

Bowling Green State University
The Center for Family and Demographic Research

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Phone: (419) 372-7279 cfdr@bgsu.edu

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**STEPFAMILIES, PARENTING COMPLEXITY, STRESSORS, AND
YOUNG ADULTS' RELATIONSHIP QUALITY**

Wendy D. Manning

Monica A. Longmore

Peggy C. Giordano

Department of Sociology and the
Center for Family and Demographic Research
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH

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Stepfamilies, Parenting Complexity, Stressors, and Young Adults' Relationship Quality

Abstract

The well documented diversity of American family life has led to growth in stepfamilies and complex parenting responsibilities that extend beyond the traditional configuration of two parents raising shared biological children within their household. We investigated the influence of self-reports of parenting complexity (only shared, only non-shared, and both shared and non-shared children) on indicators of relationship quality including satisfaction, uncertainty, verbal conflict, and physical aggression. Respondents included 500 young adults in different-sex marital and cohabiting unions (Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study). Contrary to expectations, we found that individuals in relationships with non-shared children did not, on average, report lower relationship quality than their counterparts with only shared children. Although relationship stress (finances, time, trust) influenced relationship quality, they did not mediate associations between parenting complexity and relationship quality. Our findings speak to measurement and theoretical issues that may guide future research on stepfamilies and parenting complexity.

Key words: stepfamilies, parenting complexity, relationship quality, multiple partner fertility, family processes

Stepfamilies, Parenting Complexity, Stressors, and Young Adults' Relationship Quality

In contemporary American society, young men and women are increasingly forming stepfamilies. This is due to high numbers of individuals who have children from prior unions (non-shared children or stepchildren) as well as the subset of young adults with children from more than one partner (multiple partner fertility) (e.g., Cancian, Meyer, & Cook, 2011; Guzzo, 2014; Manning, Brown, & Stykes 2014; Schoen, Landale, & Daniels, 2007; Stewart, 2007; Ventura, 2009). For example, two-fifths (43.3%) of cohabiting unions and one-quarter (26.7%) of marriages included non-shared children (stepchildren from prior relationships) (Guzzo, 2015). Further, 38% of young adult mothers of two or more children have reported multiple partner fertility (their children do not share the same biological father) (Guzzo, 2014). Although young adults' parenting biographies often include children from prior relationships (stepchildren or non-shared children), little attention has focused on the implications for the quality of these relationships.

Drawing on contemporary data (2011-2012) from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) and the process stress framework (Pearlin & Skaff, 1996), we assessed whether and how parenting complexity influenced a range of indicators of relationship quality. An advantage of these data is that we can distinguish parenting complexity due to either or *both* partners having biological children with (a) prior marital, cohabiting, or sexual partners (non-shared parenting) or (b) only with current partners (shared-only parenting). Although some recent prior research has focused on multiple partner fertility (MPF), which by definition involves families with at least two children, MPF is only one component of parenting complexity. Our study contributed to the literature by more broadly conceptualizing parenting complexity as well as empirically assessing whether parenting complexity led to relationship

problems. Specifically, we assessed whether parenting complexity influenced relationship satisfaction, certainty about the future of the relationship, physical aggression, and verbal conflict. We also considered whether various familial stressors mediated associations between parenting complexity and indicators of relationship quality.

Background

Although the vast majority of Americans become parents, nevertheless, parenthood is stressful because it requires intense investments in time, economic, psychological, and physical resources. Researchers (Evenson & Simon, 2005; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003) comparing parents and non-parents have found associations between parenthood and poorer relationship quality. Yet the reality of American family life is that a growing share of families includes children from prior unions (stepchildren) and a decreasing share of biological parents are raising their children in marital unions (Guzzo, 2015). A shortcoming of many prior studies on stepfamilies and complex parenting is that researchers often do not empirically operationalize the mechanisms by which parenting complexity affects a range of relational outcomes.

Pearlin and colleagues' (1981; 1996) stress process model conceptualizes whether and why, a life event such as complex parenting might led to poorer quality relationships for young adults as evidenced by lower satisfaction, greater relationship uncertainty, and higher odds of verbal and physical conflict. This model includes three conceptual domains: (1) sources of stress (e.g., parenting complexity); (2) mediators of stress (e.g., time, finances, trust); and (3) manifestations of stress (e.g., relationship quality indicators), and suggests that outcomes such as conflict are intrinsically related to chronic stress including role stress, and that the availability of resources amplify or diminish such stress.

