Family Complexity, Childbearing, and Parenting Stress: A Comparison of Mothers' and Fathers' Experiences

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Abstract

Theories of family functioning suggest that childbearing with multiple partners may increase parenting stress due to changes in social and economic resources and the challenges associated with parenting across multiple households. These family processes may not be equally stressful for mothers and fathers, because they face different parental constraints and responsibilities. I use four waves of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine whether multi-partnered fertility increases parenting stress for mothers and fathers. Using lagged regression models and longitudinal repeated reports of parenting stress, I find that both mothers and fathers report increases in parenting stress following the birth of a child with a new romantic partner, relative to parents who experience no additional childbearing. However, increases in parenting stress following multi-partnered fertility are similar to increases in parenting stress following same-partner fertility. I also find that transitions to new romantic partnerships are associated with increases in parenting stress for mothers and fathers only when new romantic partners have children from previous relationships. Increases in parenting stress following all fertility transitions are stronger for less-educated parents than for more-educated parents.

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The dramatic rise in nonmarital fertility in the US has raised concerns about how raising children outside of marriage affects family dynamics and the well-being of parents and children. Recent research has revealed several important facts. First, children born outside of marriage are increasingly born not to single mothers but to unmarried couples, with mother and father romantically involved and often living together (Center for Research on Child Well-being 2003; Raley 2001; Bumpass and Lu 2000). Second, relationships between unmarried parents are considerably less stable than those between married parents (Lichter et al. 2006), and a majority of urban nonmarital children see their parents break up by their fifth birthday (Center for Research on Child Well-being 2007). For certain groups, transitions to *new* romantic relationships occur quickly after relationships between unmarried parents end, resulting in a pattern of serial partnering (Lichter, Turner, and Sassler 2010; Lichter and Qian 2008). Finally, some new romantic partnerships produce additional children by more than one romantic partner, resulting in multi-partnered fertility (Carlson and Furstenberg 2007).

The dual phenomena of relationship instability and multi-partnered fertility result in dynamic and complex webs of family relationships involving a wide, and changing, cast of characters. They result in multiple paternal and maternal figures, including non-resident biological fathers (and possibly their new partners) and resident social fathers (the new partners of biological mothers). They also result in step- and half-siblings who can live in the same household or scattered across multiple households. Recent estimates indicate that multi-partnered fertility characterizes a significant portion of the U.S. population: among women with two or more children, 28% reported their children had different biological fathers (Dorius 2010).

Relationship instability and multi-partnered fertility pose challenges for family functioning. Qualitative evidence suggests that these phenomena generate uncertainty over parenting roles and family boundaries, as mothers struggle to gather socioeconomic resources and negotiate visitation with multiple men, while fathers must decide how to allocate their sometimes scarce resources of time and money across multiple households (Furstenberg 1995; Edin and Tach 2011; Classens 2007; Hill 2007; Tach and Edin 2011). The roles and responsibilities of each parent must be re-negotiated each time a partnership begins or ends, or when a new child is born. These uncertainties may increase parenting stress among both mothers and fathers, albeit for different reasons, which in turn may undermine parental and child well-being.

This paper investigates whether relationship instability and multi-partnered fertility increase parenting stress among mothers and fathers. It builds upon previous work that focuses solely on mothers and how their parenting stress is affected by romantic partnership transitions (Cooper et al. 2009; Beck et al. 2010; Osborne et al. 2010) and multi-partner fertility (Fomby 2011). Fathers and mothers face some similar sources of strain when they enter new relationships and new children are born, but they also face distinct normative and interpersonal expectations for parenting that could cause them to respond differently to changes in family structure. This paper also builds upon existing work by considering multiple sources of parenting strain, including the addition of children through same-partner fertility, multi-partner fertility, and step-children from partners' past relationships.

Background

Parenting stress is defined as a "condition or feeling experienced when a parent perceives that the demands associated with parenting exceed the personal and social resources available to

meet those demands" (Cooper et al. 2009, p. 559). Researchers have identified early childhood as a time of elevated parenting stress (Kyczynski & Kochanska, 1990), making this a particularly crucial developmental period in which to study the determinants of parenting stress. Parenting stress may undermine the quality of parent-child interactions as well as the quality of relationships between parents; it also has been linked to behavior problems in young children (Anthony et al. 2005; Crnic, Gaze, and Hoffman, 2005; Thompson et al. 1993).

Relationship Instability and Parenting Stress

Classic theories of family functioning purport that families experience stress whenever members are added to or subtracted from a family system (Boss 1980), as family members figure out who is inside or outside of the new family, what each member's new roles and responsibilities will be, and how expectations for oneself and others will change following a change in family composition. Economic and social resources help parents cope with parenting stressors, but parents may also face changes in the economic and social resources at their disposal when relationships end or begin. While these processes affect both mothers and fathers, they do so in different ways. For example, mothers experience larger declines in their economic well-being following a divorce or cohabitation dissolution than fathers do (Teachman and Paasch 1994); mothers also typically remain the primary coresidential caregivers of their children when relationships dissolve. Because of the decline in economic resources and the increased parenting responsibilities are typically larger for mothers, one might expect mothers' parenting stress to increase more than fathers' following the dissolution of a union. This is not to say that fathers face no adverse effects; they may still experience increased stress as they struggle to parent their children and interact with their ex-partners once they no longer live with them.

Mothers and fathers may also experience changes in stress when they enter new romantic relationships. If parents experience a boost in economic resources and assistance with child supervision from their new partners, their stress may decline after entering a new union (Nomaguchi, Brown, and Leyman 2012). However, the addition of a step-parent (or the nonmarital equivalent) in the household may also elevate stress by increasing the ambiguity of family boundaries and responsibilities. Prior research has documented the ambiguity of family boundaries and the associated stress it may cause within the context of remarriages and stepfamilies (Brown and Manning 2009; Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). One may expect role ambiguity to be even greater among unmarried parents, as the roles and expectations of unmarried parents are less institutionalized than those of married parents.

