The 21st Century Brady Bunch:
The Complexity of Nonmarital Family Structures & Their Consequences for Family Wellbeing

Laura Tach
University of Pennsylvania
tach@wharton.upenn.edu

Abstract

As the nonmarital birth rate in the U.S. steadily climbed over the past half century, researchers have increasingly focused their attention on the reasons for this rise and its implications for family dynamics and the wellbeing of children. Recent research has revealed that, among unmarried parents, there is a great deal of relationship instability, serial partnering, multiple-partner fertility. The goal of this paper is to construct a typology of the various family forms that result from relationship instability, serial partnering, and multiple-partner fertility, accounting for both resident and nonresident family members and both social and biological ties. It then uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to estimate the prevalence of each of these family forms for a cohort of nonmarital children born during the late 1990s. Finally, it compares the economic and interpersonal relationships among family members in each family form and discusses the implications for child wellbeing.

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As the nonmarital birth rate in the U.S. steadily climbed over the past half century, researchers have increasingly focused their attention on the reasons for this rise and its implications for family dynamics and the wellbeing of children. Recent research has revealed several important facts. First, children born outside of marriage were increasingly born not to single mothers but to unmarried couples, in which the mother and father are romantically involved and often living together (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2003). Second, relationships between unmarried parents are considerably less stable than those between married parents. The majority of nonmarital children will see their parents break up by their fifth birthday (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2007). For certain groups, transitions to *new* romantic relationships occur quickly after relationships between unmarried parents end, resulting in a pattern of serial partnering (Tach, Edin, and Mincy 2010). Finally, these new romantic partnerships often produce additional children, called multiple-partner fertility, with mothers and fathers having biological children by more than one romantic partner (Tach et al. 2010; Carlson and Furstenberg 2007).

These phenomena – family instability, serial partnering, and multiple-partner fertility – result in a complex web of family relationships involving a wide cast of characters who have both biological and social ties to one another. In particular, they result in step- and half-siblings who can live in the same household or scattered across multiple households. They also result in multiple paternal and maternal figures, such as non-resident biological fathers (and possibly their new partners) and resident social fathers, who are the new partners of biological mothers. In other words, the Brady Bunch family of the 21st century is even more complex than the Bradys of the 20th century. Imagine if the Brady parents had children from prior

relationships living in other households who sometimes came to visit, if the Brady parents had a new shared biological child who is a half-sibling to the Brady children, or if the Brady parents' past partners visited with the Brady children from time to time.

Until recently, surveys were much better at documenting complex family forms like the Bradys of the 20th century, who were married and all lived under the same roof, than they were at documenting the more complex Brady family of the 21st century, which involves nonresident and social (rather than biological) parents, partners, and siblings. These limitations are particularly acute for the unmarried population because we now know that relationship instability, serial partnering, and multiple-partner fertility are more common for this group, which must produce family forms extending across multiple households and involving both social and biological ties.

The goal of this paper is to construct a typology of the various family forms that result from relationship instability, serial partnering, and multiple-partner fertility, accounting for both resident and nonresident family members and both social and biological ties. It then uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to estimate the prevalence of each of these various family forms for a cohort of nonmarital children born during the late 1990s. Finally, it compares the economic and interpersonal relationships among family members in each family form and discusses the implications for child wellbeing. The unique design of the Fragile Families Study – which follows both unmarried and mothers and fathers after their relationships end, asks detailed questions about new romantic partners, and gathers information on all resident and nonresident children of both parents and partners – allows us to document the complexity of nonmarital family structures in a more complete way than has been done before.

Background

Relationship Contexts of Nonmarital Fertility

While the majority of births to young adults occur outside of marriage, this does not mean that unmarried mothers are parenting alone. In the late 1990s, fully 47 percent of children born to unmarried parents occurred to a couple who was cohabiting, living together all or most of the time. Another 33 percent of nonmarital births occurred to parents who were romantically involved but not living together. Just 20 percent of nonmarital births occurred to parents who were no longer romantically involved with one another. Among certain groups – young adults, racial minorities, and those with low education – nonmarital birth rates are even higher, but while marriage is no longer a normative context into which a child is born, being in a romantic relationship clearly is.

