Parenting Complexity and Indicators of Relationship Quality among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The diversity of American family life has been well documented resulting in complex parenting responsibilities that extend beyond a traditional configuration, two biological parents raising only their shared biological children. We investigated the influence of couple-level parenting complexity (no children, only shared children, any non-shared children) on relationship strains (financial, trust, and time) as well as indicators of relationship quality (satisfaction, verbal conflict, and physical aggression). Respondents included 500 young adults in opposite-sex marital and cohabiting unions (Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study). Parenthood, itself, is associated with greater strains and conflict and lower relationship satisfaction. Couples with non-shared children reported higher strains and lower relationship quality. We expect that relationship strains will mediate a share of the parenting complexity associations. We discuss measurement and theoretical issues that may guide future research on parenthood and parenting complexity.

In the U.S., parenthood is a major life course transition (Knoester and Eggebeen, 2006), which is becoming increasingly complex (e.g., Guzzo, 2014; Schoen, Landale, and Daniels 2007; Ventura, 2009). Parenting complexity is due, in part, to the following trends: an increase in cohabitation and serial cohabitation (60% of young adults cohabited); young average age of cohabitation (22); increasing ages at first marriage (27 for women and 29 for men); high divorce rates (40% end in divorce); and repartnering (Kennedy and Bumpass 2011; Manning, Brown and Payne 2013; Raley and Bumpass 2003; U.S. Census Bureau 2012). As a result, many young adults are in relationships with partners who have had children from prior unions or have had children with more than one partner (multiple partner fertility) (Guzzo 2014; Manning, Brown and Stykes 2014; Stewart 2007). Based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), for example, 12% of young adult women and 38% of young adult mothers of two or more children reported multiple partner fertility (Guzzo 2014) and one-third of young adult cohabiting parents reported non-shared children (Brown and Bulanda 2008). Thus, in contemporary American society, for young adults, parenting relationships are increasingly complex because they are often based on shared children, as well as children from prior relationships (non-shared children).

We refer to intimate relationships involving shared and non-shared children as parenting complexity (Cancian, Meyer, and Cook 2011). Individuals experiencing parenting complexity may confront additional stressors including financial, trust and time strains. Parents who raise children from different relationships may be somewhat more economically disadvantaged and face financial issues in terms of payment and receipt of child support (Stewart 2007). Concerns about trusting the partner around the opposite sex tend to characterize unions with non-shared children (Burton 2014; Cancian, Meyer, and Cook 2011; Carlson, McLanahan, and England

2004; Taylor et al. 2011), and time constraints may be more prevalent as parents negotiate relationships with their children's other biological parent (Monte 2007). Moreover, compared with parents with shared children, relationship quality is lower when one or both members of the couple had non-shared children (Carlson and Furstenberg 2007). Additionally, other researchers (e.g., Harknett and Knab 2007) reported that mothers with non-shared children perceived lower social support. In this paper, we used quantitative and qualitative data to consider the confluence of parenting complexity (no children, shared children, non-shared children), and relational strains (e.g., financial, trust, time) on young adults' relationship satisfaction, verbal conflict, and physical conflict.

There are several shortcomings with many of the data sets used to assess parenting complexity. First, many recent prevalence studies based on the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being data are not able to compare parents and non-parents because the data are based on a birth cohort of children (e.g., Carlson and Furstenberg 2006; Waller 2008). Second, some studies examined only women's experiences (e.g., Burton and Hardaway 2012; Monte 2011) or were limited to only men's experiences (e.g., Bront-Tinkew et al. 2009; Manlove et al. 2008; Guzzo and Furstenberg 2006). Third, large data sets, such as the Add Health, are not able to ascertain whether respondents' partners have other non-residential children. Finally, Guzzo (2014) noted that a major shortcoming is that many studies do not operationalize the mechanisms by parenting complexity, such as multiple partner fertility, may have implications for a wide range of relational outcomes.

In this paper, we rely on Pearlin and colleagues' (1981) stress model as a conceptual framework to investigate whether, and why, complex family patterns may put we young men and women at risk for poorer quality relationships as evidenced by greater strain, lower satisfaction

and verbal and physical conflict. This model includes three conceptual domains: (1) sources of stress; (2) mediators of stress; and (3) manifestations of stress, and suggests that outcome such as relationship strain and conflict are intrinsically related to role strains, and that the availability of resources amplify or diminish such strains. A considerable number of studies (e.g., Evenson and Simon 2005; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003; Stewart 2007) have focused on the first domain and have implicated parenthood as a source of stress. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003), for example, argued that while parenthood can be rewarding it could also be costly because increased conflicts and frustrations lead to feelings of stress, and Evenson and Simon (2005) found that parental status increased men and women's depressive symptoms. Stewart (2007) as well as Shapiro and Stewart (2011) emphasized that step-parenting is especially stressful. Carlson and Furstenberg (2007), examining data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, found that having biological children with more than one partner decreased relationship quality. Yet, it may not be 'the parenting role' that affects quality, as evidenced by findings from the Three-City Study suggesting that while 78% of the mothers had been or were involved in multiple partner fertility unions, nearly 90% indicated that they did not co-parent their partners' children from other unions (Burton and Hardaway 2012). Thus, co-parenting of non-shared children, does not appear to be common, and may not have consequences for relational outcomes. Moreover, many studies note that parenthood, itself, is associated with poorer well-being outcomes (Evenson and Simon 2005). Other studies have emphasized the second conceptual domain, mediators of stress, such as financial resources (Brody et al. 1994), issues of trust (Burton 2014), and time constraints (Umberson, Pudrovska, and Reczek 2010). Third, many studies emphasize the outcomes of stress (e.g., Leisring 2013; Roberts et al. 2011; Stith et al. 2004), and have demonstrated that stress, irrespective of its source, is often manifested in

