Does Maternal Multipartnered Fertility Affect the Mother-Child Relationship?

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Abstract

Multipartnered fertility (MPF) is widely considered detrimental to family and child well-being, yet the mechanisms by which MPF may affect well-being are unclear. We suggest that due to the higher instability and greater complexity of families with MPF, children with half-siblings may have a weaker mother-child relationship than children with only full siblings. Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY) and drawing from both mother's and children's reports, we compare the perceptions of firstborn children with younger siblings from MPF and single-partner fertility (SPF) homes regarding how much their mothers monitor and spend time with them, how close they feel to their mother and how much they share with their mother, and how often they perceive their mother missing important events. The NLSY provides rich background information and data on family instability and transitions to more accurately allow us to isolate the effects of MPF from other factors.

Having children with more than one person, also known as multipartnered fertility or "MPF", has emerged as an important topic of family research – and a growing area of social concern. Though multipartnered fertility is a relatively new area for family scholars, it has been a pervasive and durable component of family life throughout much of recorded time. In the distant past, MPF was commonly tied to the practice of polygamy among elite men, (Moore et al., 2006; Zerjal et al., 2003). In the United States, MPF has largely centered around serial, monogamous, and marital relationships, like those that developed when parents remarry and have additional children following the death or desertion of their first spouse, as was common in the 18th and 19th century (Degler, 1980). In the 20th century, MPF was often characterized by the family formations that occurred when a married parent divorced, remarried, and had children with someone new (Logan, Manlove, Irkamullah, & Cottingham, 2006), oftentimes leading to the creation of stepfamilies (Sweeney, 2010). Twenty-first century MPF is changing once more, this time by expanding beyond patterns of remarriage to incorporate nonmarital and single births across a series of short and unstable relationships that frequently do not result in either marital or cohabiting stepfamilies (Dorius and Guzzo, 2013).

Shifts in the causes, patterns, and forms of MPF, in turn, alter the meaning and implications of the resulting family complexity. The family relationships that develop from modern MPF are less often subject to less formal legal obligations (McLanahan and Beck 2010), less-supportive and less effective co-parenting (Carlson and Fursteberg 2006), reduced access to instrumental support from kin (Harknett and Knabb, 2007); and increased maternal and paternal depression (Turney and Carlson, 2011; Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, and Scott, 2009), all of which may jeopardize the well-being of children from MPF homes (Klerman, 2007). Further, there is evidence that multipartnered fertility is increasing over time (Guzzo and Furstenberg, 2007),

making the presence of half-siblings a more common childhood experience, and bringing the concerns regarding child well-being to the forefront of research on MPF families. Because scholarly work on MPF (beyond the more traditional stepfamily research) is still nascent, there is little research linking child well-being to parental MPF over time. However, the few studies addressing the topic have generally found that children's well-being is lower when they have half-siblings than when they do not have half-siblings (Halpern-Meekin and Tach, 2008; Tillman, 2008), and this is true even when accounting for one's history of family instability (Dorius and Guzzo, 2013; Fomby and Osborne, 2013). What is still unknown, though, is the underlying mechanisms through which having half-siblings may affect children.

In the current research, we investigate whether mother's parenting quality, as perceived by their oldest child, differs among those who do, and those who do not, have half-siblings in the home (a characteristic of MPF families). We address the quality of parenting among MPF mothers by using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY) and drawing from both mother's and children's reports. We compare the perceptions of firstborn children from MPF and single-partner fertility (SPF) homes regarding how much their mothers monitor and spend time with them, how close they feel to their mother and how much they share with their mother, and how often they perceive their mother missing important events. The NLSY contains a rich set of maternal background factors and childhood experiences as well as information about family structure and transitions that enable us to more carefully isolate the effects MPF from selection, socioeconomic, and instability factors.

MULTIPARTNERED FERTILITY AND CHILD WELL-BEING

Clearly, parents and parenting behaviors – how parents treat a child, the ways parents interact with their children, and the like – have strong influences on child well-being and child

outcomes (Amato, 2005). For instance, adolescents who report a close relationship with their parents and perceive their parents as supportive and involved in their lives have better mental health and fewer acts of delinquency (Hair et al., 2008). As noted by Amato (2005), parenting quality is an excellent predictor of children's emotional and social well-being, and poor parenting has been tied to a variety of negative outcomes such as poor academic achievement, emotional problems, externalizing problems, and low self-esteem.

