Chapter 3
Sociological Perspectives on Parenting Stress: How Social Structure and Culture Shape Parental Strain and the Well-Being of Parents and Children

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Introduction

The parent-child relationship is perhaps the most central and enduring tie for most adults and as such, parenting carries with it enormous emotional weight (Pearlin, 1983). Raising children involves both challenges and joys over many years (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). When burdens overweigh rewards of parenting, mothers and fathers may feel it difficult to carry on within this key social role and they may experience what researchers commonly call parenting stress (Deater-Deckard, 2004). Describing and explaining social patterns of exposure to stressors (or strains) and their consequences for mental health among parents are primary goals in sociological studies of parenting stress (Pearlin, 1989). Research within this discipline centers on understanding the social origins of parenting stress, more specifically, how stressors experienced by individual parents—parental strains—are shaped by parents' locations in the structured arrangements of statuses and roles in society (Pearlin, 1989) and the cultural ideologies or larger belief systems about parenting (Milkie & Denny, 2014). Sociologists thus investigate gradations in levels and types of parental strains, the moderating resources parents may have in order to help buffer those strains, and ultimately the mental health of parents, each of which are influenced by social loca-

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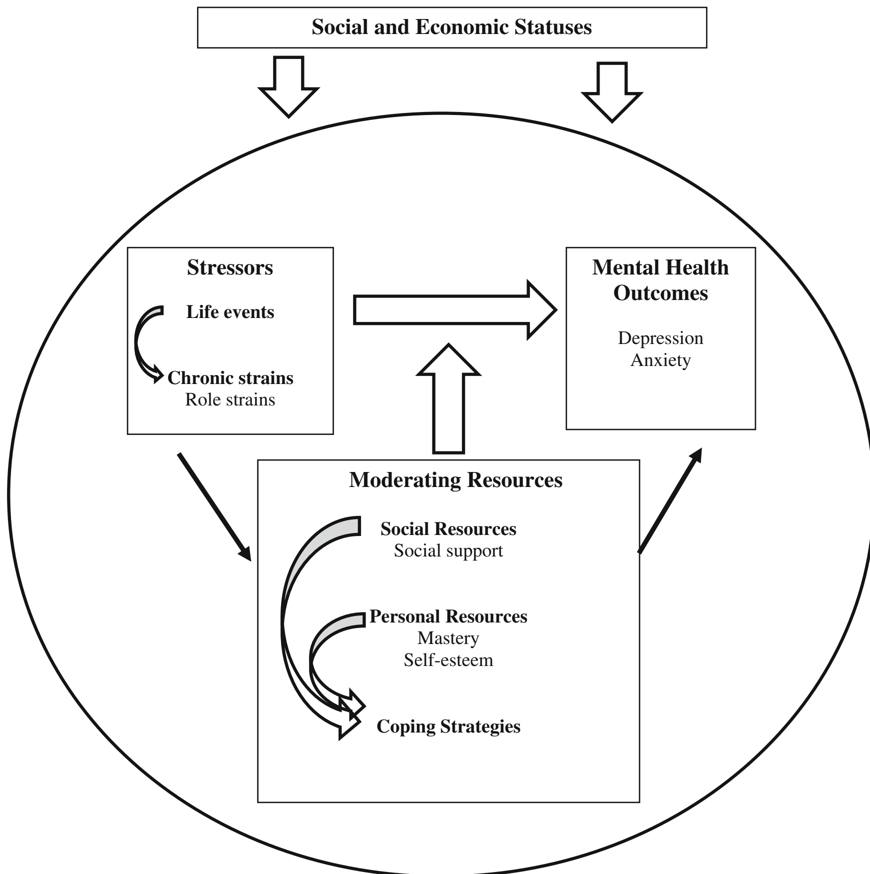
tions or social groups to which parents belong (Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Pearlin, 1989). Social groups that are important to examine among parents include, but are not limited to, social class, race-ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Findings of sociological studies inform policy-makers about the current reality of parents' needs that are specific to different social groups, and social policies are able to shape the context of parenting in important ways. For example, studies show that the negative association between parenthood and life satisfaction or depression is weaker in countries with better state supports for parents to raise children (e.g., Sweden and Denmark) than in countries with less support (e.g., the USA) (Glass, Simon, & Andersson, 2016; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011).

In this chapter, we highlight key features of *sociological* approaches to understanding sources, mechanisms, and manifestation of stress among parents, the advantages of these approaches, and future research directions. Other chapters in this volume expand this discussion by addressing research on the link between parenting stress and child development more directly. In the service of our own goals, we first discuss major theoretical frameworks and research methods used by sociologists, including unique ways in which those in the field investigate, conceptualize, and measure stressors that parents experience in a rapidly changing society. Then, we discuss theoretical perspectives and empirical work that help to explain the variation in levels and types of parenting stress across major social groups and institutions. We also discuss how disparities in availability of moderating resources lead to differential vulnerability to parenting stress across social groups. We touch on two other ways through which sociologists examine how the parenting role influences adults' well-being: comparisons between parents and non-parents and cross-national comparisons. We end this chapter by discussing future directions in parenting stress research.

How Sociologists Study Parenting Stress

Theoretical Frameworks and Research Methods

A major sociological perspective on parenting stress is the *stress process model*. This model is a conceptual and analytical framework that helps to explain socially patterned distributions of strains and mental health (Pearlin, 1989, 1999; Pearlin & Bierman, 2013; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981). The stress process model draws on the theories of human stress and coping in psychology (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) as well as the social structure and personality perspective in sociological social psychology (House, 1981). Pearlin (1989, 1999) argues that stress is an overall process with three central components: sources of stress (i.e., stressors or strains), moderating resources (e.g., supports and coping mechanisms), and manifestation or outcomes of stress (i.e., mental health). As Fig. 1.1 shows, the stress process model shows how stressors link to negative mental health outcomes. Notably, the word "stress" is often ambiguous in the



Based on Pearlin et al. (1981), Pearlin (1989)

Fig. 3.1 Stress process model

literature and can impede conceptual advancement. Its use sometimes conflates independent variables (i.e., stressors) with dependent variables or outcomes of stressors (i.e., mental health), such as depression, anxiety, anger, or substance use. Thus, sociologists tend to use phrases such as “stressors parents experience” or “parental strains” to refer to what is typically called parenting stress elsewhere.

