Maternal Partnership Instability and Coparenting among Fragile Families

The United States has witnessed dramatic increases in nonmarital childbearing over the past 50 years. Six percent of all births were to unmarried couples in 1960 compared to 40% in 2007 (Hamilton et al. 2009). 'Fragile families,' defined here as unmarried couples who share a common child, are often young, economically disadvantaged, and have low levels of education (Carlson and Högnäs 2009). Unmarried parents are also more likely to expose their young children to unstable home environments than married parents. Indeed, approximately 60% of unmarried couples will split by their child's third birthday, with more than half of these mothers subsequently beginning a romantic relationship with a new partner during the same time period (Osborne and McLanahan 2007). The unstable nature of unmarried parents' relationships has raised concerns about parenting and child well-being within this alternative family context.

Although a substantial literature exists on divorce and remarriage, little is known about the consequences of entrances and exits from other types of unions (i.e., cohabiting and dating relationships) for parenting, especially among couples who have children outside of marriage. The present study addresses this issue by examining associations between maternal partnership transitions and coparenting behavior among fragile families, playing close attention to transitions involving alternative family forms. Specifically, we ask: (1) Are maternal partnership transitions over the first five years of a child's life associated with coparenting behavior among fragile families? (2) Is the association similar for coresidential and dating transitions? And (3) is the association moderated by child gender or race/ethnicity? Importantly, we employ multiple techniques to gauge the robustness of hypothesized patterns in relation to selection processes.

We pursue these three questions using a valuable data set for research on partnership instability: the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. The Fragile Families Study is a national, longitudinal survey that follows approximately 5,000 parents and their children from birth to age 5. These data include a large oversample of children born to unmarried parents who are at increased risk for experiencing multiple partnership transitions. Moreover, the data provide detailed information on mothers' cohabiting and dating relationships which allows us to construct a more comprehensive picture of mothers' partnership instability than is typically provided in prior research.

Background
    Coparenting generally refers to how couples coordinate their parenting of common children. Empirical research indicates that coparenting is distinct from parents' relationship quality and individual parenting behavior and is a stronger predictor of parenting and child outcomes than general marital quality (Feinberg 2002, 2003). The coparenting relationship may be particularly important for children living in single-parent homes (the majority of children born to unmarried parents) if they lack access to economic and/or socioemotional resources that may more likely be available in two-parent households (Carlson and Högnäs 2009; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Thus, gaining a better understanding of the ways in which partnership instability shapes coparenting behavior among unmarried couples can enhance models of family dynamics and inform policies and interventions aimed at fragile families.
    As mentioned, the home environments of children born into fragile families are highly unstable. Although 80% of unmarried couples are romantically involved at the birth of their child (McLanahan and Beck 2010), the majority will split within three years (Osborne and McLanahan 2007). Yet, this marks only the start of children's exposure to instability. Half of

mothers who gave birth to a child outside of marriage experience three or more partnership changes before their child's fifth birthday (Cooper et al. 2010). Not surprisingly, this instability has implications for family processes, including parent-child and couple relationships. With regard to parent-child relationships, higher levels of partnership instability are associated with higher levels of punitive punishment and lower levels of emotional responsiveness and verbal interaction (Beck et al. 2010; Osborne and McLanahan 2008). With regard to relationships between couples, family structure changes reduce the quality of a mother's relationship with her ex-partner and the biological father of her child (Cooper et al. 2009).

Why are partnership transitions expected to influence coparenting behavior? To a large extent, explanations for links between marital/cohabiting transitions and disrupted family processes, including poor parenting and partner relationship quality, draw on social stress theory. According to this theory, changes in economic, social, and health resources brought on by changes in family structure induce stress and diminish an individual's capacity for positive interactions with children and former partners (George 1993; Waters and Cummings 2000). Changes in dating partners may also impact coparenting if dating reduces time spent with children, disrupts family rules and routines, or elicits negative emotions in ex-partners.

The observed link between partnership instability and poor parent/child outcomes has also been attributed to selection processes. Parents who undergo partnership transitions differ from those in stable relationships in ways that are unobserved (by the researcher), and these differences, rather than instability per se, may be the source of coparenting conflict.

Method
Data and Sample

The Fragile Families Study is a longitudinal, birth cohort survey that follows 4,898 children, including 3,712 born to unmarried parents and 1,186 born to married parents. Baseline interviews were conducted between 1998 and 2000 in 20 American cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Mothers were interviewed in the hospital within 48 hours of their child's birth and fathers were interviewed shortly thereafter (Wave 1). Follow-up phone interviews were conducted with both parents when the child was one (Wave 2), three (Wave 3), and five years old (Wave 4).

Our analysis uses data from all four waves of the Fragile Families Study. We exclude mothers who were married at the birth of the focal child (1,187 mothers) and mothers whose child did not spend time with the biological father in person at least once since the previous wave (an additional 1,200 mothers). To maximize the use of available information and minimize bias, we use the Multiple Imputation procedure in SAS to impute missing data for these mothers. Although multiple imputation is a valuable strategy for addressing missingness with longitudinal data, imputing data that are not missing at random can produce biased estimates of coefficients and standard errors (Allison 2001). Because mothers who left the study are not missing at random, we take a conservative approach to data imputation by imputing predictor variables only. Our final, imputed, analytic sample ($n = 2,511$) has observed characteristics that are very similar to the original, baseline sample of unmarried mothers.

