Emptying the Nest: The United States, 1880 to 2000

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Introduction

The last 150 years have witnessed a remarkable transformation in the living arrangements of the elderly in the United States. In the mid 19th century nearly three quarters of all persons aged 65 or older lived with children; by the end of the 20th century substantially less than one quarter did so. The principal beneficiary of this shift, and emphatically so for men, was the empty nest, a household in which only an aging husband and wife lived.

Why did the empty nest emerge as the modal living arrangement for older persons? Three explanations have been advanced, the first cultural, the second economic, and the third demographic. Cultural explanations argue that household and family arrangements reflect the desire of persons to live in arrangements sanctioned by the norms of their societies or their ethnic or reference groups. Such models countenance a wide variety of family arrangements under the same economic and demographic conditions if cultural norms vary within the population. There is little doubt that certain cultural groups enforce living arrangements (for women for example) quite distinct from those considered normal among other groups. Hence, considerable attention has been given to ethnic differences in the living arrangements of the elderly, said to be based upon norms distinct to the ethnic group to which the older persons and their children belong (Zhou, 1997; Choi, 1999; Giuliano, 2006). While Italians at one time and

Mexicans and Asians more recently have been the chief examples brought forward for a "familistic" ethos that favors joint living arrangements, the living arrangements of African American elderly differ markedly from those of native whites as well (Himes, Hogan, and Eggebean, 1996). For the most part, ethnic differences been attributed to economic and demographic differences, but some scholars still find a cultural explanation plausible (e.g. Choi, 1999).

The historical literature acknowledges broad cultural differences in ideal family arrangements but usually treats norms as period-based (Fletcher, 1970; Smith, 1979). A common historical model argues for a chronological transition in norms: in the past, extended households were common and valued and, over time, people shifted toward a preference for nuclear settings. A strong argument for historical shifts in norms has been brought forth by Ruggles, who sees a pronounced change in the early 20th century, when an opposing ideal of autonomy took hold (e.g. Ruggles, 1994a; 1996). Household extension was more likely in the nineteenth century United States among wealthy households. Thus, those most able to choose the households they preferred chose to extend. Under these normative standards, improved economic conditions during the 20th century should have led to more extended households, rather than fewer, and the rise of the empty nest in the 20th century implies a strong shift in norms.

Economic arguments are founded on the fact that substantial declines in the tendency for the elderly in the United States (and to a degree in other societies) to live with their children correspond well to improvement in the elderly's economic status. From this perspective, utility has always been best served by nuclear family arrangements; once economic status reached a necessary critical level, the opportunity for

separate living was seized upon (e.g. Michael, Fuchs, and Scott, 1980). Proponents of economic explanations are attracted especially to public and private pension systems, which arose in the mid20th century. The guaranteed stream of benefits that pensions provide reduces the uncertainty that undermines even the wealthier elderly's calculations about how long they will have to support themselves (Bethencourt and Rios-Rull, 2005; Costa, 1997; Gratton, 1996; McGarry and Schoeni, 2000). In a novel twist on the economic argument, one that refutes his earlier argument for the importance of normative shifts, Ruggles (2005) argues that attention on the elderly's economic status is misplaced. What matters is the economic status of adult children; when they have the capacity to live well on their own, they leave the parental household, creating the empty nest by their preference for independent living rather than that of the elderly.

Demographic arguments shift the debate from decisions about housing the elderly to decisions about having kids: declines in fertility (beginning in the 19th century and continuing almost without interruption into the 21st) simply reduced the availability of family members with whom the elderly could reside (Kobrin 1976; Pratt et. al., 1984; Treas, 1977). Moreover, rising levels of divorce or nonmarriage and childlessness, or an early age for last birth, are all conditions that could affect the rate of cohabitation across generations. For some observers the increased pressure upon members of the younger generation to maintain norms of support led to wide public support for pension programs that would allow the elderly to reside independently (Haber and Gratton 1994), a proposition that marries the demographic argument to the economic one.

An Analysis of Census Data, 1880 to 2000

Census data have provided one source for examination of the issues brought forth in the contentious literature. They possess the distinct advantages of reflecting the living arrangements of all persons in the United States and of providing highly similar information on living arrangements across a very long period of time. Their disadvantages are equally manifest: they lack a number of important variables (economic status, for example, is poorly measured in most historical censuses) and the series is cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal.

What can such data tell us about the historical transition in living arrangements and the possible causes for the striking changes observed? Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate the well-known emptying of the nest for older men and women.