Indeed, researchers have found that the number of family structure transitions a mother experiences, regardless of whether it is the formation or dissolution of a union, is positively associated with maternal stress (Beck et al. 2010; Cooper et al. 2009). Other studies, using more nuanced methodological approaches to control for omitted variable bias and temporal ordering, have complicated this finding. First, Meadows et al (2008) examined a composite indicator of maternal mental health (that does not include parenting stress) and found that while mothers who experienced multiple relationship transitions had poorer mental health, these differences were present prior to the relationship transitions, suggesting that the observed association was not causal but due to selection bias. Second, Osborne et al (2012) analyzed union dissolutions and union formations separately and found that mothers experienced an increase in parenting stress following a dissolution, but no change in parenting stress when they entered a new relationship.

Notably, however, this prior work focused exclusively on mothers, leaving open the question of how relationship instability affects the parenting stress of fathers. Because mothers

experience greater changes in their economic resources and parenting burdens following a break up, we might expect mothers' to experience greater increases in parenting stress than fathers. It is less clear how new partnerships will affect parenting stress, as they introduce both more resources and more interpersonal challenges for both mothers and fathers.

Additionally, previous studies of relationship transitions and parenting stress did not consider whether the effect of a re-partnering was sensitive to whether the new partner brings children from a past relationship. The parenting of step-children generates considerable role ambiguity, as noted above. These children may live with the new couple, creating situations in which parents must figure out how to support and parent residential non-biological children, or they may live with their other parent in different households, which may also cause strain if these children visit or if the partner provides financial support or spends time with the non-resident children. These situations may increase parenting stress if parents struggle with whether and how support and parent non-biological children. Thus, we might expect repartnering to cause larger increases in parenting stress when new partners have children from prior relationships.

Multi-partnered Fertility and Parenting Stress

While the addition of any child to a family may increase financial strain, role ambiguity and parenting stress, these experiences may be exacerbated in the context of multi-partnered fertility, as parenting roles may be more costly and challenging to negotiate when multiple mothers and fathers are involved. Recent qualitative studies suggest that mothers struggle to balance visitation and support, not to mention competing devotions, across multiple fathers, while fathers struggle to figure out how to distribute their time and resources across multiple households and are unsure of how to parent children who are not biologically their own (Edin, Tach, and Mincy 2010; Classens 2007; Waller 2002). As a result of these uncertainties, multi-

partnered fertility undermines the quality of couple relationships (Hill 2007) and social support received from friends and family (Harknett and Knab 2007), perhaps further contributing to increased parenting stress.

Multi-partnered fertility may also increase parenting stress if parents have difficulty maintaining the amount and quality of investments in their children. Research has shown that parents invest less in nonresident children than they do in resident children (Hofferth 2006), which places a relatively greater burden on the other parent to provide the economic and social resources the child needs. If non-residents fathers are less willing to spend time or resources on their biological children when mothers have new children with new partners (Tach et al. 2010), mothers may experience greater hardship as they work to support their children and organize childcare for them, thereby increasing the stresses of parenting. Furthermore, multi-partnered fertility may decrease paternal investments in both biological and non-biological children due to the increased costs and demands associated with parenting across multiple households. For example, researchers have found that multi-partnered fertility is associated with less child support paid by fathers to mothers (Craigie 2010; Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel 2010), which increases the financial strain placed on mothers. For their part, fathers must pay more in child support when they have children by multiple mothers than they do when their children have the same mother (Meyer, Cancian, and Cook 2005), increasing fathers' financial strain as well. Financial strain, in turn, is a key predictor of parenting stress (McLoyd 1990).

In addition to financial support, father involvement may also decline in the context of multi-partnered fertility if fathers must spread their time across multiple households and negotiate access with their exes, the children's mothers. Researchers have shown that multi-partnered fertility is associated with less father involvement in both marital and nonmarital

contexts (Manning and Smock 1999, 2000; Manning, Stewart and Smock 2003; Carlson and Furstenberg 2007), though part of this effect may be due to declines in involvement following repartnering (Tach et al. 2010). The increased challenges of maintaining meaningful involvement with children in multiple households may result in elevated stress for fathers. Declining involvement may also increase maternal stress, although research has shown that the association between father involvement and maternal parenting stress is stronger when the father lives with the mother than when he is nonresident (Nomaguchi et al. 2012).

While previous research on the associations between multi-partnered fertility and parenting stress is limited, one study that examined only mothers found that multi-partnered fertility is associated with greater maternal parenting stress (Fomby 2011). Another study examined the effect of multipartnered fertility on maternal and paternal depression but found little evidence of a causal association (Turney and Carlson 2011).

Variation by Economic Context

A parent's response to relationship instability and multi-partnered fertility may be conditioned in part by his or her economic resources. Parents with ample economic resources may be relatively less stressed by the added demands of parenting alone (in the case of mothers) or across multiple households (in the case of fathers), as they may be able to draw upon their own resources to fill any gaps produced when they break up or have new children by new partners. Indeed, researchers have shown that such a model operates for the association between new romantic partnerships and maternal parenting stress, with highly educated mothers less affected by relationship transitions than less-educated women (Cooper et al. 2009). This suggests that there may be interactions between economic resources and relationship instability and multi-partnered fertility.

Other Predictors of Parenting Stress

When considering the effect of multi-partnered fertility, one must account for parents' socioeconomic resources (Cooper et al. 2009). Parents who have children with multiple partners have greater socioeconomic disadvantages (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007a; Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, and Holcombe, 2008), and socioeconomic disadvantage is also a key predictor of parenting stress (Gershoff et al. 2007; Joshi and Bogen 2007; McLoyd 1990).

