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# Is an Empty Nest Best?: Coresidence With Adult Children and Parental Marital Quality Before and After the Great Recession

Eden M. Davis,<sup>1</sup> Kyungmin Kim,<sup>2</sup> and Karen L. Fingerman<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, The University of Texas at Austin.<sup>2</sup>Department of Gerontology, University of Massachusetts Boston.

Correspondence should be addressed to Eden M. Davis, MA, Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, The University of Texas at Austin, 108 E Dean Keeton St, Stop A2702, Austin, TX 78712-1248. E-mail: [eden.davis@utexas.edu](mailto:eden.davis@utexas.edu).

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## Abstract

**Objectives:** Since the Great Recession, the proportion of young adults living with their parents has risen steadily in the United States. Research on coresidence with adult children and parental marital quality is mixed, but marital quality may suffer if children coreside under certain circumstances. When coresidence signifies a deviation from normative expectations, it may be a source of stress in parents' marriages. Further, living with adult children who are suffering problems may be especially detrimental to parental marital quality.

**Method:** Middle-aged parents ( $N = 287$ ; mean age = 50.65) completed measures of marital quality, child problems, and coresidence at 2 time points, at the onset of the Great Recession in 2008 and again in 2013.

**Results:** Regression analyses estimating marital quality from coresidence status revealed that coresidence with a child was associated with lower parental marital quality in 2008, but not in 2013 (when it may be considered more normative to have adult children living in the home). Additional analyses showed living with a child who was suffering problems was associated with lower marital quality in 2013.

**Discussion:** These findings suggest that coresidence may be detrimental to marital quality, but perhaps only when coresidence is nonnormative or when coresidence co-occurs with child problems.

**Keywords:** Empty nest—Great Recession—Intergenerational coresidence—Marital quality

Since the Great Recession, the proportion of young adults living with their parents has risen steadily in the United States. Recent census data show that from 2007 to 2012, the percent of young adults aged 18–31 living in their parents' home rose from 32% to 36%, the highest share in more than forty years (Fry, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The length of time children reside at home and the conditions precipitating coresidence are highly variable (South & Lei, 2015), as are the effects of coresidence on family functioning.

Though coresidence with adult children is often temporary, it may strain parents' marital relationships (Bouchard,

2014). Yet, we know little about the effects of grown children who remain in the home or return to live with parents under different conditions. For example, in societies where it is normative for generations to coreside, the parties report enjoying coresidence (Newman & Aptekar, 2007). By contrast, when grown children reside with parents due to problems they are experiencing, the parents' well-being and marital quality may suffer (Greenfield & Marks, 2006).

Using a life course framework (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003), this study examined associations between coresidence with adult children and parental marital

quality in 2008 and again in 2013, before and after a major economic transition. This perspective allows us to consider the influence of coresidence within a broader context of an economic event that may affect life course trajectories. Additionally, one of the key tenets of a life course perspective is that of “linked lives,” which suggests that the developmental trajectories of parents and children overlap and mutually influence one another (Elder et al., 2003). In line with this idea, we also considered the implications of residing with children who are suffering problems, as this might be particularly harmful to parents’ marriages.

## Marital Quality and Coresidence With Adult Children

Family scholars have long been interested in determinants of marital quality over the life course. Some early cross-sectional research on marital quality suggested a U-shaped pattern, with highest marital quality in the earliest years of marriage, declines during childrearing years, and an upswing in marital quality when children leave the home (Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1996; Peterson, 1990; Rollins & Feldman, 1970). However, longitudinal studies of marital quality have reported inconsistent findings; most point to a decline in marital quality after the early years of marriage but report either stability or declines in marital quality in the middle and later years of marriage (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; C. O. Vaillant & G. E. Vaillant, 1993; Van Laningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Further, not all studies have considered parenting transitions as a key feature in marital quality trajectories (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005).

