

## A Small Extension to “Costs and Rewards of Children: The Effects of Becoming a Parent on Adults’ Lives”

In a recent article published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) addressed an important issue insufficiently researched in the family literature. Their study investigated the effects of becoming a parent on multiple dimensions of adult well-being. This work signifies an advance on a number of fronts because it considers a variety of indicators of well-being, such as social integration, marital conflict, and hours of housework, and uses longitudinal data to establish changes in these outcomes associated with the birth of a first child. They also examined variations by marital status (married vs. unmarried) and how these relationships differ for men and women. One of their many findings was that the effects of becoming parent are much less positive or more negative for singles than they are for married individuals. They conclude that “for unmarried men and women, becoming a parent may bring more costs than benefits to their lives” (p. 370).

Understanding the impact of nonmarital fertility on parents’ well-being is increasingly important. Nonmarital childbearing has risen dra-

matically, both as a consequence of the greater number of years young adults spend unmarried, and of increased birth rates among unmarried women (Smith, Morgan, & Koropecky-Cox, 1996). In fact, among White women, nonmarital birth rates doubled at all ages between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, and today, one out of three children is born to an unmarried mother. This proportion is especially high for Black children; two thirds of Black births are to unmarried mothers.

Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) failed to make an important distinction between new parents who are cohabiting and those who are single. In the early 1990s, roughly the period during which individuals in their sample were becoming parents, estimates from the National Survey of Family Growth show that about 39% of nonmarital births were to women in cohabiting unions (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). (An analysis of Nomaguchi and Milkie’s NSFH sample shows that the same percentage [39%] of the unmarried new mothers at Wave 2 were cohabiting.) Cohabiting births represent a growing proportion of nonmarital childbearing, and empirically separating them from other nonmarital births would enable a richer understanding of the reasons that having a child brings more costs than benefits to unmarried parents.

A developing body of literature suggests that cohabiting families differ from other unmarried-parent families in important ways (e.g., Bulcroft, Carmody, & Bulcroft, 1998; Dunifon & Kowaleski-Jones, 2002; Manning & Lamb,

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2003; Raley, Frisco, & Wildsmith, forthcoming). Consequently, it seems likely that the impact of becoming an unmarried parent on social integration and mental health varies by cohabitation. Prior theory and empirical findings, however, provide no clear indication of whether cohabitation or singlehood should be associated with poorer outcomes. Some perspectives on cohabitation—those that view cohabitation as similar to marriage—suggest that cohabiters would enjoy more benefits and fewer costs to becoming a parent as compared with singles. For men, cohabitation might be associated with better outcomes than being single for two reasons. First, being married is associated with greater social integration. This benefit might extend to cohabitation as well. Second, cohabiting fathers will have more access to the child than single fathers. For women, cohabitation might be associated with better outcomes than being single because live-in partners might offer greater social, emotional, physical, and financial support. Although there is some evidence to suggest that women's cohabiting partners contribute only modest financial resources (Lerman, 2002; Manning & Lichter, 1996; Morrison & Ritualo, 2000), they may also provide mothers social support and help with child care. Findings from the Fragile Families Study show that, compared with romantically involved mothers in visiting relationships, cohabiting mothers report higher levels of support from and lower levels of conflict with their partners (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). If cohabitation more closely resembles marriage than singlehood in terms of the amount of support that mothers receive from their partners, we might expect that the effect of having a child would be more similar for married and cohabiting women than for single women.

Other perspectives on cohabitation suggest that having a child while cohabiting might have especially poor outcomes, even relative to having a child while single. Cohabitation following the birth of a child may signify unresolved serious problems in a relationship, such as alcohol abuse or domestic violence. The work of Susan Brown (2000) demonstrated that cohabitation is associated with elevated depression relative to marriage, particularly among mothers. Additionally, cohabiting couples exhibit higher levels of domestic violence and alcohol use than married couples (Horwitz & White, 1998; Magdol, Moffitt, Caspi, & Silva, 1998). Although these

comparisons provide no evidence regarding how cohabiters fare compared with singles, coresidence likely provides more opportunity for domestic violence. Cohabiting mothers might also receive less support than single women from friends and relatives. Moreover, in a society that stigmatizes nonmarital childbearing, a pregnancy can exacerbate tensions in a relationship over formalizing a commitment, or otherwise enhance the dissatisfactions that inhibited marriage prior to the pregnancy. This perspective on cohabitation leads us to expect that having a birth while cohabiting may be associated with no better and possibly worse outcomes than having a child while single.

