

Relationship Context and Men's Transition to a Subsequent or Higher Order Birth: Preliminary Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study

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Background

Relationships have both important structural and socio-emotional elements. Fueled by growing numbers of children born out-of-wedlock, reports of multiple partner fertility, and concerns about father involvement in the lives of children, there is an urgent need to examine how relationships fuel male fertility patterns. In general, however, research on the role of relationships (both the quality and context) and the transition to a subsequent or higher order births for men has been slow to progress. Men's interactions with their romantic and sexual partners have been found to be associated with their procreative behaviors (Marsiglio 1998) and fertility intentions (Rindfuss and VandenHeuval 1990; Manning 1999; Stewart 2002). Yet, the scarcity of data on higher order births for men makes predictions concerning reasons for higher order pregnancies and the examination of the roles that relationships play decidedly difficult, because few studies have sought to track fathers' procreative activities after the birth of their first child.

A plethora of research studies support the notion that both the quality of the mother-father or couple relationship as well as union status are important factors that determine fertility behaviors (Manning & Smock, 2000). Yet, the role of both the structural (status) and socio-emotional elements (quality) of relationships in the transition to a higher-order birth for men is not well understood, and has not been systematically examined. Despite the significant body of research that documents the incidence of first birth for females (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998), there is a significant need for studies seeking to determine the predictors or occurrence of higher order births, especially within men's current and successive relationships. However, until recently, fertility research has focused almost exclusively on women, with little data being collected from or about men, in part because of suspected inaccuracies and underestimates in the reporting of fertility and family formation behaviors among males (Bachrach, Evans, Ellison, & Stolley, 1992). While a large body of research has developed over the past three decades that discusses the predictors of first, and in some cases higher-order, births to mothers, the factors associated with subsequent and higher-order births specifically for men has received minimal research attention. In addition, considerably more fertility research on men has been conducted among teen males than among older males (Sonenstein, 2000). Yet, given the high rates of non-marital births in the young adult years, and the fact that men are capable of fathering subsequent children at older ages than women, it is important that research on fertility be extended to examine adult males of all ages.

An understanding of these processes is important because of its potentially negative consequence for fathers, their partners, and their children. In the context of higher order births, fathers are faced with competing demands on their time and resources (Manning and Smock 2000; Mincy and Huang 2002; Magnuson and Gibson-Davis 2005), and the presence of multiple children (either with the same partner or a different partner), undermines men's social and economic investments and levels of father involvement (Carlson & Furstenburg, 2006).

Research Questions

In light of gaps in existing research, this study uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Survey (FFCW) to extend a small but growing research literature on male fertility by addressing two research questions: 1). Is relationship quality associated with fathering a higher-order birth (either with the same partner or another partner)?; and 2). Do these associations differ by men's union status? (i.e., for fathers who are married, cohabiting, romantically involved and report not being in a relationship).

Hypotheses

We specifically hypothesize that:

- H1: Relationship quality will be associated with men's transition to a subsequent birth. Specifically, we expect that fathers reporting higher levels of relationship quality will be more likely to father a subsequent or higher order birth.
- H2: Fathers reporting higher levels of relationship quality will be more likely to father a subsequent or higher order birth with the same mother.
- H3: Co-parental relationship quality will be associated with men's transition to a subsequent birth. Specifically, fathers reporting more positive co-parenting relationship quality will be more likely to father a subsequent or higher order birth.
- H4: Fathers reporting higher levels of co-parental relationship quality will be more likely to father a subsequent or higher order birth with the same mother.
- H5: Union status will be associated with men's transition to higher order births. Fathers in

married relationships will be more likely to have a higher order or subsequent birth with the same partner compared to fathers who report that they are cohabiting, romantically involved, report no relationship and report being just friends.

H6: Fathers in married relationships reporting higher levels of relationship satisfaction and co-parenting relationship quality will be more likely to have a higher order or subsequent birth with the same partner compared to fathers who report that they are cohabiting, romantically involved, report no relationship and report being just friends.

H7: Father's individual- level characteristics and family background characteristics will be associated with the likelihood of a higher order or subsequent birth with the same partner across varied union contexts.