Of particular interest to sociologists is the nature and the origins of stressors (Pearlin, 1989). Stressors appear in the form of life events, daily hassles, and role strains (Deater-Deckard 2004; Wheaton, Young, Montazer, & Stuart-Lahman, 2013). Sociologists are especially interested in role strains given that social roles tie people to major social institutions. Parental role strain refers to the enduring hardships, challenges, and conflicts or other problems that parents come to experience in their daily lives (Pearlin, 1983). The central idea is that normal aspects of individuals’ experiences

in the parenting role can have consequences for parents' mental health—which has important implications for child's well-being (see also Chap. 12 by Havighurst & Kehoe in this volume). Parental role strain involves multiple dimensions, including feeling overwhelmed or trapped by one's level of responsibilities, feeling frustrated by children's behaviors in comparison with parent's expectations, and feeling strained by the parent–child relationship (Pearlin, 1983, 1989). Pearlin (1989) identifies several general aspects of role strain, including role overload, role captivity, and interpersonal conflict. *Role overload* involves the extent to which the amount of demand exceeds the individual's capacity. To measure role overload, sociologists ask people about their subjective feelings of being overwhelmed (e.g., "Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be."). Sociologists also use objective measures of high demands of parenting, such as the number of children in the household, child illness, or single parenthood (e.g., Simon, 1992) as a way of approaching role overload. *Role captivity* refers to the extent to which individuals feel unwilling to fulfill their parenting role(s). Sociologists ask people about their feelings of being trapped by responsibilities as a parent, or having no time for themselves because of children, not being able to spend their time the way they want to (e.g., Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011). This concept may be similar to "parenting distress" in Abidin's (2012) parenting stress index. *Parent–child relationship quality*—or interpersonal conflict—(Pearlin, 1983) may be equivalent to the "parent-child dysfunction interaction scale" in Abidin's (2012) classification. The quality of the parent–child relationship plays a strong role in influencing parents' mental health (Milkie et al. 2008; Nomaguchi, 2012a; Umberson, 1992; Umberson & Gove, 1989; Ward, 2008). *Inter-role conflict*, especially difficulties in balancing paid work and parenting responsibilities, is a key challenge for today's parents in North America (Bianchi & Milkie 2010; Milkie, Kendig, Nomaguchi, & Denny, 2010; Nomaguchi, 2009). Besides direct parenting strain in the form of overload, captivity, and conflict within and across roles, being a parent (versus not) creates additional strains, such as greater workload in the home, significant financial obligations, conflicts with partners, and time strains, that may result in poorer mental health.

A major research method in sociological studies is the use of population-based surveys, which is quite different from many psychological studies of parents that may include clinical samples. Sociologists typically use a representative sample of a large-scale population, largely because the purpose of sociological studies is, as discussed earlier, to look for social patterns in the levels of strains and mental health experienced by parents. In past decades, a series of longitudinal national surveys have collected information regarding parenting stress, such as the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD), the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (FFCWS), the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), and the Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID-CDS). These data sets typically include three to five question items that are derived from the well-known Abidin's (2012) parenting stress index.

Other major methods of sociological research are observing the natural settings of parents' lives (ethnographies) and conducting in-depth interviews (e.g., Coles, 2009; Dow, 2016; Hays, 1996; Nelson, 2010). Studies using these qualitative

methods can reveal nuanced sources and processes of parenting stress. Moreover, qualitative studies are useful in finding emerging issues that serve as new sources of strain experienced by parents. This is especially important given the rapid pace of changing economic, family, or cultural circumstances of parenting in contemporary USA and other societies, as we discuss below. Measuring cultural changes in surveys is challenging. Content analysis of books (Hays, 1996), magazines (Denny, Brewton-Tiayon, Lykke, & Milkie, 2014; Milkie & Denny, 2014; Rutherford, 2011), and other documents over time, coupled with ethnographic studies and in-depth interviews with parents today, has been used to analyze changes in socially expected parenting practices.

Social Change and the Changing Nature and Sources of Parental Strain

In addition to using conventional concepts and measures of parental strain (briefly discussed above), sociologists strive to identify new types of challenges (i.e., stressors) that parents in contemporary society face. A life course perspective (Elder, 1999) argues that the levels and the types of challenges and rewards of parenting change across different historical times. This is in part because of economic changes that lead to increases or decreases in available material or social resources that parents can invest in parenting (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Types of demands and rewards of parenting also vary by historical time because of changes in parenting values (Alwin, 1989; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2016). As Goode (1960) notes, parental role strain involves individuals' subjective perception that they are unable to meet *socially expected* demands of the parenting role. What parents are expected to do for children and children's place in the world changes over time as economic circumstances and parenting values shift (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Hays, 1996). In this section, we discuss examples of major social changes that have led to changes in stressors that parents may experience.

First, the increase in mothers' labor force participation has led many parents, particularly mothers, to experience an additional source of strain: arranging quality childcare. Research shows that difficulty in arranging childcare is a major stressor that has consequences for parents' mental health (Bird, 1997; Ross & Mirowsky, 1988). These research findings have important policy implications in the USA, which suggest that it is critical to increase the availability of affordable, quality childcare as well as employees' ability to take family leaves and to have control over their work schedules. Although research and policy discussions tend to focus on childcare problems during early childhood, Kurz's (2000, 2006) qualitative studies find that how to supervise children after school is in fact a central concern among employed parents with older children. Childcare arrangements are complex, change frequently over the seasons of the year and as children grow, and are often different for siblings in the same family (Kurz, 2000). In general, control over their

work schedules—control over the timing of their work, the number of hours they work, and the location of their work—allows parents to reduce work–family conflict (Kelly et al., 2014), although as discussed in the next section, the effects of flexible work schedules on work–family conflict and mental health depend on occupational status.