A few studies of the transition to an empty nest have found increased marital quality after children have left the home (Bouchard, 2014; Umberson et al., 2005). Specifically, studies have found marital satisfaction to be higher in the empty nest phase compared to the launching phase, when children are preparing to leave the home (Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008; Hagen & DeVries, 2004; White & Edwards, 1990) and these effects persisted after the children left the home (Gorchoff et al., 2008). Scholars have suggested that this increase in marital satisfaction was driven by an increased enjoyment of time with partners (Gorchoff et al., 2008) and decreased work-family conflict (Erickson, Martinengo, & Hill, 2010). Further, the transition to an empty nest may also reduce opportunities for parent-offspring conflict (Ward & Spitze, 2007), which may in turn benefit the parental marital relationship via reductions in daily stress and irritations.

However, some scholars have reported that transitions in and out of coresidence with adult children were not associated with declines or improvements in marital quality (Ward & Spitze, 2004; 2007). Ward and Spitze (2004) described increases in time spent with spouses when children left the nest and decreases in time spent if children returned to the home, but no association between

coresidence with adult children and marital quality or number of marital disagreements.

Notably, studies of marital quality and offspring coresidence have often focused on parental gender. Such studies reported stronger associations between coresidence with adult children and marital quality for mothers (Bouchard, 2014; Rollins & Feldman, 1970). Other studies focused solely on mothers during coresidence transitions (Dennerstein, Dudley, & Guthrie, 2002; Gorchoff et al., 2008), as mothers are hypothesized to have higher levels of engagement with children and a greater share of parenting responsibilities. In addition to parent gender, it is important to consider how intergenerational coresidence patterns are situated in a broader social and historical context.

## Societal Trends and Norms Regarding Coresidence

Higher rates of intergenerational coresidence have coincided with cultural and economic trends affecting young people, including a delayed transition to adulthood, a rise in age of first marriage, greater pursuit of post-secondary education, declining employment, and economic pressures resulting from the Great Recession of 2008 (Furstenberg, 2010; Qian, 2012). Moreover, research examining rates of intergenerational coresidence across Europe has highlighted housing markets and employment conditions as key factors in predicting a country’s coresidence rate (Newman & Aptekar, 2007).

Societal and economic trends are likely to influence not only the incidence of intergenerational coresidence, but also norms about intergenerational coresidence. In parts of Europe, scholars have found that as intergenerational coresidence increases, the stigma associated with children living in the home decreases (Newman & Aptekar, 2007). Research from the 1990s indicated strong consensus on age-related norms for home leaving in the United States (Settersten, 1998). However, because living with adult children has become more common since the onset of the Great Recession (Fry, 2013; South & Lei, 2015), the United States also may be experiencing a shift in norms and decreased stigma related to intergenerational coresidence.

Parent outcomes, including marital quality, may be related to the extent to which parents hold normative beliefs about home leaving and coresidence. Scholars have found that when children violate norms regarding the timing and reasons for leaving home, parents experience negative psychological outcomes (Harkins, 1978; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009; Settersten, 2003). Further, having children who need more support than is considered normative is associated with lower parental life satisfaction (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann, et al., 2012).

Thus, during time periods when offspring coresidence is nonnormative, parental marital quality may suffer when a grown child resides at home. Conversely, when rates of coresidence increase, having a grown child in the home

may be viewed as more normative. In these circumstances, we might expect to see little effect on marital quality.

### Child Problems and Coresidence

The reasons underlying offspring coresidence with parents may also contribute to whether living with grown children is detrimental to marital quality. It is rare that young adults coreside with middle-aged parents due to parental needs or disability (Ward, Logan, & Spitze, 1992). Rather, some grown children may reside at home while pursuing education or other future goals (South & Lei, 2015), and parents may view such coresidence favorably. Coresidence may also occur due to the child's needs or problems (e.g., divorce, job loss; Smits, Van Gaalen, & Mulder, 2010; Swartz, 2009; Ward & Spitze, 2007).

It may be the case that the child problems play a role in parent's marital quality as well. Previous studies have suggested that even one child suffering life problems predicts poorer well-being among parents (Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Greenfield & Marks, 2006). Child problems are also linked to greater parental negative affect and greater family relationship strain. Moreover, among parents who report a large number of child problems, married parents experience poorer parent-child relationship quality than do single parents (Greenfield & Marks, 2006), suggesting that family dynamics may be especially disrupted in these families. Having children who suffer problems in the home may exacerbate negative feelings and diminished well-being. As such, when a child coresides due to problems, parents may experience poorer marital quality.