A number of researchers (Brown, 2003; Evenson & Simon, 2005; Kurdeck, 1999; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Stewart, 2007), focusing on the first domain, have implicated parenthood as a source of stress. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003), for example, have argued that although parenthood can be rewarding, it can be psychologically costly because of increased conflicts and frustrations, which lead to feelings of stress. Evenson and Simon (2005) have found that parental status increased fathers and mothers' depressive symptoms. Moreover, researchers (Brown, 2003; Brown & Booth, 1996) have found that for both cohabiting and married individuals, parenthood was associated with lower levels of interaction with partners and lower reports of happiness.

Consistent with Cherlin's (1978) framing of stepfamilies as incomplete institutions, scholars (Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Stewart, 2007) have argued that step-parenting is especially stressful because it requires defining and maintaining relatively unclear and variable roles and relationships. Indeed, step-parenthood is associated with greater instability of cohabiting unions (Guzzo, 2016) and remarriages (Teachman, 2008; White & Booth, 1985). Although early research on the implications of stepchildren on relationship quality was limited to remarried stepfamilies (White & Booth, 1985), conflating remarriage and step-parenthood is problematic considering the greater prevalence of alternative pathways into stepfamilies including cohabitation and nonmarital childbearing (Stewart, 2007). Moreover, given the increasing age at first marriage, 27 for women and 29 for men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), today most young adult stepparents are in cohabiting unions or first marriages.

Only a handful of recent empirical studies have considered relationship quality in stepfamilies (van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). As stepfamilies are increasingly normative, the negative implications may have weakened. For example, in 2000 stepchildren

were associated with greater marital happiness and lower conflict and divorce proneness; but in 1980, stepchildren were associated with lower marital quality (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). Further, relying on nationally representative data from the late 1980s, both Rogers (1996) and Brown and Booth (1996) reported that relationship happiness and conflict were similar in families with only biological, compared with step-children. Based on the Fragile Families data, compared with mothers who shared children with their partners, mothers with multiple partner fertility did not report lower relationship quality with current partners (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007; Monte, 2011). Further, Brown et al. (forthcoming) analyses of married and cohabiting couple data indicate that couples with only biological children and stepchildren share similar levels of relationship quality. Conversely, there is an association between step-parenting and intimate partner aggression. Based on different datasets, Brown and Bulanda (2008) and Brownridge (2004) have reported that individuals residing with non-shared children had increased odds of intimate partner violence. Thus, evidence from the majority of studies lead us to conclude that parenting complexity is not necessarily associated with some dimensions of relationship quality, but may be associated with higher odds of partner violence.

Other researchers have emphasized the second conceptual domain of the stress process model, mediators of stress, such as financial resources (Brody et al., 1994), partner trust (Burton, 2014), and time commitments and constraints (Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). Parents raising children from multiple relationships may be more economically disadvantaged and may face challenges in negotiating and receiving child support (Monte, 2007; Stewart, 2007). Further, nonresident parents may need to share financial resources between more than one household. In earlier research (Conger et al., 1990; Fox, Benson, DeMaris, & Wyk, 2002) and more recent studies (Copp, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, forthcoming) scholars have found that

financial stress led to poorer relationship quality as evidenced by verbal conflict and intimate partner violence. Concerns about trusting the partner around the opposite sex tend to characterize unions with non-shared children as children's nonresident parents are potential sexual partners (Burton, 2014; Cancian et al., 2011; Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Hill, 2007; Taylor et al., 2011). Further, issues of trust, or lack thereof, are associated with poorer quality relationships (Longmore, Manning, Giordano, & Copp, 2014), as well as partner violence (Kaufman, Longmore, Giordano, & Manning, 2014). Another source of stress, time commitments and constraints, may be more prevalent in families with non-shared children as parents negotiate relationships with their children's other biological parent (Monte, 2007). If relationships do not exist between nonresident parents and their children (Burton & Hardway, 2012), resident parents may be overburdened with time commitments and constraints as they fill the gaps left by uninvolved parents. Similarly, nonresident parents often have time constraints associated with being involved with their children. Thus, challenges in managing financial concerns, trust issues, and time constraints with ex-partners (relationship baggage) may be stressful as ex-partners may be viewed as threats to current relationships.