Likewise, parental health is a strong predictor of union instability (Hope et al. 1999; Meadows et a. 2008), and relationship instability may undermine parental health (Meadows et al. 2008). Turney and Carlson (2011) found that while additional multi-partnered fertility was not associated with an increased likelihood of depression, depressed parents were more likely to have children by multiple partners. Parents with physical or mental health challenges may, in turn, experience greater parenting stress because of the additional barriers they face in carrying out their roles and responsibilities.

Finally, researchers have shown that having a child is a stressful life event even if it does not occur within the context of multi-partnered fertility (Belsky and Kelly 1994), as it brings about added financial, emotional, and relationship demands. Thus, any study of the effect of relationship instability or multi-partnered fertility should control for additional childbearing, and compare the effect of having an additional child by the same partner to the effect of having an additional child with a new partner, in order to isolate the effect of *multi-partnered* childbearing from the effect of childbearing in general.

The Present Study

The present study examines whether relationship instability and multi-partnered fertility increase parenting stress among mothers and fathers. First, I examine how parenting stress changes following the formation of a new union. I distinguish between union formations in which the partner has children from previous relationships and those in which the partner has no previous children, as the former involves greater financial and parenting responsibilities than the latter. Second, I examine whether the birth or a second (or higher order) child is associated with increases in parenting stress. I compare the increase in parenting stress following a higher order birth to the *same* biological parent (same-partner fertility) to the increase in parenting stress following a birth to a new romantic partner (multi-partnered fertility). I also examine whether one's ex-partner's relationship and fertility transitions affect one's own parenting stress. Previous research suggests that each of the aforementioned transitions will be associated with greater parenting stress for both mothers and fathers because they increase family ambiguity and place greater demands on parents' financial and social resources. Finally, I compare these associations for less- and more-educated parents, as family transitions may increase parenting stress more among parents with fewer economic resources.

Data & Method

Data and Sample

In the analyses that follow, I use four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study to examine levels and changes in parenting stress, focusing on whether subsequent fertility with the same or new partners increases parenting stress among mothers and fathers. The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in 20 U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000. The study interviews mothers and fathers at the time of the

child's birth and again after about one year, three years, and five years. The survey contains a large oversample of nonmarital births and, when weighted, the data are representative of all U.S. cities with populations larger than 200,000. Both the mother and father are interviewed at each follow-up, regardless of their relationship status. These data are ideal for the study of parenting stress not only because of the large sample of unmarried and nonresidential fathers, but because they contain detailed longitudinal information on parenting stress collected independently from both the mother and the father. They collect information on all of the biological and non-biological, residential and non-residential children of the mother, father, and any new romantic partners with whom they become involved.

Attrition was higher for unmarried mothers and fathers in the Fragile Families data than for married parents. At baseline 87% of eligible unmarried mothers agreed to participate in the survey, and 75% of the fathers were interviewed. At subsequent survey waves, response rates for unmarried mothers were 90% at Wave 2, 88% at Wave 3, and 87% at Wave 4. Mothers who dropped out of the study were more likely to be White or Latino, were less likely to be married to the father when the child was born, and had lower average socioeconomic status (Cooper et al. 2007). Fathers had higher attrition rates, at 70%, 68%, and 66% for Waves 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Fathers who dropped out of the study were less likely to be involved with their children and were less likely to be residing with the mother of the focal child.

The analyses are based upon two subsamples. The first is the maternal subsample, which is restricted to mothers who responded to the survey in each wave and who had non-missing data on the measure of parenting stress. This results in sample sizes of 3,765 at the 1-year survey, 3,645 at the 3-year survey, and 3,555 at the 5-year survey. A similar subsample was constructed for fathers. Because fathers have higher attrition rates, their subsamples are 2,936 at the 1-year,

2,287 at the 3-year, and 2,182 at the 5-year surveys. I pool samples from each survey to create separate person-wave datasets for mothers and fathers. Fathers' attrition is nonrandom and correlated with family well-being and family structure, so analyses involving fathers' reports of parenting stress are limited to a positively selected sample, which should lead to downwardly biased estimates of the effect of multiple-partner fertility on parenting stress for fathers.

I estimate models separately for mothers and fathers using all available cases and impute item-nonresponse on independent variables using Stata's multiple imputation program (using 5 imputed datasets). Item non-response was generally less than 5% for all independent variables, except for household income at 17%. This yields the maximum number of cases for each parent, but the samples are not strictly comparable between mothers and fathers because of fathers' differential attrition.

Measures

Parenting Stress. Following Cooper et al. (2009), *parenting stress* is measured by the sum of each parents' responses to the following statements (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=strongly agree): being a parent is harder than I thought it would be; I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent; I find that taking care of my child(ren) is much more work than pleasure; I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from raising a family. This question is asked separately of mothers and fathers in the 1, 3, and 5-year surveys.

Fertility and Multi-Partnered Fertility. At the baseline survey, mothers and fathers are asked how many biological children they have. Then, in each subsequent survey mothers are asked whether they have had a new child since the last survey, and whether the biological father of the focal child is the father of this new child. If fathers have a new romantic partner, they are asked whether they have had any children with the new romantic partner. From this information, I

construct a measure of whether the mother or father has *had a new child* between each survey wave. I then divide this group into parents who have had a *new child with the same partner* and parents who have had a *new child with a different partner*. I code the small number of parents who had new children with both the same and a different partner between survey waves as having new children with a different partner.