The current study examined parent-child coresidence, child problems, and parental marital quality in 2008 and again in 2013, with data collection occurring just prior to the Great Recession and again five years later. By examining coresidence and child problems at two time periods, we were able to test associations before and after a key social and economic shift.

Specifically, we hypothesized that coresidence with adult children would be associated with lower marital quality in 2008, under the assumption that coresidence with adult children at that time was nonnormative. We also hypothesized that this association may be stronger for mothers and the association may be lessened or eliminated in 2013, when coresidence had become more normative. Further, we expected that reports of child problems would be associated with lower marital quality at both waves. With regard to changes in coresidence from 2008 to 2013, we expected that transitioning to an empty nest would be associated with increased marital quality, whereas having a child return to the home (e.g., "boomerang" child; Sandberg-Thoma, Snyder, & Jang, 2015) would be associated with decreased marital quality.

## Method

### Procedures

The sample included 287 married middle-aged parents (56% female; 40–60 years old;  $M = 50.65$ ,  $SD$

$= 4.75$ ) who participated in two waves of the *Family Exchanges Study* (FES) and provided data on marital quality and child coresidence at both waves. In 2008, 633 middle-aged parents (52% female; 40–60 years old;  $M = 50.60$ ,  $SD = 4.99$ ) with at least one child older than 18 completed a telephone interview lasting approximately 1 hr. Participants were recruited from the Philadelphia Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA) and were identified through random digit dialing and listed samples.

Of those parents, 397 were married in 2008 and 395 provided both marital quality and child coresidence data. Compared to the parents in 2008 who were not married or did not provide marital quality and coresidence data ( $n = 238$ ), married parents in 2008 were better educated ( $t = 2.67$ ; 14.35 vs. 13.91 years of education) and were less likely to identify themselves as a member of a racial/ethnic minority group ( $\chi^2 = 79.52$ ; 92 minority parents of 395 married parents vs. 139 minority parents of 236 unmarried parents of the 2008 sample).

In 2013, 73% ( $n = 287$ ) of the continuously married parents participated again and provided marital quality and child coresidence. Compared to married parents who did not return from 2008 or did not provide marital quality or coresidence data ( $n = 108$ ), the sample of married parents returning in 2013 ( $n = 287$ ) had a lower proportion of minority parents ( $\chi^2 = 17.43$ ; 51 minority parents of 287 married parents who did return in 2013 vs. 41 of 108 married parents who did not return in 2013) but did not differ on other background characteristics.

Parents provided demographic information including age, gender (0 = male; 1 = female), ethnicity (0 = non-Hispanic White; 1 = racial/ethnic minority), years of education, and employment status (0 = not employed; 1 = employed). They also provided total number of offspring, number of offspring aged older and younger than 18, and physical health (1 = poor to 5 = excellent). See Table 1 for descriptive information.

## Measures

### Dependent variable: marital quality

Marital quality was assessed using a one-item measure: "How would you rate the overall quality of your relationship with your spouse at this time," scored from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) similar to other one-item measures of relationship quality (Gager & Sanchez, 2003; Umberson, 1989).

### Explanatory Variable: Coresidence

Coresidence with adult children was assessed differently in the two waves. In 2008, parents reported how far each child lived from them in miles. We transformed parents' reports of the number of miles into a dichotomous variable where zero indicated currently coresiding with this

**Table 1.** Sample Description in 2008 and 2013

| Parent characteristics              | Wave 1<br>(2008) |           | Wave 2<br>(2013) |           |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|
|                                     | <i>M</i>         | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>         | <i>SD</i> |
| Age                                 | 50.65            | 4.75      | 55.97            | 4.75      |
| Years of education                  | 14.52            | 1.99      | 14.52            | 1.99      |
| Number of living children           | 2.68             | 1.27      | 2.69             | 1.23      |
| Number of children under 18         | 0.62             | 0.94      | 0.17             | 0.51      |
| Number of children 18 or older      | 2.06             | 1.07      | 2.52             | 1.11      |
| Marital quality                     | 4.04             | 0.98      | 3.91             | 1.09      |
| Physical health <sup>a</sup>        | 3.72             | 0.94      | 3.48             | 0.92      |
|                                     | Proportion       |           | Proportion       |           |
| Female                              | .56              |           | .56              |           |
| Racial/ethnic minority <sup>b</sup> | .18              |           | .18              |           |
| Employed <sup>c</sup>               | .80              |           | .75              |           |

Notes. *N* = 287.