Many studies emphasize the third component of the stress process model: outcomes of stress. Researchers (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Leisring, 2013; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009; Roberts, McLaughlin, Conron, & Koenen, 2011; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004; Story & Bradbury, 2004) have demonstrated that stress, irrespective of its source, often leads to poorer quality relationships as well as increased odds of intimate partner violence. Thus, each of these three domains (sources, mediators, and outcomes) of the stress process model have been extensively studied separately, but have not been applied to parenting complexity, relational stress, and indicators of relationship quality.

Another line of inquiry related to complex parenting and relationship quality emphasizes the possibility of selection processes. Carlson and Furstenberg (2007) have argued that with regard to union formation selection processes operate such that individuals do not enter into relationships where non-shared children are present unless they are willing to take on some level of responsibility for parenting someone else's children. Empirical analyses have documented that men who were involved with their nonresident children and held more pro-child attitudes were more likely to form new unions (Goldscheider & Sassler, 2006; Stewart, Manning, & Smock, 2003). This conclusion is consistent with the notion of a "relationship learning curve" (Giordano, Johnson, Longmore, Manning, & Minter, 2015), such that individuals bring the lessons learned from their past relationships to their current relationships. Individuals who have children with prior partners may have learned some ways to successfully manage and navigate relationships. Such individuals (by definition those with non-shared children) may have lower, or perhaps more realistic relationship expectations, than their counterparts experiencing a first coresidential relationship. Alternatively, negative selection processes may be operating. Individuals who have children from prior relationships may be more economically disadvantaged and as a result face more challenges in their new relationships, which may result in lower quality relationships.

Current Investigation

Drawing on data from the 2011-2012 Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS, $n = 500$), we assessed whether parenting complexity was related to relationship stress and indicators of quality among married and cohabiting young adults. We first established measures of parenting complexity. Although researchers using other data sets have focused on respondents' parental status only, we examined respondents' reports of their own *and* partners' parental status to determine whether either member of the couple have children from prior relationships. Thus,

we assessed the implications of complex parenting by focusing on both respondents, and their partners, parental status. Although we can use the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to determine multiple partner fertility among women, these data do not establish whether respondents' partners have non-residential children with prior partners. This is a serious drawback for assessing parenting complexity for couples and specifically men because men's children with other partners typically do not reside with them (Guzzo, 2015). Thus, only a few population-based data sources, such as the TARS, have asked about non-residential children for, both, respondent and partner as well as a range of indicators of relationship quality.

We hypothesized that individuals with complex parenting (i.e., respondents with non-shared children) would report the lowest relationship satisfaction, highest relationship uncertainty, and higher odds of verbal and physical conflict. Additionally, we hypothesized that parenting complexity would influence relationship satisfaction and conflict, in part, through relational stress; thus, we anticipated that accounting for these stressors (financial, trust, time) would attenuate the effect of family complexity on young adults' relationship functioning. Alternatively, we recognized that positive selection processes may be operating and complex parenting may not be associated with negative relationship dynamics. In supplementary analyses we assessed whether there are associations between complex parenting and the indicators of stress. Further, building on prior research demonstrating gender differences in the meaning of parenthood (e.g., Monte, 2011; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003) as well as the experience of multiple partner fertility (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007), we examined whether the effects of parenting complexity differed for women and men. We expected parenting complexity to have more negative implications for women than men. We controlled for other known correlates of young adults' relationship satisfaction, verbal conflict, physical conflict and family complexity

including current relationship characteristics, such as union status and duration, as well as sociodemographic characteristics (age, race/ethnicity, education, employment). Finally, the TARS included a direct question that asked the respondent's views about the implications of non-shared children on their relationship. Among this subset of respondents who have complex parenting, we determined whether reports of relationship problems were associated with lower relationship quality.

Method

Data

The TARS data focus on intimate relationships during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The initial data (n=1,321) were from a stratified, random sample of adolescents who registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio, in the year 2000. We interviewed respondents during years 2001, 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2011-2012. Because we interviewed outside of the school setting, respondents did not need to attend classes to be in the original study. At the fifth interview there were 1,021 respondents, or 77.6% of the initial survey. Respondents were young adults (ages 22-29, with a mean age of 25), and we conducted largely in person (72%) with the remaining conducted online. Although focused on young adults who were adolescents in Ohio, the advantages of these population-based data include varied measures of relationship quality, direct questions about shared and non-shared parenting, and extensive relationship and fertility histories. To date no national sample includes these measures of complex parenting. Based on U.S. Census data, the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample mirror that of the nation in terms of race, marital status, and education. We limited the analytic sample to 517 respondents who reported their current or most recent relationship as a different-sex married or cohabiting union. There were not sufficient numbers of lesbian or gay

parents in the data to conduct separate analyses. We further limited the sample to 500 respondents who reported their race as Black, Hispanic, or White.