Romantic Partnerships. At each survey wave, mothers and fathers are asked whether they still in a relationship with each other. If they are no longer in a relationship with each other, they are asked whether they have started a romantic relationship with a new partner. I use these questions to construct a dummy variable measure of whether the parent has experienced a new romantic partnership transition between survey waves. If the parent entered a new relationship, he or she is asked whether the new partner has any biological children from previous relationships. I use this information to construct a measure of whether the new partnership transition involves step-children (relative to starting a new relationship that does not involve step-children). If the parent reports a romantic partner in two consecutive waves, I determine whether this is the same or a different partner by comparing the start date of the relationship to the date of the previous survey waves. Parents who report that their relationship started after the last survey interview are counted as having a new romantic partner; if the start date was before the last interview, it is counted as the same partner (and thus no new partnership transition). This measure misses short-lived relationships that begin and end between survey waves, and is thus a conservative estimate of relationship instability.

Time-Constant Controls. Control measures were constructed separately for mothers and fathers based on their own reports. Parents' race and ethnicity were determined at the baseline survey and classified into the mutually exclusive categories: *non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic*

black, non-Hispanic other race, and *Hispanic.* I include an indicator for whether the parent was *foreign born*. *Parent's age* was measured at the time the child was born. Parent's education was coded as a series of dummy variables for *less than high school, high school or GED, some college*, and *college or higher*. I also include a dummy variable indicator for whether the *child is male.* Finally, I include measures from the 1-year survey of whether the parents have additional s*hared children* together, whether the *parent has previous multiple-partner fertility,* or whether the focal child is the parent's only child.

Time-Varying Controls. The parent's relationship status was categorized as *married or unmarried* based upon the parent's reports at each wave. I also include a dummy variable that indicates whether each parent reported that he or she lived with the focal child at least some of the time since the previous survey. Each parent's household income was measured at each wave based on a survey question that asked parents to report their total annual income from all sources for all members of the household. These values were reported in income brackets, which were recoded to the midpoint of each category, and then logged. *Father ever in jail* is a dummy variable coded 1 at each survey wave if the father or mother reported that he had ever been in jail. I include a measure of self-reported *parental health* that asks the parent to rate his or her general health on a five-point scale ranging from poor to excellent. Finally, I include a dummy variable indicator at each wave if the parent *reported using drugs* in the previous year.

Method

After presenting descriptive statistics on parental characteristics and new fertility, I estimate lagged regression models that take the following form:

$$(Stress)_t = B_0 + B_1(Stress)_{t-1} + B_2(NewSharedBaby)_t + B_3(NewMPFBaby)_t + \sum_{m=4}^{M} B_m X_m + \sum_{n=M+1}^{N} B_n \mathbf{X}_{n(t-1)}$$

where *t* indexes the survey wave at which the observation of parenting stress is measured for

child *i*, either the 3-year follow-up or the 5-year follow-up survey. The coefficient on β_1 captures the lagged effect of stress from the previous survey wave, either the 1 or 3 year follow up. The inclusion of this coefficient gives the other coefficients in the model the interpretation of a *change* in parenting stress between survey waves, net of prior parenting stress. β_2 captures how much parenting stress changes for parents who had a new-shared baby together between survey waves *t* - 1 and *t*, while β_2 captures how much parenting stress changes for parents who had a new baby with a new partner between waves *t* - 1 and *t*. The omitted reference category is parents who did not have a new baby between survey waves. The model also includes a vector *m* time-constant predictors measured at the baseline or 1 year survey and a vector of *n* time-varying predictors measured at $t - 1$. These models are estimated separately for mothers' and fathers' reports of parenting stress.

In subsequent variations of this model, I add dummy variables for: a) whether the new child is the parent's first multi-partnered fertility, b) whether the parent experienced a new partnership transition between survey waves, and c) whether the new partner has children from a previous relationship. I also estimate models separately for parents by educational status, dividing them into parents with a high school degree or less versus some college or more.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 displays the weighted sample characteristics for mothers and fathers at the baseline survey wave, separately by whether they report any multi-partnered fertility during the five survey waves. Consistent with previous research, parents with multi-partnered fertility are more disadvantaged than other parents. About 36% of mothers and fathers with multi-partnered fertility were married at the time of the child's birth, compared to over 70% of parents without

multi-partnered fertility. Parents with multi-partnered fertility are also less likely than other parents to be in any relationship with the biological parent of their child at the time of his or her birth. Parents with multi-partnered fertility had less education and lower average household incomes than other parents. Parents with multi-partnered fertility are more likely to be Non-Hispanic Black, while parents without multi-partnered fertility are more likely to be Non-Hispanic White. Finally, parents with multi-partnered fertility were more likely to have used drugs, to have been in jail or prison, and had worse self-reported health than other parents.

Table 2 shows the percentage of mothers and fathers who have broken up, repartnered, and had subsequent children between each survey wave. Overall, about one quarter of mothers and fathers reported that they had a new baby since the prior survey wave. About 85% of these were another child with the same biological parent for mothers, and about 92% were with the same biological parent for fathers. This means about 15% of mothers and about 8% of fathers who had children between the 1- and 3- year follow-ups had children with a new partner. Just over half of these constituted a parents' *first* multi-partnered child for mothers (8%), while just under half were not the first multi-partnered child for that parent. The childbearing patterns between the 3 and 5 year surveys are similar, except that transitions to a first multi-partnered birth were more common than they were in the early survey, presumably because parents have had more time to repartner. The less frequent experience of multi-partnered childbearing among fathers is the result of the higher attrition rates of more disadvantaged and less involved fathers.