lower quality relationships as well as increased odds of intimate partner violence. Copp (2014) found that a particular source of stress, financial strain, was associated with intimate partner violence. Additionally, Brown and Bulanda (2008) and Brownridge (2004) reported that individuals residing with non-shared children had increased odds of violence. Others (e.g., Stewart 2007) have also alluded to financial strain as a leading cause of stress in complex families. Thus, each of these three domains (sources, mediators, and outcomes) of the stress model have been extensively studied separately, but to our knowledge have not been applied to family complexity, relational strains, and indicators of relationship quality including satisfaction, verbal conflict, and physical conflict.

Current Investigation

Drawing on qualitative data and survey data , the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) (n = 500) from married and cohabiting respondents we assessed how parenting complexity is related to relationship strains and quality , We controlled for other known correlates of young adults' relationship satisfaction, verbal conflict, physical conflict and family complexity including current relationship characteristics, such as union status, relationship duration, number of children, and sociodemographic characteristics. We hypothesized that respondents without children would report the highest relationship satisfaction, and the lowest levels of verbal and physical conflict. We also expected that respondents with complex family forms (i.e., parents with non-shared children) would report the lowest relationship satisfaction, and the highest levels of verbal and physical conflict. Additionally, we expected that family complexity influenced relationship satisfaction and conflict, in part, through relational strains; thus, we anticipated that including these strains in the analyses would attenuate the effect of family complexity on young adults' relationship functioning. Building on research

demonstrating gender differences in the meaning of parenthood (e.g., Monte 2011; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003), we also examined whether the effects of family complexity differed for women and men. Lastly, we used qualitative excerpts from a subsample of parents (shared and non-shared children) and non-parents to further understand how individuals describe stress in their relationships associated with financial, trust, and time concerns.

METHOD

Data

The TARS data focus on dating and sexual relationships during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The initial data (n=1,321) are from a stratified, random sample of adolescents who registered for the 7th, 9th, and 11th grades in Lucas County, Ohio, in the year 2000. At the time of the first interview, we also interviewed a parent (primarily mothers) or guardian separately. Because we interviewed outside of the school setting, respondents did not need to attend classes to be in the original study. We followed the initial set of respondents over the course of five interviews for the next 10 years. The analytic sample consists of 500 respondents in different-sex married and cohabiting relationships who reported their race as Black, Hispanic, or white.

Dependent Measures

Relationship satisfaction (Rust et al. 1986), assessed at the fifth interview, included likert responses to the following nine items: (1) "I really appreciate his/her sense of humor"; (2) "He/she doesn't seem to listen to me" (reverse coded); (3) "If he/she left me, life would not be worth living"; (4) "We both seem to like the same things"; (5) "I often have second thoughts about our relationship" (reverse coded); (6) "I enjoy just sitting and talking with him/her"; (7) "We become competitive when we have to make decisions" (reverse coded); (8)"I wish there was more warmth and affection between us" (reverse coded); and (9) "He/she is always

correcting me" (reverse coded) (α = .76). Responses were (5) strongly agree to (1) strongly disagree.

Physical conflict, measured at the fifth interview, included responses to twelve items from the revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman 1996). These included how often the respondent had done the following: (1) "thrown something at"; (2) "twisted arm or hair"; (3) "used a knife or gun"; (4) "punched or hit with something that could hurt"; (5) "choked"; (6) "slammed against a wall"; (7) "beat up"; (8) "burned or scalded on purpose"; (9) "kicked"; (10) "pushed, shoved, or grabbed"; (11) "slapped in the face or head with an open hand"; and (12) "hit" in reference to experiences with the current/most recent partner (α = .94). Responses ranged from (1) never to (5) very often.

Verbal conflict, measured at the fifth interview, included responses to the following six items from the revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) (Straus et al. 1996). These included how often the respondent, and then how often the respondent's partner, had done teach of the following: (1) "insulted or swore at partner"; (2) "yelled or screamed at partner"; (3) "stomped out of the house or yard during a disagreement"; (4) "threatened to hit or throw something"; (5) "destroyed something that belonged to partner"; and (6) "called partner fat or ugly."