Dependent Variables

Relationship satisfaction (Rust, Bennun, Crowe, & Golombok, 1986), assessed at the fifth interview, included likert responses to the following eight items: (1) “I really appreciate his/her sense of humor”; (2) “He/she doesn’t seem to listen to me” (reverse coded); (3) “We both seem to like the same things”; (4) “I often have second thoughts about our relationship” (reverse coded); (5) “I enjoy just sitting and talking with him/her”; (6) “We become competitive when we have to make decisions” (reverse coded); (7) “I wish there was more warmth and affection between us” (reverse coded); and (8) “He/she is always correcting me” (reverse coded). Responses were (5) strongly agree to (1) strongly disagree ($\alpha = .82$).

Relationship uncertainty included three items about the future stability of the relationship: Two items asked respondents how strongly they disagreed (1) or agreed (5) with the statements, “I may not want to be with him [her] in a few years,” and “I feel uncertain about our prospects to make this relationship work for a lifetime.” The third item asked respondents “how often they seriously considered ending their relationship” with responses ranging from never (1) to very often (5) ($\alpha = .88$).

Physical conflict, measured at the fifth interview, included responses to twelve items from the revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). These included how often the respondent had done the following: (1) “thrown something at”; (2) “twisted arm or hair”; (3) “used a knife or gun”; (4) “punched or hit with something that could hurt”; (5) “choked”; (6) “slammed against a wall”; (7) “beat up”; (8) “burned or scalded on purpose”; (9) “kicked”; (10) “pushed, shoved, or grabbed”; (11) “slapped in the face or head

with an open hand”; and (12) “hit” in reference to experiences with the current/most recent partner. Responses ranged from (1) never to (5) very often; due to skewness we recoded the variable as any violence (1) and no violence (0) ($\alpha = .93$).

Verbal conflict, measured at the fifth interview, included responses to three items. These included how often the respondent and the respondent’s partner had: (1) “disagreements or arguments”; (2) “yelled or shouted at each other”; and (3) “disagreements about your relationship,” and responses ranged from (1) never to (5) very often ($\alpha = .89$).

Non-shared parenting relationship problems. Respondents who reported having non-shared children, were asked whether they had relationship problems based on non-shared parenting. The following question was asked of respondents who had a child with someone other than the current partner: “My relationship(s) with the father(s) [mother(s)] of my children cause(s) problems in my relationship with [name1].” A similar question was asked of respondents whose partners had a child with someone else. The response categories ranged on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Independent Variables

Parenting complexity, based on the respondent’s own experience and the partner’s experience, asked the following: Do you have children with someone other than X?” Response categories included: (1) “I don’t have any children”; (2) “I have a child with him/her”; (3) “I have a child, but not with him/her”; (4) “I have a child with both him/her and someone else.” Further, the fertility histories included a query asking whether the respondent had a child with anyone besides the father/mother of the child. We combined these questions to establish a relationship based measure of whether the couple had no children, only shared children, only non-shared children, and non-shared and shared children. We also created an indicator based on

the respondent's own fertility with the same response categories: no children, only shared children, and any non-shared children. A third measure, asked of respondents with two or more children, measured whether the respondent had multiple partner fertility.

Financial, time, and trust stress were measured separately. *Financial stress*, based on five items, assessed how concerned respondents were with (1) their standard of living, (2) not having enough money, (3) having a dead-end job, (4) not living up to potential, and (5) financially struggling ($\alpha = .82$). *Trust stress*, based on two items, asked about respondents' trust of partners around the opposite sex, and partners' trust when respondents were around the opposite sex ($\alpha = .76$). *Time stress* asked whether respondents liked how partners spent their time and managed everyday life, and was coded so that higher values reflected greater stress ($\alpha = .77$).

Control Variables

Gender, a dichotomous variable, indicated whether the respondent was female. *Age* was a continuous variable. Respondents' number of children is based on self-reports. *Race/ethnicity* consisted of three self-reported categories: Non-Hispanic White (reference group), Non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic. *Union status*, included cohabiting and married. *Duration* referred to years from the start of the relationship. *Number of children* references the number of children living in the household. *Current relationship* indicated that respondents reported on their current versus most recent relationship. *Duration* indicates the length of the current or more recent relationship in years. *Education* included four categories: less than 12 years, 12 years, some college, and college graduate.

