

THE RETREAT FROM MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD

Examining the Causes and
Consequences of Declining Rates

Edited by Sampson Lee Blair
and Zheng Mu

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES
IN FAMILY RESEARCH

VOLUME 30

THE RETREAT FROM MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD

CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN
FAMILY RESEARCH VOLUME 30

**THE RETREAT FROM
MARRIAGE AND
PARENTHOOD: EXAMINING
THE CAUSES AND
CONSEQUENCES OF
DECLINING RATES**

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2025

Editorial matter and selection © 2025 Sampson Lee Blair and Zheng Mu.
Individual chapters © 2025 The authors.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83549-307-6 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83549-306-9 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83549-308-3 (Epub)

ISSN: 1530-3535 (Series)



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FOREWORD

Early in 2024, the global population finally surpassed 8 billion. This moment sparked considerable debate among demographers and sociologists, as it again raised concerns about the growing population and the consequences, thereof. Such concerns were hardly new, however, as researchers in the 1960s and 1970s had expressed considerable alarm about increasing population size. On the global scale, it appeared that fertility rates were rising at a rapid rate, while mortality and morbidity rates were on the decline. Within accompanying increases in longevity, the general sentiment was that the world was on a reckless path of population growth which would only end with horrible consequences (e.g., starvation, global war). Of course, the feared explosion of population growth, while statistically possible, did not come to pass. It is ironic, to say the least, that many contemporary researchers are now expressing concerns that the global population may soon be headed in the opposite direction – shrinking, rather than increasing, due to massive shifts in fertility patterns.

The fears expressed in the 1960s and 1970s about rapid population growth were based upon prevailing marriage and fertility patterns of previous decades, wherein the majority of individuals generally saw marriage and childbearing as both desirable and necessary to their sense of accomplishment as adults. However, these same decades were also the time in which substantial variations in marriage and fertility began to transpire. Divorce, once regarded as almost a taboo thing to do, became increasingly viewed as acceptable, thus lending to increases in separation and divorce rates. Cohabitation, wherein adults could live together without being legally married to one another, was also once regarded as immoral and unacceptable by societal standards, quickly became not only permissible, but was eventually viewed as an integral part of a lasting relationship. And, of course, fertility rates also began to shift significantly during the 1960s and 1970s, as the “baby boom” period came to an end and the “baby bust” period, as made evident by sharp declines in fertility rates, began.

Family sociologists have long posited that, as a social institution, the family is subjected to all prevailing changes in society. As such, the structure of the family, along with its accompanying norms, does not remain static and unchanging. Instead, the family is a very dynamic entity which has long been regarded as the original social institution. William J. Goode, the prominent family researcher, proposed that the family will necessarily change as societies, themselves, change over time. He contended that, as societies modernize, populations will begin to shift toward living in urban areas, educational attainment will become a primary goal of young people, and geographic mobility (due to employment) will become increasingly the norm. All of these changing factors, Goode argued, will make the nuclear form of the family become the more “efficient” form, and that the

extended family, while still present, will become less central to the lives of most individuals. His predictions about family and modernization can certainly be seen in the many changes in family structures and norms which have occurred around the globe over the past century. Seemingly, societal modernization has become synonymous with declines in marriage and fertility, while also being associated with increases in cohabitation, childlessness, and singlehood.

There are, of course, many variations in these patterns which need to be recognized. In regard to childbearing, most modernized nations have clearly experienced substantial declines in fertility. Many countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, have undergone dramatic decreases in their respective fertility rates, leading their governments to offer incentives to young couples to bear children. These incentives, along with other similar campaigns, have largely proved to be ineffective. In other countries, such as Nigeria, Uganda, and Angola, their respective fertility rates are among the highest in the world and are associated with massive population increases. Similarly, while many countries have experienced declines in the proportion of families headed by two parents, many have seen tremendous increases in the numbers of single parent families. In addition, many cohabiting couples (whose lifestyle choice was once regarded as highly individualistic) have children. Such cohabiting households, wherein there are two adults and children, are seemingly indistinguishable from traditional married-couple families.