Second, since the late 1980s, US parenting culture has increasingly emphasized parents' close involvement in children's day-to-day lives, which has created the norms of "intensive mothering" and "involved fathering" (Hays, 1996; Milkie & Denny, 2014). Spending time with children has become a central perceived requirement of a being a "good" parent. Intensive mothering and involved fathering ideology has created high standards regarding the adequate amount of time parents "ought to" spend with their children, which may clash with the ideal of breadwinning for fathers and may be considered "never enough" for mothers. Using data from the National Survey of Parents (NSP), the 2010 General Social Survey (GSS), and the National Study of Changing Workforce (NSCW), we have found that a majority of mothers and fathers report feeling that they spend too little time with their children (Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004; Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005). Time strains with children appear to be a stressor in the parenting role (Milkie, Nomaguchi, & Schieman, 2016). Full-time employed mothers with young children report always feeling rushed (Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi, 2009).

Intensive mothering ideology is linked to a world that feels increasingly unsafe and less predictable due to economic, job and relationship insecurities and few social safety nets (Milkie & Warner, 2014; Villalobos, 2014). Milkie and Warner (2014) argue that mothers increasingly feel pressure to work to "safeguard" children's futures in a world where social programs are weak. Middle-class parents push children more to work hard toward academic achievement in school and at developing their unique talents through extra-curricular activities (Lareau, 2003; Putnam, 2015). The idealization of mothers as sole champion of children perpetuates an individualistic approach to parenting and places enormous pressures on mothers to protect children from harms and create "successful" children (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Nelson, 2010; Villalobos, 2014). When children are not succeeding, parents' own well-being suffers. For example, adult children having problems at their workplaces, in marriage and romantic partnerships, or with the law is a powerful source of parental strain among older adults (Greenfield & Marks, 2006; Milkie et al., 2008; Pillemer, & Suitor, 1991; Spitze, Logan, Deane, & Zerger, 1994). For mothers with minor children, Milkie and colleagues (2010) found that when employed parents perceive that their children are not doing well, they feel imbalanced. More research is needed to investigate how parents' perceptions as to how their children who are minors are succeeding (e.g., with peers, with teachers, and with school work) may influence parental strain.

Third, another trend in the USA that has implications for parental strain and the well-being of parents and children is the increase in incarceration rates in the past several decades, in part as a policy response to the "war on drugs" (Carson & Golinelli, 2013). The majority of inmates have children (Glaze & Maruschak,

2008). Researchers have begun investigating the consequences of incarceration for parental strains and mental health. Parents who have been incarcerated face great challenges in providing their children with financial or emotional support (Swisher & Waller, 2008). Incarceration of a partner also leads to increases in financial, instrumental, and emotional burdens in parenting (Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012). In addition, incarceration often leads to relationship dissolution and new partnerships (Turney & Wildeman, 2013), which creates family complexity that has a range of challenges in parenting as we discuss below. Fewer studies have examined the question as to how (adult) children's arrest, detention, or incarceration relates to parents' stress. Children's incarceration brings a lot of challenges to parents, including financial difficulty to pay legal fees, travel to a prison to visit their children, keeping close contact with their children, and taking care of grandchildren (Green, Ensminger, Robertson, & Juon, 2006). Because incarceration has become part of the life course of many people in low-income families, research should not ignore the role of incarceration in influencing parental strain and child's well-being.

In sum, from a sociological point of view, stressful experiences in parenting may derive from structural arrangements and its changes, cultural ideology and its shifts, and social policies (or lack thereof). These structural, cultural and policy factors are embedded in key social institutions such as the economy, the criminal justice system, and the workplace. Sociologists strive to address new sources of parental strain that are often a product of larger social changes.

Parental Strain: Variation Across Social Groups

Strain arises from certain experiences that individuals encounter repeatedly, which are often deeply rooted in social structural contexts and individuals' locations within such contexts (Pearlin, 1989). Sociological research is concerned with how parental strain is unevenly distributed across major indicators of stratification within society (Pearlin, 1989; Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). In this section, we discuss variations in parental strain by some of such major indicators, including social class, race-ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, and child's life stage.

Social Class—Education, Employment, and Occupation

Financial strain is a key factor that explains why parents raising children report poorer mental health and unhappiness compared with non-parents (Bird, 1997; Pollmann-Schult, 2014). Parents who do not earn a sufficient income, who are unable to secure a home, food, and health insurance, tend to suffer from high parental strain and poorer mental health. In this chapter, however, we do not focus

on poverty as other chapters have extensive discussions on it (Cassells & Evans; Finegood & Blair in this volume). We discuss other indicators of social class: education, employment, and occupation.

In general, lower socio-economic status (SES) is related to more stressors (Pearlin, 1999). Yet how education is related to parental strain level depends on the arena of parenting strains examined (Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011). More education may reflect higher levels of material, social, and psychological resources that mothers can use to deal with or buffer stressors (Ross & Van Willigen, 1997). Adults with a higher level of education are more likely to be able to postpone their childbearing until they are settled with financial goals and careers (Cherlin, 2010). Education is related to intended childbearing (Musick, England, Edgington, & Kangas, 2009), and intended births are associated with less depression among fathers and more happiness among mothers (Su, 2012). However, more education is often associated with more demands or expectations for parents to invest in childrearing (Lareau, 2003; Nelson, 2010; Putnam, 2015). Nelson (2010) called today's parenting among the professional middle class "out of control" in that mothers with teenagers are supposed to observe, discuss, and negotiate a range of activities in their children's daily lives. Based on her in-depth interviews, Nelson found that the professional-middle-class mothers are more likely than working-class mothers to doubt themselves and worry a lot about consequences of their parenting for their children's future. In addition, mothers with a higher level of education are more likely to have greater career demands, which increase work–family conflict (Schieman & Glavin, 2011). Using data from SECCYD, Nomaguchi and Brown (2011) found that mothers with college degrees reported more role captivity (e.g., feeling trapped), whereas mothers who did not have college education reported more parenting anxiety (e.g., worried about their children's safety and their parenting). These findings suggest that it is important to investigate how differential SES is linked to different types of parental strain.