Analytic Strategy

We first presented the descriptive statistics for two measures of parenting complexity as well as the other variables included in the multivariate models (Table 1). We used results in

Table 1 to demonstrate the utility of a union-based, compared with a respondent-based, measure of parenting complexity. Next, using ordinary least squares regression (logistic regression for physical conflict), we assessed the influence of parenting complexity on indicators of relationship quality (satisfaction, relationship uncertainty, verbal conflict, physical aggression), controlling for sociodemographic characteristics (Table 2). Third, we assessed whether stressors (financial, trust, time) mediated the effects of parenting complexity (Table 3), and estimated models that included interactions of gender and parenting complexity. In the final analyses, limited to marital and cohabiting unions involving non-shared children, we estimated whether problems with non-resident parents had deleterious effects on the indicators of relationship quality (Table 4).

Results

One goal of the paper was to demonstrate the utility of a union-based, compared with respondent or individual-based, measure of parenting complexity. Parenting complexity measured at the union level is more inclusive because respondents report on their own children, as well as their partners' children. To illustrate, in Table 1, using the respondent-based measure, 44% of married and cohabiting respondents reported that they did not have children, 39% reported that they had children only with current partners shared children, and 17% reported that they had non-shared children.

In contrast, using the union-based measure, in 38% of marital and cohabiting unions, neither partner had any children. In about a third (31%) of the unions, partners had children only with each other (only shared children). In approximately 13% of unions, partners did not have children with each other, but at least one partner had children from a different relationship (only non-shared children). Similarly, in about 12% of unions, partners had, both, shared and non-

shared children. Thus, the respondent-based indicator excluded about 13% of respondents who did not have children, but whose partners had children from other relationships. Accordingly, we used the more inclusive union-based indicator in the multivariate analyses. Summarizing, then, in about one-quarter of marital and cohabiting unions, at least one partner had a non-shared child, which may complicate parenting relative to parenting shared children only.

In the second column, Table 1, we focused strictly on marital and cohabiting unions with children. In about half of these unions, at least one partner had non-shared children. There was a nearly even split between unions in which partners had only non-shared (25%), and unions in which partners had both shared and non-shared children (25%). Unions with both shared and non-shared children, is a distinct type of multiple partner fertility (at least one partner had children with more than one person), and we assessed whether this higher degree of parenting complexity had greater deleterious effects on indicators of relationship quality.

In the second panel we described unions characterized by multiple partner fertility, which by definition involve at least two children. Again, illustrating the value of the union-based measure we compared findings with the respondent-based measure. Using the respondent-based measure, only about one-fifth of respondents reported that they had at least two children with more than one partner. The average number of children was 1.76 (range 0-6) (results not shown) so this indicator of multiple partner fertility reflects a rather limited set of young adult parents because only 26% have two or more children. Further, among respondents with two or more children, 38% had children with more than one partner.

In contrast, using the union-based measure, unions in which at least one partner was a parent, over one-quarter had multiple partner fertility – this included unions that involved shared and non-shared children (discussed above) and unions in which at least one partner had children

with multiple partners. We anticipated that this more complicated level of parenting was associated with poorer relationship quality. To best operationalize complex parenting experiences, in our multivariate analyses focused on the union-based indicator of parenting complexity.

Table 2 presented the distribution of the indicators of relationship quality (satisfaction, uncertainty, verbal conflict, physical aggression), relationship problems due to non-shared parenting, relationship stress (financial, trust, and time), and sociodemographic variables by parenting complexity. The levels of relationship quality were similar across the parenting indicators with marginally higher rates of partner violence among respondents with non-shared children. In general, stressors did not differ by parenting complexity, except respondents with non-shared children reported marginally higher levels of financial and trust stressors. The degree of endorsement with the statement that non-shared children cause relationship problems was mid-range with a mean score of 2.5. Yet, one-quarter (24.5%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Levels of agreement were higher among those with only non-shared children and lower among those with both shared and non-shared children. In response to a direct question, a substantial minority of respondents in these complex families indicated that relationships with the parents of non-shared children caused relationship problems.

