Multiple Partner Fertility across Two Cohorts of Women in the United States*

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Abstract

Family demographers have been paying increasing attention to the phenomenon of "multiple-partner fertility" (MPF). This refers to having biological children with more than one partner. Yet to date we know little about trends in multiple partner fertility or about the shifting sources of the phenomenon. This paper aims to fill that gap. We document: (1) trends over time in the incidence of multiple partner fertility; and (2) the changing sources of multiple partner fertility. By the latter, we uncover the changing share due to non-union fertility, childbearing in cohabiting relationships, and childbearing in (re)marriages. We draw on two cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth, and use an indirect method to uniquely identify fathers for women not in coresidential unions, to fulfill these aims.

Introduction and Research Goals

Family demographers have been paying increasing attention to the phenomenon of "multiple-partner fertility" (MPF). This refers to having biological children with more than one partner. The phenomenon itself, however, is not new. Research has, for some time, examined the linkages between, for example, having children from a prior marriage and the chances of remarrying, having a premarital birth and the subsequent chances of marriage, and the complexities faced by "blended" families (e.g., stepfamilies). In the more distant past, however, when divorce rates were low, most people lived their (shorter) lives with one partner and generally had children with only one partner. Times have changed: as people live longer, nonmarital childbearing is increasing in frequency and losing its stigma, high divorce rates persist, and cohabiting relationships remain more short-lived than marriages. Thus, multiple partner fertility, particularly that taking place outside of marriage, appears to be on the rise (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007; Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe, 2008).

Yet to date we know little about trends in multiple partner fertility or about the shifting sources of the phenomenon. This paper aims to fill that gap. Drawing on two cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), we document: (1) trends over time in the incidence of multiple partner fertility; and (2) the changing sources of multiple partner fertility. By the latter, we uncover the changing share due to non-union fertility, childbearing in cohabiting relationships, and childbearing in (re)marriage.

Data, Measures, and Methods

Our goal is to determine whether and how the prevalence and sources of MPF in the United States have changed across two cohorts: those born between 1951 and 1955 and those born roughly between 1964 and 1968. While these women were only born less than two decades apart, the latter group came of age when many changes in family formation and dissolution were becoming quite salient (e.g., divorce, nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation). Thus, our empirical goals are 1) to describe the change in prevalence of MPF between the two cohorts, and 2) to account for change in proportion of MPF contributed by three family arrangements: blended family, cohabiting family, and single-parent family.

As noted by Guzzo (2014), the data requirements for a temporal analysis of multiple partner fertility are steep. In particular, it is necessary to be able to uniquely identify different fathers, something that our data source (the NSFG) does not do directly for women outside of coresidential relationships. As discussed below, we use an indirect method to do so.

Data and Sample. Our data are drawn from Cycle 5 and Cycle 7 of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a nationally-representative survey of fertility and families in the United States. The survey series began in 1973 and is still being conducted today.

NSFG Cycle 5, undertaken in 1995, included in its sampling frame all American women ages 15-44 regardless of union history. In response to researchers' increased demand for more-detailed family demographic data, this cycle contained measures meant to increase the usefulness of the survey data, such as education and cohabitation histories intended to enhance data users' understanding of the interactions between these variables and respondents' pregnancy and marital histories (DHS 2009). Cycle 7 data were collected between 2006 and 2010, as the NSFG switched to a continuous interviewing design (DHS 2009).

Our analytic sample consists of women aged 40-44 years at the time they were interviewed; Cycle 5 yielded 1,862 women who fit this criterion, and Cycle 7 yielded 1,343. We focus on women aged 40-44 because the NSFG coverage is only until age 44 and most cases of MPF will be captured by this age range. Use of data collected from members of these specific cohorts allows us to estimate the prevalence and composition of MPF among women born to parents who themselves were raised during two distinct times in American history: Baby Boomers' parents' childbearing years spanned the Great Depression, and early Generation Xers were born to parents living through the socially progressive 1960s.

Measures. Our key dependent variable is whether or not a respondent has experienced MPF. Independent measures include cohort as well as an array of sociodemographic characteristics commonly used in similar studies.

When direct questions about MPF are not explicitly asked, measuring the phenomenon by way of combining union and fertility histories is a data-intensive process (Guzzo 2014). The NSFG, however, contains enough information to enable us to calculate the prevalence and examine correlates of MPF that has occurred not only in marital or cohabiting unions, but among the never-married as well.

To measure differences in the prevalence and sources of multiple partner fertility across cohorts, we build upon the usual method of identifying MPF by matching individuals' fertility histories with their union histories to allocate each live birth to the union in which it occurred. This method works well to measure occurrence of MPF alongside the formation of MPF unions, but falls short of accounting for MPF among women who have not entered a coresidential union.

For these women, we draw on data that tells us how old the father was at the time of pregnancy (Cycle 5) or birth (Cycle 7). If a woman has a nonmarital birth, we can thus glean the age of the father and use this as a proxy to uniquely identify him. While imperfect, we believe the amount of error will not be extreme.[1] For women who conceive outside of a union but give birth within a cohabiting or marital union, we assume the partner/husband is the father of the child.

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[11] We will also experiment with various pairs of ages to identify men we believe to be the same. For example, there may be some error in recall of age. Thus, we plan to examine findings when we use various cutoffs: +/- 1 year, and +/- 2 years.

In Cycles 5 and 7, each respondent reported current relationship status and provided retrospective union histories: dates of the beginning and end of each marriage, up to six; date she began premaritally cohabiting with each of her husbands; dates of the beginning and end of her nonmarital cohabiting relationships; date of each husband's or nonmarital cohabiting partner's birth (and death, when applicable); and her formal marital status at each of her live births. Each respondent's fertility history was recorded via the following information: whether or not she had any biological children with each husband or nonmarital cohabiting partner; date of the end of each of her pregnancies; and outcome of each pregnancy.

Methods. Descriptive analyses depict the prevalence of multiple partner fertility by cohort, as well as the sources of multiple partner fertility for each cohort. We also estimate multivariate models. Our dependent variable is whether a woman experienced multiple partner fertility by age 40-44. Given the dichotomous nature of our dependent variable, we employ logistic regression models; we estimate separate models by cohort as well as models that pool across cohort and include interaction terms (to test for cohort differences in correlates). If sample size allows, we also explore cohort change in MPF by (1) educational attainment and (2) race/ethnicity.

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