Typically, having a paid job is negatively related to parental strain for both fathers and mothers (Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011; Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016), perhaps because it increases material, social, and psychological resources for parents. Job loss and unemployment, especially fathers' unemployment, are related to more parental strains for both mothers and fathers (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). Yet, employment could become a source of parental strain depending on its characteristics. For example, long work hours is a strong predictor of parents' senses of time deficits with children (Milkie et al., 2004). An inflexible schedule is also positively related to parental strain for both fathers and mothers (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016). This makes sense, given that many parents, mostly mothers, change their work hours to meet their children's needs (Bianchi, 2011; Gerstel & Clawson, 2015; Nomaguchi & Fettro, 2016). Non-standard work schedules—e.g., working in the evening, at night, or rotating shifts—bring depression and strain to the mother–father relationship (Presser, 2000; Strazdins, Clements, Korda, Broom, & D'Souza, 2006), and, as we will see below, partner problems are related to parental strain (Deater-Deckard, 2004; Nomaguchi, Johnson, Minter, & Aldrich, 2017).

Types of issues parents face in balancing work and family life vary markedly across occupations. In non-professional positions, for example, in the service industry, work schedules are increasingly unpredictable (Gerstel & Clawson, 2015). With short notice, employees are told to stay at work late or come to work early; they are sent home between shifts or their shifts are cancelled because there are not enough customers. Unpredictability in work schedules disrupt parents' and children's daily routine and create challenges with arrangements of childcare. In professional positions, control over one's schedule along with the responsibility for overseeing others may create more interference with family, as today's jobs and technologies may be more likely to spill over into home life (Schieman, Milkie & Glavin, 2009). Future research should investigate how specific occupations and workplace dynamics influence differences in levels of parental strain.

Race-Ethnicity and Nativity

Sociologists have long been interested in Black-White disparities in adult and child's well-being (Brown, Donato, Laske, & Duncan, 2013). More recently, the increase in immigration from Asia and Latin America has expanded the racial–ethnic diversity of US families (Grieco, 2010). Although sociological stress research suggests that in general racial–ethnic minorities are more likely to be exposed to various kinds of stressors than whites, little research has examined variation in parental strain by racial–ethnic group.

One explanation for variations in parenting experiences by race-ethnicity is disparities in structural resources (Nomaguchi & House, 2013). There are marked differences in structural factors across racial–ethnic groups in the USA. Black and Latino mothers are more likely than White and Asian mothers to be young, be single, have more children, and have lower family income (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010), all of which reflect more burdens of parenting and lower levels of resources that mothers can use to deal with burdens, and thus are positively related to parental strain (Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011). Another explanation is racial–ethnic differences in parenting values (Nomaguchi & House, 2013). Prior research on parental strain has shown that mothers with an authoritarian parenting style are more likely than mothers with an authoritative parenting style to report frustration and conflict with their children (Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011). Blacks, Latinos, and Asians are more likely than Whites to use an authoritarian style of parenting, which is less tolerant of children's disrespectful behaviors and more likely to expect obedience and loyalty to parents and elders (Chao & Kanatsu, 2008; Dixon, Brooks-Gunn, & Graber, 2008). Thus, observed racial–ethnic differences in parental strain may be explained (in part) by differences in structural factors and parenting values.

One overlooked but critical note is that racial–ethnic variations are often compounded by differences in nativity. Using longitudinal data from the 1998–99 ECLS-K, Nomaguchi and House (2013) found that US-born Hispanics and

US-born Asians differed little from US-born Whites in structural factors, parenting values, and parental strain. This is not surprising given that Hispanic and Asian immigrants are likely to assimilate into the mainstream White culture, as seen in their high rates of intermarriage with Whites (Qian & Lichter, 2011). In their children's kindergarten year, foreign-born Hispanic mothers reported more parental strain than US-born White mothers because of structural factors, such as single parenthood and lower family income. Foreign-born Asian-American mothers reported more parental strain than US-born White mothers because of more authoritarian parenting values. US-born Black mothers, but not foreign-born Black mothers, reported more parental strain than US-born White mothers. From kindergarten to third grade years, only Black mothers experienced an increase in parental strain and their higher level of parental strain than other mothers was not explained by structural factors or parenting values (Nomaguchi & House, 2013).

In order to better understand these patterns, we need more research to investigate variations across racial–ethnic groups *and* nativity status in terms of specific concerns regarding raising children. Qualitative studies have illustrated that, for African-American parents, as children move from early childhood into school age, how to protect their children—especially boys—from discrimination may be a constant burden (Blum, 2015; Lareau, 2003; Putnam, 2015). Warner (2010) found that African-American parents report complex layers of safeguarding necessary to ensure the emotional health of their children in a racist world. Dow (2016) also reported that raising African-American boys, even in middle-class contexts, involves a constant pressure for mothers to protect their children from the reality that their sons are seen as dangerous and thus are likely to be subjected to harsher discipline in school and on the street. In contrast, for Asian immigrant parents, given the strong emphasis on academic achievement in the community, a primary concern may center on their children's academic success (Lee & Zhou, 2013). Further, Nomaguchi and House (2013) found that American Indian mothers report less parental strain than other mothers despite having structural disadvantages and authoritarian parenting values. Cultural differences, such as a closer kinship network and a more communal approach to childrearing (MacPhee, Fritz, & Miller-Heyl, 1996), may explain the lower level of parental strain among American Indian mothers. These studies suggest that besides common stressors, such as lack of material resources, there may be stressors that are specific to certain racial–ethnic groups due to their unique locations in a given society.

Gender and Sexual Orientation

In sociological research, gender is defined as a basic aspect of structure and culture in which "the patterning of difference and domination [is]… integral to many social processes" (Acker, 1992, p. 565). Despite expansion in women's economic roles and changes in American's attitudes about gender toward more egalitarianism, parenting remains gendered (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Milkie, Bianchi,

Mattingly, & Robinson, 2002) in terms of behaviors and cultural beliefs. Mothers are much more likely than fathers to take the primary responsibility for caring for their children (Bianchi, Robinson & Milkie, 2006). Additionally, the belief that mothers are better suited to the caregiving role than fathers appears to be persistent in the USA and other nations (Doucet, 2006), although some countries such as Sweden have striven to change this gendered belief (Johansson & Klinth, 2007). At the same time, ideal fatherhood increasingly emphasizes nurturing and involved fathers (Lamb, 2000) and fathers have increased their time in the care of children in many countries (Bianchi et al., 2006).

