

Maternal Repartnering and Parenting Behaviors in Fragile Families

Lawrence Berger, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Sharon Bzostek, Rutgers University

Given high rates of relationship instability among unmarried parents, many such mothers will break up with their child's father and enter a romantic relationship with a new partner soon after the child's birth. Indeed, prior research suggests that more than half of all children born to urban unmarried parents will experience at least one maternal relationship transition in the first few years of life, and a significant proportion will experience at least 3 such transitions (Osborne & McLanahan 2007). Mothers' relationship transitions, repartnering and, in particular, chronic instability are likely to have important adverse consequences for both mothers and their children. Despite a large literature on maternal remarriage after divorce (see Coleman et al. 2000 for a review), relatively fewer studies have focused on maternal repartnering into cohabitation or marriage following an unwed birth. Yet, there is reason to expect that social processes in families characterized by divorce and remarriage might differ in important ways from those found among less advantaged families that are formed (most often through cohabitation rather than marriage) following a nonmarital birth.

Changes in mothers' romantic partnerships are also likely to engender concomitant stress and disruption in family routines and functioning. These effects might be expected to fade over time once family members have been able to adjust to their new roles and responsibilities, at least among those families that experience stability following a maternal repartnering; they may persist for families characterized by multiple breakups and repartnerings. A growing body of research is examining the effects of unwed mothers' relationship instability, overall, and the effects of unwed mothers' repartnering in particular (see, e.g., Beck et al. 2010, Berger et al. 2008, Bzostek 2008, Bzostek et al. 2011, Cooper et al. 2009, Meadows et al. 2008, Osborne et al.

2011). For example, recent studies have identified associations between relationship instability, in general (and sometimes mothers' repartnering specifically) and mothers' material well-being, mental health, and parenting-related stress (Cooper et al. 2009; Meadows et al. 2008; Osborne et al. 2011). Beck et al. (2010), for example, examined the association between maternal relationship instability and mothers' harsh parenting and literacy-promoting behaviors, finding that higher levels of instability were associated with harsher parenting and fewer literacy-promoting behaviors. However, this study did not distinguish between unions formed or exited with the child's biological father versus those involving new partners (social fathers). Studies about the effects of unwed mothers' repartnering thus far have focused on the partners' economic capabilities (Bzostek et al. 2011), and the partners' involvement with the mothers' children and how this involvement is associated with child wellbeing in these families (Berger et al. 2008, Bzostek 2008). To our knowledge, no study to date has explicitly examined the association between unmarried mothers' repartnering trajectories and changes in their parenting behaviors over time, particularly over a considerable portion of a child's life.

We use data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW) and Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM) to examine how the relationship trajectories are related to mothers' parenting behaviors, and changes therein, over the first nine years of a child's life. Our sample is comprised of just over 2,000 children whose parents were unmarried at the time of their birth and whose mothers were not in a romantic relationship with their biological father approximately 3 years later. This allows us to focus on relationship trajectories over a 6-year period (between child age 3 and 9) for a cohort of mothers who were neither cohabiting with nor married to the focal child's father. We follow the modeling strategy used by Osborne et al. (forthcoming), who examined the association between mothers' relationship trajectories and

material hardship and depression. In our analyses, we pay careful attention to the timing (age) at which such transitions occur and both their short- and long-term influences on parenting behaviors in the areas of non-punitive discipline, emotional responsiveness, psychological aggression, and physical aggression. In examining mothers' relationship trajectories, we are particularly interested in differences between the influence of relationship transitions involving a new partner and those involving the child's biological father. We take advantage of both mother-reported and interviewer-assessed parenting measures, and use a modeling strategy that avoids potential selection bias by adjusting for mothers' parenting behaviors prior to the relationship transitions we observe. We also control for a host of covariates that may be correlated with both maternal partnership patterns and mothers' behaviors, including maternal relationships during the first three years of the child's life.

Our analyses address three specific aims: (1) to describe the subsequent relationship patterns of mothers who had an unmarried birth and were not in a relationship with the child's biological father approximately three years later; (2) to estimate associations of particular relationship types and trajectories with maternal parenting behaviors (and examine whether these associations vary across measures); and (3) to examine whether associations differ by the timing (child age) at which they occur as well as whether they persist or fade over time. Throughout, we are careful to separate whether transitions constitute relationship formation or break-up, as well as whether they involve the focal child's biological father or a social father.

To address these aims, we first document unmarried mothers' relationship patterns over the first 9 years of a child's life and show that the majority of these mothers repartner into a cohabitation or marriage at some point during that time period, with a substantial subset experiencing multiple break-ups and repartnerings. We then estimate associations between these

relationship patterns and maternal parenting behaviors. Here, we use a conventional HLM strategy which accounts for differences in intercepts (levels) as well as slopes (changes). Importantly, we model differences in the levels of mothering behaviors at child age 3, controlling for both background characteristics of the mother, partnership patterns between the child's birth and age 3, and subsequent partnership changes. Accounting for subsequent partnership changes (a so-called "falsification test") explicitly tests whether there is social selection into various relationship patterns and adjusts for associated bias.

Table 1 provides a summary of preliminary findings with regard to these associations. The intercept results suggest that there is selection into repartnering, such that mothers who repartnered between child age 3 and 9 were already less emotionally responsive to the child at age 3. Turning to the slope results (which represent yearly changes in mothers' parenting behaviors for each year between child age 3 and 9), we find that transitioning into a new partnership (cohabitation or marriage with a social father) is associated with increases in both punitive discipline and psychological aggression toward the child on the part of the mother. Transitioning from a single-mother family to one that includes the child's biological father is also associated with an increase in maternal use of punitive discipline. At the same time, however, remaining in a stable relationship with a social father between ages 3 and 9 is associated with increased maternal responsiveness.