The second and third panels of Table 2 show that while married and unmarried parents are similarly likely to have additional children, the experiences of multi-partnered fertility differ sharply by marital context. Over 90% of children born to parents who were married at birth were born to the same biological parent. In contrast, about 30% of new children born to unmarried

parents occurred with new romantic partners. Similarly, unmarried parents were more likely to have a new romantic partner than married parents. Many of these new partners had biological children from previous relationships, which contributed additional social children to the relationship. It was more common for mothers to repartner with someone who had previous children than it was for fathers to do so.

Lagged Regression Results

Table 3 reports the results of lagged regression models of parenting stress for mothers, regressing parenting stress at survey wave *t* on a lagged measure of parenting stress from survey wave *t* - 1, a dummy variable indicator for whether the mother had a new baby born to the same biological parent between survey waves *t* - 1 and *t*, and a dummy variable indicator for whether the mother had a new baby born to a new romantic partner between those survey waves. The model includes time-constant controls as well as time-varying controls measured at survey wave *t* - 1. The lagged parenting stress measure in the model gives the other coefficients in the models the interpretation of changes in parenting stress between survey waves. The parenting stress measure is standardized, so the coefficients can be interpreted in terms of standard deviations.

In Model 1, lagged parenting stress is a strong predictor of current parenting stress, but they are only correlated at about 0.56 across waves. Having a new baby between survey waves is significantly associated with increased parenting stress for parents having both shared and multi-partnered children. Compared to parents who have no additional children, parents who have additional same-partner fertility report a 0.12 standard deviation in parenting stress and parents who have additional multi-partner fertility report a 0.11 standard deviation increase in parenting stress. Note that these two coefficients are quite similar to one another, and a significance test for the difference in coefficients reveals that indeed they are not significantly different. This means

that while having a multi-partnered child is associated with increased parenting stress relative to having no additional children, it is not associated with significantly more parenting stress than having an additional child with the same partner.

Among the control variables, mothers with greater educational attainment report less parenting stress. Behavioral characteristics matter as well, with mothers reporting more stress when the biological fathers have been in jail or prison or when the mother used drugs within the past year. Mothers who had previous multi-partnered fertility also reported greater increases in parenting stress across survey waves, compared to mothers for whom the focal child was their first. There were few differences in changes in parenting stress by race or marital status.

Because the first transition to multi-partnered fertility might be particularly stressful for parents, Model 2 adds a dummy variable interaction term for whether the new multi-partnered child represented the mothers' *first* multi-partnered child. This coefficient was insignificant but the main effect coefficient for having a new multi-partnered child remained strong and statistically significant, indicating that having a first multi-partnered child did not result in greater increases in parenting stress than did having a higher order multi-partnered child.

Finally, Model 3 tests whether a father having a new child by a new partner increases a mothers' *own* parenting stress, perhaps by reducing the amount of time or money the father contributes to his prior biological children. This coefficient is negative and marginally significant, which fails to support the hypothesis that the other parent's subsequent fertility increases a parent's own stress. There is no relationship between a fathers' subsequent multi-partnered fertility and mothers' own parenting stress.

Table 4 presents a parallel set of analyses for fathers, regressing fathers' reports of parenting stress on whether the father had a new baby between survey waves. Results for fathers

were similar to those for mothers. In Model 1, lagged parenting stress is a strong predictor of subsequent parenting stress, correlated about 0.54 across survey waves. Having a baby is also associated with a significant increase in parenting stress for fathers. Relative to fathers who have no new fertility, fathers who have new same-partner fertility report a 0.13 increase in parenting stress, while fathers who have new multi-partnered fertility report a 0.11 increase in parenting stress. These coefficients do not differ significantly, indicating that increases in parenting stress are no larger when parents have new children with new partners than they are when parents have new children with the same partner.

Among the controls, fathers who have been in jail or prison and those who had used drugs reported significant increases in parenting stress, while fathers who report better health had significant decreases in parenting stress across survey waves. Fathers who had more children – whether biological children with the mother or with other past partners – report significant increases in parenting stress relative to fathers for whom the focal child was their first. In addition, fathers with higher household incomes report smaller increases in parenting stress.

Model 2 adds the dummy variable interaction for whether the new baby was the fathers' first multi-partnered child, and this coefficient is insignificant, similar to the results for mothers, indicating that any additional multi-partnered fertility is associated with increases in parenting stress, regardless of whether it is the first or a higher order multi-partnered child. Finally, Model 3 adds a dummy variable for whether the biological mother had a new baby with a new partner between survey waves. This coefficient is insignificant, indicating that mothers' subsequent multi-partnered fertility transitions do not significantly increase fathers' own parenting stress.

Table 5 tests whether entering new romantic partnerships is associated with changes in parenting stress, and whether that association is larger if the new partner brings children from

previous relationships with him or her. In Model 1, consistent with previous research (Obsorne et al. 2010), transitions to a new partnership do not increase parenting stress for mothers, net of lagged parenting stress and other controls. Model 2 adds two indicators – one for new partners who had no biological children from previous relationships and one for new partners who did have biological children from previous relationships. Mothers who enter relationships with partners who have no prior children report no change in their parenting stress, but mothers who enter relationships with partners who have prior children report a marginally significant increase in parenting stress, 0.04 of a standard deviation. Finally, Model 3 adds indicators for whether the other biological parent enters a new relationship. These insignificant coefficients suggest that once parents split up, a father's relationship transitions do not affect the mother's parenting stress.

The second set of columns in Table 5 show a parallel set of models for fathers. Entering a new romantic relationship is associated with an increase in parenting stress for fathers, about 0.18 of a standard deviation, perhaps because the transition into the relationship is accompanied by an increase in parenting responsibilities. Indeed, the second model for fathers adds two indicators for whether the father entered a relationship with a new partner who did or did not have children from previous relationships. Compared to fathers who do not repartner, fathers who repartner with women who have no prior children do not experience a change in their parenting stress but fathers who repartner with women who have prior children do experience a significant increase in parenting stress, 0.25 of a standard deviation. Model 3 adds an indicator for whether the mother's relationship transitions are associated with increases in parenting stress for fathers. This coefficient is insignificant, suggesting that once they break up, mothers' subsequent relationship transitions are not associated with changes in fathers' parenting stress.