Despite the primary role that gender plays in influencing the levels and types of parental strain that parents experience, empirical studies that focus on gender differences in strains are scarce. National surveys often ask only one "primary" parent, which in the majority of cases are mothers, and thus many studies do not examine fathers. Very little research examines parenting stress for single fathers compared to that for single mothers. Using data from the FFCWS, which collected information regarding parental strains from both mothers and fathers, Nomaguchi and Johnson (2016) found more gender similarities than differences in the role of employment characteristics in influencing parental strain among parents with preschool children —with unemployment and inflexible work schedules being major characteristics that are related to higher levels of parental strain. In contrast, using data from the National Survey of Parents, Milkie and colleagues (2010) found gender differences in the associations between types of time spent with children and employed parents' sense of work–family balance. This is interesting, given that work–family balance is a good indicator of lower stressors for employed parents, in that interactive "quality" time is associated with mothers' feelings of balance more than fathers'. We strongly urge researchers to collect information regarding parenting stressors and mental health outcomes from both mothers and fathers.

Parents' sexual orientation is another key status that is of emerging research interest. Gays or lesbians raising children may experience stressors related to being a discriminated against sexual minority—this "minority" stress may link to their parenting experiences and their mental health (LeBlanc, Frost & Wight, 2015). Some of the challenges for gay or lesbian parents are related to different ways through which they become parents, such as through artificial insemination, surrogacy, adoption, and/or past heterosexual relationships (Manning, Fettro, & Lamid, 2014; Meezan & Rauch, 2005). In multiple ways, gay and lesbian parents may have to overcome various difficulties like discrimination or stigma in raising children that heterosexual parents may not experience. In addition, prior research on gay and lesbian parents, which mostly focused on the well-being of children, identifies various methodological challenges in studying same-sex parents, including the difficulty in obtaining a representative sample with a large enough sample size, measuring sexual orientation, and using an adequate comparison group (Carpenter & Gates, 2008; Manning et al., 2014; Meezan & Rauch, 2005; Patterson, 2006). Future studies need careful research designs to understand how the links among parenting strains, supports and mental health may depend upon sexual orientation.

Marriage and Romantic Partnerships

Marriage and romantic partnerships play an important role in influencing parental strain and mental health (Umberson, Pudovska, & Reczek, 2010). There have been notable changes in romantic partnerships in the past several decades in the USA and other Western countries (Cherlin, 2010). A relatively larger share of couples cohabitate rather than marry compared to the past. In the 2011 National Study of Family Growth (NSFG), 65% of US women aged 19–44 reported that they had ever cohabited (Manning & Stykes, 2015). And having children within a cohabiting union is increasingly common. The share of births to cohabiting women in the USA increased from 6% in the early 1980s to 25% in 2009–2013 (Manning, Brown, & Stykes, 2015). Many of these cohabiting unions do not last long. Data from the 2006–2010 NSFG showed that 40% of women's first cohabitations ended in marriage and 27% ended in dissolution, whereas 32% remained cohabiting within the three years after union formation (Copen, Daniels, & Mosher, 2013). Adults who dissolved their cohabiting unions as well as those who divorced typically recouple or remarry. In 2013, 40% of all marriages were remarriages (Lewis, Jamie, Rose, & Kreider, 2015) and close to half (46%) of adults who remarry have children from a previous marriage or relationship. Previously married adults are likely to choose to cohabitate before they remarry. In 2013, 47% of cohabiting adults were previously married (Manning, 2015). These changes in romantic partnerships may make parenting more complex. Many studies investigate how these diverse and increasingly complex mother–father relationship contexts influence child's well-being, but fewer investigate how these changes influence parental strain.

The increase in cohabitation has led to a question as to differences in parental strain between married and cohabiting parents. Using the 1999 National Survey of American Families, Brown (2004) showed that cohabitating parents were more likely to report a higher level of parental strain than married parents at the descriptive level. Using the FFCWS, Gibson-Davis (2008) found that at the bivariate level, mothers without a partner and mothers cohabiting with a new partner (i.e., their children's stepfather) reported more parental strain than mothers who live with their children's fathers. Cohabiting stepfathers reported more parental strain than fathers who are married to the mother of their children and lived with them. One question is to what extent these associations are due to what sociologists call a "selection effect." That is, men who become cohabiting stepparents are less advantaged in many ways compared to those who remain married to their children's mother or those who remarry their stepchildren's mother, including having less education and lower income (Hofferth, 2006). These antecedent differences may shape the differences in parenting stress between cohabiting stepfathers and residential biological fathers or married stepparents. Gibson-Davis (2008) used fixed-effects models, which control for unobserved antecedent characteristics that might be related to step-parenthood, cohabitation, and parental strain, and found that there was little difference in parental strain levels by family structure except that cohabiting stepfathers reported less parental strain than biological married

fathers. This may be because cohabiting stepfathers assume fewer parenting responsibilities—they may be less worried about financial or emotional aspects of raising stepchildren, particularly if there is a biological father who remains connected to those children. As cohabitation becomes more common in the USA and a "legitimate" form of parental union, such differences in parenting stress between cohabiting and married (step)parents may diminish (Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015).

The increase in cohabitation, which is a less stable form of union, has led to an increase in the percentage of mothers and fathers who experience more than one partnership dissolution and have children from multiple partners (Guzzo, 2014). This "multiple partner fertility" (MPF) often leads to complex co-parenting arrangements across multiple biological and social parents, which presumably leads to more strains and poorer mental health. Again, because MPF is far more likely to be experienced by economically and socially disadvantaged adults than those who are more advantaged (Guzzo, 2014), both MPF, including family complexity that MPF creates, and poorer mental health are results of such disadvantages (Turney & Carlson, 2011).