<sup>a</sup>1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, and 5 = excellent.

<sup>b</sup>0 = non-Hispanic White and 1 = racial/ethnic minority.

<sup>c</sup>0 = not employed and 1 = employed.

offspring and all other values indicated not coresiding. In 2013, we explicitly asked about current coresidence for each child.

**Explanatory Variable: Child Problems**

Parents indicated whether any of their adult children had experienced 10 life problems in the past 2 years (e.g., serious health problems, drinking or drug problems, financial problems, or troubles with the law; Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009; Greenfield & Marks, 2006). If a parent indicated that any child had experienced a problem, they then indicated which child(ren); responses were coded (0 = no problem, 1 = has problem) for each problem for each child.

**Analytic Strategy**

We began by examining descriptive statistics regarding coresidence at each time point, as well as stability and change in coresidence across the two time points. Then we used ordinary least squares regression to examine concurrent associations between coresidence and marital quality at each time point. We also conducted these analyses with parent gender and the interaction term between parent gender and coresidence included in the model, to address potential gender differences in the effect of coresidence on marital quality.

Next, we examined descriptive statistics regarding life problems experienced by grown children and associations with parental marital quality. Then, to examine the association between coresiding with a child with problems and marital quality, we conducted analyses of variance (ANOVAs) at each wave to test mean differences in marital quality based on membership in four Coresidence × Child problem groups. Finally, we examined whether change in

coresidence from 2008 to 2013 was associated with marital quality in 2013. In each regression model, we controlled for parent health, education, employment status, racial/ethnic minority status, presence of children younger than 18, and total number of children.

**Results**

**Coresidence**

Of the 287 parents, 34% reported that they did not live with a grown child at either wave of data collection, 29% reported coresiding with at least one grown child in both 2008 and 2013, 18% reported coresiding with at least one grown child in 2008 but reported no coresidence with grown children in 2013, and 20% reported no coresidence with grown children in 2008 but did report residing with at least one grown child in 2013. Overall, in 2008, 46% of parents had at least one adult child in the home and in 2013, 48% of parents had an adult child who coresided (though not necessarily the same children).

**Coresidence With Adult Children and Parental Marital Quality in 2008 and 2013**

Regression analyses revealed that in 2008, coresidence was associated with lower parental marital quality (*B* = -0.12, *p* = .04), but in 2013, the association was not significant (*B* = -0.08, *p* = .16; see Table 2). As can be seen in Table 2, we also found a significant gender by coresidence interaction in 2008; Figure 1 shows that the association between coresidence and lower marital quality was stronger for women. This interaction term was not significant in 2013.

Following up the finding regarding the interaction term, in post hoc analyses, we estimated separate models for mothers and fathers in 2008 and 2013. We found a significant association between coresidence and marital quality only for mothers in 2008 (*B* = -0.55, *p* < .001; see Supplementary Table 1), suggesting that the effect of coresidence on marital quality in 2008 was driven by mothers. There were no significant associations between coresidence and marital quality for mothers or fathers in 2013.

**Coresidence With a Child with Problems and Parental Marital Quality in 2008 and 2013**

Preliminary analyses examined the distributions of children’s problems at each wave of data and associations between children’s problems and marital quality. In 2008, 66% of parents (*n* = 191) reported at least one of their grown children suffered from one or more problems. In 2013, 72% of parents (*n* = 208) reported at least one grown child suffered from one or more problems. Further, in 2008, 49% of coresiding children suffered from at least one problem, whereas 51% did not suffer problems. In 2013, 61% of coresiding children suffered from at least one problem, while 39% did not suffer from problems. Regression analyses revealed that