Taken together, the results in Table 5 suggest that mothers and fathers who enter romantic relationships with partners who have children from past relationships experience an increase in parenting stress, but this increase is larger for fathers than for mothers.

Finally, in Table 6 I test whether the associations in Tables 3-5 differ by the educational status of the parent. Educational status is used as a proxy for parental economic resources. I split the sample into parents who had a high school degree or less vs. some college or more, and I report regressions on changes in parenting stress following new fertility in the top panel of Table 6 and following new partnerships in the bottom panel of Table 6. For less educated mothers, new same-partner and multi-partnered childbearing is significantly associated with increases in parenting stress, but these childbearing transitions are not associated with changes in parenting stress for more educated mothers. Fathers have a similar pattern of results, with less-educated fathers reporting increases in parenting stress following both types of new fertility, but no significant changes for more educated fathers.

In the second panel of Table 6, less-educated women report increases in parenting stress following transitions to new romantic relationships with men who have children from prior relationships, but this association is not significant for more educated mothers. There is again a similar pattern of results for fathers. Less-educated men report significant increases in parenting stress when they start relationships with new partners who have children from previous relationships, but more educated men do not.

Discussion

In this paper, I used longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine whether multi-partnered childbearing was associated with an increase in parenting

stress among mothers and fathers. The results suggest that having an additional child with a new romantic partner is associated with an increase in parenting stress for both mothers and fathers, relative to having no additional children, but having an additional multi-partnered child does not increase parenting stress more than having an additional shared child does. Having an additional child is stressful, regardless of whether it is with the same partner or a new partner. Furthermore, having a first multi-partnered child is no more stressful than having a higher order multi-partnered child, nor does parenting stress increase when one's past partners go on to have additional children. These results were stronger for parents with less education and weaker for parents with more education, suggesting that parental economic resources may moderate the association between additional fertility and parenting stress. I find similar results for both mothers and fathers.

These findings run contrary to the theoretical perspectives outlined above, in which multi-partnered fertility was predicted to increase parenting stress more than same-partner fertility because of the increased family ambiguity and declines in resources associated with parenting in the context of multiple fathers and mothers. In this paper, I find that while parenting stress does increase when a multi-partnered child is born, this increase is no greater than the increase in parenting stress that accompanies the birth of a child to the same partner. There are several ways to reconcile this finding with the existing literature. First, the time frame over which changes in parenting stress were measured occurred during the first year or two of the new child's life, and it is possible that the stress associated with caring for a newborn baby dominates all other potential sources of parenting stress during the new baby's first years. It is possible that the difficult negotiations parents must face over visitation and support in the context of multi-partnered fertility do not manifest themselves until the child is older and more independent.

Thus, one might observe differential effects of multi- and same-partnered fertility as children get older.

Second, it is possible that while parenting stress increases following both same- and multi-partnered fertility, the *sources* of such stress may differ in these two contexts. Parents may report greater stress due to negotiating support and visitation across multiple households or fathers in the context of multi-partnered fertility, while greater stress in the context of same-partnered fertility may result from balancing the demands of a new child across just two partners. Finally, it is possible that the narratives of parenting stress conveyed in qualitative studies of parenting, which tend to come from disadvantaged and unmarried samples, are not as much about multi-partnered fertility itself, but about parenting in the context of socioeconomic disadvantage. Indeed, I found that increases in parenting stress following childbearing were greater among less-educated parents than they were among more-educated parents.

I also examined whether transitions to new romantic partnerships that involved children from previous relationships increased parenting stress by adding additional social children to the relationship. For both mothers and fathers, however, transitions to new partnerships were associated with increases in parenting stress when the new partner had children from past relationships. The results were stronger for fathers than for mothers, which may be due to the fact that children are more likely to reside with their mothers than their fathers following a break up. Thus, mothers' new romantic partners are unlikely to have coresidential social children with whom the mother would have routine contact, while fathers' new romantic partners are likely to have coresidential social children with whom the father would have routine contact as part of his relationship with the mother.

Indeed, qualitative studies of unmarried fathers reveal that fathers often take on the role of social father when they become involved with a new woman, and they often view winning over the woman's children as a crucial part of solidifying their romantic relationship (Edin et al. 2009). Fathers who move in with new partners also report that they feel a responsibility to provide financially for both their biological children and the new partners' children, but they struggle to do so in the context of limited financial resources, and they often feel conflicted and uncertain about how to discipline and parent these non-biological children (Edin and Tach 2011). The findings from this study suggest that these new relationship transitions are accompanied by increased parenting stress, particularly for men.

All new children – same-partner, multi-partner, or social children from new partners – increase parenting stress for less-educated parents, but not more-educated parents. This is consistent with the theory that such family transitions create greater stress within the context of socioeconomic disadvantage, in which parents have fewer resources to cope with the added demands of childbearing, whether those children are born into simple or complex family households.

The data used for this study come from a sample of parents who recently gave birth to children and followed them through the child's fifth birthday, so the results presented here apply to parents who made the transition to new partners and new children within a relatively short time span. The results may not apply to parents who take longer to repartner or to engage in multi-partnered fertility. The sample is also restricted to urban areas, so the results may not generalize to childbearing in suburban or rural contexts. In addition, the fathers who remained in the sample were a positively selected group who were, on average, more committed to the focal child and mother and less likely to have multi-partnered fertility. While this may downwardly

bias the results, the fact that results were similar for mothers and fathers, and if anything stronger for fathers, suggests that differential attrition would not explain the results found here.