At the descriptive level, single mothers report higher parental strain than partnered mothers (Avison, Ali, & Walters, 2007). Explanations for this discrepancy focus on two different perspectives—resource versus crisis models (Amato, 2010; Williams, 2003). The resource model contends that single mothers are more likely than partnered mothers to have fewer economic resources and weaker social support, which leads to greater financial strain, overload, and work–family conflict (Nomaguchi, 2012b). Some studies support this perspective, showing that differences in parental strain by partnership status were no longer significant once SES was controlled for (Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011; Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016). Other studies, however, show that single motherhood is related to more parental strain even after controlling for SES (Nomaguchi & House, 2013). The crisis model posits that divorce or the termination of a relationship is a stressful event, but most people are able to adjust after a while. Using longitudinal data from the FFCWS, a couple of studies (Cooper et al., 2009; Halpern-Meekin & Turney, 2016) found support for the crisis model, suggesting that longitudinal examination is critical in understanding the link between single parenthood and parental strain.

Residency status with children is important for understanding parental strain. Non-resident parents tend to feel more, not less, parental strain and poorer mental health than resident parents, perhaps because they face many constraints to support or spend time with their children and thus they feel they are not adequate as a parent (Evenson & Simon, 2005; Gibson-Davis, 2008; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). Increasingly, post-divorce arrangements involve joint custody and co-parenting, which has led to an increasing diversity in living arrangements among separated parents and their children (Bakker & Karsten, 2013). Yet, we do not know much about how joint custody arrangements, which may involve coordination of childcare responsibilities and children's residential transitions between two households, influence parental strain. Based on in-depth interviews with formerly married or cohabiting parents in the Netherlands, Bakker and Karsten (2013) found that

mothers with a joint custody arrangement, in which their children alternate living between parents, experience fewer constraints in combining work, childcare, and leisure. Also using Dutch data, van der Heijden, Poortman, and Van der Lippe (2016) report that for mothers, a joint custody arrangement is related to less time pressure than a sole custody (i.e., their children live mostly with them) arrangement.

The quality of the mother–father relationship plays a primary role in influencing parental strain (Umberson et al., 2010). The concepts and measures that capture relationship quality vary, including emotional support, conflict, intimate partner violence, and cooperative co-parenting (Crnic & Ross in this volume; Nomaguchi, Brown, & Leyman, 2015; Nomaguchi, Johnson, Minter, & Aldrich, 2017). To better understand how partners affect each other's stress and mental health, it is important to examine how fathers' contributions to childcare influence mothers' parental strain. Using data from the FFCWS, Nomaguchi, Brown, and Leyman (2015) found that two aspects of fathers' participation in parenting—engagement with children and participation in child-related chores—were negatively related to maternal parental strain regardless of mother–father relationship statuses (i.e., married, cohabiting, dating, separated, and repartnered). Van der Heijden, Poortman, and Van der Lippe (2016), in the Dutch study mentioned earlier, reported that sole-resident mothers experienced less time pressure when their former partner saw their child more often. Thus, given that engagement with children is related to less parental strain levels for fathers (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016), there is a gain for both mothers and fathers when fathers participate more. As briefly discussed earlier, however, fathers often face challenges in spending time engaged with children in daily lives due to long work hours and inflexible work schedules (Fox, 2009; Gerstel & Clawson, 2015).

There are other changes in mother–father relationship contexts that may have important implications for parental strain. One trend toward diversity in romantic relationships is the increase in interracial marriage and romantic partnership (Qian & Lichter, 2011). Research that examines parental strain among interracial or interethnic couples is rare. Interracial or interethnic couples are more likely than same-race or same-ethnic couples to have different values in childbearing and other issues (Hohmann-Marriott, & Amato, 2008), which may add another layer of challenge to parenting. Finally, it is possible that factors that are salient to parental strain may vary across family structure, family type, and residential status. For partnered parents, fairness in the division of labor and the quality of partnership may be salient sources of parental strain, whereas for single parents, lower levels of social support both in the workplace and in the household may be more relevant (e.g., Nomaguchi, 2012b). Identifying specific stressors or needs of parents that differ across different family structures is critical in informing policy-makers about effective social policies that help parents raise their children.

Life Stage

Although researchers and the public tend to focus on early childhood as the period when parenting is most stressful, sociologists using a life course perspective argue that parental strain does not stop when children reach a certain age (Pearlin, 1983). Parenthood continues throughout the entire life course, and the emotional stakes of relationships with children are high even after children are far into adulthood (Milkie et al., 2008; Umberson, 1992). However, parents' specific concerns about children change as children get older. For parents of newborns, for example, sources of strain may have more to do with physical exhaustion, and the fears of making sure the baby is properly cared for (Fox 2009; LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981). Parents of school-aged children may be more concerned about misbehavior at school, failure to achieve acceptable grades, and relationships with friends. Moreover, parent–child relationship quality begins to decline as children move from preschool to school-age as well as from school-age to adolescence (Nomaguchi, 2012a). For parents with adolescents, there are many new forms of strain potentially introduced. For example, monitoring teenagers' behavior can be quite difficult, and the kinds of trouble that adolescents may encounter (e.g., experimenting with drugs and alcohol, sex, skipping school, law breaking) can have serious consequences (Lanctôt, Cernkovich, & Giordano, 2007). Negative events in youths' lives can have a long reach—even elderly parents whose adult children had trouble years back when those offspring were adolescents are more depressed than the elderly whose adult children had fewer problems as teens (Milkie, Norris, & Bierman, 2011). Recent studies have suggested that parents of young adults continue to be heavily involved ("helicopter parents") or are relied upon as a safety net when misfortunes such as job loss or relationship dissolution happen in their children's lives (Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2013; LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). For aging parents, major sources of potential stressors include whether their adult children are economically independent, staying clear of legal issues, and have strong social support (e.g., Greenfield & Marks, 2006). Poorer relationship quality with adult children—conflict, unpleasant treatments, or ambivalence—is another key stressor for aging parents (Fingerman et al., 2008; Milkie et al., 2008; Umberson 1992). These studies indicate that children in each life stage may create unique stressors for parents.