Regarding sociodemographic characteristics, higher concentrations of White respondents were in unions in which partners had only shared children, greater shares of Hispanic respondents were in unions characterized by only non-shared children, and greater shares of Black respondents were in unions characterized by shared and non-shared children. Marriage was the most common union among respondents who had only shared children with their partners, and cohabitation was the most common union (80%) among respondents who reported

that they had shared and non-shared children with their partners. Educational levels were highest among respondents with only shared children; 25% were college graduates. Among respondents with shared and non-shared children, 13% were college graduates.

Table 3 presented multivariate models examining whether parenting complexity, stressors, and sociodemographic characteristics influenced relationship satisfaction, uncertainty, conflict, and physical aggression. We presented only one model for each outcome because the inclusion of correlates did not change the association between parenting complexity and relationship quality indicators. Shown in the first column, complex parenting (shared and non-shared) positively influenced relationship satisfaction. Respondents with only non-shared children reported similar relationship satisfaction as those with only shared children. As expected, financial, trust, and time stressors negatively influenced relationship satisfaction.

Parenting complexity was not associated with relationship uncertainty, suggesting that the future orientation of the relationship was not dependent on parenting configuration. Black and cohabiting respondents reported greater relationship uncertainty. Financial, trust, and time stressors positively influenced relationship uncertainty.

Parenting complexity was not significantly associated with verbal conflict and the stressors operated in the expected direction. Respondents with more children reported higher levels of verbal conflict. The odds of experiencing physical aggression were similar for respondents with and without parenting complexity. The initial marginally significant difference at the bivariate model was explained with the inclusion of the sociodemographic variables, specifically number of children (results not shown). Respondents with more resident children reported higher levels of physical aggression. The stressors were positively associated with the odds of experiencing physical aggression.

Finally, gender interactions suggested that women, compared with men, with only non-shared children reported higher relationship satisfaction, yet more relationship uncertainty (results not shown). Gender differences were not significant in the associations between having both shared and non-shared children and indicators of relationship quality (results not shown).

Table 4 presented the regression models predicting the indicators of relationship quality among the subset of respondents who had non-shared children. In bivariate models (model 1), the greater agreement with the statement that non-shared children cause problems in your relationship is significantly associated with relationship quality: lower satisfaction, greater uncertainty, higher levels of conflict, and marginally greater odds of intimate partner violence. In the multivariate models agreement that non-shared children cause relationship problems was associated with lower satisfaction and greater verbal conflict. Thus, there is a subset of respondents with non-shared children who report that it causes relational problems and they do experience lower levels of relationship quality.

Discussion

Although rates of stepfamilies and parenting complexity have been documented, there are only a handful of studies focusing on the implications of parenting complexity for the quality of relationships. We considered a union-based indicator of parenting complexity that accounted for the respondents' children as well as their partners' children, and applied a stress perspective to our analysis of relationship quality.

A contribution of our work was to examine both individual and union-based measures of parenting complexity. Examining the respondent-based measure, 30% of cohabiting or married respondents with a child reported a non-shared child. In contrast, the measure that included the respondents' reports of their own and their partners' parental status, about half of these unions

with children included non-shared children. Both measurement strategies can be appropriate depending on the research question. Given our focus on relationship quality we relied on the union-based measure that included both the respondents' and partners' parental status. Similarly, we examined multiple partner fertility as well as parenting complexity. Multiple partner fertility is a subset of complex partnering, but by definition requires one parent to have at least two children. Although this may be an appropriate indicator, it is sometimes used as a proxy for complex parenting. More attention to the use and definition of multiple partner fertility is warranted (Guzzo, 2014). Many of the parents with non-shared children will go on to form unions characterized by multiple partner fertility. In essence, they are the population at risk for future multiple partner fertility.

Our measure of parenting complexity may also be termed, a stepfamily. Traditionally, definitions of stepfamilies were based on the biological relationship of residential children (Stewart, 2007). Several researchers including Sweeney (2010) and Stewart (2007) have argued for an expanded definition of stepfamilies that include children who live outside the home. For example, nonresident fathers who form new relationships are by definition forming stepfamilies. Unfortunately, not many population-based surveys permit measurement of the expanded definition of stepfamilies as questions about both the respondent and spouse/partners children living in the home and outside the home are required. Many prior surveys simply have collected household rosters and have not queried about the partner's nonresident children. Guzzo (2015) reported that the counts of stepfamilies are more than doubled when including resident and non-resident stepchildren. As data collections encompass broader definitions of families, the terms we use in research likely will be modified.

