"Family Transitions and Social Integration"

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Introduction

A long tradition of research has shown that social integration has important implications for long-term outcomes, including mental and physical health (Berkman and Breslow 1983; Hughes and Groves 1981), women's longevity (Moen, Dempster-McClain, and Robin M. Williams 1989), and mortality (Blazer 1982). In recent decades, however, Americans may have become more socially isolated than in previous decades (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears 2006), although we know little about why. At the same time, research has also shown that fragile families experience multiple partnership transitions between the birth of a child and that child's fifth birthday (Beck, Cooper, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2010) and multipartnered fertility is common among these families (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006). However, prior research has largely focused on the how transitioning out of one marriage impacts social integration (with mixed results), and little research has considered the impact of multiple partnership transitions on social integration. In terms of having children, prior research has largely focused on how the age of one's child influences their social relationships, but has not considered the impact of having multiple children on social relationships. Given the complexity of family forms today, it is important to consider whether having multiple children in the context of partnership changes impacts parents' social relationships.

This study extends the literature by examining the link between multiple family transitions (e.g., partnership changes and having children) and parents' levels of social integration. More specifically, this study examines the following question: Are multiple partnership transitions and having multiple children associated with parents' levels of social integration (i.e., how many close

friends they have)? I futher examine whether race, education, marital status, and gender moderate these relationships. I use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine these associations. These data do not allow me to examine how changes in family transitions and childbearing affect changes in levels of social integration because the latter is only measured in the 5th year of the survey. Given this limitation, I am unable to control for possible unobserved heterogeneity and therefore my results may be biased. However, these unique data allow me to observe whether family transitions are associated with social integration (i.e., close friends) for both men and women. The findings suggest that partnership transitions are significantly associated with less social integration for men and women, and having multiple children is significantly associated with less integration for women, but not men.

Theory/Background

The importance of social integration dates back to Durkheim's ([1897] 1951) seminal work on suicide. The interplay between individuals and collectivities has the potential to shape individual outcomes, including (Durkheim's focus) one's decision to commit suicide. Social integration is typically conceived as the connectedness of individuals through a set of shared beliefs and norms constituting a collectivity (e.g., families or religious organizations), legitimizing its members, and providing a sense of purpose. The development and maintenance of—and support from—personal relationships are central components of social integration. The significance of social integration is highlighted in a July 2, 2006 New York Times article entitled "The Lonely American Just Got a Bit Lonelier." This article reports on studies showing that Americans may be more isolated from close social relationships than they were several decades ago (McPherson et al. 2006; Putnam 2000) and Robert Putnam comments that "…the number of friends you have is a strong predictor of how long you live". Not only do friendships reduce your chances of dying early, the companionship one gets

from friends is also associated with greater happiness throughout the life course (Larson & Bradney 1988).

Family stability potentially increases the likelihood that these personal relationships are maintained and research suggests that shared friendships within marriage are potential sources of support (Hurlbert and Acock 1990). When couple relationships end, connections may be lost in the breakup (Gerstel 1987). When people re-partner, they may bring some of the remaining ties to the new relationship, and they potentially start new relationships. Multiple partnership transitions may make it difficult to keep ongoing relationships and to form new ones that endure, particularly given the time commitment needed to establish a new partnership. The story is even futher complicated when we consider new births. Additional children may make it even more difficult for men, and especially women, to maintain friendships.

