for other family attitudes. We review these findings, noting where appropriate the studies that provide insight into whether people have different attitudes toward unmarried parenthood for men and women.

Is there evidence that attitudes toward unmarried parenthood are likely to become more positive in the future, as Axinn and Thornton (2000) suggest? One indicator is likely to be age; younger people with more positive attitudes will gradually replace older people with their more restrictive attitudes via cohort succession. Older individuals tend to hold more traditional attitudes about marriage and family than their younger counterparts (Pagnini & Rindfuss 1993; Thornton, 1985), and those who are older are more disapproving of unmarried motherhood (Trent & South, 1992). However, such differences may reflect life course processes and the increased conventionalism that often accompanies increased age.

Another harbinger of changes in attitudes is the increase in education that, although it has almost halted among the young, is still rapid among older persons (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999). Higher education is linked with openness to a wider range of family types and with greater gender equality. Studies have shown that the more educated are also more accepting of nonmarital childbearing (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993). Similarly, having experienced a nontraditional family structure in childhood is a very rapidly growing experience in the adult population, and it has been shown to reduce disapproval of unconventional family forms (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Thornton & Camburn, 1989). Those whose parents divorced value marriage less, feel more positive about remaining single, and in early studies have been found to approve of nonmarital childbearing more often than those from intact families (Amato, 1988; Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Trent & South, 1992). Together, the effects of these three factors (age, education, and childhood family structure) should provide some evidence of the likelihood of increased approval for unmarried parenthood.

It is also important to control for other factors likely to affect attitudes toward unmarried parenthood. Blacks and Hispanics have higher rates of unmarried parenthood than non-Hispanic whites (Bumpass & McLanahan, 1989). Furthermore, the increase in unmarried parenthood has been particularly sharp among African Americans (Fitch & Ruggles, 2000; Koball, 1998), leading Furstenberg (1996) to suggest that marriage—but not parenthood—may be a “luxury consumer item” for low-income African Americans. However, the difference in the nonmarital birth rate between blacks and whites has decreased over the last several decades (Ruggles, 1997), and Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1995) find that African Americans have similar attitudes toward marriage as other racial and ethnic groups, which does not support this interpretation. Nevertheless, other studies show that blacks are more accepting of nonmarital childbearing (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Trent & South, 1992).

The evidence on Hispanics is also inconsistent. Latinos place a higher value on marriage than do other groups (Oropesa & Gorman, 2000; Tucker, 2000), which would suggest that they are less likely to approve of unmarried parenthood for men or women. However, studies of Hispanic adolescents and adults find that they are less,
not more, disapproving of nonmarital fertility (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Trent & South, 1992).

Religious affiliation and religiosity have been linked across a wide variety of family domains with greater support for traditional familism. Research has shown that the more religious disapprove of nonmarital childbearing (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993) and nonfamily living (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999), while supporting marriage (Sweet & Bumpass, 1990) and marital stability (Thornton, 1985; Thornton & Camburn, 1989). Religious involvement may also increase family-based sexism (Coltrane, 2001).

Life course experiences often shape attitudes about family life. As adults, those who are married parents tend to be most supportive of this lifestyle and to be more disapproving of unmarried parenthood (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993) and divorce (Thornton, 1985). Parents tend to have more traditional attitudes concerning marriage and family than those without children (Morgan & Waite, 1987). In contrast, those who are separated or divorced hold less positive attitudes toward marriage (Thornton, 1985; Thornton & Freedman, 1982) and are more approving of unmarried motherhood (Trent & South, 1992).

Finally, despite overall convergence, regional differences in the United States remain in a wide range of family-related attitudes. The South often appears the most familistic, with southerners being more positive about marriage and less positive about divorce and nonmarital childbearing (Trent & South, 1992). There is some suggestion that these traditional attitudes are more prevalent among southern men than women (South, 1993). Those in the far West have been in the forefront of many family-related changes, particularly the increase in divorce, based, perhaps, on the higher levels of support for individualistic behavior in that region (Campbell, 1978). However, Trent and South (1992) find that those living in the North are less disapproving of nonmarital fertility than those living in the West. Given this heterogeneity, our analysis of the importance of family roles will control for these factors.

STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESES

The purpose of our study is to examine attitudes toward single motherhood and single fatherhood. We develop a typology of four categories to describe people’s attitudes, two of which make no distinction by gender and two that do. The first category we call “egalitarian unlinked attitudes,” which includes those who approve of parenthood outside of marriage for both men and women. This category therefore indicates those who do not believe marriage and parenthood must be linked and are equal in their assessment of this for men and women. The second category we call “egalitarian linked attitudes,” which includes those who disapprove of parenthood outside of marriage for both men and women, thereby indicating those who believe marriage and parenthood must be linked both for men and women.

The two “unlinked” versions differ by beliefs on whether men or women should be married before becoming parents. Those who hold attitudes we call “unlinked for women” approve of single motherhood but not single fatherhood. This attitude likely reflects some sort of essentialism (women are better parents); clearly, however, they are suggesting that marriage and parenthood need not be linked as closely for women.
as for men. The final category we call “unlinked for men,” which includes those who approve single fatherhood but not single motherhood. This outlook likely reflects the “double standard” in which men were permitted to be more sexually promiscuous than women, together with the assumption that the burden (and the shame) of caring for a nonmarital child would fall on women. The attitude therefore suggests that marriage and parenthood need not be linked for men as closely as for women.

We propose the following hypotheses:

- Women will be more accepting of single motherhood (unlinked for women) than men, whereas men will be more accepting of single fatherhood (unlinked for men) than women, although each will be more approving of single motherhood than single fatherhood.
- Young persons, the more educated, and those who experienced a single parent family in childhood will be more accepting of single parenthood for both men and women (egalitarian unlinked) than their counterparts, suggesting that approval of single parenthood will continue to increase.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

We perform cross-tabular and multivariate analyses of the determinants of attitudes toward unmarried parenthood. Our analysis is based on a set of cross-sectional data that contains excellent family-related measures of attitudes and behaviors. It is the only nationally representative data source available that has ever asked about attitudes toward single fatherhood as well as single motherhood, separately for men and women. As such, it is an important resource. Nevertheless, our interpretations would be stronger if we had data on changes in attitudes over time, particularly since the 1950s.

SAMPLE

The data for this study come from the 1992–1994 wave of the NSFH, a nationally representative sample of the U.S. population at its first wave in 1987–1988. The second wave obtained a response rate of 82%, with 10,008 of the original primary respondents. Although there was some attrition between Waves 1 and 2, the response rate from the original sampling frame was higher for the second wave (for more information on this survey, see Sweet & Bumpass, 1996). Sample weights were used for all analyses to compensate for the oversampling of certain population groups, including minorities and single parents. Both male and female respondents were queried separately about attitudes toward nonmarital childbearing for “a man” and “a woman.” Questions concerning attitudes were included in a self-administered portion of the survey; 96% answered the questions on attitudes toward unmarried parenthood for men and women.

MEASURES

Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed (on a five-point scale) with the following statements:
1. “It is all right for a man to have a child without being married.”
2. “It is all right for a woman to have a child without being married.”

For most analyses, we combined the last two response categories (“strongly disagree” and “disagree”) as the disapproving single parent response, linking marriage and parenthood, and the first three categories (“strongly agree,” “agree,” and “neither agree nor disagree”) as less clearly disapproving of single parenthood. We then recoded the responses for the pair of statements into a single variable to observe the extent to which people distinguish between “a man” versus “a woman” in this situation. Our dependent variable consisted of the following four categories:

- Egalitarian unlinked: those who agree or are neutral that it is all right for either a man or a woman to have a child outside of marriage.
- Unlinked for women: those who agree or are neutral that it is all right for a woman to have a child outside of marriage but disagree that it is all right for a man to have a child outside of marriage.
- Unlinked for men: those who agree or are neutral that it is all right for a man to have a child outside of marriage but disagree that it is all right for a woman to have a child outside of marriage.
- Egalitarian linked: those who disagree that it is all right for either a man or a woman to have a child outside of marriage.

Our view is that those who are not sure have already taken the big cognitive step of questioning the linkage between marriage and parenthood, justifying theoretically our decision to combine them with those who feel more strongly that linkage is not needed. We tested this assumption by examining the predictors of agreement, disagreement, and “unsure” in a multinomial regression. As we expected, the factors predicting “unsure” were far more similar to those predicting agreement with nonlinkage of marriage and parenthood than predicting disagreement (results can be obtained from the authors by request). Nevertheless, we realize that this dichotomy undoubtedly oversimplifies a more complex reality.

Our independent variables focused most importantly on gender, given our interest in the growth of single fatherhood, followed by our indicators of change (age, education, and childhood family structure) and race/ethnicity, religious participation, marital/parental status, and region, measured at the same interview as the attitudes. Descriptive statistics for these independent variables are shown in Table 1, separately for men and women. Due to missing cases, the sample size is reduced to 10,005.

