Are Celebrities Trendsetters for Nonmarital Fertility?

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Abstract

This paper explores whether the dramatic rise in U.S. nonmarital fertility since the 1970s might be partially explained by growing media coverage of nonmarital fertility among celebrities, contributing to normalization (or even glamorization) of out-of-wedlock childbirth. Specifically, I pair 40 years’ worth of covers of People magazine (1974-2014)—coded for all pregnancy- and birth-related stories—with national U.S. birth data. I examine whether the rise in nonmarital fertility among celebrities, broken down by race/ethnicity and level of education, precedes, mirrors, or succeeds the rise in comparable demographic groups in the U.S. as a whole. (If warranted, methods for making stronger causal arguments will be explored.) Qualitative analyses will explore changing framings of celebrity nonmarital fertility over time. The project contributes to the literature on fertility intentions, by exploring a potentially powerful mechanism by which schemas of parenthood and marriage (Bachrach and Morgan 2013) may change over relatively brief periods of time.

Extended abstract

Background

In 1980, 18.4% of U.S. births occurred to unmarried women. In 2010, just thirty years later, this figure had risen to 40.8% (Martin et al. 2015). Scholarly explanations for this substantial and rapid shift have focused on a combination of economic factors, such as women’s increasing financial autonomy, and cultural factors, such growing secularization and individualism (Lesthaeghe 2010; Willis and Haaga 1996). However, a number of recent studies argue that both economic and non-economic explanations often under-theorize fertility intentions and the complex cognitive, psychological, and social factors underlying them (Bachrach and Morgan 2013; Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011; Schoen and Tufis 2003). In particular, Bachrach and Morgan emphasize the importance of “schemas” (mental representations) of childbearing, parenthood, and marriage, which “are imbued with sensation and feeling and may be linked strongly to a person’s identity or sense of self” (2013:462; italics in original). Fertility-related decisions, it is argued, emerge at the intersection of individuals’ structural circumstances and their personal schemas (ibid.).

Delving more deeply into this model, one may ask how individuals’ schemas develop. Bachrach and Morgan answer this in general terms: “the schemas we learn and use most reliably are those we learn from observing recurring patterns of social life” (2013:468). In this paper, I
take seriously the notion that media depictions of celebrity fertility may constitute such “recurring patterns of social life”, and thus may shape individual beliefs about what sorts of family formation are normal, moral, and/or desirable.

*Celebrities as Agents of Cultural Change*

Demographers have rarely seriously examined the role of popular culture in shaping fertility-related norms. However, it is *a priori* plausible that celebrity culture could shape American fertility behavior. *People* magazine, with its 45.1 million adult readers, is the most widely read magazine in the U.S. (Johnson-Greene 2009); its web site is also widely read, recently setting a traffic record of 72 million unique visitors in a single month (2014). Its pages, paper or virtual, reach many eyes.

Moreover, there is evidence that readers attend to and retain information from celebrity news. In 2013, *The New York Times* published Angelina Jolie’s op-ed about her decision to get a double mastectomy. A nationally-representative survey conducted 3 weeks later found that 74% of sampled adults knew about Jolie’s decision and the reason behind it (Borzekowski et al. 2014). More directly related to fertility, Lieberson’s research showing that trends in baby names are often shaped by popular celebrities makes clear that celebrity culture can influence even very personal decisions, such as what to name one’s offspring (Lieberson 2000).

Finally, a small but growing body of research directly links popular culture to fertility-related behavior. Recent studies have found that Brazilian women watching television soap operas (which portray relatively small families) have lower fertility than women in areas without access to soap operas (La Ferrara, Chong and Duryea 2012), and that regions with higher viewership of the television program *16 and Pregnant* showed greater declines in teen pregnancy (Kearney and Levine forthcoming; Trudeau 2015).

Precisely how celebrity news might affect attitudes toward nonmarital fertility is unclear, however. Cultural conservatives from Dan Quayle onwards (Carter 1992) have argued that celebrities’ nontraditional lifestyles contribute to an erosion of traditional family values, but others argue that “the popularity of celebrity weddings and reality television shows such as *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* attest to marriage’s enduring appeal” (McClintock 2015). Whether celebrities are trendsetters, trend-followers, or even trend-laggards in terms of nonmarital fertility thus remains an open question.
Research Question and Approach

This paper seeks to test whether celebrities are societal trendsetters with respect to nonmarital fertility. As a first step, it explores whether the rise in celebrity nonmarital fertility preceded, coincided with, or succeeded the rise in the general population. Temporal precedence is not in itself proof of causality, of course, but it is a necessary precondition. If celebrities are found to be “early adopters” of nonmarital fertility, then I will explore additional sources of data permitting stronger causal claims. (Kearney and Levine (forthcoming), for example, use data from Google Trends, Twitter, and Nielsen ratings to link geographic differences in viewership of 16 and Pregnant with differences in teenage birth rates. A similar strategy could be explored for this project.) A finding that celebrities merely follow population trends, or lag in adopting them, would also be interesting, however, as it undermines arguments that celebrity culture damages traditional family values. Moreover, even if nonmarital fertility rates are not higher among celebrities, it is possible that cases of nonmarital fertility are presented in particularly attractive (or at least non-problematic) light in the case of celebrities (Cramer 2002). Qualitative analyses of celebrity news stories will address this possibility.

Data and Methods

Birth data from the National Vital Statistics System of the National Center for Health Statistics from 1974 to 2013 (the most recent year currently available) will be used to calculate general as well as race- and education-specific nonmarital birth rates by calendar year.

These will be compared with data obtained from close coding of 40 years’ worth of covers of People magazine, from its initial issue in March 1974 through the end of 2014. (Only covers were coded, with the reasoning that information on the cover is most likely to constitute what comes to be general public knowledge, rather than knowledge specific to fans.) I coded all cover stories presenting celebrity’s pregnancies, births/babies, and adoptions for variables including parents’ birth year, race/ethnicity, highest level of education, and relationship status (including dating, engaged, and married). Stories were linked by parents’ names such that changes in relationship status (e.g., marriage, break-up, or divorce) during or soon after a pregnancy could be identified. At the time of this writing, all coding is complete, and most variables have been cleaned and prepared. A total of 384 stories about celebrity fertility were found.
Graphs of celebrity vs. general population patterns, broken down by demographic subgroup, will provide an initial sense of the relative timing of the rise in nonmarital fertility in both groups. As mentioned earlier, additional more formal analyses will be explored if warranted. Also, qualitative analyses of *People* covers will identify changes in presentation of celebrity nonmarital fertility: were such stories framed as scandalous, normal, progressive, etc.?

*Initial Findings*

Figure 1 shows the percentage of births (or in the case of celebrities, pregnancies, births, or adoptions) to unmarried women in the general population and on the cover of *People* magazine. (Due to time limitations, the present U.S. data come from a recent National Vital Statistics Report (Martin et al. 2015), rather than from own analyses; hence the start date of 1980 rather than 1974. I will likely exclude celebrity adoption information in my final analyses.)

For much of the period shown in this graph, nonmarital fertility rates among celebrities are in fact lower than those for the general population. However, it is worth noting the U.S. data includes all racial/ethnic and educational groups. In contrast, the celebrity mothers shown on *People*’s cover are 93.33% non-Hispanic white, and the celebrity fathers are 91.41% non-Hispanic white. A more meaningful comparison would thus be between white celebrity and non-celebrity parents. I look forward to presenting this and other findings at PAA.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of births to unmarried women, in the general population and on the cover of *People* magazine, 1980-2013.
Works cited