Figure 1: All Men 65 and Over, Empty Nest vs. With Children

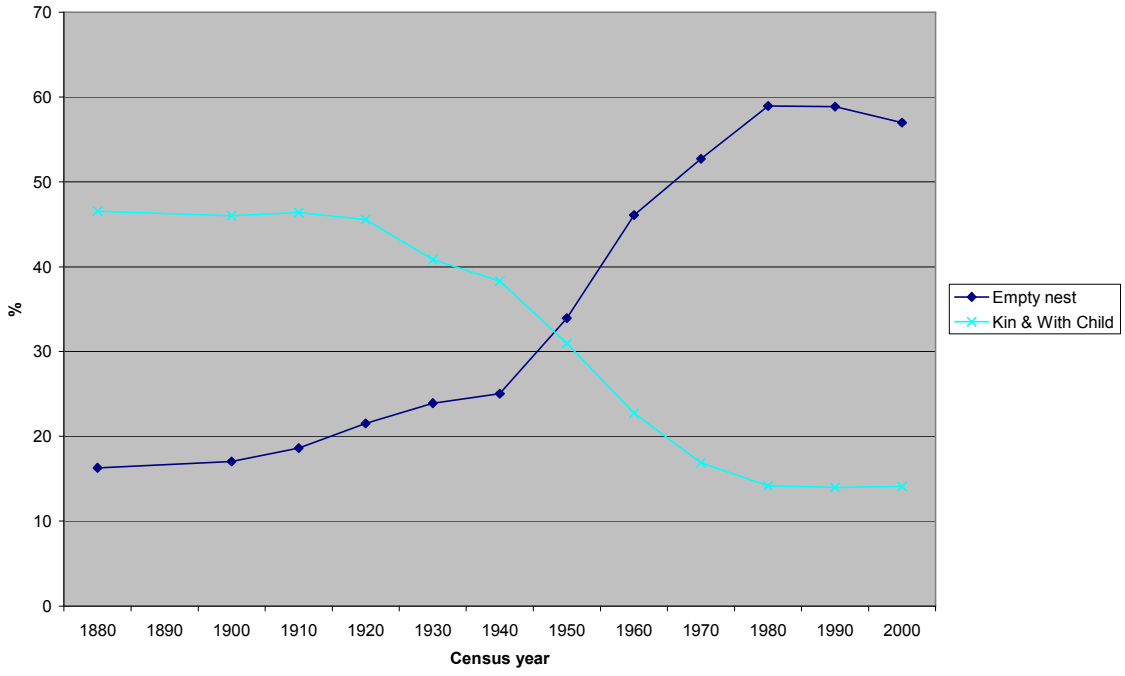
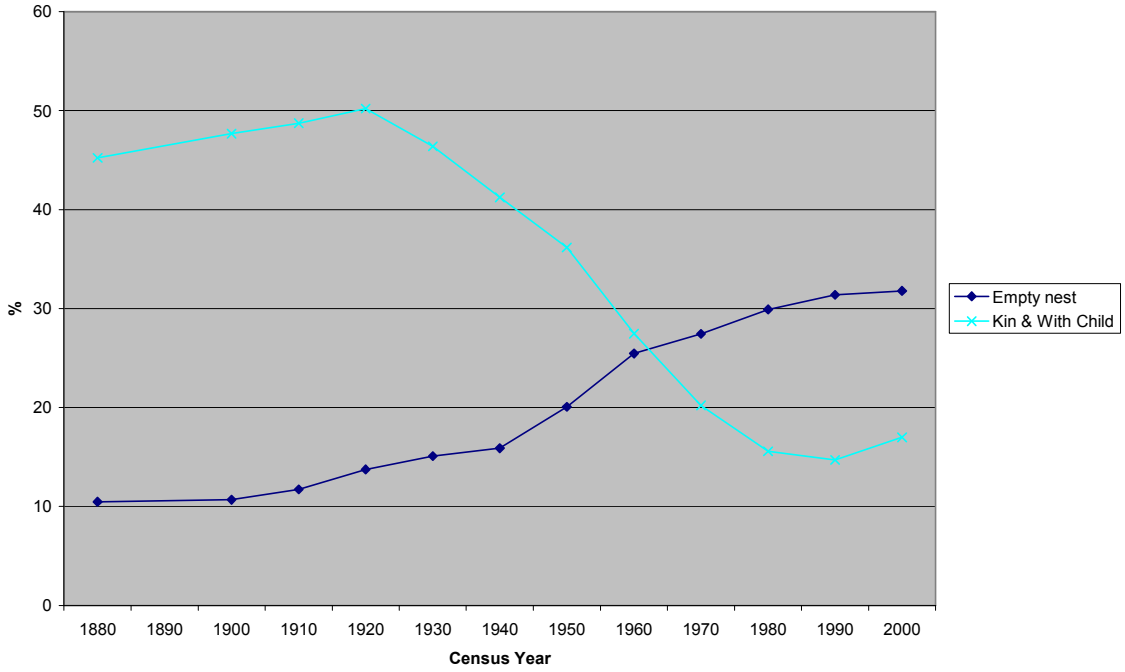


Figure 2: All Women 65 and Over, Empty Nest vs. With Children



The proportion of those 65 and over who lived with at least one child in the household declined from nearly half to less than 20% between 1880 and 2000. The proportion in the empty nest more than tripled, rising from 16% to 57% among men, and 10% to 32% among women. Among women, those living alone (often widows who had lived previously in empty nests) captured another third, such that, by 2000, two thirds of American women lived without any child in the household.