Many but not all of these measures are self-explanatory. There are four categories for education: less than high school, high school graduate (reference category), some college, and college graduates (including those who earned advanced degrees). Childhood family structure is measured as a dummy variable for those who did not live with both biological parents throughout their childhood.

There are four racial/ethnic groups: those who self-describe as black, Hispanic, and Asian, with the remaining respondents (most of whom self-describe as white) as the reference category. There are such small numbers of other racial/ethnic members
that we combine those who identify as “other” with whites. Religious participation measures frequency of attendance at religious services. Those who never attend religious services, those who attend religious services a few times a year, and those who attend religious services monthly are compared to those who attend religious services at least every week.

Marital/parental status is measured with four categories: those who are married and have children (reference category); those who are married and have no children; those who are not married and have children (coresident or not), most of whom were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (mean)</strong></td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>48.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>18.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (reference category)</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>38.7**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate or higher</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>20.1**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Childhood family disruption (%)</strong></td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>31.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/other (reference category)</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>80.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>11.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious participation (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never attends</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>23.2**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends a few times a year</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>19.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends monthly</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends weekly or more (reference category)</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>39.7**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital/parental status (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, parents (reference category)</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>52.8**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, no children</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>6.0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, parents</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>29.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, no children</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>11.7**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Region (%)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South (reference category)</td>
<td>32.9</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N = 3875 men, 6130 women (10,005 total).
*p < .05; **p < .01.

Note: Percentage totals do not always add up to 100 due to rounding.
previously married; and those who are not married and have no children, most of whom were never married. Region is divided into the four census categories: Northeast, Midwest, South (reference category), and West.

There are some gender differences in these characteristics. Women are significantly older (48.5 versus 46.8), more likely to have experienced childhood family disruption, report more religious participation, and more likely to be single parents. Men report significantly higher levels of education and are more likely to be married parents.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

We first describe respondents’ attitudes about unmarried parenthood, highlighting similarities and differences between men and women, and then examine the patterns shown in the constructed, gender-contrast variable we detailed above. We then turn to the results from multinomial regression models, presenting findings separately for men and women. We also combine the sample of men and women to obtain coefficients for gender (indicated on the tables) and test gender interactions. The significant interactions are also indicated on the tables, and we discuss the important ones in the text.

**RESULTS**

**Descriptive Findings**

There is little consensus and much ambivalence among the respondents to this survey about single parenthood (Table 2). About half of men and women report that it is not all right for women to separate marriage and parenthood, and the rest are distributed fairly evenly between those who feel that unmarried motherhood is all right and those who neither agree nor disagree, which we have combined in our linkage variable for the reasons indicated above. This seems to be a dimension of modern life that, like abortion, is characterized by “contested values” (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996).

Although the differences between men’s and women’s views are not great, the designers of the NSFH2 gained something in asking separately about “a man” and “a woman” with their questions on unmarried parenthood. The largest category for each sex is disapproval of having a child under these circumstances, whether by a man or a woman. There is somewhat more disapproval of men’s behavior on this issue (57.4% of women and 54.6% of men) than disapproval of the women involved. However, there is a significant gender difference in attitudes toward single fathers, with men being more accepting than women. Overall, both sexes are both more approving and less sure in the case of women than of men.

When we reconstruct the information to create the gender contrast typology, showing the extent to which individuals make a gender distinction in the linkage between marriage and parenthood, we see a significant gender difference in attitudes, though the magnitude of this difference is not great. About the same proportions of men and women disapprove of unmarried parenthood for both a man and a woman (43% of men and 44% of women). Slightly more men than women approve (or are
unsure) of unmarried parenthood for both men and women (40% of men and 37% of
women). The overall level of gender differentiation is relatively small, as less than
20% of both men and women feel that single parenthood is acceptable for one gender
but not the other. Both sexes are considerably more likely to say marriage and paren-
thood should be linked for men but need not be linked for women. Learning for which
groups this pattern is most powerful and which groups feel that unmarried parenthood
is acceptable will be an important contribution of the multivariate analysis.

Table 2
Comparison of Men’s and Women’s Attitudes toward Single Mothers
and Single Fathers (Weighted %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single mothers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All right</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not all right</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single fathers*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All right</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not all right</td>
<td>54.6</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typology linking marriage and parenthood*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian, unlinked</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlinked for women</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlinked for men</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egalitarian, linked</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 3733 men, 5874 women (9607 total)
*p < .05.
Note: Percentage totals do not always add up to 100 due to rounding.

