

Parent-Adult Child Relationship Quality: Variation by Union Status & Childbearing Partners

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Abstract

Parents with a history of union instability have weaker relationships with their adult children, but the literature has not considered whether having children with new partners could also play a role. We find that, net of instability, having children with multiple partners is unrelated to parent-adult child relationship quality.

Complexity & Parent-Child Relationships

- Generally, continuously married parents have stronger relationships with their adult children than other parents
- Most work studies union behaviors, with dissolution and repartnering linked to poorer parent-child relationships
 - Harsher parenting, more parental stress during childrearing years
 - Ambiguous ties in stepfamilies
 - Competing obligations across households
- Research has yet to examine whether having children with new partners is linked to parents' relationships with their children
 - Having children with multiple partners is linked to other negative outcomes
- The oldest child would be most affected by parents' dissolution, repartnering, and additional childbearing

Is having children with more than one partner linked to the quality of parents' relationship with their oldest adult child?

- Lower quality: more competition and demands on parental resources, more ambiguous boundaries between members

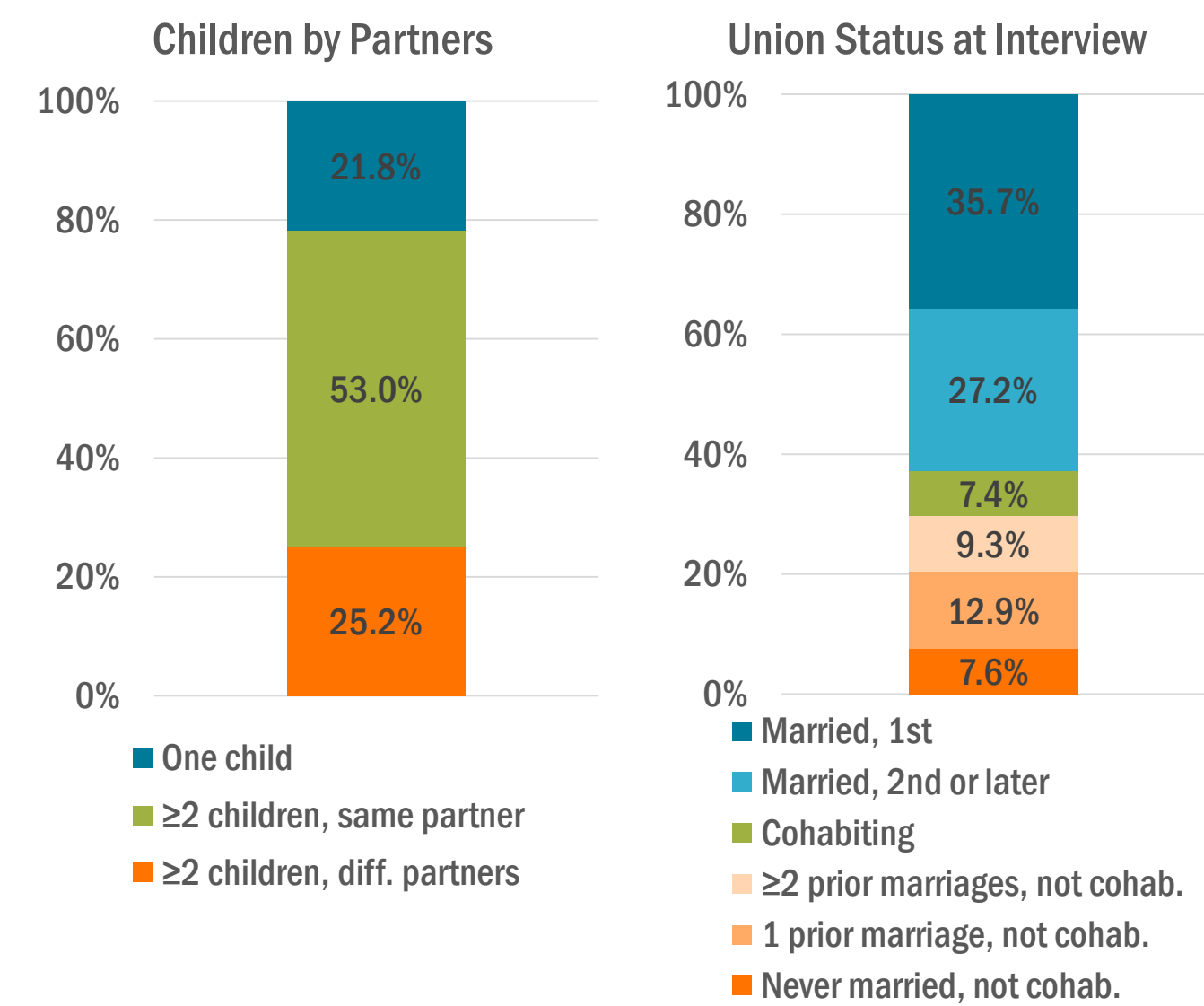
Higher quality: establishes family ties across otherwise unrelated family members