**Table 2.** Regressions Predicting Parental Marital Quality From Coresidence Status and Parental Gender

| Variables   | Wave 1 (2008) |      |         |      | Wave 2 (2013) |      |         |      |
|---|---------------|------|---------|------|---------------|------|---------|------|
|   | B             | SE   | B       | SE   | B             | SE   | B       | SE   |
| Intercept   | 2.69          | 0.48 | 2.76*** | 0.47 | 2.20***       | 0.52 | 2.28*** | 0.53 |
| Coresidence <sup>a</sup>                              | -0.24*        | 0.12 | -0.50** | 0.15 | -0.18         | 0.12 | -0.35*  | 0.16 |
| Parent gender   |               |      | -0.12   | 0.16 |               |      | -0.00   | 0.17 |
| Coresidence <sup>a</sup> × Parent gender <sup>b</sup> |               |      | 0.57*   | 0.22 |               |      | 0.40    | 0.24 |
| Covariates  |               |      |         |      |               |      |         |      |
| Has children under 18 <sup>c</sup>                    | -0.08         | 0.12 | -0.14   | 0.12 | -0.03         | 0.20 | -0.05   | 0.20 |
| Number of living children                             | 0.04          | 0.05 | 0.05    | 0.05 | 0.05          | 0.06 | 0.05    | 0.06 |
| Employed <sup>d</sup>                                 | 0.01          | 0.14 | -0.00   | 0.14 | 0.09          | 0.14 | 0.10    | 0.14 |
| Years of education                                    | 0.02          | 0.03 | 0.02    | 0.03 | 0.01          | 0.03 | 0.01    | 0.03 |
| Racial/ethnic minority <sup>e</sup>                   | -0.24         | 0.15 | -0.26   | 0.14 | -0.32         | 0.16 | -0.30   | 0.16 |
| Physical health <sup>f</sup>                          | 0.30***       | 0.06 | 0.31*** | 0.06 | 0.42***       | 0.07 | 0.43*** | 0.07 |
| F   | 6.10***       |      | 5.78*** |      | 7.99***       |      | 6.87*** |      |
| Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>                               | .11           |      | .13     |      | .15           |      | .16     |      |

Notes. <sup>a</sup>0 = not coresiding with an adult child and 1 = coresiding with one or more adult children.

<sup>b</sup>0 = mother and 1 = father.

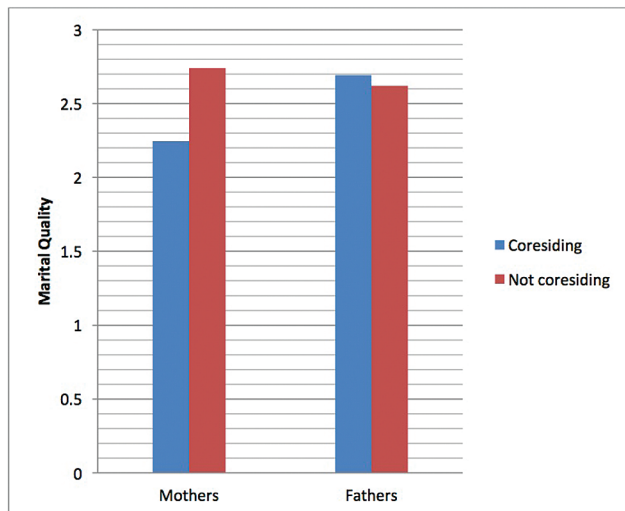
<sup>c</sup>0 = no children under 18 and 1 = one or more children under 18.

<sup>d</sup>0 = not employed and 1 = employed.

<sup>e</sup>0 = non-Hispanic White and 1 = racial/ethnic minority.

<sup>f</sup>1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, and 5 = excellent.

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



**Figure 1.** Interaction between child coresidence and parent gender on marital quality in 2008.

having a child with a problem was not significantly associated with parent's marital quality in 2008. In 2013, having a child with problems was associated with lower concurrent marital quality ( $B = -0.12$ ,  $p = .03$ ; not in tables). With regard to specific types of problems, financial problems were the most common in 2008 and 2013. In 2008, 39% of coresiding offspring (and 42% of all offspring) experienced a financial problem. In 2013, 36% of coresiding offspring (and 37% of all offspring) experienced a financial problem.