Who is more likely to approve of parenthood outside of marriage for men and for
women? Are there clear “leaders” in the erosion of this linkage, and are the patterns
the same among men as among women? To address these questions, we turn to our
multivariate analysis.

Multivariate Results

The results of our multinominal logistic regression analyses of men and women’s
attitudes about whether it is all right for a man/woman to have a child without being
married are complex, and the full results are shown in Table 3. The results are pre-
sented separately for men and women, with indications where the factors influencing
the attitudes of men and women differ significantly, based on testing interactions in a
pooled model. The coefficients are the result of tests against egalitarian, linked views
(it is not all right for either men or women to be unmarried parents). We also tested
other contrasts to distinguish factors that influence gendered versus egalitarian perspectives. The results of these tests are discussed in the text where appropriate.

**Gender.** The first surprise in the results is the weakness of the gender effect; only one of the three possible differences in attitudes between men and women is significant. Women are more likely to hold the “unlinked for women” view that it is all right for women but not men to have a child while unmarried (compared with the view that it is not all right for either). But women are no less likely than men to support the “unlinked for men” view that it is all right for men but not women. And there are no differences between men and women in the two egalitarian views; men and women are no more likely to see marriage and parenthood unlinked for either men or women than they are to see them as linked for both sexes. Gender is simply not a strong predictor of these views, particularly compared with some of the other dimensions of cleavage.

**Indicators of change.** There is some evidence that views of single parenthood will become more positive in the future, based on the results for age, education, and childhood family structure, and perhaps particularly among women (based on the results for age). Younger people are definitely more supportive of single parenthood for both men and women than are older people, and this is particularly the case among women. However, younger people are also more supportive of the view that it is all right for women but not for men and, more surprisingly, also more supportive of the view that it is all right for men but not for women—the double standard. These puzzling patterns apply to both men and women; the oldest respondents hold the most traditional view that single parenthood is not all right for either men or women, while younger people are significantly more likely to espouse each of the other positions in the typology.

Among women, age has a significantly greater effect vis-à-vis egalitarian linkage and a significantly smaller effect vis-à-vis the “unlinked for men” position, indicating that gender differences are likely to be greatest among younger people. But whether this result portends change and sexual division or a different life course effect, with men moving more rapidly away from the double standard and women moving from their egalitarian view that one parent can manage child raising well, requires that these questions be asked again in the future.

The increases in education still occurring across the population do not portend a clear increase in support for single parenthood. Educational level does not distinguish between the two egalitarian groups in any way, with no significant differences by education between those who feel that single parenthood is all right for both men and women and those who feel it is all right for neither men nor women. The most powerful effect in this table related to education appears in the rejection of the double standard (unlinked for men) among the college educated, among both men and women. Those who have graduated from college are less likely to feel that it is all right for men but not for women to become single parents, relative to each of the other three options (tests not shown). There is also evidence those who did not graduate from high school reject the position that single parenthood is all right for women but not for men, but the coefficient is only significant among women.
Table 3

Multinomial Logistic Regression Models of Attitudes toward Single Mothers and Single Fathers (Relative to Egalitarian, Linked)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Egalitarian Unlinked</th>
<th>Unlinked for Women</th>
<th>Unlinked for Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female (pooled model)</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>.117***</td>
<td>-.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>0.321</td>
<td>-.881***</td>
<td>-.964***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.049***</td>
<td>-.032***</td>
<td>-.025***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (ref. = high school grad.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>-.151</td>
<td>-.068</td>
<td>-.381**b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>-.072</td>
<td>-.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate or higher</td>
<td>-.032</td>
<td>-.014</td>
<td>-.689***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood family disruption</td>
<td>0.305***</td>
<td>0.311**</td>
<td>-.241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity (ref. = white/other)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.927***</td>
<td>0.380</td>
<td>0.407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.448**</td>
<td>0.292</td>
<td>0.575*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>-.762</td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>-2.183*b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious participation (ref. = weekly)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never attends</td>
<td>1.906***</td>
<td>1.303***</td>
<td>0.485**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends a few times a year</td>
<td>1.536***</td>
<td>0.905***</td>
<td>0.238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attends monthly</td>
<td>0.939***</td>
<td>0.747***</td>
<td>0.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital/parental status (ref. = married parents)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married, no children</td>
<td>0.094</td>
<td>0.140</td>
<td>-.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, parents</td>
<td>0.905***</td>
<td>0.453**</td>
<td>0.254*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, no children</td>
<td>0.321**</td>
<td>0.370*</td>
<td>-0.531*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region (ref. = south)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>0.853***</td>
<td>0.279</td>
<td>0.713***a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>0.468***</td>
<td>0.290*</td>
<td>0.486***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>0.611***</td>
<td>0.471***</td>
<td>0.274*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (difference from 0).