No association: any linkage is actually driven by parental union instability

Data

- Family & Relationships Survey (FRS) 2013**
 - Nationally representative survey of 7,242 adults aged 18-65
- Analytical sample:**
 - Parents whose oldest child is 18 or older and nonresidential (N = 1,895) with complete information on union status at interview and whether children are all with same partner (N = 1,859)
- Valid responses to three questions about their oldest nonresidential child (N = 1,827)**
 - Closeness: "How close do you feel to [child]?" 1 = not close at all to 5 = extremely close
 - Visitation: "During the past 12 months, how often did you see [child]?" 1 = not at all to 6 = several times a week
 - Contact: "During the past 12 months, how often did you communicate with [child] by telephone, email, text, Skype, letter, or other forms of communication?" 1 = not at all to 6 = several times a week

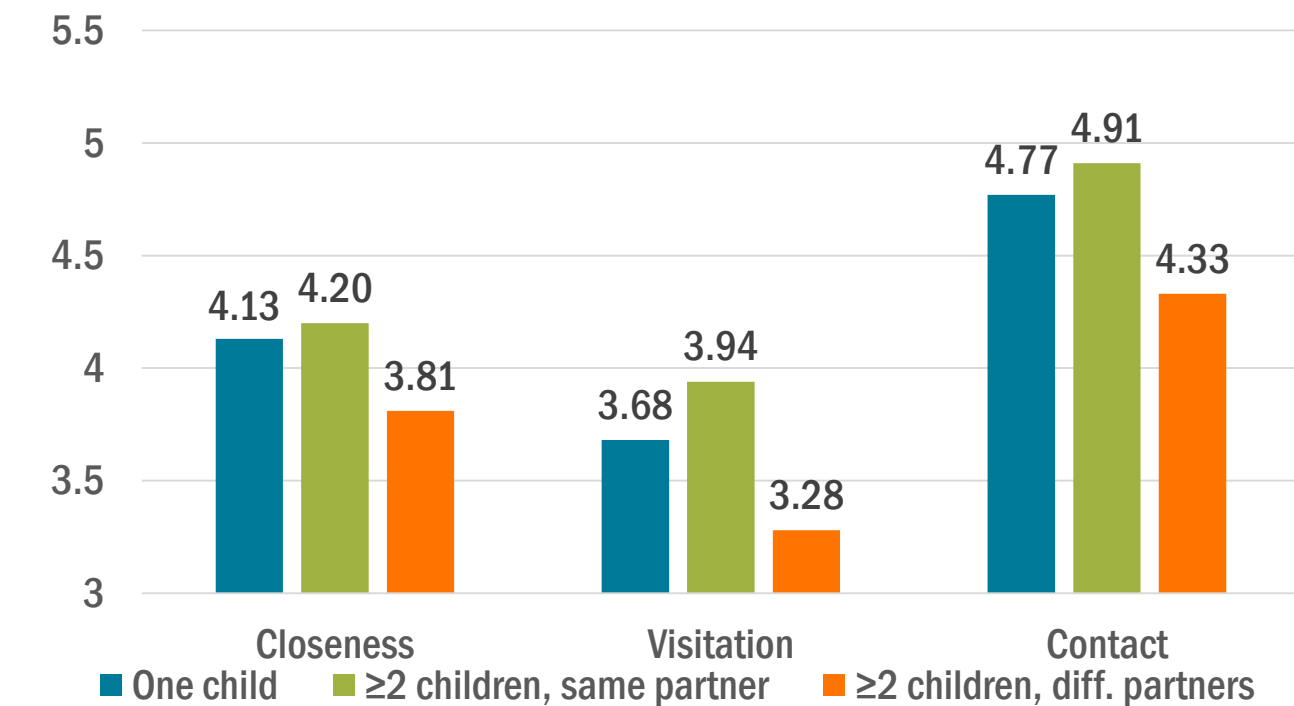
Key Independent Variables



Covariates & Approach

- Control variables:**
 - Demographic – parent's age, gender, and race-ethnicity; oldest child's age and gender
 - Socioeconomic – education, employment
 - 'Need' – respondent's self-rated health and concerns over family income
- Ordered logistic regression for each measure**
 - Model 1: Children + union status + controls
 - Disaggregated (semi-interactive) models to account for instability
 - Model 2: children + controls (only those in 1st marriage)
 - Model 3: children + union status + controls (only those not in 1st marriage)

Mean Relationship Quality, by Children



Multivariate Results

<i>CLOSENESS</i>	Model 1	Model 2: 1 st marriage	Model 3: Not 1 st marriage
Children by partners			
One child	1.80 **	4.96 **	1.63 *
≥2 children, same partners	1.60 *	5.22 ***	1.31
≥2 children, diff. partners	ref	ref	ref
Union status			
Married, 1 st	ref		--
Married, 2 nd or later	0.66 **		ref
Cohabiting	0.91		1.31
≥2 prior marriages, not coh.	1.07		1.65 *
1 prior marriage, not coh.	0.69		1.14