Independent Measures

Couples' parenting complexity, is based on questions about the respondent's own experience and the partner's experience. The question asked the following: Do you have children with someone other that X?" Response categories included: (1) "I don't have any children"; (2) "I have a child with him/her"; (3) "I have a child, but not with him/her"; (4) "I have a child with both him/her and someone else." Further, the fertility histories included a query asking whether the respondent had a child with anyone besides the father/mother of the

child. We combined these questions to establish whether the couple had no children, only shared children, and any non-shared children. To assess the value of the couple indicator, we also created an indicator based on the respondent's own fertility with the same response categories: no children, only shared children, and any non-shared children.

Financial, time, and trust strains are measured separately. *Financial strains*, based on five items, assessed how concerned the respondent is with their standard of living, not having enough money, having a dead-end job, not living up to potential, and financially struggling. *Trust strains*, based on two items, asked about the respondent's trust of the partner around the opposite sex, and the partner's trust when the respondent is around the opposite sex. *Time strains* asked whether respondents liked how their partners spent their time and managed everyday life.

Control Measures

Union status, based on relationship histories, included dating, cohabiting, and married. *Current relationship* indicated that respondents reported on their current versus most recent relationship. *Relationship duration,* measured in years, ranged from .08 (about a month) to 10 years. *Gender,* a dichotomous variable, indicated whether the respondent was female. *Age* was the difference between date of birth and the fourth interview date. *Race/ethnicity* consisted of three self-reported categories: White (reference group), Black, and Hispanic. *Family structure during adolescence,* from the respondent's first interview asked, "During the past 12 months, who were you living with most of the time?" Respondents selected one of 25 categories, which we collapsed into four categories: two biological parents (reference group), single parent, stepparents, or 'other family' including living with other family members or foster care. *Respondent's education* is based on four categories: less than 12 years, 12 years, some college,

and college graduate.

Analytic Strategy

Table 1 included descriptive statistics for all variables included in the multivariate models. We used these data to provide a descriptive portrait of the sample. Below we present preliminary descriptive analyses. For the PAA presentation, we will include multivariate regression and logistic models. We will include qualitative excerpts in which a subsample of male and female respondents describe their experiences with parenting complexity, as well as the stressors associated with their intimate relationships.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Initial analyses of the TARS married and cohabiting couples indicated that 38% reported no children, 31% only shared children, and 31% any non-shared children (Table 1). Thus, among couples that have a child (respondent and/or partner) half have a non-shared child. This indicator of parenting complexity captures the respondent's and partner's parenting and includes resident and nonresident children. An individual based measure (only respondent) of fertility indicated that 44% have no children and 56% do have children. The average number of children among respondents with children was 1.76 (range 0-6) reflecting that although parenthood is somewhat normative, individuals differed in their number of children. This further demonstrates that an indicator of multiple partner fertility would include a rather limited set of young adult parents because only 26% have two or more children. Further, relying on an individual-level indicator underestimates non-shared children. The individual indicator is limited because only 17% of respondents reported having a non-shared child (or 30% of parents) and about 13% of respondents without children have a partner with children. To best encapsulate the parenting experiences our multivariate analyses focused on a couple-level indicator of parenting

complexity. Thus, our first question examines how parenting influences strains, financial, trust, and time strains, as well as the key outcome indicators of relationship satisfaction, conflict, and physical aggression. Second, we assess whether the strains moderated the association between parenting and relationship quality indicators. We rely on qualitative data to inform these results and provide insights based on the actual perspectives of young adult men and women.

CONCLUSION

While the levels of parenting complexity have been documented, there are only a handful of studies focusing on the implications of parenting complexity for relationship well-being. We will build on prior work by applying a stress and strain theoretical framework, considering a couple-level indicator and extending analyses to include couples without children. We are hopeful that these findings will contribute both methodologically and theoretically to future research on the implications of parenthood and parenting complexity.

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Table 1. Distribution of Independent and Dependent Variables for Married and Cohabiting Couples (n=500)

Couple Parenting Complexity	
No Children	38.4%
Only Shared Children	30.8%
Any Non-Shared Children	30.8%
Respondent Parenting Complexity	
No Children	44.0%
Only Shared Children	38.8%
Any Non-Shared Children	17.2%
Strains	
Financial (1-5)	2.4
Trust (1-5)	3.2
Time (1-5)	3.6
Relationship Quality	
Satisfaction (1-5)	3.6
Conflict (1-5)	2.5
Physical Aggression	27.6%
Sociodemographic	
Age (22-29)	25.7
Female	56.6%
Race/Ethnicity	
Non-Hispanic White	71.2%
Non-Hispanic Black	16.2%
Hispanic	12.6%
Union Status	
Married	43.2%
Cohabiting	56.8%
Education	
Less than high school	8.8%
High school	20.6%
13-15	36.8%
16+	33.8%
Family Structure	
Biological Parents	51.4%
Stepparent	14.6%
Single Parent	20.4%
Other Family	13.6%

Source: Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study