ap < .01.

bp < .05 (difference between men and women).
The growing experience of childhood family disruption provides perhaps the least equivocal indication that attitudes toward single parenthood will continue to become more positive, although the magnitude of the effects are not large. Those with this experience, which normally means living with a single mother, are significantly more likely to choose the egalitarian unlinked option that it is all right for both men and women to be unmarried parents. However, they are also more likely to choose the option of saying that it is all right for women but not men. This result suggests that they feel some resentment toward their fathers for their role in producing or managing single parenthood, consistent with the research that shows that divorce weakens relationships with fathers far more than with mothers (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990).

**Effects of controls.** Part of what makes it difficult to strongly affirm the results for gender and potential change is that the strongest and most consistent factors that discriminate Americans’ attitudes toward single mothers and fathers are those that delineate the cleavages of American society—race, religious involvement, family status, and region. Most of the results are perhaps not surprising. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely than whites to approve of single parenthood for both men and women. Interestingly, while black women are significantly more likely than white women to think that marriage and parenthood need not be linked for women, Hispanic men and women are significantly more likely than their white counterparts to feel that marriage and parenthood need not be linked for men. One last race difference to note is that Asian women, in contrast to black women, are significantly less likely than white women and Asian men to approve of single motherhood.

Religion has a very strong effect on attitudes toward single parenthood. Those who attend religious services less than weekly are more likely than weekly participants to see the link between marriage and parenthood as unnecessary for both men and women, and this effect is particularly strong for those who never attend religious services. Similarly, those who attend religious services less than weekly are more supportive of unmarried parenthood for women only than are weekly attendees. The least religious (those who never attend religious services) are also more likely to support unmarried parenthood for men only. Marital/parental status has a significant effect on attitudes, though the greatest distinction seems to be between those who are married and those who are not. Single men and women, whether parents or not, are more likely than married parents to approve of both men and women having children outside of marriage. Interestingly, single fathers feel more strongly about this than single mothers, while single women without children feel more strongly than single men without children. Single people are also more likely than married parents to think single parenthood is okay for women but not men. The effects of being single on attitudes toward single fathers are a bit more complicated. Not surprisingly, single fathers are significantly more likely than married fathers to feel that marriage and parenthood need not be linked for men. In contrast, single men without children are significantly less likely than married fathers to accept single fatherhood, and this effect is also significantly different for men and women.

Finally, region has a strong effect, with southerners holding the most traditional attitudes. Men and women living in the Northeast, Midwest, and West are all significantly more likely than southerners to think that it is acceptable for both men and
women to have children outside of marriage. Those in the Midwest and West are also more likely to think unmarried parenthood is acceptable only for women. Interestingly, northeastern women are more likely to feel that only unmarried motherhood is acceptable, while northeastern men are more likely to feel that only unmarried fatherhood is acceptable, and these gender differences are significant.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study is to examine attitudes toward single parents, and its main contribution lies in its distinction between single motherhood and single fatherhood. While the assumption that children should be born within a marital union remains strong, a substantial proportion of men and women feel it is all right for either a woman or a man or both to become single parents. Our goal is to shed light on these differences and the factors that contribute to them.

Gender is our primary focus in examining issues involving single parenthood. With the emphasis on separate spheres in the nineteenth century, particularly for middle-class whites, men and women’s roles occupied different spaces. Whereas men occupied the public sphere of work, women occupied the private sphere of home. This emphasis on home life for women ensured that marriage and children would be more important for women’s lives.