Moderators in the Stress Process

As Pearlin (1989) noted, not all parents who are exposed to the same level of stressors show manifestations of stress, such as increased depression, anxiety, or anger. One reason for such differential vulnerability to stressors is differential distributions of coping resources. Although research typically focuses on social support, mastery, and individual problem-solving skills as coping resources

(Pearlin, 1999), coping resources include other types, such as financial resources and family-friendly workplace policies. Here again, sociologists focus on unequal distributions of coping resources across social locations. In general, parents with better resources, such as a higher level of education, higher earnings, and wealth, are more likely than those with limited resources to be able to better cope with challenges. For example, Cooper and colleagues (2009) found that the link between family structure transitions and parental strain are less pronounced among college educated mothers compared to mothers without college degrees. When balancing work and family life, higher-SES mothers have better resources to do so, including control over work schedules, which are related to less work–family conflict (Kelly et al., 2014). Higher-SES mothers can reduce housework hours through hiring cleaning services and ordering dinner from restaurants. Lower-SES mothers have limited options—they tend to drop out of the labor force in response to their children's needs and problems, which may result in financial strain (Budig & Hodges, 2010; Damaske, 2011; Gerstel & Clawson, 2015). Although having children with disabilities is stressful for any parent (Neece & Chan, in this volume), whether parents are economically and socially advantaged make a difference. For example, parents with more education are more likely than those with less education to easily interact with health professionals and educators, and thus receive more satisfying care for their children, which is a key factor reducing stressfulness and anxiety among parents raising children with disabilities (Hogan, 2012). It is important to note that research underscores that the same levels of parental strain could have different implications for different social groups.

Another reason for differential vulnerability to stressors in the parenting role by social groups is differences in the salience of the parenting role due to cultural ideology and structural factors. As mentioned earlier, women are more likely than men to be assumed to take the primary responsibility for raising children in the USA. These gendered cultural expectations may lead women to be more vulnerable to parental strain than men. Time strain with children has implications for mothers and fathers (Milkie et al., 2016); however, it may be more relevant for mothers' well-being as Nomaguchi, Milkie and Bianchi (2005) found that for mothers, time strain with children is associated with worse well-being, whereas for fathers, time strain for oneself, which could reflect role captivity in the parenting role, is a more important factor for life satisfaction. Salience of the parenting role may vary by race-ethnicity, too. The parenting role may be more important relative to other social roles, such as employment and marriage, for Blacks than for Whites because Blacks are more likely than Whites to face greater barriers and fewer opportunities to succeed in other social roles (Lee, Peek, & Coward, 1998). Milkie, Bierman, and Schieman (2008) found that the association between negative events experienced by adult children and aging parents' depressive symptoms was more likely to be found among Black parents than White parents, and among mothers more than fathers. Note that disparities in salience of the parenting role across different social groups change as the structured arrangements in the larger society change. For example, as gender inequality in the workplace and the mainstream culture diminishes, the gender gap in the salience of the parenting role should be narrowed,

which may, in turn, lead to a narrowing gender gap in vulnerability to stressors in the parenting role.

Finally, the ability to mobilize care networks for children is a key resource, particularly in a culture which emphasizes individual or family responsibility rather than that of the larger community. Hansen (2005) found that some families were able to bolster their childrearing capacities by pulling in multiple hands to help care for their children, and creating interdependent networks to aid in their many responsibilities for their offspring. Small (2009) shows that social capital building for parents can be distinctly patterned by organizational practices that bring parents together (or do not). More research on how neighborhoods and social networks influence and may buffer parenting strain is crucial.

Other Key Factors in the Sociology of Parenting Stress

Comparisons Between Parents and Non-parents

Sociological studies on parenting stress and mental health have largely focused on the link between the parenting role and individuals' health and well-being (Umberson et al., 2010; Umberson, Thomeer, & Williams, 2013). Researchers investigate variations between parents and non-parents in various indicators such as depression (Evenson & Simon, 2005; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003), happiness or life satisfaction (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011; Pollmann-Schult, 2014), loneliness (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2002), and emotions such as anger and guilt (Glavin, Schieman, & Reid, 2011; Ross & Van Willigen, 1996). Explanations for such effects lie in differences between parents and non-parents in exposure to social stressors in major life domains—work, marriage, and leisure. Major stressors include financial strains, relationship strains, and time strains (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Pollmann-Schult, 2014). These studies conceptualize that the demands of parenting proliferate into other domains, such as work or marriage and romantic partnership, increase work stress or relationship stress, and in turn may lead to poorer mental health.

Comparisons with non-parents are useful because results can reveal the social arrangements that are lacking in supports for adults who take care of dependents. The type of "non-parent" researchers compared to parents is vital—are those considered "non-parents" people who already reared children who are no longer in the household (and thus an age control is necessary)?; are they step-parents and/or perhaps have children living elsewhere?; or are they those who never had biological or step-children (in which issues of desirability and intentions for having children should be considered) (Nomauchi & Milkie, 2003)? Research using careful comparisons of parents and non-parents shows that parents fare worse in mental health and well-being by some, but not all measures, and this varies by social status (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). In certain ways, parents may be better off, such as experiencing more meaning in life (Umberson et al., 2010).

To understand parents' well-being, it is important both to compare non-parents to parents and to expand our understanding of sources and mediators of stressors that parents experience uniquely and to greater extents or depths than non-parents. To better understand the mechanisms and variation by social contexts, it is important to examine specific forms of parental strain. One reason for focusing on more general mental health or well-being indicators, rather than parental strain, may be due to data limitations. Sociologists use national surveys that are designed to cover various issues and often include non-parents. Questions for everyone, not just parents, are more likely to be included in national surveys. We encourage researchers to include parental strain questions in ongoing large-scale data collections.