Parenting behaviors and the parent-child relationship vary according to children's developmental needs (Kalil, Ryan, and Corey, 2012), but they also vary across parental and family characteristics, and family research has examined this extensively. Some research focuses on differences in parenting behaviors and relationships by characteristics such as parental gender (e.g., Craig, 2006; Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson, 2004), family structure (e.g., Kendig and Bianchi, 2008), coresidence (e.g., Manning, Stewart, and Smock, 2003), and social class (e.g., Kalil, Ryan, and Corey, 2012). An extensive literature exists regarding family size, birth order, and parental investments, focusing on the notion that more children dilute parental resources (Cáceres-Delpiano, 2006; Downey, 1995; Price, 2008; Steelman, Powell, Werum, and Carter, 2002). While some of these literatures more explicitly consider complexity in family structures than others, little research has acknowledged the possibility that parenting behaviors and the parent-child relationship may be affected by the existence of half-siblings.

Because MPF women are exposed to higher levels of boundary ambiguity in new partnerships, face more stressors over time, and receive less instrumental support than single-partner fertility (SPF) women (Dorius, 2012), maintaining high quality parenting is likely a difficult challenge for these mothers. And given that parenting quality often declines after relationships dissolve or during periods of single motherhood (Amato, 2005) both of which are

necessary conditions of an MPF home, it would not be surprising to see lower parenting quality, especially as experienced by the oldest child who lived through both transitions. Further, because MPF women lack the same level of access to kin-based childcare, which provides a much needed parenting break (Monte, 2011), it may leave MPF women unable to 'recharge' parenting energies from day to day, leading to lower levels of parent-child relationship quality. Finally, there may be a greater disparity in children's needs within MPF homes due to the larger age differences between children in MPF families than in SPF families (Dorius ,2012), which may further drain parenting resources.

In light of rising family instability and complexity, there is growing attention to MPF and its implications for family functioning. It appears that children with half-siblings do worse than their peers with only full siblings in terms of early sexual debut and drug use (Dorius and Guzzo, 2013), but the underlying mechanism is unclear. We suggest that in addition to the challenges all children face when younger siblings are born, the unique changes in family dynamics among those with MPF might negatively impact how firstborn children with half-siblings might perceive their mother's parenting behaviors. Specifically, firstborn children with half-siblings have usually experienced their biological parents' union dissolution, spent some time in a single-parent family, experienced maternal (and often paternal) repartnering and stepfamily living, and then experienced the birth of a new half-sibling. Half-siblings tend to be more widely spaced than full siblings (Dorius, 2012), which means the birth of a half-sibling may be more disruptive (or perceived as more disruptive) than the birth of a full sibling given that it may impact long-standing patterns and relationships. Further, although family size is inversely related to the amount of time each child spends individually with their parent(s) (as parents divide their time more or less equally among all children), older children are more likely to be cognizant of the

lower levels, perhaps even remembering greater interactions and more attention prior to the birth of siblings. Finally, because the mother-child relationship can be negatively affected by maternal repartnering (Cartwright, 2012; King, 2009), a birth in a new partnership may represent an additional source of strain for parent-child relationships as mothers not only shift some attention to their new partners but new children as well. Mothers, for their part, may also feel a need to focus on their new child and current partnership (Cartwright, 2012), and/or their interactions with older children from a past relationship may be affected by the level of involvement from biological nonresident fathers.

We hypothesize that compared to peers with only full siblings, first-born children with half-siblings report lower levels of maternal monitoring and time spent with mother, report higher levels of maternal absence regarding important events and activities, and report lower feelings of closeness and sharing with their mother. We use the children's reports of maternal behaviors and the parent-child relationship because it seems likely that it is child *perceptions* of mothering and their relationship with their mother that influence child well-being.

Our analyses will also account for the role of selection into multipartnered fertility of more disadvantaged individuals as well as socioeconomic factors during childhood; evidence suggests that more advantaged mothers spend more time with their children and monitor them more closely (Lareau, 2003; Kalil, Ryan, and Corey, 2012). Additionally, we will control for any potential impacts of family structure, family instability, and the number of transitions children experienced during childhood, as these, too, may impact mothering and the mother-child relationship (Sweeney, 2007).

DATA AND METHODS

We utilize 24 waves (1979-2010) of nationally representative data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Study of Youth main youth interviews and 9 waves (1994-2010) of the young adult (NLSY79-YA) surveys. Born between 1957 and 1965, main youth respondents are drawn from the later Baby Boom Generation who entered young adulthood in the late 1970s and early 1980s when cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing were increasing and multipartnered fertility was likely on the rise. These NLSY79 respondents have been interviewed every year from 1979 through 1994 and biennially thereafter.