Despite these limitations, the Fragile Families data provide us with novel insight into the process of multi-partnered family formation and its consequences during a key developmental time period for young children, a time when parenting stress is at its highest (Kuczynski and Kochanska 1990). Because parenting stress is associated with negative outcomes for both parents and children (Anthony et al. 2005; Crnic and Acevedo 1995; Crnic et al. 2005), studying the determinants of parenting stress and the effectiveness of interventions to reduce parenting stress – perhaps by providing economic or social support or reducing the costs associated with parenting across multiple households – remains an important area for future research.

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Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Mothers and Fathers at Focal Child's Birth, by Multi-Partnered Fertility

	Mother		Father	
	No MPF	MPF	No MPF	MPF
Relationship status				
Married	0.70	0.37	0.69	0.35
Unmarried	0.25	0.51	0.29	0.60
No relationship	0.05	0.12	0.02	0.05
Educational attainment				
Less than high school	0.21	0.37	0.23	0.30
High school graduate	0.28	0.38	0.21	0.40
Some college	0.21	0.18	0.26	0.26
College degree	0.29	0.07	0.29	0.03
Race/ethnicity				
Hispanic	0.31	0.29	0.32	0.35
Non-Hispanic White	0.43	0.25	0.47	0.15
Non-Hispanic Black	0.16	0.39	0.14	0.48
Non-Hispanic other race	0.09	0.04	0.06	0.03
Native born	0.74	0.85	0.79	0.81
Age at child's birth	27.64	25.96	29.48	31.95
Child is male	0.58	0.57	0.56	0.61
Household income	47,671	24,790	52,595	33,836
Father ever in jail or prison	0.14	0.30	0.12	0.32
Used drugs	0.03	0.05	0.02	0.11
Self-rated health	4.03	3.75	3.99	3.89
Unweighted N	2,014	1,541	1,288	894

Notes: Sample is restricted to parents who remain in the survey at the 5-year follow up. Values weighted by national sampling weights.

Table 2. Percent of Mothers and Fathers Having Subsequent Children between Survey Waves

	Mom		Dad	
	Wave 2-3	Wave 3-4	Wave 2-3	Wave 3-4
Had new child	25.29	23.49	22.01	24.54
With biological father	84.99	79.93	91.74	77.46
With new partner	15.01	20.07	8.26	22.54
First MPF birth	8.09	12.27	1.65	4.99
Had new partner	10.99	18.38	4.61	7.93
New partner has biological children	59.81	62.78	35.33	57.76
Married at Birth				
Had new child	26.54	22.06	23.16	18.17
With biological father	94.10	87.26	98.65	95.15
With new partner	5.90	12.74	1.35	4.85
First MPF birth	1.25	11.53	0.47	2.68
Had new partner	3.25	8.81	1.25	1.35
New partner has biological children	78.03	62.06	19.51	44.63
Unmarried at Birth				
Had new child	23.28	25.78	20.08	35.85
With biological father	69.44	70.06	78.45	61.57
With new partner	30.56	29.94	21.55	38.43
First MPF birth	20.17	13.26	3.93	7.06
Had new partner	22.92	33.11	10.52	19.81
New partner has biological children	55.78	62.99	38.72	59.52
Unweighted N	3,425	3,289	1,781	1,714

Notes: Sample size restricted to parents with non-missing reports of parenting stress at both survey waves. Values weighted by national sampling weights.

Table 3. Regression of Parenting Stress on Subsequent Childbearing, Mothers

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Lagged Parenting Stress	0.568	***	0.568	***	0.568	***
	(0.011)		(0.011)		(0.011)	
Same-Partnered Childbearing	0.119	***	0.119	***	0.127	***
	(0.018)		(0.018)		(0.021)	
Multi-Partnered Childbearing	0.109	***	0.119	**	0.129	**
	(0.031)		(0.046)		(0.042)	
* First MPF	-----		-0.018		-----	
			(0.061)			
Father Multi-Partnered Childbearing	-----		-----		-0.066	
					(0.033)	
Controls						
Married	-0.060		-0.019		-0.019	
	(0.019)		(0.021)		(0.020)	
Educational attainment						
High school graduate	-0.060	**	-0.060	**	-0.060	**
	(0.019)		(0.019)		(0.019)	
Some college	-0.089	***	-0.089	***	-0.089	***
	(0.021)		(0.021)		(0.021)	
College degree	-0.054	*	-0.054	*	-0.054	+
	(0.029)		(0.029)		(0.033)	
Race/ethnicity						
Hispanic	-0.019		-0.019		-0.019	
	(0.023)		(0.023)		(0.023)	
Non-Hispanic Black	-0.007		-0.007		-0.007	
	(0.020)		(0.020)		(0.020)	
Non-Hispanic other race	0.028		0.028		0.028	
	(0.043)		(0.043)		(0.043)	
Native Born	-0.003		-0.003		-0.002	
	(0.024)		(0.025)		(0.025)	
Age at child's birth	0.004	*	0.004	*	0.004	*
	(0.002)		(0.002)		(0.002)	
Child is male	0.013		0.013		0.013	
	(0.014)		(0.014)		(0.014)	
Logged household income	0.012		0.012		0.011	
	(0.007)		(0.007)		(0.008)	
Ever in jail or prison	0.038	*	0.039	*	0.039	*
	(0.016)		(0.016)		(0.016)	
Used drugs	0.050	+	0.050	+	0.050	+
	(0.030)		(0.030)		(0.030)	

Self-rated health	-0.009		-0.009		-0.009	
	(0.008)		(0.008)		(0.008)	
Childbearing status						
Prior shared children only	0.013		0.014		0.014	
	(0.019)		(0.019)		(0.019)	
Own prior MPF	0.037	*	0.037	*	0.036	*
	(0.019)		(0.017)		(0.019)	
Father has prior MPF	-0.001		-0.001		-0.001	
	(0.016)		(0.016)		(0.017)	
Constant	-0.068		-0.068		-0.068	
	(0.057)		(0.058)		(0.058)	
R Squared	0.331		0.331		0.331	

+ p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Model fit is from the first imputed dataset.