The discourse on multiple partner fertility, stepparenting, and non-shared parenting has

focused on the potentially negative ramifications of such complexities. Negotiating everyday life with former partners who are the parents of non-shared children can be challenging and are reflected in slightly higher financial and trust stressors. Former partners may be threatening to relationships as they present possible sexual and relationship threats and are reflected in terms used in population culture such as “baby momma drama.” Non-shared children bring with them former ‘relationship baggage’ that may interfere with the quality of the relationship. At the same time individuals who are in relationships where at least one partner has non-shared children were aware of this parental status at the time they entered into cohabitation or marriage. Thus, there may be some positive selection of individuals into relationships where one member of the couple has a child with someone else. Further, individuals who have had a non-shared child by definition have prior relationship experience and may have a positive ‘relationship learning curve.’ In other words, they have learned from their prior relationships and possibly have more realistic expectations of their relationships.

Drawing on a stress perspective we found that higher levels of stress were associated with lower levels of relationship quality. Contrary to our expectations, responses to the direct questions about non-shared parenting and relationship problems revealed that on average non-shared parenting was not viewed as a source of stress in relationships. Further, inconsistent with the stress perspective parenting complexity was not associated with lower levels of relationship quality. The findings were similar across four indicators of quality and persisted with or without controls for relationship stressors. Our findings best align with the notion of a relationship learning curve or selection argument. However, there appeared to be a subset of individuals who experienced some stress based on non-shared parenting, and our study is unique in asking direct questions about this dynamic. Analyses indicated that for this subgroup parenting complexity

was associated with greater stress and lower relationship quality.

Although this study extended our understanding of parenting complexity, there are a few shortcomings. First, the analyses were cross-sectional and it would be ideal to have indicators of relationship quality at the outset of the relationship. Examining individuals as they initiate relationships would be challenging because it would require frequent data collection. Second, this was a regional sample and the findings should be replicated with a nationally representative sample. Third, our sample was limited to relatively young parents with young children and it is possible that parenting complexity becomes more problematic as children get older and there are more demands on time and resources. Our work best represents the early years of stepfamily life with young children. This is an important group to study as half of cohabiting and married couples with children have non-shared children. The chances of parenting complexity likely increase with age so this study represents how young adults manage parenting complexity. Finally, prior studies focused on factors that we could not assess due to limited sample size and measurement. The residence of stepchildren could be important in assessing their influence on couple relationship quality as well as the level of co-parenting non-shared children (Monte, 2007). We were not able to measure the extent of co-parenting or dynamics of children's residence in this study, but agree these factors are important in assessments of couple relationship quality.

As parenting complexity becomes increasingly common we believe it is important to expand our methodological and theoretical treatments of family structure to include more diverse family experiences. We anticipate that future studies will consider specific conditions under which parenting complexity increases stresses associated with lower relationship quality. Further, a central goal of new research will be to assess the ways that parenting complexity

influences a broader array of family processes and outcomes such as co-parenting, family instability and child well-being.

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Table 1. Shared Parenting and Multiple Partner Fertility (Cohabiting and Married Young Adults)

Parenting Complexity (n=500)	Total (n=500)	Parents (n=308)
Union-based Parenting Complexity		(n=308)
No Children	38.4%	--
Only Shared Children	30.8%	50.0%
Only Non-Shared Children	12.6%	25.3%
Both Shared and Non-Shared Children	12.4%	24.7%
Respondent-based Parenting Complexity		(n=267)
No Children	44.0%	--
Only Shared Children	38.8%	69.7%
Any Non-Shared Children	17.2%	30.3%
Multiple Partner Fertility		
Union (n=308 Respondent or Partner has Child)		
No Multiple Partner Fertility		71.4%
Respondent or Partner has Multiple Partner Fertility		28.6%
Respondent (n=267 Respondent has child)		
No Respondent Multiple Partner Fertility		81.3%
Respondent Multiple Partner Fertility		18.7%
Respondent (n=129 Respondent has 2 or more children)		
No Respondent Multiple Partner Fertility		61.2%
Respondent Multiple Partner Fertility		38.8%

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Table 2. Distribution of Independent and Dependent Variables for Married and Cohabiting Couples with Children (N=308)