At each survey wave, the mothers in our sample were asked questions regarding their union and fertility experiences and their current household composition (which allowed for the assessment of cohabitation prior to the first direct survey questions in 1990), and NLS provided a unique ID number for each of the mother's partners which were maintained for every year the man was in the household. As a result, it is possible to triangulate information and identify birth fathers, assess whether multipartnered fertility occurred, and document the individual events of instability (e.g. marriage and cohabitation starts), as well as cumulative counts of instability (e.g., the total number of union dissolutions and formations over a period of time). This coding strategy allowed us to quantify a number of important characteristics surrounding the timing of each child's birth, including the residential status of the father (resident or nonresident) and the total number of residential partners prior to the birth (see Dorius 2010 for a complete discussion of these coding procedures).

We rely on the original 6,282 women from the cross-sectional and supplemental samples of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, with military and economically disadvantaged respondents excluded because these oversamples were dropped in the 1990s. We

include women who missed fewer than three consecutive or five total waves of data collection, as missing more than this would have made it difficult to reliably measure relationships over time, leaving us with 2,715 eligible mothers with two or more children. We restrict the analyses to those with two or more children to ensure that our counterfactual is accurate and intuitive; all children whose mothers have multipartnered fertility have at least one sibling, but not all children whose mother have single-partnered fertility have siblings. Thus, we are comparing first-born adolescents who have at least one half-sibling to first-born adolescents who have only full siblings.

Our analytic sample consists of the first-born children of NLSY mothers who completed a young adolescent interview (the adolescents must have been younger than 14 years old when the 1992 young adult assessment began, dropping 742 children, and completed a young adolescent interview by the final survey in 2010, dropping an additional 6 children). We include only those children who lived with their mothers at least 75% of the time from birth to age 15 (dropping 73 children), and provided valid responses to questions on parenting questions assessed from ages 10 to 14 (excluding a further 211 children). Because our sample selection criteria reduces the number of older children and earlier/younger mothers (the earliest mothers gave birth to children who turned 14 before the YA assessments began in 1992 so they did not complete a 14 year old interview), and it excludes those with the less traditional living arrangements (those who live with someone other than their mothers), our analytic sample has slightly lower rates of instability and MPF than has been found among all women of the NLSY79 cohort (Dorius, 2010). The final sample includes 1683 first-born young adults aged 10 to 14 at the time of the survey.

Measures

Children's perceptions of mothering and the mother-child relationship Self-reported assessments were created by pooling the biennial young adult data from 1992-2010 and isolating the survey from the year closest to the child's 14th birthday to maximize the number of children who have experienced maternal multipartnered fertility. Maternal monitoring is derived from the question "About how often does your mother know who you are with when you're not at home?" with answers of 1 "often," 2 "some of the time," and 3 "hardly ever." Maternal time spent with children is measured with the question "Please think about the time you spend with your mother. Do you think she spends enough time with you, or do you wish she spent more time with you?" with answers of 1 "she spends enough time with me," 2 "I wish she spent more time with me," and 3 "she spends too much time with me." The child's perceptions of their mother's involvement in important life events is measured by the responses to the question "How often does your mother miss the events or activities that are important to you? Is it a lot, sometimes, or almost never?" with responses of 1 "she misses events a lot," 2 "she sometimes misses events," and 3 "she almost never misses events." Closeness is based on the question "How close do you feel to your mother?" with responses ranging from 1 "not very close" to 4 "extremely close." The child's perception of whether they can discuss their lives with their mother is derived from the question "How well do you and your mother share ideas or talk about things that really matter?" with responses ranging from 1 "not very well" to 4 "extremely well." At a minimum, we will likely dichotomize these variables, and we will explore the possibility of creating a scaled or factor measure.

Children's experiences from birth to age 14. Multipartnered fertility status is a dichotomous measure identifying whether a woman has ever had children by two or more fathers. This was

assessed by creating a detailed relationship history for each woman from 1979-2010 and noting when births occurred within relationships to identify unique birth fathers. By triangulating data from the women's self-reports (NLSY79), the biological children's self-reports (NLSY79-YA), and the household roster for each year, multipartnered fertility was ascertained for all women in the sample, including those in non-residential relationships at the time of birth (see Dorius 2012 for more details).