To address our final research aim, we use piecewise HLM models (in which the slope is estimated in segments rather than continuously), to examine the timing of maternal partnership transitions in order to better understand the extent to which changes in mothering behaviors co-occur with partnership transitions and whether these effects persist or fade. We expected that most effects would fade over time as families adjusted to new norms and routines, but that some

effects might accumulate for families that continued to experience ongoing transitions. Contrary to our expectation, preliminary results suggest minimal fade-out over time of the adverse mothering behaviors (particularly with regard to punitive discipline) that are associated with partnership changes.

By focusing mothers' parenting behaviors, this study has implications for better understanding as to why family instability, in general, and maternal repartnering in particular might affect children's well-being, and will provide insights as to how public policies may support families as they become increasingly complex and less stable.

References

- Beck, A., Cooper, C., McLanahan, S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2010). Partnership transitions and maternal parenting. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 219 – 233.
- Berger, L., Carlson, M., Bzostek, S., & Osborne, C. (2008). Parenting practices of resident fathers: The role of marital and biological ties. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, 625-639.
- Bzostek, S. (2008). Social fathers and child well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70, 950-961.
- Bzostek, S., McLanahan, S. & Carlson, M. (2011). Mothers' Repartnering after a Nonmarital Birth. Fragile Families working paper 2006-27-FF.
- Coleman, M., Ganong, L., & Fine, M. (2000). Reinvestigating remarriage: Another decade of progress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1288 - 1307.
- Cooper, C., S. McLanahan, S. Meadows, & J. Brooks-Gunn. (2009). Family structure transitions and maternal parenting stress. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71(3), 558-574.
- Meadows, S. O., McLanahan, S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2008). Family structure changes and maternal health trajectories. *American Sociological Review*, 73, 314 – 334.
- Osborne, C., L. Berger, and K. Magnuson. Forthcoming. Family structure transitions and changes in maternal resources and well-being." *Demography*.
- Osborne, C., & McLanahan, S. (2007). Partnership instability and child wellbeing. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 1065 – 1083.

Table 1: Summary of HLM Models for Types of Family Structure Transitions

	Non-Punitive Discipline		Emotional Responsiveness		Psychological Aggression		Physical Aggression	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
<i>Intercept at 3:</i>								
Social father at 3	-0.146	-0.124	-0.186*	-0.130	-0.109	-0.127	0.066	0.045
	(0.101)	(0.100)	(0.090)	(0.091)	(0.095)	(0.097)	(0.095)	(0.097)
% time with biological father birth-3	-0.011	-0.055	0.000	0.019	0.134	0.167	0.099	0.142
	(0.101)	(0.107)	(0.086)	(0.092)	(0.102)	(0.108)	(0.102)	(0.108)
% time with social father birth-3	-0.157	-0.118	-0.248	-0.119	0.234	0.249	-0.111	-0.125
	(0.252)	(0.255)	(0.210)	(0.217)	(0.233)	(0.234)	(0.240)	(0.242)
Number of transitions birth-3	-0.002	-0.012	0.050+	0.057+	-0.029	-0.016	-0.026	-0.015
	(0.031)	(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.035)
Ever to biological father 3-9	-	0.175**	-	0.137*	-	-0.026	-	-0.112+
	-	(0.065)	-	(0.064)	-	(0.066)	-	(0.064)
Ever to social father 3-9	-	0.014	-	-0.024	-	-0.061	-	-0.049
	-	(0.051)	-	(0.051)	-	(0.046)	-	(0.046)
Stable social father 3-9	-	-0.178	-	-0.497**	-	-0.006	-	-0.001
	-	(0.236)	-	(0.186)	-	(0.207)	-	(0.171)
Ever to single mother 3-9	-	0.023	-	-0.102+	-	-0.069	-	-0.042
	-	(0.064)	-	(0.061)	-	(0.060)	-	(0.062)
Ever changed social fathers 3-9	-	-0.055	-	-0.293**	-	-0.015	-	0.023
	-	(0.110)	-	(0.098)	-	(0.083)	-	(0.085)
<i>Slope 3-9:</i>								
Ever to biological father 3-9	-0.059**	-0.090**	-0.020	-0.041*	-0.012	-0.009	-0.020	-0.007
	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.013)	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.012)	(0.015)
Ever to social father 3-9	-0.088**	-0.091**	-0.011	-0.003	0.019+	0.028*	-0.013	-0.007
	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.019)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.011)

Stable social father 3-9	0.006	0.035	0.063+	0.133**	0.037	0.038	0.026	0.027
	(0.041)	(0.063)	(0.035)	(0.047)	(0.034)	(0.046)	(0.033)	(0.040)
Ever to single mother 3-9	0.022+	0.020	0.001	0.013	0.002	0.008	-0.007	-0.004
	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.011)	(0.012)
Ever changed social fathers 3-9	-0.074**	-0.066*	0.019	0.061*	-0.007	-0.005	-0.009	-0.011
	(0.020)	(0.028)	(0.018)	(0.025)	(0.020)	(0.023)	(0.014)	(0.017)
Note: The reference group is stable single-mother families.								