Despite a relationship built on a tenuous foundation, many unmarried couples still have high hopes for the future and fathers are quite involved, at least early on. Young men often readily acknowledge paternity rather than contest it (Edin et al. 2009; Furstenberg 1995; Sullivan 1993; Waller 2002) and many eagerly embrace the role of father (Hamer 2001; Waller 2002; Young 2004). The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study data shows that an overwhelming majority of unmarried fathers (74 percent) offered financial support to the mother during her pregnancy, and roughly seven in ten visited her and the child in the hospital (*). In contrast to popular images, most unmarried men are not eager to flee their parental responsibilities as soon as the child is conceived (Achatz and MacAllum 1994; Augustine, Nelson and Edin 2009; Hamer 2001; Nelson et al. 2002; Nurse 2002; Waller 2002), though this certainly does sometimes happen.

These relationships are quite unstable, however, and the majority of unmarred children will see their parents break up within five years. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Table 1 traces the relationship trajectories of young parents. By the time their child is five years old, 56 percent of mothers who were married at the time of the birth are still married to their baby's father, which is consistent with other work showing that marriages that begin at younger ages are less stable than marriages among older couples.

Similarly, over half of the young mothers (53 percent) who were cohabiting with the father at the time of the birth were still in a romantic relationship with him five years later. Relationships were much less stable among the couples who were romantically involved but not living together at the time of the birth: just 27 percent of these relationships remained intact five years later. Many married and cohabiting couples, and even some romantic non-resident couples, went on to have more children together.

Serial Partnering & Multiple-Partner Fertility

After unmarried parents end their romantic relationships, transitions to new romantic relationships occur quickly, resulting in a pattern of serial partnering. Table 1 shows that almost two-thirds of young mothers who ended their marriages, and over three fourths of young mothers who ended their cohabiting relationships, had engaged in a new romantic relationship by the time the child was five years old. Many had even had two or more different partnerships during that time period, although this pattern of "churning" through partners was more common among unmarried mothers than among divorced mothers. Rates of partner churning were particularly high for mothers who were not involved with the focal baby's father when the child was born.

For a subset of young parents, there is an extraordinarily high rate of churning through a number of very weak partnerships, leading to high rates of multiple-partner fertility and highly complex family forms. Parents are more likely to experience multiple-partner fertility when they have a first sexual experience or a first child at a young age or have children outside of marriage, whereas having more than one child with any given partner is associated with reduced odds. There are also racial and economic disparities in the likelihood of multiple-partner fertility. Blacks and Hispanics have greater odds of experiencing multiple-partner fertility than Whites, and less-educated parents are more likely to experience multiple-partner fertility than highly-educated parents (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007a, 2007b; Manlove et al. 2008; Mincy 2002). Estimates from the NSFG indicate that

almost one-third of fathers under age 25, and 47 percent of Black young fathers, have children with multiple partners (Smeeding, Garfinkel, and Mincy, forthcoming).

Unmarried mothers who repartner typically do so with men who have considerably more human capital and fewer behavioral problems than their prior partners (Bzostek 2008; Graefe and Lichter 2007), but we know next to nothing about the quality of the subsequent partnerships in which mothers fathers are involved. Nor do we know much about how stable these subsequent unions are. Drawing on other research showing that complexity is strongly associated with dissolution (Cherlin 1992; Kreider and Fields 2005; National Center for Health Statistics 2002) and that the unions of serial cohabitors – who engage in multiple sequential cohabitations – are quite unstable (Lichter and Qian 2008), we can infer that these new pairings among young parents are likely quite fragile.

Many of these romantic partnerships produce children, resulting in a pattern of multiple-partnered fertility, in which mothers and fathers have biological children by more than one romantic partner. Twenty one percent of divorced young mothers, and 26 percent of formerly cohabiting mothers, had a new child by a new partner within five years of the focal child's birth. Over 35 percent of mothers who were in romantic nonresident relationships with the father prior to splitting up had new children by new partners, and fully 40 percent of mothers who were not involved with the baby's father at the birth had new children by new partners. This, combined with the high rates of multiple-partner fertility that mothers and fathers brought with them to many of their relationships, even at young ages, can result in exceedingly complex family structures, with children experiencing two, three, or even more different father figures and a host of different resident and non-resident half-siblings.[1]

[1] For now, Table 1 considers just mothers' relationships and fertility transitions, and future versions will include fathers' relationship and fertility transitions as well. Families will be even more complex when these are included. Other work shows that fathers' rates of these transitions are at least as high as mothers' (Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2010).