Data

Data for this study come from The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (commonly known as Fragile Families), a longitudinal study of marital and non-marital births in large U.S. cities. Baseline survey data were collected between 1998 and 2000 for 4,898 families in 20 cities in the United States.¹ The study includes 3,712 unmarried couples and 1,186 married couples who were interviewed at the birth of their child; further interviews with parents, including non-resident fathers, have been completed or are scheduled for when the child is 1, 3, and 5 years old. Sample weights make these data nationally representative of non-marital births in U.S. cities with populations over 200,000.

The survey provides information on the characteristics of fathers and mothers and their relationships with one another at the time of their child's birth, on the factors that support or strain their relationships, and on the influence of public policies such as welfare reform on parents' behaviors and living arrangements (McLanahan, Garfinkel et al. 2001). In-person interviews were conducted with mothers in the hospital within two days of giving birth, and fathers were interviewed following the birth, either in the hospital or elsewhere. Our sample for analyses includes 2,683 fathers interviewed at baseline, during the 12-month follow-up and during the 3-year follow-up.

Measures

Dependent variable. Our dependent variable, the experience of higher order or subsequent birth between the 12-month follow-up and the 3-year follow-up, has three categories: subsequent birth with the mother of the child born at baseline (focal child), subsequent birth with a partner other than the mother of the focal child, and not having a subsequent birth.

Relationship quality measures. We included a number of relationship quality measures in our analysis. General relationship quality was measured during the 12-month follow-up and asked fathers if their relationship with the focal mother was excellent, very good, good, fair or poor. Relationship support and relationship conflict were derived from items that ask the father about his interactions with the focal mother. Included in these measures are items such as "she expresses affection or love for you" and "she tried to prevent you from going to work or school." Co-parenting is a scale comprised of a series of questions asking about co-parenting between the father and the focal mother. Dating measures the amount of time mother and father spend doing activities together. We also included a variable that measures whether or not mother and father solve problems together.

Union status and change. We included a measure of respondent's marital status (married vs. not married) and measures of changes in union status between baseline and the 12-month follow-up. These items measure whether or not the relationship became more stable, less stable, or stayed the same.

Family background. We included three measures of family background: family structure (whether or not respondent lived with both biological parents at age 15), highest parent educational level (less than high school, high school, at least some college), and whether or not respondent's biological father was involved in raising him (not involved/never knew father, somewhat involved, very involved).

Father's individual characteristics. We included five measures of father's individual characteristics: age at birth of focal child, race/ethnicity, education, income, and nativity (whether father was born in a foreign country or not).

Other Critical Controls. We also included a number of critical control variables, including: religious service attendance (father attends at least weekly), father's attitudes towards being a father, mental health, drug use, length of time father knew mother before she became pregnant (father knew mother at least four years before pregnancy),

¹ The 20 cities are Austin, TX; Baltimore, MD; Boston, MA; Chicago, IL; Corpus Christi, TX; Detroit, MI; Indianapolis, IN; Jacksonville, FL; Milwaukee, WI; Nashville, TN; Newark, NJ; New York, NY; Norfolk, VA; Oakland, CA Philadelphia, PA; Pittsburgh, PA; Richmond, VA; San Antonio, TX; San Jose, CA; and Toledo, OH. Sixteen of these cities comprise the "national" sample because they were selected by stratified random sample (McLanahan et al., 2001).

wantedness (whether father thought about the mother having an abortion), frequency of arguments between mother and father, and relationship quality change once father found out about the pregnancy (got worse, stayed the same, got better).

Methods

Our analyses proceeded in four stages. First, we present descriptive statistics for our variables of interest. Second, we used chi-square tests to assess bivariate associations between the three-level dependent variable and relationship quality and co-parental relationship quality. Third, for multivariate analyses we used multinomial logistic regression to examine whether: 1) fathers who have a subsequent or higher order birth did so with the same partner versus a different partner; 2) fathers who had a subsequent or higher order birth did so with the same partner versus no subsequent or higher order birth; or 3) fathers who had a subsequent birth did so with another partner versus no subsequent or higher order birth. Multinomial logistic regression allowed us to compare fathers in each of these three groups. We present results for all three groups. We will also conduct multivariate analyses for each of the samples of married fathers, cohabiting fathers, romantically involved fathers and fathers reporting no relationship. Analyses of these sub-samples will allow us to examine how relationship quality and co-parental relationship quality controlling for a variety of socio-demographic characteristics works across sub-populations to predict the likelihood of a subsequent or higher order birth.