This is a well-known phenomenon, but its explanation continues to be debated. Did cultural effects strongly influence this shift? We think not. Lacking any direct measurement of cultural attitudes, the census provides an indirect, but still useful measure: ethnicity. We are able to identify persons who are immigrants and, until 1970, those who are the children of immigrants. The literature on old age strongly suggests that ethnic cultures have distinct norms for housing arrangements and that these influence the

choices that parents and adult children make (e.g. Zhou, 1997; Choi, 1999; Giuliano, 2006). Figures 3 and 4 provide evidence, at cross-sectional points, that this could be true; in fact, the evidence appears to confirm arguments that particular groups, such as Italians and Mexicans, are more familistic. For example, in 1940, among immigrants, Italians and Mexicans had lower rates of empty nest arrangements than persons of English or German or native (nonimmigrant) descent. These differences can be seen, to varying degrees, in most census years.

Figure 3: Immigrant Males 65 &Over in Empty Nest by Group

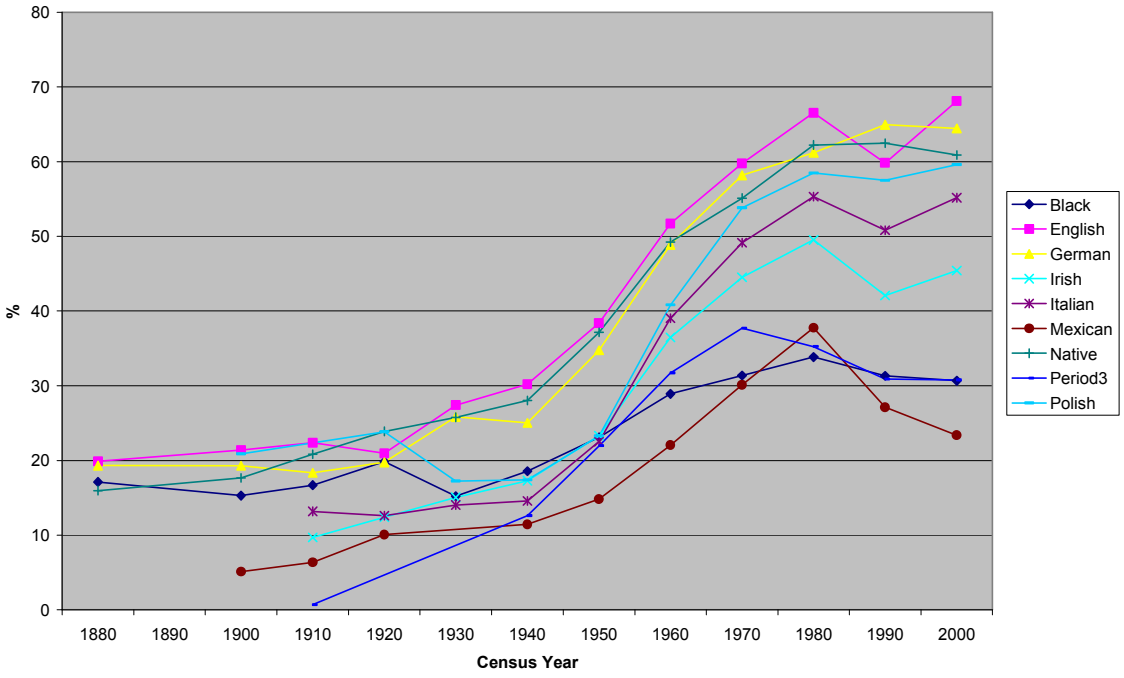
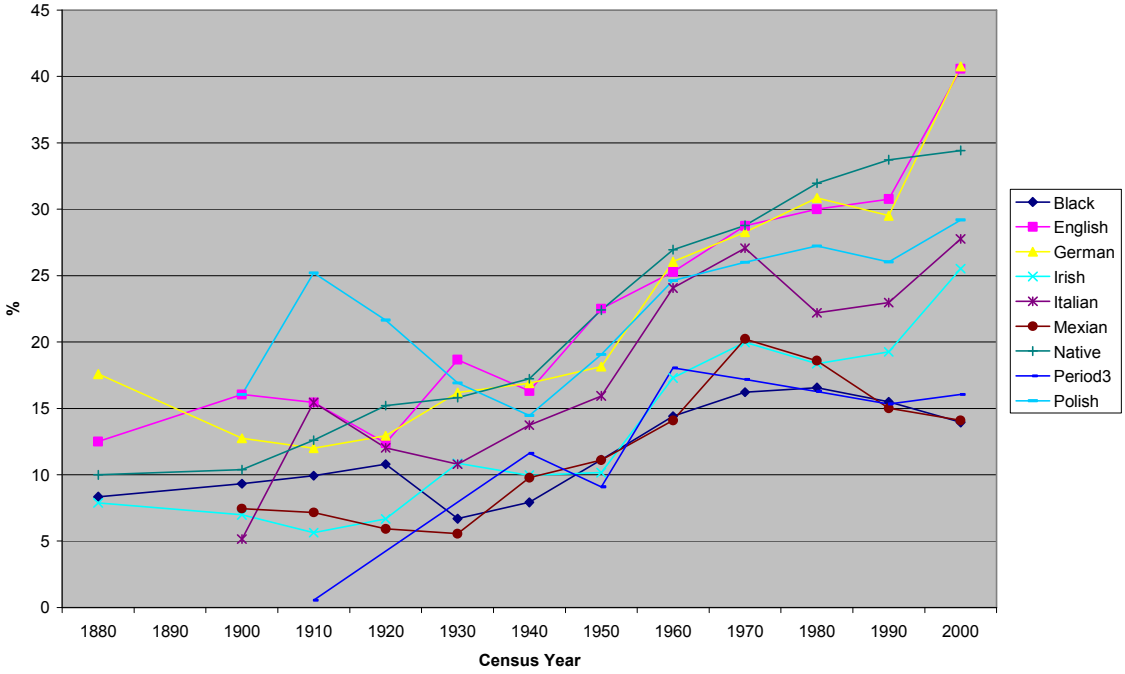


