

Factors Influencing the Context of Non-Marital Childbearing

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Nonmarital childbearing has become increasingly common in the United States in recent years, accounting for 41.0% of all births in 2009 (Child Trends, 2010). Although existing research points to the rising incidence of childbearing within cohabiting unions as a major reason for the observed increase (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008), many births also occur in other types of nonmarital unions. The majority of unmarried parents are romantically involved at the time of their child's birth (McLanahan & Beck 2010), with most cohabiting together while others live apart but are romantically involved, or "visiting". These relationships are fragile, with over sixty percent of non-marital unions ending within five years of the birth of their child. Union stability is heavily influenced by residential status, with 60% of cohabiting couples and only 20% of non-cohabiting couples still together five years after the birth (McLanahan & Beck 2010). The residential context at birth appears to be an important factor which shapes the stability of these fragile families. This paper aims to examine factors which influence the relationship context of women's first non-marital birth, whether women are cohabiting or visiting with a romantic partner at the time of the birth.

While the context of childbearing has become increasingly diverse in the United States, many sociodemographic factors and life course experiences have been shown to influence childbearing behavior. Non-marital childbearing is more prevalent among younger women (Ventura, 2009) with non-marital births to women over twenty more likely to occur within cohabiting unions (Mincieli, Manlove, McGarrett, Moore & Ryan 2007). Research also points to racial differences in childbearing behavior (e.g. Landale, Schoen & Daniels 2010), with higher rates of non-marital childbearing among Black women. Additionally, the relationship context of non-marital childbearing appears to be shaped by race, with non-marital births to white and Hispanic women more likely to occur within cohabiting unions (Mincieli et al, 2007). Educational attainment also shapes fertility experiences and may influence the context of non-marital childbearing. Women with higher levels of educational attainment are less likely to have a non-marital birth (Kennedy & Bumpass 2008).

Family structure during childhood also appears to influence the experience of non-marital childbearing. Family sociologists have long been concerned with understanding the intergenerational effects of parental marital and fertility behavior (e.g. Webster, Orbuch & House 1995). While the relationship between childhood family structure and non-marital fertility behavior is not very clear or straightforward (Burton, 1995), evidence does suggest that women who grow up in non-intact families are significantly more likely to experience non-marital childbearing (Wu & Martinson, 1993). Given the possibility of the intergenerational transmission of family structure and childbearing behavior, family structure during childhood may be particularly influential on a woman's experience of a non-marital birth.

Finally, whether a birth was intentional or desired may be associated with the context in which the birth occurs. While non-marital births are less likely to be planned than marital births, births to cohabiting women are more likely to be planned compared to births to single women (Musick, 2004).

Beyond attributes of individuals, characteristics of couples may shape the nature of their relationships surrounding a non-marital birth. Romantic partners often share similar qualities, selecting one another on key sociodemographic factors, such as race and age. Heterogeneity in the traits of partners may serve as a source of conflict and stress for the couple, ultimately shaping the nature and stability of their relationship. Heterogeneity on characteristics such as age and race may influence the context in which non-marital births occur. The impact of racial heterogeneity on the relationship context at birth is somewhat disputed in the literature with some scholars indicating that father's race matters (Goldstein & Harknett 2006) and others suggesting that differences in race matter (Manlove et al 2010). However, no research to date has examined how racial homogeneity influences the relationship context of strictly non-marital births (e.g. cohabiting versus "visiting" unions).

Age heterogeneity may be another source of stress in a romantic relationship that influences the context in which non-marital births occur. Concern about the consequences of age differences between partners often centers on older partners and teen childbearing (e.g. Lindberg, Sonenstein, Ku & Martinez, 1997). Some research suggests that large age differences, specifically when young women are partnered with older men, influence fertility behavior (Darroch, Landry & Oslack, 1999; Wu, 1996). Research has not specifically examined how age differences between partners may influence the relationship context of non-marital childbearing.

The current study extends prior research by examining multiple factors which shape the residential context of nonmarital childbearing with careful consideration of whether certain factors, such as race and age at birth, may act as moderators of relationship context. Furthermore, much of the research on non-marital births has relied on data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, an urban birth cohort sample which is not nationally representative, and therefore may miss some of the variation in experiences surrounding non-marital births in the US population. Additionally, the current study follows individuals over time from adolescence into young adulthood and is able to capture information on behavior and experiences prior to birth, while other research examining relationship context at birth (e.g. Mincieli et al, 2007) have relied on data collected after the birth (Early Child Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort). To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first time the Add Health sample has been used to examine relationship context at first non-marital birth.

Preliminary analyses were conducted using data from Waves I and IV of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative, school-based sample of US students in Grades 7 through 12 in 1994. The fourth wave of data was collected with in-home interviews of original respondents in 2007 and 2008 (at ages 24 to 32). The current analytic sample is restricted to female respondents who participated at both waves, have valid sample weights, and who experienced their first birth outside of a marital union by Wave IV. In addition, women whose first non-marital birth occurred prior to the date of their Wave I interview are excluded (n = 121), yielding an analytic sample of 1,986 women.