Fourth, we will test for sample selection effects using Heckman selection models in Stata, adjusted for potential selection characteristics.² We speculate that fathers who completed a questionnaire in each of the waves of the Fragile Families study (included in our sample) might be different from those fathers who did not complete a survey for each wave (excluded from our sample).

Preliminary Findings

Bivariate Results

Bivariate analyses were conducted to test the associations between our predictor variables and the three-level dependent variable comparing having a subsequent birth with the mother of the focal child, having a subsequent birth with a different woman, and not having a subsequent birth. The findings indicate that men who had a subsequent birth with the same partner reported significantly higher relationship quality and coparenting scores, less conflict, more support and more time spent with their partner than fathers who had a subsequent birth with another partner and fathers who did not have a subsequent birth. Fathers who had a subsequent birth with the same partner were more likely to report solving problems together with their partner, more likely to be married, and more likely to report that the status of their relationship became more stable between baseline and 12-month follow-up. Compared only to fathers who had a subsequent birth with a different partner, they were more likely to report that their relationship status stayed the same.

Family background and individual characteristics were also associated with the experience of a subsequent birth. Compared to fathers who had a subsequent birth with a different partner, fathers who experienced a subsequent birth with the same partner were more likely to have lived with both biological parents at age 15 and to have had a biological father who was very involved in raising him. On the other hand, they were less likely to have parents with a high school education and to have a biological father who was not involved or to have never known their father. Fathers who experienced a subsequent birth with the same partner were significantly older than fathers who had a birth with a different partner and younger than fathers who reported no subsequent births. They are also more likely to be Hispanic or white, to have at least some college education and to make more than \$50,000 per year. They are less likely than fathers who experienced a subsequent birth with a different partner to have less than a high school education.

Compared to other fathers, fathers who have a subsequent birth are also more likely to attend religious services at least weekly, less likely to report that the quality of their relationship worsened, yet more likely to report that it improved after they found out about the pregnancy, and less likely to have thought about the mother having an abortion. Compared to fathers who had a subsequent birth with a new partner, they are less likely to be depressed and less likely to report that the quality of their relationship stayed the same once they found out the mother was pregnant. Fathers who reported a subsequent birth with the same partner were more likely than fathers who had a subsequent birth with a new mother and less likely than fathers with no subsequent birth to report that they knew the same partner at least four years before the focal pregnancy occurred.

² We adjusted for selection using mothers' reports of the following father characteristics: age at the birth of the focal child, education, race/ethnicity, employment in the week before the most recent birth, and drug/alcohol problems that interfere with work or friends.

Multivariate Results

We conducted multinomial logistic regression analyses predicting a three-level dependent variable comparing having a subsequent birth with the mother of the focal child, having a subsequent birth with a different woman, and not having a subsequent birth. The results from the full model (including all relationship quality variables and critical controls) indicate that fathers who report higher general relationship quality with the same partner and higher co-parenting scores have increased odds of having a subsequent birth with the same partner or not having a subsequent birth than having a subsequent birth with a different woman. Income is also significantly associated with the odds of having a subsequent birth. Fathers who earned less than \$20,000 had increased odds of having a subsequent birth with the same partner or not having a subsequent birth than to have a subsequent birth with a different woman. Fathers who are not white, black or Hispanic have reduced odds of experiencing a subsequent birth with the same partner or to not have a subsequent birth than to have a subsequent birth with a different woman. Additionally, fathers who report that their relationship with the same partner became less stable between baseline and 12-month follow-up have reduced odds of having a subsequent birth with the same partner or not having a subsequent birth than having a subsequent birth with a different woman.

Results also indicate that fathers' younger age at the birth of the focal child, fathers knowing the mother for more than four years before the pregnancy, and decreased relationship stability between baseline and 12-month follow-up are associated with reduced odds of having a subsequent birth with the same partner versus not having a subsequent birth. However, fathers who attend religious services at least weekly and those whose relationships stabilized between baseline and 12-month follow-up had greater odds of experiencing a subsequent birth with the same partner than not having a subsequent birth.