Figure 4: Immigrant Women 65 & Over in Empty Nest by Group



But much more impressive than these cross-sectional differences is the longitudinal similarity in nearly all groups, a strong shift toward the empty nest, regardless of cultural norms. 65% of Italian women lived with children in 1940; only 24% did in the year 2000. The lack of utility of a cultural explanation is further confirmed by measurements that periodize immigrant groups. Unless we propose a "Northwestern European" family model (certainly this has been suggested, e.g. Giuliano, 2006) the high similarity of Germans, Swedes, and the English, in cross sectional rates could not be explained by culture. The overall similarity of Italians and Poles, and their distinctiveness from Germans, is still more difficult to argue for in cultural terms.

Such differences suggest a relationship between family structure and period of arrival of the ethnic group. This can be demonstrated by aggregates that collect various immigrant groups whose numbers are too small to be modeled independently but who

arrived in largest numbers during certain periods. As an example, except for Mexicans, the many national groups from Latin America and Asia who have arrived principally after 1965 are too small in number to be separately modeled. Groups can be aggregated based on the immigration period in which they predominated: Period One represents smaller national groups who were most likely to come in the 19th century (as examples, Danes and Scots), Period Two those from the early 20th century (as examples, Montenegrins and Greeks), and Period Three from the late 20th century (as examples, Filipinos and Ecuadorians). Period lines, despite the rich variety of cultural backgrounds mixed within them, track closely the lines for groups that can be identified from the same period: in Period One, Germans, English and Swedes, in period 2, Italians and Poles, and in period three, Mexicans.

While there are exceptions to the general rule of harmonic trends (the Irish from Period 1 appear distinct), the fact that the period aggregates mirror the large groups from the same period, and maintain differences with ethnicities from other periods implies arrival effects rather than culture. The differences appear to be the product of demographic and economic characteristics of immigration itself: the availability of children and the number of older persons to be cared for, and the economic standards of the immigrant group. A final indication can be found in the dissonant trend among Mexicans and other Period Three groups after 1970. Rather than following the moderate rise in empty nest characteristic of all other groups, these actually show a decline in use and this decline occurs during a period of very heavy immigration. The emptying of the nest in all groups means that a cultural shift would have had to have been so powerful that it penetrated directly and quickly into the beliefs of immigrants and their children.

The graphic display for all persons and for the separate groups also proves that the trend was not monotonic. Three different periods can be seen in the data; periods that are similar for all but select groups. The first runs from at least 1880 to 1940, a 60 year era in which the shift from living with children to living without them rose at a very slow pace. If we plot a regression line through these points, the percentages in the empty nest in 2000 would have been 34% for men and 22% for women, instead of 57% and 32%. (Figures 5 and 6). However, after 1940 and until 1970, change is sharp and again affects