Prior Research

Research linking family transitions and social integration has largely focused on divorce. Some evidence suggests that couples' networks shrink after marriage because couples tend to isolate themselves (Kalmijn 2003). Even so, some shared friendships dissolve following a divorce and ties are lost when common friends lose contact with the husband or wife (Terhell, Broese van Groenou, and Tilburg 2004). On the other hand, divorcees may gain ties because they engage in singles activities once their marriages end (Gerstel 1988). Kalmijn and Broese van Groenou (2005) try to disentangle whether couples become more integrated or isolated following a divorce and found mixed results. Along some dimensions couples were more integrated, but they were more isolated along others. Gerstel (1988) finds that social integration following a divorce varies by gender. Because women are often "kinkeepers" (Rosenthal 1985), they tend to maintain social ties (for the couple) during marriage, and both kindship and very close friendships become more intimate after a divorce. Men, on the other

hand, are more likely to lose contact with kin and close friends (though they maintain some old friendships) and are also more likely to form new social relationships. The norms and expectations within marriages are related to the changes in social relationships following a marriage. We know little, however, about how multiple partnership transitions (among both married and unmarried couples) influences men's and women's subsequent social integration. I expect that having multiple partnership transitions will be associated with fewer close friends given that new partnerships are time intensive and may reduce investments in friends.

Having children may also influence levels of social integration. Harknett and Knab (2007) found that those who had children with more than one partner were significantly less likely to perceive access to social support, despite presumably having additional family ties. We might also expect women who have children with more than one partner to have less interest in—and time available to—participate in social activities outside of the home. On the other hand, more children may increase the size of parents' networks (Umberson 1987). Small (2009), for example, found that disadvantaged mothers made beneficial contacts through their children's formal child care centers. Mothers who have multiple children, however, may not use formal child care arrangements because of the added expense. Therefore, additional children may lead to fewer contacts and less social integration for the mothers that Small observed. Along similar lines, Munch et al. (1997) found that childrearing reduced the size of women's personal networks and changed the composition of men's personal networks. While children may reduce the size of personal networks, a religious parent may attend church more frequently in order to raise her children with religion and thus find more time to spend with friends.

Methods

Data are from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth cohort study with an oversample of unmarried parents. The study includes 4,897 births—3,710 to unmarried parents

and 1,187 to married parents. The weighted sample represents nonmarital births in U.S. cities with populations more than 200,000. Baseline interviews with mothers and fathers took place in 75 hospitals in 20 U.S. cities just after the baby's birth. Response rates were 88% for unmarried mothers and 75% for unmarried fathers at baseline; 85% of mothers were retained in the study by the five-year interview, and 88% of fathers were interviewed at least once.

The number of partnership changes were counted between the the baseline interview and the 5th year of the survey. For example, if the respondnet was married to the focal mother or father at baseline, but cohabiting with a new partner at year 1, this was counted as a transition. Respondents may have also changed status from cohabiting with the focal father to cohabiting with a new partner. Each new partner was counted as a transition. Given that there was a two-year window between waves, I added one additional transition because respondents were likely to be single between partners. This approach attempts to capture all transitions, but likely underestimates the number of partnership transitions because men and women could have had additional partners between waves. The second family transition, having multiple children, was measured by the number of children the respondent had following the birth of the focal child. Social integration was measured using the following question: In general, how many close friends do you have overall? This question followed a series of questions about contacts respondents made through child care centers.

Results

The results suggest that an increase in the number of family transitions (between the birth and fifth year of a focal child's life) reduces social integration (e.g., the number of close friends) for both men and women. Specifically, ordered logistic regression results suggest that partnership transitions are associated with a significant decrease in the size of both men's and women's friendship networks, controlling for a number of factors including race, education, age, employment, health and mental

health, residential changes, and others. Having multiple children was associated with fewer friendships for women, but was not significantly associated with the size of men's friendship networks. Neither race, education, nor marital status moderated the association between partnership transitions and the number of close friends men and women reported. I expect this to be the case for having multiple children. Multiple family transitions may be part of the explanation for why Americans have become more socially isolated in recent decades. Although these data do not allow me to examine these changes on a larger scale (i.e., whether demographic changes are linked to greater isolation of Americans), this study offers some insight into the micro-level associations between family transitions and social integration. The findings in this study suggest that family transitions may be linked to social integration in important ways, and more work is needed in to better understand whether this relationship is causal. I discuss the limitations of this study along with its implications for research and pulic policy.

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