There is little doubt that societal change and modernization have affected the structure and norms of the family, as posited by William J. Goode. However, our understanding of the many factors which have brought about these contemporary patterns is still limited and absolutely warrants further study. In the same vein, we also need to know more about how these evolving patterns are likely to shape family structures and norms, as time moves forward. In this volume of *Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research*, we have assembled a collection of researches whose works will advance our knowledge in those very areas.

The first part of the volume contains studies which examine the reasons, views, and values toward marriage. In "Challenges and Choices: Unveiling the Motivators Behind Delayed Marriage in Iran," Milad Bagi examines the patterns of marriage postponement in Iran during the period from 1984 through 2022. The findings confirm that young adults are postponing marriage at substantial rates. Among the reasons for men doing so are those related to economic security and stability, such as finding a job, financial concerns, and housing. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to view finding the right partner, educational attainment, and conducive circumstances as their reasons for postponement. In "Understanding the Cognitive and Emotional Processes of Singles from the Perspective of Attachment Theory," Lucija Šutić, Karmen Korda Orlović, Matea Šoštarić, and Margareta Jelić examine the role of attachment dimensions (avoidant and anxious) on maladaptive cognitive and emotional processes in single young adults. Fear of intimacy and low motivation for new relationships were found to be significantly associated with both avoidant and anxious attachment among college students. These complicating factors are regarded as contributing to the appeal of singlehood among young adults.

Yiqing Gan and Wenjing Qin pursue an examination of how Chinese individuals define the purpose of marriage in “Transforming Marriage Purpose in Contemporary China: The Role of Cohort and College Education.” Using data from the Chinese General Social Survey, they find that post-materialistic purposes of marriage have gained prominence among young adults, and that college education is associated with a less traditional view of marriage. Given the rise in educational attainment in China, it appears likely that marriage rates there will continue to decline. In “It’s About Survivors, Not Sex: Exploring Future Aspirations of Undergraduate Survivors of Sexual Assault,” Ioana Podarita and Christina L. Scott examine the impact of sexual violence upon the marriage aspirations of Gen Z. They find that the experience of sexual violence is associated with lower self-esteem and lower optimism toward marriage. Sexual violence was found to affect both females and males, alike, and raises concerns for better social support for victims of sexual assault.

The second part of the volume focuses upon the reasons, views, and values toward parenthood. In “Reasons, Views, and Values Toward Becoming a Parent: A Mixed-Method Examination,” Brittany Stahnke, Morgan Cooley, and Amy Blackstone examine the most prevalent reasons as to why individuals in their sample prompted them to become parents. Among the primary reasons were the love for children, a desire for a family, an interest in creating life, and a basic desire to parent. While such reasons proved to be quite influential, the findings suggest that many parents do not really put much thought into their choice. Karen Benjamin Guzzo and Sarah R. Hayford, in “Subjective Evaluations of Personal and Public Well-Being and Expected Future Childbearing,” assess how individuals’ expectations for having children are influenced by factors such as satisfaction with their own lives, their understanding of challenges facing young people, their beliefs about problems in their community, and their predictions about future COVID-19 outbreaks. Using data from the American Trends Panel, they find that individuals who are more dissatisfied with their own lives are less likely to expect to have children.

In “Understanding the Lowest-Low Fertility of Contemporary China: The Multidimensional Reproductive Beliefs Among Chinese Youth,” Ting Li explores the multifaceted nature of reproductive beliefs among young adults and attempts to provide a comprehensive explanation on China’s ultra-low fertility. Li finds that the birth aspirations of young adults are often affected by a wide array of factors, including those at the macro and micro levels. Many of the prevailing factors of previous generations, such as son preference, are slowly fading but remain salient influences upon fertility plans. Zheng Mu, Mengxin Shi, Yu Zhao, and Chan Zhang examine how marriage and fertility intentions are not necessarily as intertwined in China as previously thought. In “(De)Coupling of Marriage and Fertility Intentions: Evidence From a Survey of College Students in China,” they find that educational performance has a substantial bearing upon students’ marriage and fertility intentions. Women, in particular, are shown to view childbearing as a meaningful individual actualization and to not adhere to traditional standards concerning marriage and childbearing. In “‘I’ll Take One for the Team’: Individual- and Couple-Level Decisions About Sterilization,” Sharon

