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Marriage and Cohabitation

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Marriage and Cohabitation. By Arland Thornton, William G. Axinn, and Yu Xie. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. x+443. $29.95 (paper).

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Focusing on a cohort from the baby boom generation, Arland Thornton, William G. Axinn, and Yu Xie's *Marriage and Cohabitation* considers factors that influence the timing of marriage and cohabitation in contemporary society. Chapters in the first part of the book address historical perspectives on marriage and conceptual issues in studying decisions to marry or cohabit. Subsequent chapters use data from the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children (IPS) to identify parental and child factors in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood that predict entrance into cohabiting and marital unions. It is clearly an ambitious undertaking for the authors to not only discuss the historic roots of marriage but also to draw parallels between family life in the past and present.

The historical overview addresses the range of factors (e.g., social, economic, religious, and political) that have encouraged marriage and changed the ways in which Americans organized their sexual and romantic lives. Of course, historians have written entire books about these changes. These authors focus on continuity and change in courtship and marriage in Northwestern Europe and colonial America, beginning with the late 1700s. Throughout their discussion they emphasize commonalities across countries rather than differences. For instance, they describe how the church and state gained more authority over the course of recent centuries in regulating marriage and intimate relationships, and how in recent decades, individuals and couples have become more autonomous and flexible in defining their family lives.

This greater latitude that individuals now have in organizing their family lives is reflected in their choices with respect to union formation (e.g., remaining single vs. forming cohabiting and marital unions). Discussions concerning the growth of cohabitation in recent decades typically highlight motivation to cohabit on the part of young adults (e.g., testing compatibility before marriage or benefiting from economies of scale). The authors buttress these discussions with a consideration of how transitions to cohabitation and marriage should be conceptualized and modeled, delineating the assumptions of different strategies for modeling union formation. Both new and experienced researchers estimating models of union formation will find this discussion informative; it is the most thorough and straightforward one I have seen on this topic.

The IPS began in 1962 with a sample of white couples in the Detroit metropolitan area who had recently given birth to a child. Both the mothers and their children were interviewed over a 31-year period, with the final interviews occurring in 1993. These data enable the authors to mea-

sure the entire constellation of factors that impinge upon decisions to form cohabiting and marital unions, including sociability, religiosity, education, employment, earning potential, and career aspirations. Also noteworthy are the numerous points during which data on these factors were collected from mothers and their children. Consequently, the IPS provides information on the grandparents, the early and later lives of parents, and the children from birth up to the period during which they are at risk of union formation. The data allow these authors to explicate pathways through which various factors influence union formation. The discussion of total, direct, and indirect effects offers researchers a refresher on estimating models on intergenerational transmission, regardless of their outcome of interest.

These authors and other researchers have published articles addressing how various factors influence union formation. What is especially about this endeavor is its consideration of the universe of factors that impinge upon union formation, its parallel measures for parents and children at several points in the life course, and its routine consideration of cohabitation (in addition to marriage). Also unique is its exploration of how early dating and sexual activity is related to subsequent union formation; however, an article addressing this issue with more recent data was published in the same year as this book. These authors find that the choice of cohabitation over marriage is strongly related to premarital sexual experience, and that other measured factors fail to explain this association. As they state, "The large positive direct effect is one of the major stories of our book" (p. 199).

Generally speaking, the findings in this study are consistent with those in the literature. For instance, greater earning potential accelerates marriage for men but not women and are inconsequential to cohabitation. At the same time, the analyses also extend current knowledge of union formation due to contributions noted in the previous paragraph. One broader finding is that parental influences have strong and independent effects on union formation, suggesting mechanisms beyond intergenerational transmission of parental traits. A promising direction for future research would be to anchor the analyses around social class, a factor found to more sharply demarcate family life now than in recent decades. Of course, more seasoned researchers can glean information about social class differences from the analyses, but it would be great if the authors explicitly addressed this issue. Another question that could be addressed is whether geographic distance between parents and children weakens intergenerational influences.

The authors (repeatedly) point out limitations of their study, including the broad brushstrokes painted of family life over recent centuries, the inability to identify causal effects, the initial sampling frame of Detroit families, the focus on a single cohort, and the exclusion of minorities. At the end of each chapter is a discussion of how various factors differ in their levels and effects for African-Americans. One thing I noticed im-

mediately is the failure to acknowledge same-sex unions. Until recently, surveys routinely failed to collect information on these unions, and studies of union formation continue to assume that all young adults are at risk of opposite-sex cohabitation and marriage. It is increasingly difficult to discuss greater freedom in family life over the course of recent decades without reference to sexual minorities.

Some minor issues aside, I urge scholars studying families and the life course to check out this book if they have not already. Although this book was published in 2007 and is somewhat dated in its scope (i.e., the analyses do not extend beyond 1993), it has some gems that make it an essential book on academic reading lists.

Family Configurations: A Structural Approach to Family Diversity. By Eric D. Widmer. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2010. Pp. xii+167. $99.95.

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The notion that families are an important site of sociological analysis remains uncontested in the face of debates about how to interpret observed changes in contemporary families. Eric Widmer's *Family Configurations: A Structural Approach to Family Diversity* examines family through the social relationships within family networks. The central goal of the book is to uncover general principles that cut across diverse family types, in an attempt to establish the continued relevance of family as a societal institution with the function of social integration.

The book introduces a configurational perspective based on the notion that families are not defined by institutional criteria, but rather by interdependencies that transcend marital ties, coresidence, or even blood relationships. The emphasis is not only on the existence but also on the nature of ties between social network members within and beyond the nuclear family.

Widmer draws on case studies as well as small and large data sets from the United States and Switzerland to document whom people see as part of their family and the type of relationship they have with these persons. Contemporary families do not have clear, obvious definitions and can best be conceptualized as sets of interdependencies. These interdependencies go beyond notions of financial interdependence and include communication and emotional ties, regardless of actual contact, and may be shaped more by perceived rather than actual support. Analysis of cross-national survey data indicates that individuals across society rely on a variety of people for social support, backing up the claim that social capital extends beyond the nuclear family unit. Examinations of both support and conflict