Furthermore, these partners also bring with them both resident and nonresident children from previous relationships, complicating the picture even further.

Implications for Family Relationships

These dynamics, in turn, have many repercussions for the dynamics of family life. Having children from a previous union reduces the prospects that parents will marry (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004; Mincy 2002; Stewart, Manning, and Smock 2003; Upchurch, Lillard, and Panis 2001). Harknett and Knab (2007) have also found that parents' kin networks provide less social support to them when they have children by other partners. Prior partners, who often continue to engage with the mother via child visitation, are a significant source of tension in new couple relationships, as the prior partner's visits to see the child fuel jealousy from the current partner (Classens 2007; Hill 2007).

Multiple-partner fertility means that fathers' scare resources must be spread across several households, and this presents a challenge to maintaining meaningful involvement with all of the households to which they may be obligated. Fathers' relationships with the mothers of their children become increasingly complicated when they and their former partners take on new partners and have subsequent children. For fathers this may lead to a "crowding out" effect, reducing fathers' investments and involvement with any one family. Furstenberg and his colleagues suggest that fathers' priorities may shift as they move from one family to the next, taking on commitments and obligations with a new romantic partner (Furstenberg 1995; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Furstenberg and Harris 1992). Indeed, fathers visit their nonresident children less frequently (Carlson and Furstenberg 2007; Manning and Smock 1999; Tach et al. 2010) and provide less economic support to them via formal and informal arrangements (Manning and Smock 2000) when they have children with new partners. Fathers with children in different households are also less intensively involved with their current residential children (Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008), causing strain for current couple relationships (Carlson and Furstenberg 2007; Classens 2007; Hill 2007). Upon

starting new romantic relationships, men also become more involved in the lives of the mother's other children who live in the household, to whom they are not biologically related, taking on the role of "social father." Biological fathers often see these new partners as competition, asserting the primacy of the biological father-child role (Edin, Tach, and Mincy 2009).

Maintaining high quality relationships between parents is crucial for the intensity and quality of fathers' involvement with their children, both in the context of romantic relationships and after those relationships have ended (Carlson and McLanahan 2004; Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Marsiglio and Cohan 2000). In other words, "good partners make good parents" (Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2006). Cooperative coparenting – the ability of mothers and fathers to actively engage with one another in order to share childrearing responsibilities (Ahrons 1981; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991) – is relatively uncommon, but it predicts more frequent and higher quality father-child contact (Sobelewski and King 2005). Custodial mothers play an important role as "gatekeepers," either facilitating or hindering a nonresident father's involvement (Arditti 1995; Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch 1996), and mothers are more likely to restrict access when the two have a troubled relationship, regardless of whether they are currently romantically involved with another partner (Waller and Swisher 2006).

Research Questions

Thus, complex family forms may have implications for the social and economic resources available to children in the households, and they may furthermore be unequally distributed within households. This project extends research on family instability and multiple-partner fertility to document the complex family forms that result and the implications of these forms for family relationships and, ultimately, their wellbeing. The research questions addressed in this study are:

- What types of nonmarital family forms result from serial partnering and multiple-partner fertility?
- What is the prevalence of each of these newly-identified family forms for a cohort of children born in the late 1990s?
- How do the economic and social relationships between family members differ across these various nonmarital family forms?

Data

This project answers these questions using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which is a nationally representative sample of about 4,000 nonmarital births occurring in U.S. cities of at least 200,000 in the late 1990s. This longitudinal survey interviews both mothers and fathers shortly after the child's birth and then reinterviews each of them when the child is one, three, five, and seven years old. It continues to follow both parents even if they break up, which overcomes several limitations of other nationally representative national surveys. First, it considers all nonmarital relationships and relationship transitions – both cohabiting and dating – which have been overlooked in other national surveys (particularly dating relationships). Second, it asks about all nonmarital children, including both resident and non-resident step-and half-siblings. It collects this information from both mothers and fathers, and also collects information on new partners and fertility that occur after their romantic relationship has ended. It also collects information about the fertility of the new romantic partners of both mothers and fathers. Other surveys do not document nonresident children, children from past partnerships, or children from partnerships after the biological mother and father have broken up as comprehensively as the Fragile Families Study does. Thus, this project will offer the most comprehensive national estimates of the prevalence of family forms for nonmarital children, including nonresident and social family members with whom they have a

relationship. This will provide a description of family forms that more accurately reflects the reality of families' lived experiences.