Figure 5: All Men 65 and Over, Empty Nest Regression Lines by Period

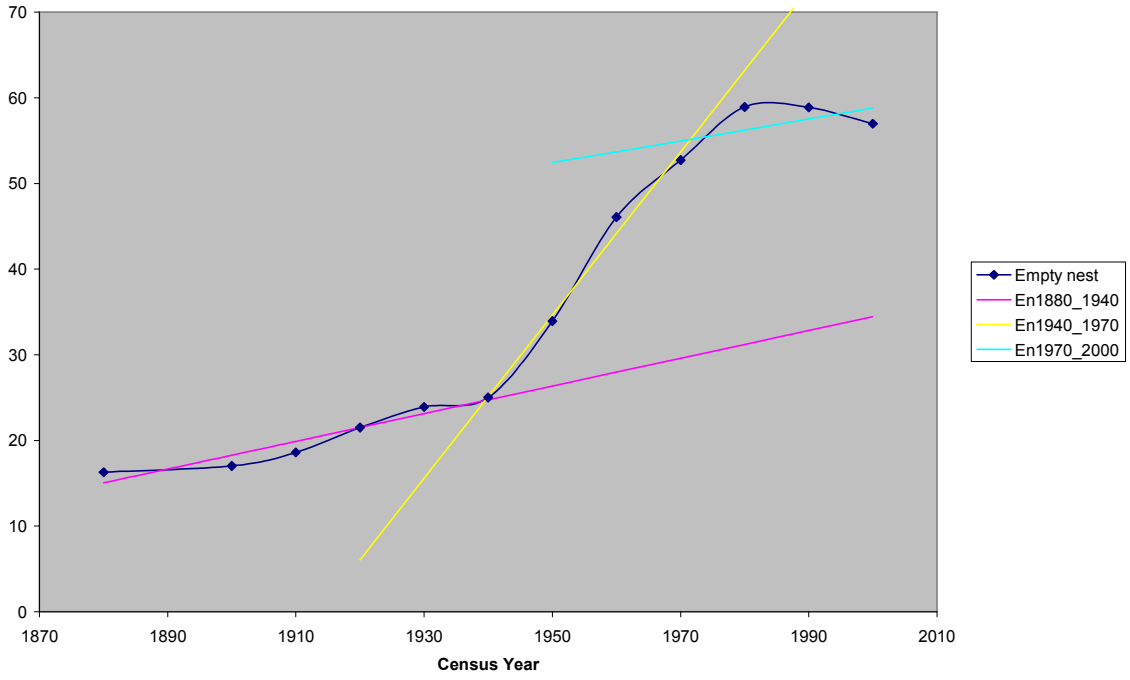
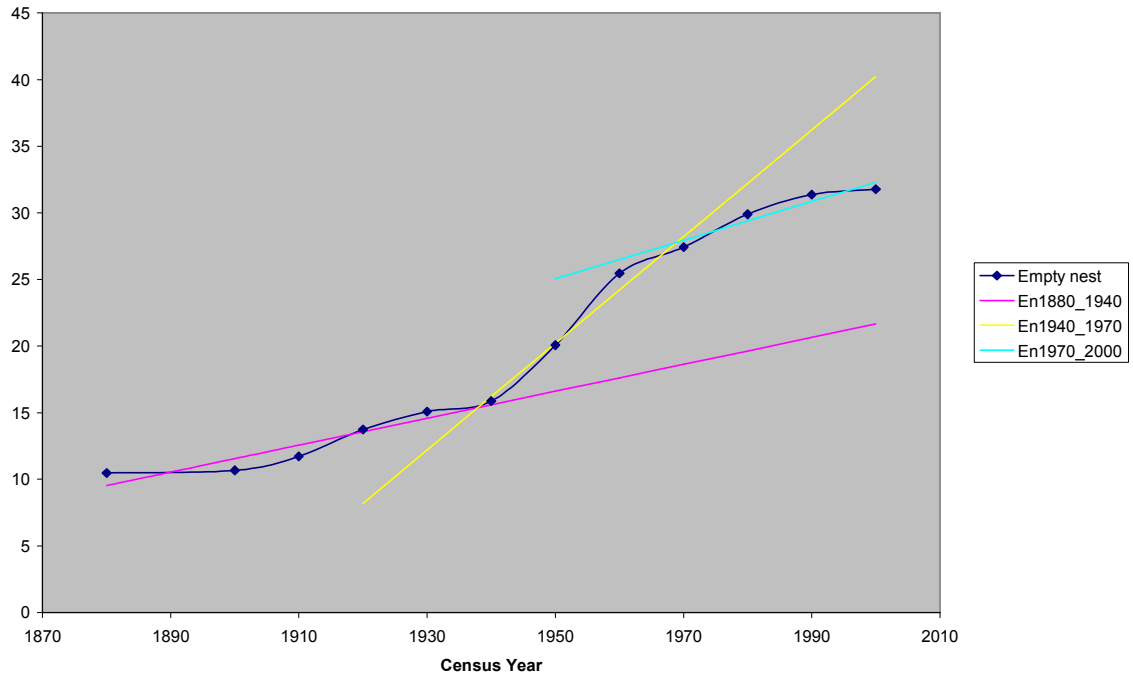


Figure 6: All Women 65 & Over, Empty Nest Regression Lines by Period



nearly all groups. In that 30 year period, rates nearly doubled; among native males from 27% to 55%, and 17% to 29% for females. For immigrants like the Poles, change was highly similar: for men 17% to 53% and for women, 15% to 24%. But rapid upward movement stalls after 1970. The rate of change becomes much more moderate in the late 20th century, and for some groups, declines. Plotted regression lines for the late 20th century parallel those from 1880 to 1940. The 30 year interval constitutes the sharp break.