	TOTAL	Only Shared	Only Non-shared	Both Shared & Non-shared
Relationship Quality				
Satisfaction (1-5)	3.6 (0.7)	3.6 (0.75)	3.6 (0.72)	3.7 (0.62)
Uncertainty (1-5)	2.3 (1.4)	2.2 (1.13)	2.4 (1.20)	2.4 (1.08)
Conflict (1-5)	2.6 (0.9)	2.6 (0.89)	2.7 (0.92)	2.6 (0.96)
Physical Aggression	32.5%	27.2%	37.2%+	38.2%+
Stressors				
Financial (1-5)	2.4 (0.9)	2.4 (0.88)	2.6 (1.01)+	2.6 (0.98)
Trust (1-5)	3.1 (1.3)	2.9 (1.26)	3.3 (1.37)+	3.1 (1.31)
Time (1-5)	2.6 (0.9)	2.6 (0.87)	2.7 (0.94)	2.5 (0.87)
Non-shared Causes				
Relationship Problems (1-5) (n=151) ^a	2.47 (1.26)	--	2.61 (1.33)	2.32 (1.19)
Sociodemographic				
Age (22-29)	25.8 (1.71)	25.9 (1.76)	25.6 (1.65)	25.9 (1.68)
Number of R's children	1.6 (1.00)	1.5 (0.79)	2.2 (1.24)*	1.4 (0.92)*
Gender				
Female	56.8%	54.5%	66.7%	51.3%
Male	43.2%	45.5%	33.3%	48.7%
Race/Ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic White	61.7%	73.4%	48.7%	51.3%
Non-Hispanic Black	22.1%	12.3%	25.6%	38.1%
Hispanic	16.2%	14.3%	25.6%	10.5%
Union Status				
Married	45.8%	58.4%	46.1%	19.7%
Cohabiting	54.2%	41.5%	53.8%	80.2%
Duration	4.0 (2.79)	4.8 (2.59)	4.2 (2.82)	2.1 (2.24) *
Current Relationship				
Yes	90.2%	92.0%	84.0%	88.1%
No	9.8%	8.0%	16.0%	11.9%
Education				
Less than high school	12.3%	11.0%	14.1%	13.2%
High school	25.3%	21.4%	35.6%	22.4%
13-15	44.8%	42.2%	43.6%	51.3%
16+	17.5%	25.3%	6.4%	13.1%
N	308	154	78	76

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Standard deviations in parentheses

^a. Item only asked of respondents and partners with non-shared children+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ difference between only shared children

Table 3. Relationship Quality and Complex Parenting among Married and Cohabiting Young Adults with Children (N = 308)

	Relationship Satisfaction	Relationship Uncertainty	Verbal Conflict	Physical Aggression ^a
<i>Parenting Complexity</i>				
(Only Shared)				
Only Non-shared	0.095	0.016	-0.161	0.967
Shared and Non-shared	0.171*	0.134	-0.080	1.729
<i>Sociodemographic</i>				
Age	0.023	-0.042	-0.014	0.906
Number of children	-0.032	0.056	0.178***	1.634**
Female (Male)	0.095	0.152	0.103	1.241
Race/Ethnicity (Non-Hispanic White)				
Black	-0.050	0.329**	0.067	0.911
Hispanic	-0.102	0.026	-0.100	1.435
Cohabiting (Married)	-0.026	0.288**	0.120	1.324
Duration	0.000	0.025	-0.005	1.002
Current Relationship (Prior)	0.178+	-0.231	-0.102	0.444+
Education (Some College)				
Less than high school	0.028	-0.077	-0.038	0.623
High School	0.130+	-0.139	-0.139	1.074
College Graduate	-0.050	0.174	0.196	1.095
<i>Stress</i>				
Financial	-0.092**	0.152**	0.159**	1.542**
Trust	-0.047+	0.092*	0.087*	1.250+
Time	-0.473***	0.726***	0.448***	1.657**

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Note: Reference group in parentheses.

^a. All models present OLS regression coefficients except physical aggression, which presents logistic regression odds ratios.

+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 4. Relationship Quality and Reported Problems with Non-Shared Children Among Married and Cohabiting Young Adults with Non-Shared Children^a (n=151)

	Relationship Satisfaction		Relationship Uncertainty		Verbal Conflict		Physical Aggression	
	Model 1	Model 2 ^b	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Non-shared causes problems	-0.202***	-0.089**	0.244***	0.0225	0.269***	0.199***	1.261 ⁺	1.041

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study

Note: Reference group in parentheses

^a. All models present OLS regression coefficients except physical aggression, which presents logistic regression odds ratios.

^b. Model 2 includes age, gender, race/ethnicity, union status, education, and stress as defined in Table 3.

+ p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001