To examine the association between coresiding with children experiencing problems and parental marital quality,

we created a categorical variable with four groups at each wave (0 = no coresiding children or children with problems; 1 = coresiding with a child with problems; 2 = has children with problems, but none coresiding; 3 = has coresiding children, but none with problems). The distributions of these classifications can be seen in Table 3.

One-way ANOVAs tested mean differences in parents' concurrent marital quality based on group membership in 2008 and 2013. Table 3 shows there were significant mean differences at both waves. Planned contrasts revealed that in 2008, unsurprisingly, parents who indicated that they had neither coresident children nor children with problems had a significantly higher mean marital quality than the other three groups. Additionally, the two groups of parents with coresident children had significantly lower marital quality than the two groups of parents without coresident children (regardless of presence of problems).

Planned contrasts revealed that in 2013, parents who indicated that they had children with problems coresiding with them had a significantly lower mean marital quality compared to the other three groups. Additionally, planned contrasts showed that the two groups of parents who had children with problems had significantly lower marital quality than the two groups of parents who did not have children with problems, regardless of coresidence.

### Changes in Coresidence Status and Parental Marital Quality

We also examined changes in marital quality over time associated with empty nest or boomerang children. A paired

*t*-test demonstrated a significant decline in marital quality from 2008 ( $M = 4.04, SD = 0.98$ ) to 2013 ( $M = 3.91, SD = 1.00; t = 2.36, p = .019$ ).

To examine mean differences in marital quality based on changes in coresidence status from 2008 to 2013, we created a categorical variable to indicate the four potential coresidence patterns: (a) not coresiding with adult child(ren) in 2008 or 2013, (b) coresiding with adult child(ren) in 2008 and 2013, (c) coresiding with adult child(ren) in 2008 but not in 2013, and (d) coresiding with adult child(ren) in 2013 but not in 2008. As shown in Table 4, a one-way ANOVA testing mean differences in parents' marital quality at 2013 based on these four categories revealed no significant mean differences in parental marital quality. Additionally, we reran the analyses separately for mothers and fathers and found no mean differences (mothers:  $F(3,157) = 0.92, p = .43$ ; fathers:  $F(3,122) = 1.08; p = .36$ ).

### Discussion

Since 2008, the proportion of adult children in the United States living with parents has increased (Fry, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), and norms regarding coresidence during the transition to adulthood may also be changing. This study examined how coresidence with adult children

is associated with parental marital quality before and after the Great Recession. Additionally, we examined how residing with a child suffering problems may be associated with marital quality, as child problems may co-occur with or necessitate coresidence. Findings from this study are consistent with a life course perspective, which suggests that marital relationships are embedded within broader family ties as well as societal and economic contexts (Elder et al., 2003); changes within the family and the economy appear to shape the marital tie.

Findings suggested that in 2008, coresiding with an adult child was associated with lower parental marital quality. Specifically, mothers appeared to show the lowest marital quality when living with an adult child. However, in 2013, coresidence with an adult child was no longer associated with parental marital quality, perhaps due to changing norms regarding intergenerational coresidence in the United States after the Great Recession.

Results showed that in 2013, having a child who was experiencing problems was associated with lower parental marital quality, while this was not the case in 2008. Further, in 2013, parents who lived with adult child suffering problems had significantly lower marital quality than parents who lived with a child not suffering problems or parents who had a child with problems who did not coreside.