An adequate explanation for the emptying of the nest requires an explanation of these three distinct stages, the first a long and very moderate trend away from children, the second, a dramatic shift of about 30 years duration in which the empty nest became the predominant form, and the third, a return to moderate trends. The gradual rate in the first and third period fits neatly with an economic explanation, one based in the

inarguable and relatively slow increase in the average income of Americans of every cultural background. It corresponds with demographic change across long periods as well, in which the average number of children available to older parents declined slowly in accord with declines in fertility. While a gradual shift suits cultural explanations also, since changes in attitudes toward living arrangements are likely to occur slowly, the similarity of effects for immigrants of widely different cultural backgrounds makes this explanation less attractive.

The sharp transition in the middle of the 20th century does not correspond well to any of the three models. Gains in real income in the period, while evident, are not dramatic enough to satisfy this sharp a change. Nor was demographic change correspondingly rapid. Cultural shifts, already discounted for the lack of immigrant specific effects, are not likely to be this rapid. An attractive alternative lies in Social Security, which changed radically in exactly this period. In 1940, social security benefits were relatively small and affected a very small proportion of the aged population. By 1950, the rapid expansion of Old Age Assistance benefits meant that the population 65 and over in many states had or could expect a steady stream of income that did not depend on work, and by 1960 these were guaranteed and augmented across the national population by amendments to the Old Age Insurance provisions. For these reasons, and especially because the program arrived and expanded in almost exactly this period, it appears that the Social Security explanation is the best fit model for the three-period history.

Attractive as this proposition has been to many researchers (e.g. Bethencourt and Rios-Rull, 2005; Costa, 1997; Gratton, 1996; McGarry and Schoeni, 2000), a broader

examination makes it unlikely that Social Security had a determining role. When we model younger old persons (those aged 50-64), largely not eligible for social security or private pensions, we find almost exactly the same long-term trends, albeit at different average rates. (Early retirement at age 62 was possible under Social Security after 1956 for women and 1961 for men). As figures 7 and 8 show, both males and females in this

Figure 7: All Men 50 to 64, Empty Nest vs. with Children

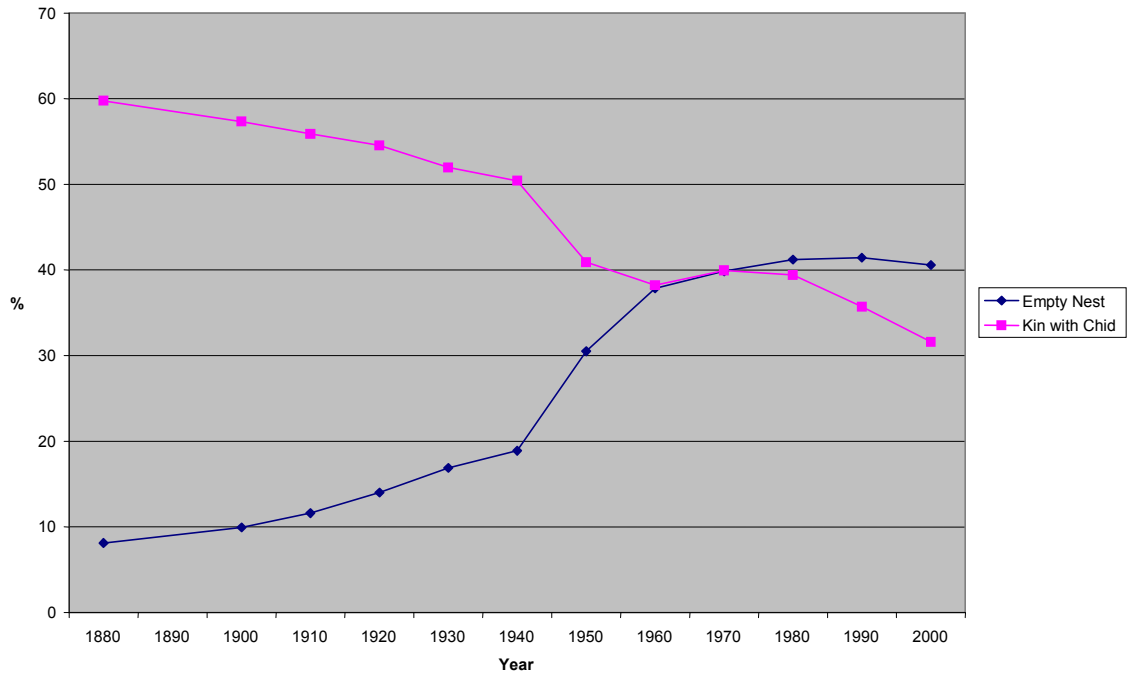
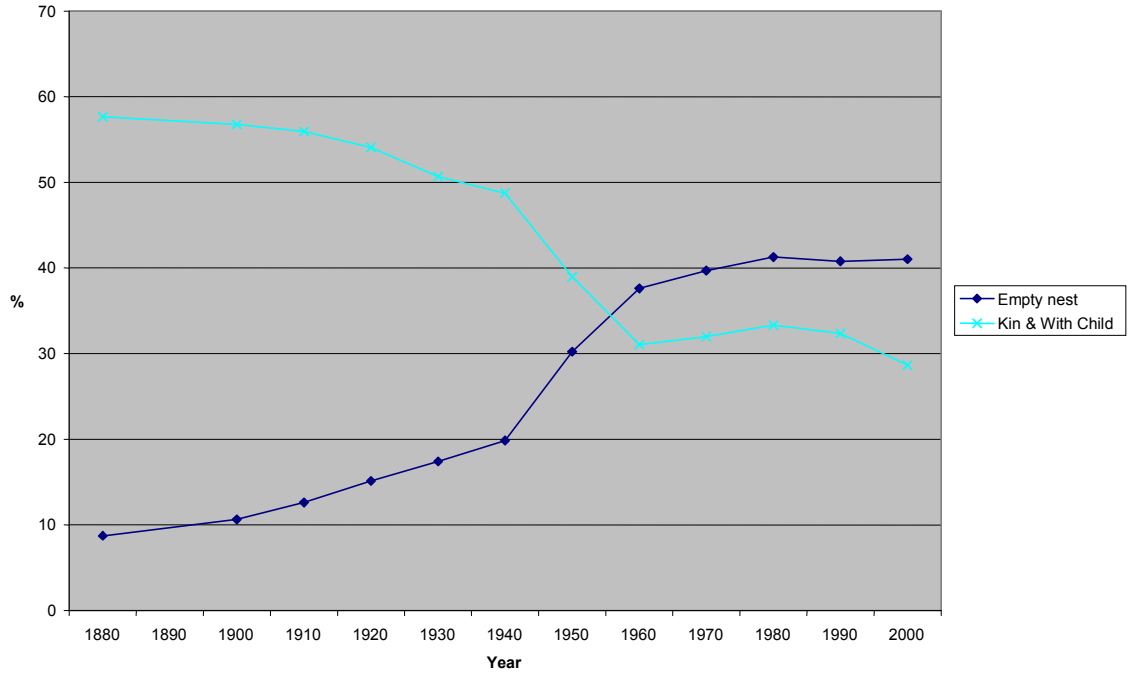