To test whether multipartnered fertility matters net of family instability generally, it was important to develop additional measures of family change over this period. As such, we created a set of "ever" measures that tap whether the adolescent ever experienced certain family forms between birth and age 14; including three dichotomous indicators of ever experiencing a divorce, cohabitation, or cohabitation end (1= yes). We also include an indicator of whether or not the child did not experience a marriage (1= no marriage). The item for marriage was reverse coded to provide a theoretically relevant reference string in the final models (Cohen, Cohen, West and Aiken 2003). Because these groupings are not mutually exclusive, each dummy is entered into the regression models. In addition, to capture the cumulative effect of family structure instability more generally we count the total number of family transitions (e.g., maternal coresidential union dissolutions and formations) experienced from birth to age 14. Note that we do not count as a transition the marriage of cohabiting biological parents; a child is unlikely to experience that as instability (see Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004). The scale of cumulative family structure transitions originally ranged from 0-10, but was truncated at 5 due to the small number of individuals in the upper range (less than 3%). Truncating measures of cumulative instability is a common method employed in the family literature to deal with non-

normal distributions of instability (Cavanagh & Fomby, 2012; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Crosnoe, 2012) and helps us to better meet the assumptions of OLS regression analyses.

In addition to family structure changes, we address issues of family size, race, gender, and exposure to poverty, maternal employment and education, and urbanity of residence to shed light on the context of childhood and provide an overview of the resources and constraints faced by the children in our sample. Family size is a continuous measure of the number of full- or half-biological siblings born to the mother by the time of the child's fourteenth birthday (0 to 11). Race/ethnicity is derived the child's reports of whether they self-identified as Hispanic, Black or African American, or non-Hispanic White (reference), and we also include child gender. We include a measure indicating whether or not the mother went on to receive additional education above and beyond what was reported at the time of the child's birth. Exposure to poverty and urbanity of residence were assessed by identifying the proportion of years (0 to 1) from the time of the child's birth to age 14 that the mother reported living in poverty (measured as the total number of years the mother reported living under the federal poverty line divided by the number of years assessed) and residing in an urban place (measured as the total number of years the mother reported living in an urban residence divided by the number of years assessed). The proportion measures were created to express the child's ongoing exposure to poverty, and type of residence rather than their experience during any given year. Note that for all proportions, missing values do not add additional years to the denominator. We also include an indicator of whether the mother was working part-time or full-time at the time of the child report, as time spent with children and missing activities could be affected by employment schedules.

Mother's characteristics at the time of first birth. Age, education, economic resources, and relationship status at birth have all been shown to influence the likelihood of experiencing

subsequent fertility with a new partner. As a result, we consider each item in our models, with the general hypothesis being that women who are younger, less educated, poorer, and single at the time of birth will be more likely to enter into multipartnered fertility relationships than their counterparts (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007; Manlove et al. 2008). Because our data allow us to identify every residential relationship reported by the woman from 1979 to the time of the first birth we are able to measure the number of residential partners each woman had over this period. Our measure of number of residential partners ranged from 0 to 5 but was truncated at 2 or more partners due to the small number of women who had 3 to 5 partners prior to their first birth (less than 1%). By truncating the item we were able to reduce the non-normal distribution between number of partners and the dependent variables, helping us to better meet the assumptions of OLS regression analyses. Our measure of number of residential partners prior to first birth ranges from 0-2 or more, with one partner (most often the birth father) being the modal response and reference category. A second item assessed whether or not the biological father was living in the home at the time of birth. A third identified whether or not the mother was teenager at the time of first birth. We also include a measure of the mother's education at the time of birth, constructed as a binary measure of whether or not the mother had less than a high school education. We also include two items assessing whether or not the woman lived below the poverty line or was employed (i.e., the woman reported working an average of 1 and 40 hours a week) during the twelve months leading up to the birth.

Mother's selection into childbearing. To minimize the possibility that selection is driving the effect of multipartnered fertility on the mother-child relationship, we control for two early life characteristics that have been shown to relate to both women's parenting and children's well-being. This includes a dichotomous indicator of immigrant status, and the woman's exposure to

family instability at age 14 (constructed from the 1979 question regarding one's family situation during childhood; this variable was collapsed into four categories variables indicating whether the woman lived with two biological parents (reference), one biological parent and one step parent, a single parent, or no biological parents at age 14).

Analysis

Our analyses will be divided into two parts. The first stage will provide a descriptive examination of first-born children's reports of maternal behaviors and the mother-child relationship among women with at least two children by MPF status in the NLSY79 sample. The second stage of analysis will likely use OLS and/or logistic regression models (depending on exploratory analyses of the measures) to explore the impact of maternal multipartnered fertility on mothering and relationship reports. Our paper will conclude by considering the long-term and inter-generational consequences of having children with more than one person and will discuss how these findings might be used to inform policy and family interventions.

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