Measures

Coparenting. Mothers report on coparenting behavior at Wave 4 if the father saw the child at least once since the previous survey. Mothers indicate how true (1 = never, 2 = rarely true, 3 = sometimes true, 4 = always true) they find the following eight statement statements

about the focal child's biological father: (1) When father is with child, he acts like the father you want for your child. (2) You can trust father to take good care of child. (3) He respects the schedules and rules you make for child. (4) He supports you in the way you want to raise child. (5) You and father talk about problems that come up with raising child. (6) You can count on father for help when you need someone to look after child for a few hours. (7) You respect father's wishes about how child should be raised. (8) You are critical of the things father does with child. The last item is reverse coded and responses are summed to create the final measure ($\alpha = .89$).

Partnership transitions. Coresidential transitions are measured by summing the number of times mothers transition in and out of coresidential relationships with cohabiting or marital partners during the first five years following the focal child's birth. At each wave, mothers reported whether they were involved in a romantic relationship, whether they were living with a partner, and whether, if applicable, the current partner was the same partner identified in the previous wave. Based on this information, a coresidential exit or entrance between two waves is coded as one coresidential transition, while experiencing both (in either order) is coded as two coresidential transitions. At Wave 4, mothers were also asked how many romantic relationships lasting at least one month they had experienced since the last interview and whether they lived with any of these partners. Responses to these questions allow us to determine whether mothers were involved in relationships between Waves 3 and 4 that could not be identified based on reports of current status. Because mothers were not asked about their between-wave romantic relationships in earlier years, we are likely undercounting coresidential transitions between Waves 1 and 3. Note also that our measure of coresidential transitions does not examine whether mothers are changing residences, only whether they are transitioning into or out of a relationship that is coresidential in nature.

Dating transitions are counted similarly but are limited to transitions that do not involve a change in coresidence. We follow the measurement strategy of Osborne and McLanahan (2007) and Beck and colleagues (2010) by coding mothers who reported a pregnancy between two interviews as having entered and exited a dating relationship if they reported not having a partner at either time points. Importantly, we do not count changes in relationship status with the same partner (e.g., from cohabitation to marriage) as a partnership transition. Our final measure of partnership transitions sums coresidential and dating transitions to create a measure of the total number of transitions between Waves 1 and 4.

Controls. To minimize the possibility that the associations between family instability and child outcomes are spurious, all models control for the following demographic characteristics: residential status at Wave 1 (0 = biological parents live together; 1 = biological parents live separately), maternal age in years at Wave 1, maternal age in years at birth of first child, race/ethnicity (dummy variables for Black, Hispanic, White, and Other), immigrant status (1 = not born in United States), maternal and paternal education (0 = high school degree or less, 1 = some college or more), maternal poverty (dummy variables for poor or below 100 percent of the federal poverty line, almost poor or between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty line, and nonpoor or above 200 percent of the federal poverty line), parity (1 = first born), child gender (1 = male), child low birth weight (1 = below 2,500 grams). We also control for an additional set of characteristics that are typically not available in other data sets, including mothers' cognitive ability (measured with the Weschler Adult Intelligence Scale – Revised), maternal and paternal nonjoint births (whether individual has children by another partner), partnership instability prior to focal child's birth (number of relationships lasting at least one month mother had prior to

relationship with focal child's biological father), and maternal grandmothers' mental health (whether she suffered from depression or anxiety).

Analytic Techniques

Ordinary least squares regression techniques are employed to address each of our research questions. We regress each of the coparenting measures on the total number of partnership transitions and the full set of controls. Then, we replace total number of transitions with separate indicators of coresidential and dating transitions to test whether the coefficients are significantly different from one another. Next, we add interactions to the previous model to examine whether associations between partnership transitions and outcomes vary by child gender or race/ethnicity.

Finally, because our data are observational, we must consider the possibility that partnership instability is picking up the effect of a third (omitted) variable that is affecting both partnership instability and coparenting outcomes. To investigate this possibility, we conduct three additional sets of analyses. First, we estimate lagged dependent variable models which include measures of outcomes at Wave 3. The lagged models control for unmeasured variables that are associated with coparenting at age 3. Second, we estimate fixed effects models which examine the association between changes in partnership instability and changes in coparenting. The fixed effects models are based on within-couple changes in instability and parenting, and they control for unmeasured characteristics of the parents that do not change over time. Third, we estimate models that regress coparenting outcomes at Wave 3 on future partnership instability (measured between Waves 3 and 4). The logic behind this 'falsification test' (Rothstein 2007) is that future instability cannot affect current coparenting, and thus a positive coefficient would suggest that selection is a problem.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results indicate that approximately 60% of mothers who gave birth outside of marriage report two or more partnership transitions (entrances or exits) by their child's fifth birthday. Consistent with expectations, we find that higher levels of partnership instability are significantly associated with lower quality coparenting among fragile families, net of the control variables. Multiple robustness checks suggest that at least part of this association is causal. We also find that the effect of dating transitions on coparenting is significantly stronger than the effect of coresidential transitions, but this difference is driven by biological parents entering marital or cohabiting relationships. Mothers who transition into a coresidential relationship with the biological father report higher quality coparenting. Consequently, when these mothers are excluded, the difference in the effects of coresidential and dating transitions is no longer significant and both types of transitions significantly reduce coparenting quality. Finally, we find that the negative association between coresidential transitions and coparenting behavior is stronger for boys than girls, suggesting that boys may be at increased risk following family structure changes (Cavanagh and Huston 2008). Racial/ethnic differences were neither substantial nor statistically significant.

Citations available upon request.