Information on the child's date of birth, the reported relationship status with the pregnancy partner at birth (married, cohabiting, romantic/visiting, or non-romantic), and the entrance and exit dates of unions (pregnancy relationships, cohabitations and/or marriages) were used to construct the dependent variable – relationship context at birth. The respondent's report of their relationship with their partner at the time of the birth is used to determine the context at birth. If dates on marital unions suggest that the birth is marital, but the respondent reports it is not, the marriage dates are used as the reference and the birth is labeled as marital. Given that multiple cohabitations are not well documented in Add Health, respondents who report being in a "visiting" relationship but report a cohabitation entrance date prior to birth are considered visiting at birth. These "unstable cohabitators" do not differ

from other women with non-marital births, except that their births are more likely to be unintended (birth was unplanned and/or unwanted). About fifty-two percent of the sample are cohabiting at birth. Information on the measurement of predictor variables is not provided due to space limitations but is available upon request. Mean and mode substitution is used to deal with missing data on predictor variables. Future analyses will use multiple imputation procedures. Preliminary results are weighted with adjustments made for clustering and stratification in the Add Health sample design.

Descriptive statistics indicate some important differences between those who have had a non-marital birth, those who have had a marital birth, and those who have had no birth at all (see Table 1). Two-sample t-tests indicate that women with a non-marital birth are significantly more likely to be black or Hispanic, to have less than a high school education, to have a parent with less than a high school or a high school education, and to come from a non-intact family status at wave 1 compared to both women with a marital birth and those women who haven't given birth yet. Women who have not given birth by wave 4 are also more likely to be white, be more highly educated, have more highly educated parents, and come from an intact family than those women who have given birth, either nonmarital or marital. Additionally, women with a non-marital birth are significantly younger when they give birth, have a smaller age difference with their partner, are more likely to have a partner who is a different race, are more likely to have a black or Hispanic partner, and more likely to say that their birth was unintentional compared to women whose first birth is marital.

Preliminary results from logistic regression models (not shown) indicate that several individual and couple level characteristics are important predictors of the residential context in which women have their first non-marital birth. These include: race, educational attainment at the time of the birth, whether the woman came from an intact family status, the age difference from the partner, mother's age at birth, and whether the birth was unintended. In addition, the current study examined whether the race and ethnicity of women moderated the influence of various factors on the residential context of their birth. Preliminary analyses indicate that there are significant race/ethnic differences in the effect of education, having a younger partner, having a partner of a different race, and having an unintended birth on odds that a woman is cohabiting with her partner at the time of her first nonmarital birth. Additional analyses examined the moderating role of maternal age at birth.

Given the rising number of births that occur outside of marriages and the increasing instability in family structure experienced by children (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008), it is important to understand how characteristics of parents shape the setting in which these non-marital births occur. Results from this study will deepen our understanding of the context of nonmarital childbearing among American women. Careful attention to race-ethnic differences in contextual influences may also shed light on variation in the experience of women who have births outside of marriage.

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Table 1.. Descriptive Statistics for the Non-Marital Birth, Marital Birth, and No Birth Samples

	Non-Marital Birth (N = 1986)	Marital Birth (N = 1817)	No Birth (N = 3694)
Race (%)			
White	56.10 ^{bc}	79.17 ^{ac}	69.21 ^{ab}
Black	27.00 ^{bc}	5.23 ^{ac}	14.04 ^{ab}
Hispanic	11.93 ^{bc}	10.00 ^a	10.83 ^a
Other race	2.51 ^{bc}	3.94 ^{ac}	4.69 ^{ab}
Educational Attainment(%)			
Less than HS	46.24 ^{bc}	13.73 ^{ac}	5.28 ^{ab}
High school degree	49.70 ^{bc}	59.48 ^{ac}	46.71 ^{ab}
Bachelor's or higher	4.06 ^{bc}	26.79 ^{ac}	48.00 ^{ab}
Parent's education (%)*			
Less than HS	22.84 ^{bc}	16.95 ^{ac}	12.02 ^{ab}
High school	39.92 ^{bc}	36.18 ^{ac}	32.79 ^{ab}
Some college	17.51 ^{bc}	21.59 ^{ac}	20.36 ^{ab}
Bachelor's or higher	12.337 ^{bc}	20.93 ^{ac}	30.06 ^{ab}
Intact family status (%)	38.64 ^{bc}	60.72 ^{ac}	63.07 ^{ab}
Mother's age at birth	20.65 ^b	23.81 ^a	
Partner age difference	2.63 ^b	2.86 ^a	
Partner is white (%)	48.72 ^b	76.61 ^a	
Partner is black (%)	31.57 ^b	6.47 ^a	
Partner is hispanic (%)	15.37 ^b	12.06 ^a	
Partner is other race (%)	4.14	4.48	
Partner is a different race (%)	17.75 ^b	11.00 ^a	
Birth was unintended (%)	63.27 ^b	31.71 ^a	

Notes: Results are weighted and based on non-missing data. Significantly different from ^a Non-marital birth sample, ^b marital birth sample, ^c no birth sample. *Approx. 7% of the nonmarital birth sample, 4% of the marital birth sample, and 5% of the no birth sample are missing on parent's education. Missingness for each of the other independent variables is less than 3%.