We extended Nomaguchi and Milkie's (2003) analysis of changes in well-being (as measured by changes in social and psychological resources) associated with the birth of a first child. We used the same data source, the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), and a similar methodological approach. A key difference between our analysis and the prior work is that we focused on how the effect of a nonmarital birth varies by cohabitation status. Consequently, we restricted our sample to the 1,325 respondents who were unmarried at Wave 1. A second difference in our approach is that we conducted separate analyses by gender. Nomaguchi and Milkie found numerous gender differences in their analysis, and union status has different implications for men and women, given that most children born to single mothers do not live with their fathers. Another motivation for the separate analyses is that men underreport children they have fathered outside of marriage (Harris & Boisjoly, forthcoming; Rendall, Clarke, Peters, Ranjit, & Verropoulou, 1999), and thus the quality of data might not be as good for men. Nomaguchi and Milkie's sample included 897 women and 1,036 men ages 18–44 who never had a child at Wave 1. (Please see their methods section for details of the sample and variable construction.) Our analysis focused on the 582 women and 743 men who were unmarried at Wave 1.

For our extension, the primary independent variables indicate the respondents' union and parental status at Wave 2. A single dummy variable describes parental status; either the respondent became a parent ( $n = 159$  women, 168 men) or did not ( $n = 423$  women, 575 men). Union status has three mutually exclusive categories: married ( $n = 214$  women, 265 men), single ( $n = 304$  women, 379 men), and cohabiting

( $n = 64$  women, 99 men). (Note that the sample size fluctuates across outcomes, because some have more missing data than others.) Although to directly parallel Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003), our categories would take into account whether the respondent was cohabiting at Wave 1, our sample size is not large enough to support this level of detail. Given our limited sample size and our goal of understanding how the effects of being an unmarried parent vary by union status, it is most appropriate to measure union status at Wave 2, after some of the respondents have become parents. Our multivariate models examine the additive and interactive associations between parental and union status, and four outcomes related to social and psychological resources: social integration, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and depression.

Table 1 presents the results of our extension for women. Only coefficients for the union and parent status variables are presented in the table, but Model 1 includes controls for age, education, employment, income, race, duration of marriage at Wave 1, whether the respondent was previously married at Wave 1, and the Wave 1 value on the dependent variable. Model 2 adds an interaction term between becoming a parent and marital status at Wave 2. Even though the Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) analysis combined men and women and included those who were married at Wave 1, our results in Model 1 are similar to theirs. Having a child is associated with a 0.49 greater increase in social integration, compared with not having a child. Childbearing is not associated with self-esteem, is negatively related to self-efficacy, and is not associated with depression.

In Model 2, we allowed the effects of becoming a parent to vary by marital and cohabitation status. Once this interaction is included, the coefficient for *had a child* represents the association for those married at Wave 2. The interaction term between being single and having a child is not significant for any of the outcomes. In other words, the association between having a child and mental health is similar for married and single women.

In contrast, the experience of becoming a mother for cohabiting women is uniformly and dramatically poorer. For this group, becoming a mother is negatively associated with social integration, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and mental health (i.e., a positive association with depression). That is, new mothers who are co-

habiting have fewer social resources and are more likely to be depressed than cohabiting women who are not mothers and married new mothers. With one exception, the cohabitation interaction is highly significant. The interaction term is only of borderline significance ( $p = .01$ ) for the model predicting self-efficacy. Nonetheless, the strength and stability of these interaction terms is remarkable given that our sample includes only 64 women cohabiting at Wave 2.

The pattern of results for men presented in Table 2 tells a completely different story. First, for only one outcome, depression, is becoming a parent associated with significantly lower well-being for unmarried men than for married men. Moreover, for men, being a cohabiting parent is not associated with poor outcomes relative to being a single parent. In fact, becoming a father is associated with significantly *greater* gains in social integration for those cohabiting than for those married or single by Wave 2. Similarly, only cohabiting fathers experienced an increase in self-esteem. Looking at the results for depression, we see that becoming a father is associated with increases in depression regardless of union status at Wave 2, but this positive effect is especially great for those who were single at the end of the observation period. The positive association between having a child and depression is similar (and smaller) for both married and cohabiting fathers.

The results of this extension suggest qualifications to the conclusions of Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003) regarding the effect of having a child for unmarried parents. Having a child is similarly associated with well-being for married and single women, but *cohabiting* women experience remarkable declines in social and psychological well-being, even controlling for their (often lower) level of well-being prior to the birth of the child. That is, cohabitation is associated with particularly problematic mental health outcomes for new mothers. Whereas for new mothers, cohabiting is worse than being single, for new fathers, being single is associated with greater depression than cohabiting. When explaining the reasons that single parenting might be stressful, prior research has focused on the strain of parenting alone. The results we present here suggest that not living with one's child is associated with depression for new fathers.