The growth of individualism over familism has often been more focused on women, for women’s roles (at work) have changed more rapidly than men’s roles (at home). The result, in the years since the great increase in female labor force participation got underway, has been marriages in which women have added employment to their domestic responsibilities faster than men have relieved them of the latter. Hence, marriage came to benefit men more than women. While most women still want to marry, and may spend quite a bit of time in this preoccupation, they are likely to realize that they do not need to be married to have children. At the same time, men are still oriented to the package deal (Townsend, 2002). Both men and women agree that it is more acceptable for women than for men to become single parents, possibly acknowledging the emotional and financial capabilities of single mothers (Bock, 2000). However, as hypothesized, women tend to be relatively more supportive of single mothers, whereas men support single fathers as much as single mothers. Despite the greater difficulties single men face in “having” children, they may be becoming more aware of their role in the procreative process (Marsiglio, 1998). Still, it is noteworthy that there is no significant gender effect for “egalitarian unlinked” or “unlinked for men” attitudes. While earlier studies showed that men were more likely than women to stress traditional family values linking marriage and parenthood (Amato, 1988; Thornton, 1985), our study suggests men may be equally accepting of single parenthood in general and single fatherhood in particular.

As expected, younger individuals are more accepting of unmarried parenthood, which is consistent with Trent and South’s (1992) finding regarding unmarried motherhood. This result suggests that attitudes are shifting toward a more approving yet egalitarian outlook on unmarried parenthood. Interestingly, younger women are especially likely to identify with “unlinked for women” attitudes and younger men with
“unlinked for men” attitudes. It may be that younger women and men may be more open to considering becoming single parents themselves.

We find partial support for our hypothesis regarding education. Women who did not complete high school are less supportive of single motherhood than single fatherhood. It seems likely that this group is the least prepared for single parenthood, while at the same time more at risk themselves of becoming single parents given the greater rates of both nonmarital childbearing and divorce among the least educated. This result may thus be based on experience. In contrast, the rejection by college-educated men and women of the “unlinked for men” position is more likely to be ideological, suggesting that they view with distaste the vestiges of the double standard in such attitudes. Childhood family disruption has the expected positive effect on acceptance of single parenthood. Adults today are increasingly likely to have lived with a single parent at some time during their childhood, and nonmarital births are a major contributing factor (Fields & Casper, 2001).

Other patterns to take note of are the effects of race/ethnicity, religious participation, marital/parental status, and region. Not surprisingly, blacks and Hispanics are more supportive of single parenthood than whites, probably reflecting the greater occurrence of single parenthood among these minorities. Still, it is interesting to point out that Hispanic men and women are more supportive of men having children outside of marriage, relative to women. This might suggest that the double standard and traditional notions of the importance of family for women are still strong among Hispanics. The effect of religious participation is as expected, with those who attend services weekly most likely to value the connection between marriage and parenthood.

It is also no surprise that those who are single are more supportive of single parenthood, and single motherhood, than married parents. However, being single has a more complex relationship with men’s attitudes toward single fatherhood. Single fathers view single fatherhood favorably, most likely based on their own personal experiences with fatherhood. On the other hand, single men without children are less likely than single women without children to support single fatherhood. These men may still be seeking the package deal, with concerns about any departure from this path. As with the religious and married parents, southerners are more likely to feel that marriage and parenthood should be linked. Nevertheless, northeastern men and women may not be in agreement on the relative acceptance of unmarried motherhood versus unmarried fatherhood. Northeastern women favor unmarried motherhood significantly more than men, while northeastern men favor unmarried fatherhood significantly more than women. It may be that northeasterners are more individualistic, focusing on the potential of themselves or, at least, members of their own sex.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the data are over ten years old, and attitudes may have changed during this time period. Second, the data are cross-sectional. As such, we can only gain insight into attitudes at this one point in time. It would appear that attitudes toward single parents are changing, but we cannot be definitive about changes in attitudes toward single mothers versus single fathers given the unique nature of these survey questions.

Future research might address these limitations by collecting more data on attitudes over a period of time. We might be better able to track trends in attitudes with
more systematic and sustained data collection. In addition, it would be interesting to examine whether attitudes toward single parents vary based on the circumstances of the single parent. For example, are people more supportive of divorced single parents or never married single parents, and how does this vary by gender of the single parent? Finally, it seems as though there might be a connection between attitudes and behaviors. Future research should consider how attitudes toward single fathers and single mothers shape subsequent family formation behaviors.

Is parenthood within marriage as an institution becoming more optional, or even possibly a luxury (Furstenberg, 1996)? Will attitudes toward single motherhood and single fatherhood keep up with the trends in these behaviors? The current study has provided a unique look at attitudes toward single parents by distinguishing between single mothers and single fathers. As single fathers represent an ever-increasing proportion of single parents, special attention should be given to changes in attitudes toward single fathers and the possible factors associated with this trend.

REFERENCES