Sassler, Amanda Jayne Miller, and Katharina Geppert examine the complicated decision-making which precedes the choice to be surgically sterilized. Not surprisingly, many more men had contemplated having a vasectomy, as compared to the number who actually did so. A variety of factors influenced such decisions, including the timing of marriage, monetary costs, and nervousness about the procedure. The role of a partner's encouragement and prompting was also shown to have substantial bearing upon the choice to obtain a vasectomy, underscoring the manner in which such decisions are made both individually and jointly.

The chapters in the third part of the volume examine the diverse nature of marriage and parenthood. Karel Karsten Himawan and Christina Claudia examine the complicated nature of being unmarried in Indonesia. In "Single But Not Singular: Exploring the Diverse Realities of Singleness in Indonesia," they find that marriage postponement is influenced by both situational and dispositional factors. With the traditional boundaries of Indonesian culture, social stigma is often attached to those remaining unmarried, yet these norms are beginning to change. Singleness, they find, should not be viewed as a homogeneous category. In "Navigating Romance: The Enduring Challenges of Black College-Educated Women," Sarah Adeyinka-Skold and Austin Lee probe the barriers to relationship formation among heterosexual, never-married Black college-educated women, along with how they differ by age. For such women, a variety of structural and cultural barriers limit relationship opportunities, with these barriers being more acute for middle-aged women. Many of the women in their sample utilize different strategies to make singlehood more acceptable and enjoyable. Their work underscores the need to better understand the many factors which influence singlehood.

Margaret Gough Courtney examines the fluctuations in marriage and cohabitation in the United States, wherein the former is becoming increasingly more common. In "Trends in Cohabitation and Marriage By Experience of Economic Vulnerability in the United States," she uses data from the Current Population Survey to estimate trends in cohabitation and marriage, along with how economic vulnerability and social welfare participation may be associated with these trends. Economic vulnerability is shown to be a salient predictor of cohabitation, yet the need to consider multiple measures of such are demonstrated. In "Moving Together or Living Apart: Cross-border Couples Between Hong Kong and Shenzhen Under the COVID-19 Pandemic," Xinyu Shi and Jing Song examine how young cross-border couples decided to move together or live apart when the pandemic led to the closure of the border. Among women, individualistic desires, self-development, or relationship satisfaction were factors when couples decided to live apart. Among those who remained together, it was more frequently the woman who was forced to quit her job. Their findings indicate that gender and relationship dynamics are undergoing change within China. Finally, in "Gendered Employment Realities in Dual-Earner Couples: A Framework for Understanding the Differential Effects of Earning Levels for Evaluations of Mothers and Fathers," Ziding Shen and Jody Clay-Warner propose that women's retreat from parenthood may be associated with the disadvantage they face in parenting evaluations, relative to men, in dual-earner couples. They find that

perceived conflict and devotion are positively associated with parenting evaluations, and that working women are regarded as experiencing more work–family conflict.

The valuable research provided by the authors in this volume both reveal many intriguing factors affecting the retreat from marriage and childbearing, around the globe, but also raise many additional questions which warrant further investigation. The declines in marriage and fertility rates, particularly in the global north, have generated considerable debate about the changing nature of the family as a social institution, and also raise concerns about population changes which may yield considerable impacts upon other social institutions. The central factor among all of these issues – change – is going to continue to affect marriage and fertility patterns around the world. We gratefully acknowledge and offer our most sincere appreciation to all of the contributing authors in this volume, along with the many reviewers and the helpful staff at Emerald Publishing. Thank you, one and all!

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