An unresolved puzzle concerns the finding that having a child is associated with greater relative increases in social integration (and self-

TABLE 1. REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS OF SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR WOMEN (N = 582)

Variables	Social Integration				Self-Esteem							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2					
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>				
Intercept	4.89***	1.27	0	4.75***	1.27	0	5.78***	1.13	0	5.71***	1.12	
Had a child	0.49*	0.23	0.10	0.77**	0.28	0.16	-0.06	0.18	-0.02	0.07	0.22	
Single	0.46*	0.22	0.11	0.58*	0.24	0.14	-0.11	0.18	-0.03	-0.09	0.20	
Cohabitation	0.15	0.27	0.02	0.54	0.32	0.09	-0.59***	0.23	-0.12	-0.21	0.27	
Single $\times$ had a child				-0.27	0.5	-0.03				0.31	0.41	
Cohabitation $\times$ had a child				-1.48*	0.6	-0.13				-1.39**	0.48	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.20				0.21			0.16			0.18	
<i>F</i> value	9.54***				8.75***			7.75***			7.52***	
	Self-Efficacy											
	Depression				Depression							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2					
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>				
Intercept	2.83***	0.64	0	2.77***	0.64	0	1.66*	0.75				
Had a child	-0.31**	0.11	-0.13	-0.25	0.14	-0.1	-0.13	0.13				
Single	-0.38***	0.11	-0.19	-0.37**	0.12	-0.18	0.25*	0.13				
Cohabitation	-0.45***	0.13	-0.15	-0.31	0.16	-0.1	0.27	0.16				
Single $\times$ had a child				0.07	0.24	0.01						
Cohabitation $\times$ had a child				-0.54	0.29	-0.09						
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.17				0.17			0.21				
<i>F</i> value	8.36***				7.54***			11.1***				

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

TABLE 2. REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS OF SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR MEN (N = 743)

Variables	Social Integration						Self-Esteem					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Intercept	5.11***	1.42	0	4.79***	1.42	0	9.67***	1.1	0	9.52***	1.1	0
Had a child	0.27	0.23	0.05	0.19	0.28	0.04	-0.28	0.17	-0.07	-0.54*	0.21	-0.12
Single	0.05	0.22	0.01	0.06	0.23	0.01	-0.43*	0.17	-0.12	-0.50**	0.17	-0.15
Cohabitation	-0.61*	0.28	-0.09	-0.95***	0.33	-0.14	-0.04	0.21	-0.01	-0.42	0.25	-0.08
Single $\times$ had a child				-0.61	0.56	-0.05				0.15	0.44	0.01
Cohabitation $\times$ had a child				1.30*	0.61	0.10				1.39**	0.46	0.14
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.08				0.09			0.17			0.18	
<i>F</i> value	4.46***				4.37***			10.5***			9.79***	
	Depression											
Variables	Self-Efficacy						Depression					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Intercept	2.34***	0.58	0	2.39***	0.59	0	1.66**	0.61	0	1.8**	0.62	0
Had a child	-0.30**	0.10	-0.13	-0.25*	0.12	-0.10	0.47***	0.10	0.19	0.32*	0.12	0.13
Single	-0.24*	0.09	-0.13	-0.22*	0.10	-0.12	0.33***	0.10	0.16	0.25*	0.10	0.12
Cohabitation	0.13	0.12	0.04	0.22	0.14	0.07	0.34**	0.13	0.11	0.29	0.15	0.09
Single $\times$ had a child				0.01	0.25	0.00				0.67**	0.26	0.11
Cohabitation $\times$ had a child				-0.32	0.26	-0.06				0.17	0.28	0.03
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.12				0.17			0.16			0.17	
<i>F</i> value	7.35***				6.47***			9.34***			8.62***	

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

esteem) for cohabiting men than for married men. This result arises partly because cohabiting men who do not have children suffer significant declines in social integration, whereas men who are married by Wave 2 hold steady. That is, the comparison group for cohabiting fathers is doing more poorly than the comparison group for married fathers. Why cohabitation for non-parents would be associated with declines in social integration for men and not women is an interesting question, but one beyond the scope of this investigation. The important point is that there are differences in the implications of parenthood for singles and cohabiters, and these implications vary by gender. For new fathers, being a single father is associated with lower well-being than is cohabiting. For new mothers, cohabitation is associated with lower well-being than singlehood.

Our sample is too small to identify why cohabitation is associated with poor outcomes for new mothers—whether it is because extended families provide resources to single mothers but not to those who are cohabiting, or if it is because (continued) cohabitation following a first birth is selective of couples and individuals with characteristics that might be associated with poor mental health, such as domestic violence or substance abuse. Although our study does not provide proof regarding the causal influence of cohabitation on mental health, the results do suggest that cohabitation differs from marriage in important ways for new mothers. Clearly, in the current context of rising proportions of children being born to unmarried women, it will be important for future research to investigate the conditions that contribute to reductions in the social and psychological resources of unmarried mothers, particularly those who are cohabiting.

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