Figure 8: All Women 50 to 64, Empty Nest vs. With Children



age group emptied the nest—indeed, for women, the percentage in the empty nest is higher in the younger age group. Moreover, the three-part periodization is manifestly the same, and rates of change similar. Moderate upward trends until about 1940 are followed by sharp upward shifts through at least 1960. They are succeeded by much more moderate change in the last decades of the 20th century. The adoption of much younger persons to this historical model implies that Social Security itself did not fund the separation from children.

Multivariate Analyses

Some light can be shed on the effect of variables on housing arrangements through multivariate analyses at cross-sectional points. For this paper, we carried out multinomial regressions at 40 year intervals: 1880, 1920, 1960, and 2000. We examined

separately males and females 65 and over and excluded those in group quarters, those living with nonkin only, and those living in complex households that included kin and non kin. The four family arrangement categories were: 1) empty nest (husband and wife only); 2) at least one child (spouse and other kin could be present); 3) living alone; 4) living with kin but without children.

The regression results show that age has a strong effect across 120 years in moving men toward the empty nest and away from the other three categories. As we discuss below, it has consistent but different effects on women. Controlling for expected age effects, other variables showed much greater variability across time. In the earlier censuses, as Ruggles has shown (1994a), greater affluence (measured here by an occupational status variable) led men to form households with a variety of kin. However, other than this category, higher occupational status made the empty nest more likely…that is, more likely than living with kids or living alone. In 1960 and 2000, higher status made any category other than the empty nest unlikely.

The bottom of the occupational status variable, 0, means no occupation is reported. This category is modeled separately in the regressions. The content of the variable changes: for persons 65 and over in the last two censuses it almost invariably indicates retirement with some level of guaranteed income. In the earlier period, while certain affluent persons no longer work, others reporting a "0" are simply without jobs. The 1880 to 1920 period showed males with no occupation more likely live with kin than in the empty nest; it seems likely that many of these are dependent. Hence those at the top or the bottom of the economic ladder lived with kin rather than in the empty nest. By

1960, men without occupations (usually retired) were more likely to be in any category except the empty nest, but, 40 years later, only living alone was more likely.

Given the prominence of farming, and its decline across the bulk of this period, its role has been subject to scrutiny a variety of historians and historical economists and sociologists (Haber and Gratton 1994; Ruggles 2005). In these multivariate analyses, we provided an imperfect measure: whether the older person lived in a rural area, versus a metropolitan one. Rural location meant that the empty nest was more likely than living with assorted kin and more likely than living alone; but until 1920, it was less likely than living with kids. In 1960 and 2000 a rural location encouraged the empty nest in contrast to any other category.