Cross-National Comparisons

Parenting experiences vary across different countries in part because the degree in which countries rely on individual family members to take care of the dependents—children and the elderly—varies. Several studies find cross-national variations in life satisfaction disparities by parental status (e.g., Aassve, Mencarini, & Sironi, 2015; Aassve, Goisis, & Sironi, 2012; Glass et al., 2016). Margolis and Myrskylä (2011) show that the link between the number of children and life satisfaction depends on life stage of the individuals and welfare regime of the county in which they live. Using data from the World Values Surveys (WVS), which include 86 countries, they found that overall the number of children is negatively related to happiness among those aged less than 30 years old, whereas it is positively related to happiness among those aged 40 or older. There is little association between the number of children and happiness among those aged 30–39. The negative association between the number of children and happiness among the youngest group is weakest in countries with high public support for families (e.g., Denmark and Sweden). The positive association between the number of children and happiness among the older age group is stronger in developing countries where support for the elderly depends mostly on the family. Similar patterns are found in a study by Aassve, Goisis, and Sironi (2012) that used the European Social Survey. Glass, Simon, and Andersson (2016) report that happiness disparities by parental status are larger for the USA than the other 21 OECD countries in part because of less generous policies such as subsidized childcare and paid leave. These studies indicate that institutional contexts in a larger society play a critical role in shaping the burdens and rewards of parenting.

In sum, the burden of being a parent is heavy. Parents must provide financially and socially for their children whereas, obviously, non-parents do not. They must provide enough monetary resources to invest in housing, clothing, food, health care, and so on, for these dependents, which can create financial strain, work overload, or both. While providing financially, they must figure out often complex childcare arrangements during work hours in the early years, and as children age, for

after-school hours and summertime for many years. Simultaneously, parents must have the time, stamina, and energy to establish and maintain close ties with children as they manage and shape parent–child time and the child's independent social activities. They must plan and meet challenges related to the child's well-being. Non-parents simply do not have these incredibly extensive obligations in raising the next generation and are thus freed from the many and varied strains inherent in the parent role. While the work of parenting is heavy, it can be greatly supported, although public and workplace monetary and social supports in some countries, including the USA, are quite thin.

Conclusions

Parents face a multitude of pressures and difficulties that arise and are often sustained over the many years that children develop from helpless infants to mature adults. A sociological perspective is unique in that it "zooms out" to assess the "big picture" affecting parents—the social and economic statuses, the wider social and cultural milieu in which parents live—such as local communities, ethnic cultures, and nations—and the social changes which create new and different strains for parents. Knowing these structural and cultural factors can explain much variation in which parents experience strains, and thus potentially poorer mental health. Besides common stressors in parenting such as overload, parent–child relationship strain, caregiving strain or role captivity, financial strain, and work-family conflict, contemporary parents may be facing new types of challenges that parents from previous generations have not experienced. In addition to what we discussed above, there are several important venues for future research in sociological perspectives on parenting stress that will help advance the field.

First, more conceptual advancement in the study of the stress of parenting and their families is vital. The concept of *stress proliferation* in the stress process model would be useful to purse for parenting scholars. For example, we know that low-income parents may face a wide range of stressors, such as difficulties in unemployment, financial strain, arranging childcare, work–family conflict, major traumas and adversities, a history of intimate partner violence, incarceration, single parenthood, and ambient stressors reflecting neighborhood environments. Yet, we know less about the mechanisms through which these stressors proliferate from one to another arena for different groups of parents, as well as from one generation of parents to the next. As Pearlin (1999) noted, it is important to identify primary—or initial—stressors that are likely to lead to secondary stressors to understand why some people are more vulnerable than others, who hold similar social statuses and roles, to the same sets of stressors.

Additionally, understanding the stress process that involves multiple family members is warranted. As Milkie has written elsewhere (2010), stressful experiences confronting parents and families may be unequally shared, with mothers perhaps taking responsibility more often for trying to address "family" or children's

problems as they arise. Examining how difficulties—large and small—such as financial setbacks, housing concerns, migration problems, and children's peer or health troubles come to be taken on as the burden of one parent, and how mothers and fathers may or may not share a sense of family togetherness or mastery in solving their problems may be fruitful venues for future research.

The poignant and profound moment that occurs when a mother or father holds a child for the first time signals that parenting is a life-long process. Life course scholars (Milkie et al., 2008; Umberson et al., 2010) contend that it is crucial to assess how parenting shapes life experiences and influences the well-being of adults over the life course. How different trajectories vary by the social statuses of parents is of central concern. For example, although many mothers experience disruptions of employment activities due to their children's schedules and needs, mothers with less education are more likely than mothers with a college degree to experience a greater number of disruptions, which is related to poorer health outcomes (Frech & Damaske, 2012). Avison (2010) urges researchers to investigate life course patterns of single mothers' exposures to a wide range of stressors in the broader scope of life span including their own childhood experiences.

Although studies tend to focus on strains and challenges, research suggests that parenthood also brings resources and facilitates adult's well-being. Sociological work assessing the contrasting costs and rewards of parenting can be expanded. For example, having children who are minors expands social networks with extended family members, other parents, and people who are engaged in carework such as childcare workers, teachers, and volunteers in the community (Gallagher & Gerstel, 2001; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003), although it may curtail social networks with adults without children (Munch, McPherson, & Smith-Lovin, 1997). Emotional gains from having children may include a sense of purpose, life meaning, responsibility, and direction in life (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Umberson & Gove, 1989). Better relationship quality with their children leads to better psychological well-being (Nomaguchi, 2012a, b; Umberson, 1992). Some quantitative studies have considered both costs and benefits of parenting (Gove & Underson, 1989; Nomaguchi & Brown, 2011; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Pollmann-Schult, 2014). Children with special needs may strain parents' marriages and sibling relationships, but they also make their families have more family-centered lives, eating meals, playing games, or watching television together (Hogan, 2012). We need more research to investigate under which conditions and in which cultures parenting produces more stressors than resources. Similarly, studies investigating potential new supports as well as new stressors that parents today experience, compared to those in the past, will expand the field.

In all, mothers and fathers produce vital public goods—healthy children—and parents need a great deal of support to accomplish the ongoing and often arduous work of raising children. Along the life course, many potential roadblocks to successful parenting arise, particularly for those in society with less advantaged statuses, and with fewer social and economic resources. National and workplace policies can help alleviate some stressors of parenting, through help in providing paid leaves, tax relief, high-quality childcare and schooling, health care, university

tuition support, and so on. Understanding the most important social factors supporting parents can go a long way in helping the multitudes of mothers and fathers on the front lines of the daily work of caring for the next generation of citizens.

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