Table 4. Regression of Parenting Stress on Subsequent Childbearing, Fathers

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Lagged Parenting Stress	0.542	***	0.543	***	0.543	***
	(0.016)		(0.016)		(0.016)	
Same-Partnered Childbearing	0.126	***	0.126	***	0.128	***
	(0.024)		(0.025)		(0.025)	
Multi-Partnered Childbearing	0.106	*	0.111	*	0.117	*
	(0.044)		(0.041)		(0.043)	
* First MPF	-----		-0.019		-----	
			(0.227)			
Mother Multi-Partnered Childbearing	-----		-----		-0.051	
					(0.107)	
Controls						
Married	-0.002		-0.003		-0.002	
	(0.027)		(0.027)		(0.027)	
Educational attainment						
High school graduate	0.054	+	0.053	+	0.053	+
	(0.030)		(0.030)		(0.030)	
Some college	-0.004		-0.005		-0.006	
	(0.033)		(0.033)		(0.033)	
College degree	0.026		0.025		0.025	
	(0.043)		(0.043)		(0.043)	
Race/ethnicity						
Hispanic	-0.082	*	-0.082	*	-0.083	*
	(0.033)		(0.033)		(0.033)	
Non-Hispanic Black	-0.059	*	-0.058	*	-0.058	*
	(0.029)		(0.029)		(0.028)	
Non-Hispanic other race	0.047		0.049		0.048	
	(0.057)		(0.057)		(0.057)	
Native born	-0.064	+	-0.063	+	-0.062	+
	(0.033)		(0.032)		(0.032)	
Age at child's birth	-0.003		-0.003		-0.003	
	(0.002)		(0.002)		(0.002)	
Child is male	0.013		0.013		0.014	
	(0.021)		(0.021)		(0.021)	
Logged household income	-0.028	*	-0.028	*	-0.028	*
	(0.013)		(0.013)		(0.013)	
Ever in jail or prison	0.083	**	0.082	**	0.082	**
	(0.028)		(0.028)		(0.027)	
Used drugs	0.164	*	0.163	*	0.163	*
	(0.073)		(0.073)		(0.073)	

Self-rated health	-0.020	*	-0.024	*	-0.024	*
	(0.012)		(0.012)		(0.012)	
Childbearing status						
Prior shared children only	0.079	**	0.080	**	0.079	**
	(0.026)		(0.026)		(0.025)	
Own prior MPF	0.076	*	0.077	*	0.075	*
	(0.031)		(0.031)		(0.031)	
Mother has prior MPF	0.007		0.007		0.007	
	(0.025)		(0.026)		(0.025)	
Constant	0.302		0.300		0.302	
	(0.192)		(0.192)		(0.192)	
R Squared	0.317		0.317		0.317	

+ p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Model fit is from the first imputed dataset.

Table 5. Regression of Parenting Stress on New Romantic Partnerships

	Mom			Dad		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Lagged Parenting Stress	0.567 ***	0.567 ***	0.576 ***	0.540 ***	0.540 ***	0.540 ***
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)
New Partner	0.023	-----	-----	0.182 *	-----	-----
	(0.018)			(0.092)		
New Partner Has Kids	-----	0.040 +	0.089 *	-----	0.253 *	0.265 *
		(0.022)	(0.031)		(0.103)	(0.119)
New Partner Has No Kids	-----	-0.004	-0.005	-----	0.128	0.133
		(0.027)	(0.037)		(0.098)	(0.106)
Other Parent Has New Partner with No Kids	-----	-----	-0.026	-----	-----	-0.044
			(0.037)			(0.080)
Other Parent Has New Partner with Kids	-----	-----	0.021	-----	-----	-0.008
			(0.032)			(0.081)
Controls Included	X	X	X	X	X	X
Constant	-0.002	-0.008	-0.058	0.271	0.228	0.373
	(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.068)	(0.196)	(0.198)	(0.226)
R Squared	0.328	0.329	0.334	0.311	0.312	0.312

+ p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001
Model fit is from the first imputed dataset.

Table 6. Regression of Parenting Stress on New Fertility and Romantic Partnerships, by Parental Education

	Mom				Dad			
	High School or Less		Some College or More		High School or Less		Some College or More	
New Fertility								
Lagged Parenting Stress	0.545	***	0.611	***	0.515	***	0.678	***
	(0.013)		(0.017)		(0.022)		(0.025)	
Same-Partnered Childbearing	0.129	***	0.083		0.114	**	0.643	
	(0.025)		(0.028)		(0.035)		(0.034)	
Multi-Partnered Childbearing	0.177	***	0.075		0.151	*	-0.471	
	(0.028)		(0.061)		(0.078)		(0.230)	
New Relationships								
Lagged Parenting Stress	0.55	***	0.611	***	0.516	***	0.568	***
	(0.017)		(0.019)		(0.022)		(0.025)	
New Partner With No Kids	-0.005		0.006		0.138		0.033	
	(0.047)		(0.062)		(0.124)		(0.245)	
New Partner Has No Kids	0.107	**	0.054		0.257	*	0.105	
	(0.039)		(0.055)		(0.146)		(0.240)	

+ p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

All models include full set of time-constant and time-varying controls.