A variety of ethnic specifications were tried in preliminary models. Save for African-Americans, these failed to show any significant effects after controls for age, occupation, location and other variables, confirming the previous findings that immigration, rather than ethnicity, appears to govern living arrangements. Given the apparent importance of immigration arrival effects, we removed ethnic specifications and provided a generation variable. While not perfectly consistent, between 1880 and 2000, being in the first generation, rather than native born, made it more likely that a man would live alone and, from 1880 to 1960, less likely that he would live with kin than in the empty nest, results highly consistent with demographic conditions of availability of kind and especially of the higher propensity of males to emigrate without family members. These findings provide cold comfort to cultural explanations, since the effect is spread across diverse cultures. It concurs with trend lines for ethnic groups, their period of arrival, and their gender, suggesting that it is not ethnicity but immigration that

governs family arrangements. Although ethnic specifications did not work for immigrant groups, being African American had consistent effects. The empty nest—shown by the graphic displays—was always relatively low in the black population. Black men were particularly prone to living alone. From 1920 on they were more likely to be in any arrangement other than the empty nest, after control for age, occupational status and location.

Some of these effects are similar for women. Others, starting with age, differ completely. While age generally makes women less likely to live with kids, it does not push them uniformly toward the empty nest. Instead, age leads women toward living alone. Occupational status cannot be applied for older women, since only a small minority is in the labor force before Social Security and even fewer after its institution and spread. The lack of an occupation—which generally means economic dependence on a husband before Social Security and dependence on Social Security after its instatement—always makes the empty nest more likely than other states. Rural location affects women consistently, regardless of period. The empty nest is more likely when posed against any other household choice. Immigrant women are quite different from immigrant men, in large part because they are much less likely to emigrate alone: while like their male counterparts they are less likely than native women to live with kin (until 2000), they are more likely to live with children than in an empty nest and are always less likely to live alone. Black women follow a course like that of their male peers—away from the empty nest. Only in 1880 does the empty nest dominate. Especially in 1960 and 2000, they are more likely than nonblacks to live with children, kin, or alone.

Conclusion

The census data examined in this paper make a cultural explanation for the emptying of the nest difficult to sustain. Diverse cultural groups followed very similar trends across time, and, at cross sectional points, there was great similarity in types of family arrangements among ethnic groups said to be distinct in family values. A cultural model would require that a view of how to organize households not only shifted radically within 30 years (1940 to 1970) within the native population, but that it was so powerful that it converted immigrants and their children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Given the difficulties of a cultural model, economic and demographic explanations remain. The data and analysis presented in this paper are not sufficient to confirm or disconfirm either model, but are sufficient to raise questions about their applicability. We have not modeled the economic conditions for different periods, nor how these affected the aged in particular. It is clear that rising economic affluence across the 120 years correlates with the long-term shift away from children, and fits particularly well with slow rates of change. Given economic expansion is the dominant force, whether it has its greatest effect among parents, as most have argued, or among children, as Ruggles 2005 maintains, is another of the research tasks still to be carried out.

The sudden shift in categories across a few decades in the middle of the twentieth century sits less comfortably with economic expansion. The central curiosity that merits attention is the sharp uptick in living arrangements in a very short period, 1940 to 1970. What features, specific to this period, could explain such rapid change? While the implementation of broad social security benefits (and a concomitant spread of private pensions) does fit rather precisely these decades, strikingly similar patterns in age

groups largely not affected by social security and pensions imply that these cannot be the most critical economic factor.

Well-known demographic features across the 120 year period offer an attractive explanation, especially for relatively slow rates of change. We have as yet not examined the impact of features, such as the average number of children available to older persons, the average age at which the youngest child reaches 18 or 21, the rate of divorce etc. The known trend in these demographic features does fit a shift toward the empty nest. A careful assessment remains in the research agenda for future work. But it is unlikely that demography can explain dramatic shifts across short periods of time, unless a shock can be observed in populations before the period. One aspect of demographic change does fit this period, and it has elements of a shock: the cessation of immigration. In the 1920s, the massive immigration that had characterized the United States since 1840 came to an end. Heavy flows did not resume until after 1965. An explanation based in immigration is tantalizing, not only because it might fit the three periods visible in the great trends, but also because of the resistance of the immigration groups of the final period to follow the common trajectory. In all models the late 20th century is characterized by relatively flat lines, both for most ethnic groups and for the combined aging population. But within this harmony can be heard dissonance: Mexicans, the great immigrant group of the post 1965 era, shift away from the empty nest. So also, we presume that other groups that came in the period, from the Vietnamese to the Peruvians, when collected into the Period 3 collective, also decline to empty the nest. Immigration may then provide part of the answer to this interesting puzzle.

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