**Table 3.** Mean Differences in Parental Marital Quality by Coresidence Status and Presence of Child Problems

|               | Not coresiding with child(ren) |                        | Coresiding with child(ren) |                        | ANOVA          | Contrast    |      |      |             |             |             |   |
|---------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------|-------------|------|------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---|
|               | No problem child(ren)          | Has problem child(ren) | No problem child(ren)      | Has problem child(ren) |                | F ratio     | 1    | 2    | 3           | 4           | 5           | 6 |
| Wave 1 (2008) | W1 ( $n = 57$ )                | W1 ( $n = 97$ )        | W1 ( $n = 41$ )            | W1 ( $n = 92$ )        |                |             |      |      |             |             |             |   |
| Wave 2 (2013) | W2 ( $n = 48$ )                | W2 ( $n = 101$ )       | W2 ( $n = 33$ )            | W2 ( $n = 105$ )       |                |             |      |      |             |             |             |   |
|               | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )         | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )     | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ) | <i>F</i> ratio |             |      |      |             |             |             |   |
| Wave 1 (2008) | 4.22 (0.84)                    | 4.17 (0.94)            | 3.85 (1.14)                | 3.86 (1.01)            | 2.94*          | <b>.050</b> | .111 | .200 | .081        | <b>.006</b> | .847        |   |
| Wave 2 (2013) | 4.19 (0.92)                    | 3.92 (1.07)            | 4.18 (0.81)                | 3.69 (1.21)            | 3.29*          | .089        | .457 | .116 | <b>.004</b> | .337        | <b>.003</b> |   |

Notes. Comparison 1 contrasts the first group and all other groups; Comparison 2 contrasts the second group and all other groups; Comparison 3 contrasts the third and all other groups; Comparison 4 contrasts the fourth and all other groups; Comparison 5 contrasts the two coresiding groups and the two non-coresiding groups; Comparison 6 contrasts the two child problem groups and the two no child problem groups. Significant contrasts are bolded. ANOVA = analysis of variance.

\* $p < .05$ .

**Table 4.** Mean Differences in 2013 Marital Quality by Coresidence Pattern

| Not coresiding with adult children in 2008 or 2013 ( $n = 98$ ) | Coresiding with adult children in 2008 and 2013 ( $n = 82$ ) | Coresiding with adult children in 2008, but not 2013 ( $n = 51$ ) | Coresiding with adult children in 2013, but not 2008 ( $n = 56$ ) | ANOVA          |
|---|--|---|---|----------------|
| <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )  | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )                                       | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )  | <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )  | <i>F</i> ratio |
| 4.10 (0.96)   | 3.70 (1.21)  | 3.82 (1.14)   | 3.96 (1.03)   | 2.26           |

Notes. ANOVA = analysis of variance.

## Coresidence With Adult Children and Parental Marital Quality

Prior research on the association between coresidence with adult children and parental marital quality is mixed, but we expected living with a grown child to be negatively associated with marital quality (Bouchard, 2014; Umberson et al., 2005). The current study did lend some support to this idea; coresiding with a grown child was associated with lower marital quality but only in 2008 and more so for women. In 2013, living with a child was not associated with marital quality. This finding suggests that coresidence with adult children may be detrimental to parental marital quality, but only under certain conditions.

In 2008, before the onset of the Great Recession, most grown children were not living with their parents in the United States. However, in 2013, many American families were still struggling to rebound from the economic and financial setbacks of the Great Recession (Desilver, 2014) and social trends towards increased coresidence with adult children were capturing attention of the popular press (Kingkade, 2013). In fact, the proportion of adult children living at home has continued to increase despite the end of the recession (Fry, 2015), suggesting a shift in cultural norms as well as economic trends that induced coresidence.

Other sources also point to changing norms regarding coresidence with adult children in the United States. In a nationally representative sample of emerging adults and their parents, respondents were asked to report the most important criteria for becoming an adult. Only 5% of parents (and 0% of emerging adults) reported "moving out of the house" as an important criterion for adulthood (Arnett & Schwab, 2012). This is in stark contrast to norms from prior decades, where home leaving was seen as a key marker of adulthood (Hogan, 1980). A shift in norms regarding coresidence may help explain why coresidence and marital quality were not associated in 2013 in the current study.

Additionally, changing coresidence norms may also influence marital functioning through each parent's own well-being. Researchers have found that children's achievements and problems shape parental self-evaluations and well-being in midlife (Cichy, Lefkowitz, Davis, & Fingerman, 2013; Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, et al., 2012; Pillemer & Suito, 1991; Ryff, Schmutte, & Lee, 1996). Parents' sense of "how children turned out" appears to influence parental mental health and could be associated with marital functioning as well. It may be the case that broader social acceptance of intergenerational coresidence allows parents to make more positive attributions regarding their own children's coresidence, which in turn may buffer parents from decrements to their own self-evaluations and well-being at midlife.