I use four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to create a typology of family forms among children born to unmarried parents. At each survey wave the Fragile Families Study obtains rosters from mothers and fathers of all biological children, their ages, and their residential status (whether they live with them or in another household), and whether the other biological parent is also the parent of the child. After the parents of the focal child break up, the study continues to survey both the mother and the father about whether they have entered into a new romantic relationship, whether it is a cohabiting or dating relationship, and whether they have had a child with the new partner. It also asks about all biological children of the new partner and their residential statuses.

These questions are used to create indicators at each survey wave for:

- Parental Structures:
    - 2 biological parents in the child's household
    - 1 biological parent in the household, and 1 biological parent outside the household
    - Social parent in the child's household
    - Social parent in the non-resident biological parent's household
- Sibling Structures:
    - Resident biological sibling(s) only [two parents in common, in same household]
    - Nonresident biological sibling(s) [two parents in common, not in same household]
    - Resident half-sibling(s) [one biological parent in common, in same household]
    - Non-resident half-sibling(s) [one bio parent in common, not same household]
    - Resident step-sibling(s) [no biological parents in common, same household]
    - Non-resident step-siblings [no biological parents in common, not same household]

These indicators are then combined in all possible combinations to create a typology of family forms. The very infrequent/implausible combinations are excluded, and estimates of the prevalence of the remaining family forms are assessed at the time the children are seven years old. I then estimate the prevalence of each family form for all children and for children of various demographic and economic groups, using survey weights to generate estimates that are representative of nonmarital births in U.S. cities with populations of at least 200,000.

Family Relationship Measures

In the second stage of this analysis, I compare measures of family economic and social relationships across the various family forms developed in the preceding analysis. These measures include:

- Frequency of contact between focal child and biological and social fathers and mothers in the past month
- Formal and informal economic support from biological and social fathers to the focal child's household and to other households, including formal child support payments, informal cash, in-kind transfers, and health insurance coverage for focal child
- Formal and informal economic support from sources other than the biological and social mothers and fathers to the focal child's household including formal child support payments, informal cash, in-kind transfers, and child care.
- Reports of maternal trust towards biological fathers and social fathers

Preliminary & Future Results

Preliminary analysis has documented the rates of instability, the frequency of repartnering, and the quantity of multiple-partner fertility for mothers of the children in the Fragile Families Study. These tabulations are shown in Table 1 and described in the text above. Subsequent analysis will create indicators from these data for fathers as well in order to create the typology, estimate the prevalence of each family form, and compare the economic and

social relationships between family members across the family forms. Taken together, this analysis will provide a more comprehensive depiction of nonmarital family structures—and the relationships between family members within them—than existed before.

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Table 1. Young Adult Mothers' Relationship and Fertility 5 Years After the Birth

	Relationship Status with Baby's Father at Baseline			
	Married	Cohabiting	Romantic Nonresident	No Relationship
	(N=218)	(N=927)	(N=732)	(N=349)
Percent In Relationship With Baby's Father	56.6	53.86	27.3	9.3
Percent Who Had New Child With Baby's Father	42.5	46.8	31.8	14.9
One Child	33.8	33.6	25.2	12.7
Two Children	8.7	12.7	5.4	2.2
At Least Three Children	0.0	0.5	1.2	0.0
Percent Not In Relationship With Baby's Father	43.4	46.1	72.8	90.7
percent Who Had New Romantic Partner [a]	64.3	76.1	81.4	87.0
One Partner	38.6	39.7	36.1	20.3
Two Partners	15.7	29.7	28.6	37.2
3 Or more Partners	10.0	6.7	16.7	29.5
Percent Who Had New Child With Different Romantic Partner [a]	20.7	26.1	35.1	40.5
One Child	12.4	20.7	21.6	23.6
Two Children	8.3	4.9	11.8	16.7
At Least Three Children	0.0	0.5	1.7	0.2

a. Sample restricted to mothers who have ended romantic relationship with baby's father.

Notes: Data come from four waves of Fragile Families Surveys. Sample is restricted to mothers who gave birth to focal child at age 24 or younger. Data are weighted using national sampling weights.

Sample is restricted to those who are in the sample at both the baseline and 5-year follow up surveys, and those who have non-missing information on subsequent romantic partners and fertility at both waves.