Never married, not coh.	0.79		1.05
Unweighted N	1,827	720	1,107

*p ≤ 0.05, **p ≤ 0.01, ***p ≤ 0.001 *Note: Models contain a full set of covariates*

<i>VISITATION</i>	Model 1	Model 2: 1 st marriage	Model 3: Not 1 st marriage
Children by partners			
One child	1.40	5.75 ***	1.22
≥2 children, same partners	1.61 **	8.75 ***	1.18
≥2 children, diff. partners	ref	ref	ref
Union status			
Married, 1 st	ref		--
Married, 2 nd or later	0.42 ***		ref
Cohabiting	0.54 **		1.29
≥2 prior marriages, not coh.	0.44 ***		1.12
1 prior marriage, not coh.	0.78		1.98 ***
Never married, not coh.	0.72		1.52
Unweighted N	1,827	720	1,107

*p ≤ 0.05, **p ≤ 0.01, ***p ≤ 0.001 *Note: Models contain a full set of covariates*

<i>CONTACT</i>	Model 1	Model 2: 1 st marriage	Model 3: Not 1 st marriage
Children by partners			
One child	1.56 *	6.97 ***	1.36
≥2 children, same partners	1.48 *	6.04 ***	1.22
≥2 children, diff. partners	ref	ref	ref
Union status			
Married, 1 st	ref		--
Married, 2 nd or later	0.51 ***		ref
Cohabiting	0.65		1.35
≥2 prior marriages, not coh.	0.67		1.40
1 prior marriage, not coh.	0.61 **		1.29
Never married, not coh.	0.50 *		0.99
Unweighted N	1,827	720	1,107

*p ≤ 0.05, **p ≤ 0.01, ***p ≤ 0.001 *Note: Models contain a full set of covariates*

- Parents with children by more than one partner report lower levels of closeness and less visitation and contact with their oldest child
- However, this is largely true only for parents who are still in their 1st marriage
 - For this group, having children with different partners indicates instability that is not captured by union information
- Union instability – not having children with different partners – is the primary driver of poorer parent-adult child relationships

Implications

- Adult children are an important source of support for parents in old age
- Weaker relationships with adult children among parents with unstable relationships may lead to a 'care gap'
- Future work should consider if these patterns also hold for younger children