Alternatively, the lack of association between coresidence and marital quality in 2013 could be due to individual changes in the parent across the 5 years. Theorists have argued that adults shift towards increasing positivity

over the course of adulthood (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005). Further, over the course of those 5 years, the parents may have accumulated life experiences and coping strategies that allow them to better regulate interpersonal conflicts (Fingerman, Turiano, Davis, & Charles, 2013), including conflicts that arise due to the presence of a grown child in the home. Nevertheless, a grown child's problems may still taint parent's well-being due emotional dysregulation and the stresses involved (Charles, 2010; Charles & Luong, 2013), and as such, problems (but not coresidence) was associated with marital quality in 2013.

An alternate explanation for differences in the patterns in 2008 and 2013 could be that parents hold different views about coresidence depending on the timing of coresidence within the empty nest stage. Parents may feel differently about coresidence and boomerang children in the early part of the empty nest phase as opposed to later in the empty nest stage. For example, in the early stages of the empty nest in 2008, parents may have been looking forward to time as a couple, whereas by 2013, this is less novel or important to them. Future research should seek to disentangle the effects of coresidence on marital quality and family functioning at different stages of the empty nest transition.

## Child Problems, Coresidence, and Parental Marital Quality

Although there is a dearth of research linking child problems and marital quality, we do know that child problems can be a source of stress for parents and can lead to lower well-being (Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, et al., 2012; Greenfield & Marks, 2006). Adult children's problems, coresidence, or the co-occurrence of problems and coresidence may also lead to parental ambivalence toward children. Research suggests that parents are likely to experience mixed emotions when children fail to achieve adult statuses or develop independent lives (Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006; Pillemer et al., 2007). Therefore, if child problems or coresidence are perceived by parents as failures to achieve independence, it may have negative consequences for parents' emotional health.

In line with these ideas, the current study showed that child problems may be detrimental to parental marital quality, but again only under certain circumstances. In 2008, coresidence was associated with lower parental marital quality. However, in 2013, parents who coresided with at least one child experiencing problems showed lower marital quality.

Further, in 2008, parents with coresident children had lower marital quality than parents with non-coresident children (regardless of the presence of child problems). The opposite was true in 2013, where parents who had children with problems reported had lower marital quality than parents who did not have children with problems (regardless of coresidence). In 2013, when coresidence may have been

viewed as more normative, parents appeared to be negatively affected only by the co-occurrence of child problems and coresidence.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations in this study should be addressed in future research. For example, the study included only a global measure of marital quality, which prohibited a closer examination of the parental marital relationship. Coresidence and child problems may influence specific aspects of the marriage, such as frequency of conflict, amount of time spent alone with a spouse, or feelings of equity within the marriage. However, other studies have utilized one-item measures of marital quality (Mickelson, Claffey, & Williams, 2006) or marital happiness (Gager & Sanchez, 2003) and similar to the current study, most prior work focuses on global marital quality or satisfaction (Orbuch et al., 1996; Umberson et al., 2005). Nevertheless, future work should seek to discover possible pathways by which coresidence and child problems may influence marital functioning.

Future research also should assess why young adults coreside with parents. Although research suggests that grown children coreside with parents due to the child's needs when parents are in midlife (Smits et al., 2010; Swartz, 2009; Ward & Spitze, 2007), the nature of those needs warrants greater attention.

The study also did not explicitly assess norms regarding coresidence. Therefore, we cannot test associations between endorsement or rejection of these norms and marital quality. Although a cultural shift appears to be underway regarding intergenerational living arrangements in the United States, future studies should examine how norms are related to family and marital functioning.

In sum, this study is the first to examine associations between coresidence with adult children and marital quality before and after the Great Recession. Findings suggest that links between coresidence and marital quality may depend on the historical period in which the coresidence occurs. As norms regarding intergenerational coresidence in the United States continue to change, we may see family and marital dynamics in these households change as well.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material can be found at: <http://psychsocgerontology.oxfordjournals.org/>

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